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Research Essay #2

The story of, “The Yellow Wallpaper” by Charlotte Perkins Gilman is a tale about a woman named Jane who is bound to a single room by her husband and is told from her diary entries as she catalogues her thoughts over the course of her stay in said room. The question that remains within the mind of the reader regarding Jane is, whether it is the room that is causing the progression of her mentality or if it is she alone that is afflicted regardless of the environment? I claim that Jane in, “The Yellow Wallpaper” is suffering from psychosis that is irrespective of the environment and doesn’t solely appear that way from flowery diary entries as she; begins to cry when she is completely alone, experiences lapse in her ability to perform even simple mental tasks, sees phantom figures in the wallpaper, and has aggressive thoughts towards others when thinking about the wallpaper.

The background information that I will describe is the way that an individual that is afflicted with genuine psychosis acts, thinks, and perceives the world around them. This background information is significant because it will show how it pertains to the narrator’s thoughts and actions over the course of the story. Suess’ research analysis states, “Thus, the psychotic person is devoid of any ‘Normal’ connection to society or language” (SUESS pg83). This gives insight into how such an individual thinks. Knowing how such a psychotic would think, assists in demonstrating the link between their actions and that of Jane’s. Jane is unable to interact effectively with the people in her life as the story continues. Jane is adequately described by the analysis and her actions increasingly fits the description presented by the quotation as the story progresses.

Jane begins to cry at nothing constantly, but only when no one else is around. This is the result of stress which Jane is attempting to conceal from her husband John, as she fears that this evidence will only worsen her situation as it lends credence to her mental state not being normal. Jane states, “I cry at nothing, and cry most of the time. Of course I don’t when John is here, or anybody else, but when I am alone” (GILMAN pg556). Here Jane demonstrates the mental strain that she is experiencing, which is the start of her rapid decline into psychosis, causing problems that will develop further and remain relevant throughout the story. Poirer’s research states, “That Wharton was encouraged to ‘Act like a baby’ seems to reflect more Mitchell’s beliefs in the limited nature of women’s physical and emotional strength” (POIRER 32). This quote is from research included in Poirer’s analysis where Wharton is the subject of the case of Mitchell’s rest cure. Jane is clearly at her emotional limits. Poirer’s research states, “The use of rest per se for overworked women is sensible…” (POIRER 21). Notice how they say that the use of rest “Per se” is sensible, which to me means that there is an underlying issue with Jane that was not addressed before she began the rest cure. I interpret the information presented in these quotes as Jane demonstrating her current poor mental health after only a short time in the room. She is clearly dealing with some mental issues beyond what such a length of time could reasonably be expected to cause her. I feel that this adds to the claim that her initial mental state is upset rather than it being that way from the room. Jane crying uncontrollably is encapsulated perfectly by Poirer’s analysis of someone’s genuine depiction of mental instability. As I continue to prove Jane’s initial genuine insanity I will speak about the impairment of her normal thought process.

Jane experiences lapse in her ability to perform even simple mental tasks, a complication of her increasingly poor mental health. She is demonstrating cognitive decline, which is a symptom of mental instability. She writes, “It is getting to be a great effort for me to think straight” (GILMAN 556). I interpret this quote as Jane degenerating cognitively to the point where she will have trouble differentiating between reality and machinations of her mind. Notice how she describes the effort to think straight, in that it is getting to be a “Great” effort, which to me this says she was already experiencing issues with thinking prior to her treatment of drugs and absenting social interaction. Davison asserts that, “These descriptions gesture towards the narrator’s later madness and offers one possible theory as to the case of her progressive mental division” (DAVISON 62). They are speaking of the divide in what Jane will begin to perceive as reality. Her mental strain is causing her own devolution. These two quotes demonstrate to me the genuineness of her decline and that they share a depiction of the unwell that sits quite closely with the way Jane acts in the story. I like how blunt Jane is in the quote provided, as she seems to understand the situation that she is really in even if it is for the briefest of moments. The prior section showed Jane admitting to her mental decline, however the next section will show the tears in her perception of reality.

