

The Mad Eyes

Comparative essay of the works *The Yellow Wallpaper* and *The Black Cat*



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Introduction

Declaration

I, Kevin Varga declare that this is my own intellectual work, created only with using my own ideas, the works which have been cited and the ideas heard during the courses History of American Literature 1 and Reading 19th Century Literary Texts. The structure of the essay is based on Kerry Walk's strategy of comparative analysis writing from the Harvard College Writing Center's strategies for essay writing.

Emendation

During the analysis, I use statements to show my points and believes. It is important to acknowledge that these are my own subjective opinions and should not be treated as facts.

Subject matter

This work is about the comparison of the books called *The Yellow Wallpaper* written by Charlotte Perkins Gilman and *The Black Cat* written by Edgar Allan Poe.

Frame of reference

The two works is compared based on the madness present in both books of the mad protagonists and the oppressive nature of society.

Grounds for comparison

The works have been chosen because of their popularity. Choosing classical literature as the topic of a comparative essay can lead to a better understanding because the people are already familiar with the chosen works.

Citation

The citation is done according to the MLA format.

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Comparison of the selected works

Narration

The narrators in the stories have been chosen to be nameless. The reason behind this could be that it might make the story more mysterious to some of the readers, or to indicate that it could happen to anyone and not only to certain individuals.

The narration starts out the same way in both stories. The narrators narrate their story in a way that we might consider those individuals sane, and that the story we are about to read is going to be an everyday tale, without any madness involved. Here I would like to clarify that, even though *The Black Cat*'s narrator mentions that he believes that this is not an everyday story, and it might sound unreal, the beginning of the story feels quite ordinary.

Both narrators are having a recap of their past days in a written form, but in a different manner. The narration in *The Yellow Wallpaper* is done with a help of a diary, where the entries were presumably added by the narrator on different days, and not written all at once. While in the case of *The Black Cat*, it seems as if the story would be a synopsis of the previous times, written all at once after the imprisonment of the narrator. This is a crucial point if we would like to analyze the stories. Because in the case of *The Yellow Wallpaper* the character development becomes extremely sharp. We can see how the mental state of the narrator gets worse and worse on the basis of the entries. While in the case of *The Black Cat* the lines become blurry. The whole story was written in a completely shattered mental state.

The gender of the authors is also different. In the case of *The Yellow Wallpaper* the narrator is a woman, although in the work *The Black Cat*, the narrator is a man. Which is another important aspect when we are looking at the works.

Gender and society

This section of the essay builds on some of the ideas heard during the course Reading 19th Century Literary Texts and William Ames's work.

We can take another look at the story of *The Yellow Wallpaper*. Due to the fact that we do not have a lot of information about the life of the narrator before her imprisonment. We can assume, that she had a completely healthy mental state, before she got locked up by John. In this case, we can immediately see the injustice done to the central figure of the story. Following this train of thought and analyzing the whole tale in this feminist manner we can arrive to a conclusion that the story deals with the injustice done to woman at that century. The total control of the patriarchy. Women imprisoned by their husbands, feelings and society's conventions.

The idea that the work does not only deal with one woman's life comes from the nameless narration and from the part of the story, where it is said that there are a lot of women creeping, and not only one.

Building on this idea we can draw a parallel between the female characters of the selected works. Between the woman of *The Yellow Wallpaper* and the wife of the madman in *The Black Cat*, both imprisoned by their husbands. The first in the attic and the second in the basement, behind a wall.

Solitude

Another parallel can be found between the two stories. The solitude of the protagonists. As we take a look at the madman of *The Black Cat*, we can see that he did not have healthy relationship with people. He lived his life in isolation. Besides her wife, and pets he did not have anyone.

The woman of *The Yellow Wallpaper* lived in isolation as well. The only people she met was her husband and his sister during her time in the attic.

With the help of Emily Coffey's article, in which she asserts that solitary confinement leads to the degradation of the prisoner mental health, I conclude that one of the key factors, which induced madness in both stories were the solitude.

