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Honors English 3

11 May, 15

Mixed opinions:

An Analysis of societal and cultural conflicts in "The Yellow Wallpaper," "Barn Burning," and  
"The Blessed House"

Individuals are constantly shaped by the environment around them. Societal expectations, family, and religion influence every choice, leaving no decision entirely autonomous. However, when such external pressures conflict with internal beliefs, characters often struggle trying to balance their perspectives. In Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper," William Faulkner's "Barn Burning," and "The Blessed House" from Jhumpa Lahiri's "Interpreter of Maladies," the protagonists confront cultural collisions imposed by their surroundings. The narrator, Sarty, and Sanjeet each grapple with the impact of societal and cultural pressures on their identities, exploring themes of oppression and adaptation as they strive to reconcile these external influences with their inner selves.

In "The Yellow Wallpaper," the narrator's gradual descent into madness highlights the destructive impact of rigid, paternalistic societal norms imposed on women, illustrating how oppression stifles personal expression and induces psychological deterioration. Through her diary entries, the narrator describes the harsh conditions of her environment: "But I MUST say what I feel and think in some way—it is such a relief! But the effort is getting to be greater than the relief" (485). Her desperate need to express herself in her journal underscores the suppression

of her voice in society and her resistance to patriarchal norms, demonstrating the conflict between her individual needs and societal expectations. The narrator's lack of a name in the story symbolizes the broader theme of women's suppression by society, suggesting that she is not even considered "important enough" to be named. The anonymity of the narrator reinforces her marginalization and the erasure of her identity. Additionally, her growing fixation on the yellow wallpaper reveals her obsession with the oppressive environment. She describes the wallpaper: "It is the strangest yellow, that wallpaper! It makes me think of all the yellow things I ever saw—not beautiful ones like buttercups, but old foul, bad yellow things" (489). This reflection encapsulates her deteriorating mental state and the suffocating impact of her surroundings as she rants about meaningless subjects in a state of mental decay. As her mental health further declines, the narrator writes, "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" (481). This statement highlights her internal conflict and growing awareness of her needs versus the oppressive advice of her husband, representing patriarchal authority. Her recognition of needing more "stimulus" contrasts sharply with her husband's restrictive guidance, marking her gradual rejection of patriarchal restrictions in her life.

Unlike the narrator's conflict with societal norms in "The Yellow Wallpaper," Sarty's moral dilemma in "Barn Burning" conflicts with his father's expectations and the American legal system, leading to his eventual rebellion and underscoring the intense struggle between familial loyalty and ethical integrity. When Sarty testifies as a witness against his father, he describes the courtroom: "He could not see the table where the Justice sat and that the Justice's voice was as

cold and distant as the voice of the enemy” (1046). Sarty’s depiction of the justice system as foreign and threatening highlights the collision between his family’s way of life and broader societal laws, emphasizing the deep divide between familial expectations and the concept of justice. The divide is further illustrated through the description of Sarty’s father, Abner Snopes: “His father, stiff in his black Sunday clothes, stood near the table, his hand flat on the faded leather of the worn grip from which protruded papers, testimony to justice” (1046). The portrayal of Snopes in this courtroom setting not only introduces his character but also underscores the thematic elements of justice and morality versus family loyalty. The “stiffness” of his Sunday clothes and the worn condition of his grip symbolize his rigid nature and antagonistic relationship with legal authorities. Furthermore, Sarty’s disillusionment with the justice system stems from his upbringing under a rebellious father. The conflict between Sarty’s ethics and his father’s expectations is evident in his hesitance when dealing with the justice system, highlighted when Snopes tells Sarty, “I don’t want to have to hit you” (1056). Furthermore, Sarty’s decision to alert the family despite his father’s threatened retaliation demonstrates his breaking free from the oppressive expectations placed upon him. The interaction demonstrates Sarty’s emotional struggle, marking his transformation from a loyal son to an ethical, independent individual.

Sanjeev’s discomfort with the unexpected discovery of Christian artifacts in his new home in "The Blessed House" highlights the challenges of cultural adaptation and the internal conflict between maintaining traditional values and embracing a new identity. Sanjeev’s reaction to Twinkle’s decision to keep the Christian items illuminates his inner turmoil: “But to hang it up on the wall as a decoration, when neither of them was Christian, seemed to Sanjeev the height of irrationality” (147). The quote highlights the clash between Sanjeev’s traditional mindset and

Twinkle's embracing of a different culture. His view of the Christian paraphernalia as irrational reflects his difficulty reconciling his cultural identity. Additionally, Sanjeev's paranoia regarding the items demonstrates his struggle to adapt to his new life: "He opened the closets and peeked behind doors, half expecting something to leap out at him, though nothing did. The house was still, and he was alone" (137). This captures his initial feelings of isolation and apprehension as he explores his new home, symbolizing his discomfort and unfamiliarity with his new life and marriage. The act of opening closets and peeking behind doors reflects his tentative probing into a life that diverges from his traditional expectations. Sanjeev's eventual acceptance of Twinkle and her interests signifies his overcoming of conflicting views: "She would never put it in her study he knew... He decided these were among the things that made Prabal think she was wow... Twinkle gave his elbow a little squeeze and headed for the living room. Sanjeev pressed the massive silver face to his ribs, careful not to let the feather hat slip, and followed her" (153). The situation captures Sanjeev's gradual acceptance of Twinkle's distinct personality and interests. When Sanjeev acknowledges Twinkle's decision not to place the item in her study, he recognizes the qualities that make her special, signifying his understanding of her personality. Twinkle's affectionate gesture of squeezing his elbow and leading the way to the living room contrasts with Sanjeev's initial rigidity and suggests a positive future in their marriage. Sanjeev's careful handling of the massive silver face and his choice to follow Twinkle indicate his willingness to support and embrace her preferences, even if they conflict with his traditional values. His delicate handling of the item symbolizes his effort to balance his cultural identity with the new influences in his life.

When personal beliefs and cultural backgrounds collide, characters are compelled to reevaluate their identities. The narrator in "The Yellow Wallpaper" struggles against oppressive

societal norms, leading to a psychological conflict and, ultimately, her mental deterioration. In "Barn Burning," Sarty faces a moral dilemma between familial loyalty and ethical integrity, resulting in his courageous defiance of his father's destructive behavior. Sanjeev's journey in "The Blessed House" illustrates the challenges of cultural adaptation as he learns to reconcile his traditional values with the new cultural influences brought into his life by Twinkle. Each character's experience underscores the different outcomes when one faces a conflict in perspectives. Through the narratives, the stories explore the impact of societal and cultural pressures on individuals, ultimately revealing the resilience required to navigate and integrate these influences into their lives.