Jane is seeing phantoms in the wallpaper of the room in which she is confined, which is something that she is using to explain her mental fall. When she sees this phantom, she envisions it as a woman and later as herself, and in doing so she finds herself a familiar source of her ire and pain that dispels fault on the self. Jane attests, “I can see a strange, provoking, formless sort of figure that seems to skulk about behind that silly and conspicuous front design” (GILMAN 555). This quote is the first of several times that Jane would write that she has seen a figure, form, woman, etc. in the wallpaper as she continues to see them during the story. At first these mentions are dismissive of the detailing in the wallpaper, as seen here, but later become the obsession and target of her ire. Suess states that, “Eventually, Jane not only recognizes but becomes the woman in the wallpaper” (SUESS 93). Suess is describing the sort of person that Jane is when she sees these phantoms. As she continues to see them, she attributes, to what I interpret to be a tear of the mind, more and more of herself as her blame fails her. Suess then finalizes their analysis when they state, “…Jane does not belong to the same world or have the same identity as earlier” (SUESS 95). I am drawn towards the way the quote says that Jane doesn’t belong to the same “World” as before. I interpret the quotes provided as her truly being in a different mental state than prior. That Jane has changed state over the course of the story and not poetically writing of her grief. These quotes all tell a similar story of genuine mental instability that I feel supports my topic. Jane has written of her view of the room around her and as I move into the next section, she will disassociate herself from even the people around her.

Jane begins to experience aggressive thoughts towards the persons in her life when they have anything to do with the wallpaper of her room. Jane’s hostilities are the final nail for her attempts to remain in reality. Jane’s twisted mentality comments, “But I am here, and no person touches this paper but me—not alive!” (GILMAN 560). The quote shows the finality of her stance regarding the yellow wallpaper. She has given enough of herself over to this crutch that she can’t see herself without it and will lash out at anyone as it belongs to Jane alone. Quawas states, “With this recognition and perception, the narrator begins to act wildly and assertively” (QUAWAS 48). Quawas speaks of Jane seeing herself as a part of the wallpaper and begins to act accordingly to those around her who in her mind are a threat to the relationship she shares with it. This realization is the tipping point for her sudden shift in thoughts when it comes to the people of her household. As Suess describes, “…Jane, who is not only a woman but who is also a psychotic, is twice removed from an understanding of the Symbolic Order” (SUESS 89). The use of the “Symbolic Order” here is particularly captivating as it is representative of even a child’s ability to accept the rules that dictate interaction between others, society, etc. These quotes provide evidence to the topic that Jane has drastically changed from her beginning point in the story. Her view of the other people in her life is drastically different from the beginning of the story to when the quote takes place. This demonstrates to me that she is indeed suffering mentally. Now that Jane has been established to be genuinely impaired from before she encountered the yellow wallpaper, I will concede the other interpretations of the information provided.

Another interpretation suggests that the writings of Jane were just her expressing herself and her view of her surroundings and the situation that has been forced upon her from, “Haunted house heroine: *Female gothic closets in ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’”* by Carol Margaret Davison. Some of the strengths of this alternative view to my thesis are that it relies less on the interpretations of Jane’s book writings and more on facts of the writer and era. Charlotte Perkins Gilman has made her criticism of Jane’s predicament known as the “Rest cure” that she has had to deal with herself. This combined with information regarding the era and the treatment of women at the time lends good factual evidence to support this view. Davison writes, “The narrator’s complex vision of the horrors of patriarchy in *The Yellow Wallpaper* is only matched by the final complex and horrific vision of the senseless and crawling, infantile narrator…” (DAVISON 66). This quote does paint a picture of the type of treatment that women of the era were subjected to and further strengthens the claim that the narrator’s writings are akin to this treatment. This interpretation has its merits, but it hinges on a certain moment towards the end of the story being interpreted in one way.

Davison’s flaw in their reasoning is that it relies on an inherently unreliable narrator and characters acting consistent with people of the era. My thesis is does not falter based on one person’s reaction of one person in the story. That interpretation believes that John faints out of shock from what Jane has done, in that she has continued to write, ignored his orders, and has demonstrated a behavior that is beyond what a lady of the time would do, which relies on an unreliable narrator or unreliable source from the narrator. Poirer states, “Gilman seemed aware of this exercise of both medical and male authority when she combined the roles of husband and physician in *The Yellow Wallpaper*” (POIRER pg27). This quote is weak because of its assumption that Gilman only created their characters as symbols and that they had no agency or ties to how people behave in the first place. When it says that John was a representative of, “The roles of husband and physician” I find that to be a far too broad depiction of two very large and varying groups that can differ so wildly that Gilman would hardly be expected to believe themselves. The psychosis of Jane is a far more direct approach to the character and holds the writings from the diary in which the entire story is based to be truthful, rather than a fantasy. The psychosis of Jane is a far more direct approach to the character and holds the writings from the diary in which the entire story is based to be truthful, rather than a fantasy.

Jane is genuinely psychologically impaired that has begun before the story’s beginning and not just writing to spite her husband John in her own expressive manner. All interpretations of this story must ask whether Jane can be trusted as a reliable narrator and my thesis says that she is, so one must wonder how can other thesis base themselves on such shaky ground if they do not trust her? The story of, “The Yellow Wallpaper” by Charlotte Perkins Gilman is a fantastic window in the life of someone that must live with immense strain that can be caused by numerous outside forces.

Works Cited

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