

A PSYCHOANALYTICAL CRITIQUE

ON

THE YELLOW WALLPAPER

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ABSTRACT

The text that is being analyzed in this report is 'The Yellow Wallpaper' by Charlotte Perkins Gilman. In this report we have reviewed the same in accordance to the Psychoanalytical theory, which was pioneered by the psycho-analysts Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan.

In this report we try to analyze the character of the protagonist of the story and describe the different stages of her consciousness as put forward by Freud and Lacan. The background and setting of the story which plays a vital role in the story is critically analyzed. Since this is a semi-autobiographical story, it was all the more important to think along the narrator's state of thinking and point of view for reviewing this text.

This analysis is in partial fulfillment of the assignment component of the course 'Literary Criticism' (HSS F335).

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Charlotte Perkins Gilman was a prominent American writer, socialist and utopian feminist. With her unorthodox methods and ideologies, she serves as a great inspiration for today's feminists and socialists. Although from a very poor background, her intellect and breadth of knowledge greatly impressed her teachers. She was very interested in natural philosophy. She underwent a severe bout of post partum depression after her child's birth, which obviously had a great impact on her ideologies and social viewpoint.

Having got divorced from her husband, she involved herself and also led many famous feminist movements and social reformist movements. She was diagnosed with incurable breast cancer and soon after that, committed suicide by taking an overdose of chloroform. Almost as a fitting end, her suicide note quoted her autobiography: "Choose chloroform over cancer."

INTRODUCTION

Psychoanalytic theory, put forth by prominent Austrian neurologist and psychiatrist Sigmund Freud is a method of literary criticism which incorporates several elements of psychoanalysis. Later Jacques Lacan, a French psychoanalyst gave his own revolutionary theories regarding the same.

In this type of literary analysis, the person reviewing the book thinks along the same lines of the protagonist and tries to draw parallels between the thinking patterns of the character and the various theories that were presented by different psycho-analysts. He then tries to connect these thinking patterns with the character's past and the major influences in his life. Jacques Lacan's Mirror theory and Object Relation theory are very useful tool while doing the same. In the following, significant parts of the text are taken which provide ideal cases for psycho-analysis. Our interpretations, based primarily on Freud's and Lacan's theories are then presented. At the end, a suitable summary is given, giving all the interpretations in a nutshell.

ANALYSIS

In this short story the different concepts regarding psychoanalysis are well defined with every character of the story representing a distinct concept. The protagonist of the story, who is also the narrator of the story, is a passionate writer, who often lets her creativity and imagination run wild. This untamed imagination, however, probably led her into a state of neurotic depression, the recovery from which, demanded refrain from writing and for that matter any creative activity. This becomes a source of exhaustion and frustration for her. Her husband and brother are also very adamant that she shouldn't delve herself into any kind of creative work.

At this junction, parallels can be drawn between the husband's attempts at curbing her creative instincts and the concept of the super ego, where the super ego acts as a gatekeeper to the inner sub-conscious. He did this in spite of loving her deeply since he thought it was for her best.

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

This leads the author to have quite a bit of resentment in her heart towards John, her husband. She herself admits that she was never so sensitive before and cites her depression for the same. However, it might as well be her Id (inner conscious) trying to break out after being suppressed for so long.

"I get unreasonably angry with John sometimes. I'm sure I never used to be so sensitive. I think it is due to this nervous condition"

The narrator's varied reaction and perception of the prominent yellow wallpaper in her room provides for an interesting study. Initially, her reaction was one of repulsion and hatred. She describes the pattern on the wallpaper to be both dull and constantly irritating. Also she uses adjectives like repellent, revolting, unclean for mere properties of the wallpaper like its color. However, a few weeks later, the way she comprehends the patterns on the wallpaper undergoes a strange transition. She now sees more than just a few lines on the wallpaper. She now begins to imagine different patterns and figures behind the art.

"But in the places where it isn't faded and where the sun is just so—I can see a strange, provoking, formless sort of figure, that seems to skulk about behind that silly and conspicuous front design."