Freedom over insanity

This section of the essay builds on some of the ideas present in Aig123's work and the ideas heard during the courses Reading History of American Literature 1 and Reading 19th Century Literary Texts.

Limbo, or two women inside the room

Here I would like to notify the reader that the point of view about the woman shifts. At this section I will treat the woman in *The Yellow Wallpaper* sane through the whole story.

The definition of limbo varies. The Cambridge Dictionary explains it as "an uncertain situation that you cannot control and in which there is no progress or improvement" (Cambridge University Press), although one of the definition on the English Oxford Living Dictionary site asserts that it is "[a]n uncertain period of awaiting a decision or resolution; an intermediate state or condition" (Oxford University Press). When I refer to limbo in this section I'm referring to the "... intermediate state or condition..." (Oxford University Press), the definition of the English Oxford Living Dictionaries.

There are two images of the same woman in the work. The conformist, obedient, submissive wife, who does as John wants her to do. And the strong, warrior-like figure of an independent woman, who does as she pleases, even against her husband's will.

These two women are locked inside one mind. The mind of the narrator. With this kind of a perception, we can even think about the room as a mental state, a limbo, where the two characters of the same woman fight.

If we follow the story with this approach we can see how the second, strong and independent character wins in the story. At the end of the story the wife creeps in the room, and pronounce that she has won, and they will not be able to put her back to the wallpaper, which has the "right" pattern, because she destroyed it all. The husband, John, lies unconscious on the floor and the woman creeps through the room as she pleases, going through the body of her husband.

The door stands open, which leads to freedom for the woman. The way by which she achieved her goal is also important. She threw out the keys from the window and made her husband unlock the door. Which might suggest and show the message that the women's strongest weapons could be their wit and the ability of manipulation.

The fight for freedom

The notion of freedom in current societies are often criticized. Democracy doesn't permit a lot of actions. One of it is murder. In the work *The Black Cat* we can choose to neglect the insanity of the man who killed his cat and his wife. If we do so, we can see a man who is not fitting in the society and tries to break out, creating his own rules. He chooses the easiest way for carrying out his actions, he fails to control himself. At the end, he gets imprisoned, but which cannot be overlooked is that for a certain period of time he escaped society and lived his life entirely by his own rules.

Which highlights another connection between the two stories, the fight for freedom. How important and how dangerous could it be to live a life without some type of a control. In the case of *The Yellow Wallpaper*, with this certain mindset we cannot be sure how the woman will live her life, whether it will be harmful or beneficial. But we can see what total neglect of rules, whether it is internal or external leads to. The man in the story *The Black Cat* ends up dying because of his lifestyle. Whether being free from external rules for such a short time was worth the imprisonment and probable close death is entirely subjective.

The psyche

This section deals with a psychoanalytic view. Most of the ideas used in the analysis of *The Black Cat* comes from Maroš Buday's work. *The Yellow Wallpaper* is analyzed in the same manner, but it is done by myself. The base of the id, ego, superego comes from the article written by Saul McLeod on the site SimplyPsychology and the idea of emotional transference comes from Maroš Buday's work.

A brief introduction to id, ego, superego and emotional transference

It was explained by Saul McLeod that the id is nothing else than our personality which we have at birth, including the sex and the aggressive instincts. While the ego is the connection between the id and the external world. It exists for the purpose of conveying these needs and making it acceptable in the eyes of the society. The superego consists of two parts; the ideal self and conscience. The ideal self is the picture of who we want to become. The conscience helps us become that person by making us feel bad when the ego permits the id in doing something that our ideal self would not do.

As for the emotional transference, I would like to quote Freud, as Maroš Buday did, because his explanation is easy to understand and the information could not be more authentic.

It is "a reproduction of emotions relating to repressed experiences, [...] and the substitution of another person [...] for the original object of the repressed impulses" (Freud).

