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Text Analysis: The Yellow Wallpaper

The Patriarchy's Toll on Her Mind

Throughout history, the division of labor between the two sexes has always been a major point of tension and debate. For the majority of the female population, whether it is something they wish or not, their place in the domestic environment is fixed, and pushed upon them by their surroundings and society, their past and present. In the short story "The Yellow Wallpaper", the author criticizes the oppressive division of labor by highlighting the negative effects of patriarchal control on the autonomy, creative prowess, emotional well-being, and medical needs of women in order to promote action against sexism.

The author showcases the constant subordination of women in society by showing John's inexplicable dominance over the protagonist and the difference in their roles. In the story, John is both the protagonist's husband and doctor, and his relationship with the protagonist provides a striking parallel to both an oppressive spousal relationship and a neglectful patient-doctor relationship. It is constantly shown how cautious the protagonist is of her husband and how much he is suppressing her in every way. In the name of treatment, her ability to do anything for herself is taken away, including the freedom to go outside, and enjoy any physical exertions. However, it is not limited to her body only, as John seems to take control of her mind as well. In the beginning of the story the protagonist thinks to herself, "I sometimes fancy if I had less opposition and more stimulus—but John says the very worst thing I can do is think about my condition" (Gilman 648). From this extract of the text it can be inferred that

even her thoughts and imagination are limited and often blocked by her husband's warnings. The writer highlights the protagonist's franticness and anxiety by making her thought entries random and in short bursts, her own will often self-countered by what her husband says. John, who is the doctor, belittles the condition of his patient who is suffering from postpartum depression by stating that there is "nothing the matter" with her and diagnoses her with "temporary nervous depression" (Gilam 648). According to the writer of the article "Escaping the Sentence: Diagnosis and Discourse in 'The Yellow Wallpaper'", this diagnosis itself reflects this domineering mentality as she comments that "It is the voice of male logic and male judgment which dismisses...the narrator's condition as serious" (Treichler 65). Treichler argues that John's role in the story fits perfectly with the predetermined institutional roles of marriage, medicine, and the division of labor and just how his authority over the protagonist is legitimized, his diagnosis is also validated under the patriarchal framework.

The deterioration of the protagonist's mental health is a direct result of her treatment due to the patriarchal framework which infantilizes, belittles, and suppresses women's creativity and imagination. In the same vein, women begin to internalize these harmful ideas stemming from the male dominated society, limiting their experience and influence in life. The framework devises men as rational, intellectual, and responsible. Thus, their role lies outside the home as their superior minds possess the ability to experience and form opinions about the world around them. On the flip side, it shows women as incapable of thinking critically, and likening them to children while shouldering them with humanity's survival mission of reproduction. In the article, "Beyond The Yellow Wallpaper", Oakley highlights the role of women in healthcare and

how misguided suppressive treatments administered by men who thought women's emotions and imagination are their weakness caused damage to women's minds and bodies. The work that most women are fated to do is undermined by the patriarchal framework, as Oakley states "These activities are known as housework, a somewhat peculiar term, since most of the work done has nothing to do with houses, but a great deal to do with maintaining the health and vitality of the individual" (Oakley 30).

However, since women's work in their confined domestic state is not allowed to be exposed to the world, they are not taken seriously when it comes to health and their pursuits are not given importance or respect. In "the Yellow Wallpaper", this can be seen through the protagonist and John's conflict of opinion regarding her passion of writing, as John forbids her to write or even think of anything out of the ordinary or inspiring as the protagonist mentions, "he hates to have me write a word" whereas she herself thinks that "he does not believe I am sick! And what can one do?" (Gilman 647), which once again signifies her distrust in her knowledge about her own health due to her husband's overbearing male voice of authority. John displays his own infantilized view of the protagonist as he addresses her as "little girl" and "blessed little goose" and labels her concerns as "foolish fancies" (Gilman 652). This view is additionally extrapolated by the descriptions of the room, which is originally a nursery for children. The room is described as queer and disturbing the mental state of the protagonist, and the more her creative and emotional outlets are repressed, the more her obsession with the room—specifically with its yellow wallpaper—grows. John, projecting his self-proclaimed superiority and maturity, refuses to indulge his wife in the most simple requests such as changing the room or remaking the paper of the wall and gaslights her to "be not so silly

as to make him uncomfortable just for a whim (Gilman 652)", further showing how he sees her as an immature child undeserving of autonomy. The continuous dismissal of medical needs further works to weaken her mental health. These mental strains and confinement worsens her condition as Oakley states "there is good evidence that a person's social relationships or lack of them are crucial influences on physical and mental functioning (Oakley 30)" and eventually she finds that the only place she can find comfort is in her wild obsession with the unpleasant walls of the room she is bound to due to her husband and doctor. This development establishes that forced passivity of oneself and blocking of one's self-expression results in the destruction of the mind, as the protagonist found that when she finally discovered sanity, she found herself drowned in madness.

The change of the interpretation of the story "The Yellow Wallpaper" gives a good idea of the evolution of patriarchal ideals and how they are viewed by society. For a long time, this story was regarded as a gothic horror about the dramatics and hysterics of women, but now it is perceived as a feminist piece which brings light to important issues such as domestic abuse, medical malpractice and discrimination, and the negative effects of patriarchal society on the free spirits of countless women. The protagonist's journey brings awareness to the warning signs of toxic dynamics and ignites a fire for empowerment and strength in future women in similar situations. It lays an important foundation in preparing women to take charge of their own destiny and recognize that they are not alone in the fight against gender inequality. It is a timeless piece of literature which will continue to call attention to the mental health issues of women and

challenging society while advocating for change so that women can pursue their own happiness outside the influence of the patriarchal framework.

Works Cited

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