Partly due to the unsettling wallpaper and partly due to her frustrating condition, her own imagination and speculations began to take a toll on the narrator. She becomes increasingly irritable and is desperate to change the room they were staying in. She resents her husband's and his sister's over-bearing nature. Although she tries to occupy herself with writing secretly and trying to figure out the pattern on the wallpaper, she tires very soon and has to go to sleep again. Although she slowly adjusts to the room they were living in, she continues to hate the wallpaper. Her only relief and comfort was that her child was happy and she loved her more than anything else

and tried to keep her impatience under control, for the sake of her baby.

Out of another I get a lovely view of the bay and a little private wharf belonging to the estate. There is a beautiful shaded lane that runs down there from the house. I always fancy I see people walking in these numerous paths and arbors, but John has cautioned me not to give way to fancy in the least. He says that with my imaginative power and habit of story-making, a nervous weakness like mine is sure to lead to all manner of excited fancies, and that I ought to use my will and good sense to check the tendency. So I try.

I think sometimes that if I were only well enough to write a little it would relieve the press of ideas and rest me.

But I find I get pretty tired when I try.

There's one comfort, the baby is well and happy, and does not have to occupy this nursery with the horrid wall-paper.

From a psychoanalytical viewpoint, these events describe the conditions that lead to the re-awakening of the Id. The Husband, his sister and the room, all represent the symbolic order. They are things which detach the narrator from her inner consciousness and her primordial feelings. However, to quote Lacan: "The unconsciousness is the Kernel of the being." In spite of the narrator's imagination and inner self being curbed in such a rigid manner, or maybe because of it, her Id and the feelings related to it comes out in a vehement and uncontrollable manner, as we will soon see.

Now, we will have a detailed look at the narrator's reactions toward the yellow wallpaper and the possible interpretations we can garner from that. When we do this, it is very important to incorporate the

Object Relations theory that was proposed by Otto Rank. Also it is equally important that the feelings accumulated in the Imaginary/ Mirror stage is not necessarily during the childhood. For instance, as seen a little ahead in this analysis, the narrator relates herself with the imaginary woman in the wallpaper since she feels that the woman is imprisoned in the wallpaper and trying to escape out of it, much as she felt about herself.

An intriguing place to start is when the narrator actually starts to feel fond of the room **because** of the wallpaper. She is constantly taunted by the Yellow wallpaper and she tries vehemently to unravel the pattern on the wallpaper. She describes the pattern in great detail and emphasis on how it seemed very confusing and endless. She describes how the different curves and twists and the seemingly blatant ignorance of the conventionally used laws of design. She devotes so much time and energy in unraveling the pattern that her mind actually gets a purpose and the creativity, suppressed till now, re-surfaces with all its might.

I'm getting really fond of the room in spite of the wall-paper. Perhaps BECAUSE of the wall-paper.

It dwells in my mind so!

I lie here on this great immovable bed—it is nailed down, I believe—and follow that pattern about by the hour. It is as good as gymnastics, I assure you. I start, we'll say, at the bottom, down in the corner over there where it has not been touched, and I determine for the thousandth time that I WILL follow that pointless pattern to some sort of a conclusion.

I know a little of the principle of design, and I know this thing was not arranged on any laws of radiation, or alternation, or repetition, or symmetry, or anything else that I ever heard of.

It is repeated, of course, by the breadths, but not otherwise.

Looked at in one way each breadth stands alone, the bloated curves and flourishes—a kind of "debased Romanesque" with delirium tremens—go waddling up and down in isolated columns of fatuity.

But, on the other hand, they connect diagonally, and the sprawling outlines run off in great slanting waves of optic horror, like a lot of wallowing seaweeds in full chase.

The whole thing goes horizontally, too, at least it seems so, and I exhaust myself in trying to distinguish the order of its going in that direction.

They have used a horizontal breadth for a frieze, and that adds wonderfully to the confusion.

There is one end of the room where it is almost intact, and there, when the crosslights fade and the low sun shines directly upon it, I can almost fancy radiation after all,—the interminable grotesques seem to form around a common centre and rush off in headlong plunges of equal distraction.