The psyche of the narrator of *The Black Cat*

If we analyze the psyche of the protagonist, we can see that he does not function as a normal human being. He achieves everything in the "easiest" way possible, which is brutal in many cases. There are problems with both the ego and the superego of the character. The problems with his ego probably arises from the lack of human interactions, which is why he does not know how to deal with his emotions and suppresses them. According to Maroš Buday, the

superego is definitely twisted, and that's why he cannot restrain the outbursts of emotions put forth by the id.

The emotional transference plays the biggest part in the story, Maroš Buday suggests that we should replace the words "cat" / "Pluto" with the word "wife", this way we can have the original picture which is suppressed by the madman. Buday also asserts that the source of the hate might have aroused from the pressure of society. He says that the protagonist did not want to marry, the society made him to, and that he doesn't love her wife, he only endures it, to the point where he can no longer control himself and his ego gives the privileges to his id to satisfy his desires. He makes his points more legitimate by making the reader aware of the fact that before he brings home the second cat, which he loved, started to hate immediately, after it became his wife's favorite. Moreover, after the murder of the wife, the cats become rarely mentioned. These points make the picture extremely sharp, and I completely agree with Buday's opinions, that there was an emotional transference, all that hatred was towards the wife, but the cat was the one who had to endure it.

The psyche of the woman of *The Yellow Wallpaper*

This point of view differs from the aspects presented before. Here I would like to present two interpretations. The woman was insane before she got locked up, and the woman only went mad inside her custody. The theory that I have written, based on Buday's interpretation of *The Black Cat* and Saul McLeod's article about the psyche, is applicable for both of the interpretations.

The wife of John has been taken away and locked inside of an attic in a house because of the problems with her ego. It could have been done before the not well trained eyes could see that there was a problem with this individual, because her husband who made the arrangements was a physician. I assume that the ways with which she wanted to achieve her desires was not seen as proper for the community of hers, mainly for her husband. The reasons could have been that she did destroy her surroundings just as in the attic or just that she wrote things that her husband did not want others to see.

The ideal self-part of the superego can be seen easily. She mentions how obedient and suppressive should she be, and what it means to be a good wife. But I believe the problem lies in her conscience, although she feels bad after writing and creeping she also feels joy, and thinks happily about these times, and makes arrangements when she will do these things again. As if there would be two ideal selves inside her.

I believe there is an emotional transference as well, she feels hatred towards John and Jennie because they locked her up, but she projects this hate to the wallpaper, and tears it down, destroys it.

The ending is ambiguous, we don't know whether the husband got killed or just fainted when he has seen the room in the state in which the wife left it.

I would like to go with the first interpretation, because it makes the image extremely sharp and draws another parallel between the stories. It can be concluded that the emotional transference wasn't a solution for either of the characters, they have built up and suppressed emotions which

busted out at the end, i.e. the main characters gave total control to their id. Both stories ended with the death of the marriage, with the death of their life partners.

Resurrection

The idea of writing about this section came from Djaafour Fouzia's interpretation of the symbols from *The Black Cat*. He claims that the symbol of the half-eyed black cat could have come from Norse Mythology. He compares the cat to Odin, a wise Norse God, who wanted to gain the wisdom of the depth, therefore he sacrificed one of his eyes. But this was not enough for him, he also wanted to gain the wisdom of the occult, therefore he hanged himself in Yggdrasil, until he resurrected himself with the knowledge that he gained from his journey.

The connection between Pluto, the black cat and Odin can be easily seen with the information collected by Djaafour Fouzia. Because in the story, Pluto loses one of his eyes, and he is being hung on a tree. A second cat appears with overly similar traits. It could be a possibility that the second cat was still Pluto, who got resurrected.

A type of a resurrection can also be seen in the work *The Yellow Wallpaper*. The protagonist of the story lost her way of living. She became locked up in a room that she despised. After the death of her husband she got back her life, thus got resurrected.

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