Since the narrator's creativity was so subdued before, it took on the new task of trying to imagine what the pattern on the wallpaper meant, with a lot of vigor and energy. It was a new challenge for her which she took on with relish.

The next part of the analysis is when the author goes to the stage of seeing an imaginary woman within the wallpaper. The narrator says that when light falls on the wallpaper at a particular angle, she can almost discern a figure skulking behind the pattern on the wallpaper. And as time passes, she realizes the figure is that of a woman who is trying to get out of the prison that is formed by the endless and

confusing pattern. The narrator sympathizes with this woman unknowingly and wishes her to get out. In the night she imagines the woman in the wallpaper to be shaking the pattern, almost as if the pattern were like a jail for the imaginary woman. She also goes on to say that the wallpaper has an effect not only on herself, but also her husband and sister-in-law. She often caught them gazing at the same and touching it. However, she is determined to solve the mystery first; to make sure the woman inside is set free. She also emphasizes on the color of the wallpaper, which she calls the 'strangest yellow'. She also comments upon the smell of the same which had a remarkable property of being all-pervasive. According to her it was present everywhere she went in the house and even she smelt it on herself often.

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.

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.

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.

I find it hovering in the dining-room, skulking in the parlor, hiding in the hall, lying in wait for me on the stairs.

It gets into my hair. Even when I go to ride, if I turn my head suddenly and surprise it—there is that smell! Such a peculiar odor, too! I have spent hours in trying to analyze it, to find what it smelled like. It is not bad—at first, and very gentle, but quite the subtlest, most enduring odor I ever met. In this damp weather it is awful, I wake up in the night and find

it hanging over me. It used to disturb me at first. I thought seriously of burning the house—to reach the smell.

The Object Relations theory can be effectively used to analyze this part of the short story. The narrator obviously identifies herself with the imaginary woman figure behind the pattern that seems imprisoned. This is clearly because she feels the same about herself, with her husband and the room representing the prison. The fact she wants the woman to escape is completely understandable in this respect. During the day, when she is not able to see the imaginary figure, she imagines her to be roaming around the streets, since she herself enjoys a little freedom during the day. Therefore it is clear in these lines that her inner conscious relates to the woman figure trapped in the wallpaper. The aspirations and behavior of both can be described to be in perfect sync, which is all the more evident from the urgent desire to help her from the narrator. Another interesting point to note here is the kind of description the narrator gives regarding the pattern on the yellow wallpaper. They vividly resemble guillotines and other stringent measures used in prisons to stop convicts from escaping. These metaphors clearly describe the narrator's inner feelings about her husband, her sister-in-law and the house they were living in as elements who were imprisoning the same. Her resentful feelings about her husband and sister being affected by the wallpaper is understandable, since she feels a

certain possessiveness about the woman inside, who is basically her own inner self.

The last part of the story abruptly leads to the climax of the story. The feelings of resentment, excitement and frustration culminate inside the narrator and give her a desperate urge to free the woman inside the yellow wallpaper. She is influenced to such an extent by these feelings that she actually locks herself in the room and starts tearing away at the wallpaper. Slowly, as the imaginary woman inside seems more free, the narrator loses more control. When she is suddenly interrupted by her husband, she had actually transformed completely into the woman inside the wallpaper and tells her husband that despite all their efforts she had won free and was no longer under their will.

The analysis of this part of the story is pretty straightforward. When all the inner feelings come together inside the narrator, the Id stage becomes too strong and breaks away from the shackles of the Ego and the Super Ego stage, in this case the husband. Her eerie words symbolize the above in very clear terms and the fact that she uses the verb 'creeps' confirm that the narrator had lost control over her outer being and her inner conscious had won over the gatekeepers, had surfaced and taken total control over the narrator.

CONCLUSION

In a nutshell this story when being analyzed from a psychoanalytical point of view provides all the stages through which a suppressed inner consciousness tries to break through the Ego and Super Ego. Also Lacan's symbolic order and Rank's Object Relations Theory are used to analyze specific part of the story.

From the time of occupying the house to leaving it, the narrator passes through all the stages which ultimately leaves the Id/Inner Being of the narrator in control. 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.

