

Woolf's Women: Behind the Walls

As Virginia Woolf sees it, the traditional roles of women in society seem as oppressive as being confined to the home, and as enslaving as being considered mere possessions of their husbands. In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf subtly draws comparisons between a woman's subordinate lifestyle and a slave's inferior societal status. Constantly subjected to isolation and derogatory discourse, women lack both the respect and the opportunity needed in order to achieve social equality. Similarly trapped in rooms of their own, the women in Chopin's "The Story of An Hour" and in Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" remain secluded from the outside world; similar to slaves, these women are unable to openly express their opinions and abilities without retaliated repression from men – their superiors by social standards.

While slaves were born into subordination, women were married into it: "[I]n fact she was the slave of any boy whose parents forced a ring upon her finger" (Woolf 44). Woolf depicts the sacrament of marriage as an enforcement of social stratification instead of a symbiotic benchmark in a relationship. Once married, women become "property" of their husbands, like slaves to their masters, and can "hardly read," and "scarcely spell." Instead of being encouraged to express themselves, both slaves and women are forced to live simplistic lives free from the influence of literature or of higher education. Women lack these skills not because of disinterest, but instead because of social pressures: "She picked up a book now and then, one of her brother's perhaps, and read a few pages. But then her parents came in and told her to mend the stockings or mind the stew and not moon about with books and papers" (47). Conditioned to be ashamed of the desire to express their thoughts, women will "scribble some pages up in an apple loft on the sly," but will be careful to "hide them or set fire to them" later, as the demonstration of intelligence seems to be a shameful sin. Men, distorted by their need for

masculinity, further discourage women from playing active roles in society by talking down to them and distorting women's views of their importance in the greater community. Woolf emphasizes the constant re-enforcement of this male-dominated perspective by incorporating the term "overcome" in order to create a parallel between the plight of slavery and the struggle of women: "There would always have been that assertion – you cannot do this, you are incapable of doing that – to protest against, to overcome" (54). Woolf then powerfully refers to the gender struggle as "[t]he history of men's opposition to women's emancipation," thus highlighting the imprisoning aspect of women's life in a patriarchal society (55). Meanwhile, women's hidden talent and contribution to humanity remains concealed by the oppressive ego's of their male counterparts.

Similar to Virginia Woolf's portrayal of women in society, the woman from "The Yellow Wallpaper" also finds herself confined within the nightmarish pattern of female life. Driven to insanity from constantly holding back their intellectual talent, women become even more deeply trapped within the walls of oppression. The woman from the story becomes quarantined to a small room due to her diagnosed "emotional madness." Left alone to analyze her surroundings, the woman becomes engaged in the intricacies of the faded yellow wallpaper. Eventually, she claims that several women, symbolizing herself and other demoralized women in her community, appear to be on the other side of the wallpaper, straining to break through its boundaries: "Sometimes I think there are a great many women behind, and sometimes only one, and she crawls around fast, and her crawling shakes it all over" (Gilman). The woman's desire to analyze the yellow paper acts as an emotional outlet for her suppressed intellect, as she strives to express her imaginative potential. Gilman further depicts the woman as coming to grips with her inferior status as the woman observes that the faces behind the wallpaper are "all the time

trying to climb through. But nobody could climb through that pattern – it strangles so.”

Metaphorically, women are constantly attempting to break through the gender barrier in which men enforce. However, the “pattern,” or traditional societal boundaries, will not submit.

As Woolf suggests women’s ownership to their husbands, Kate Chopin also speaks to women’s enslavement to men. In “The Story of an Hour,” Mrs. Mallard experiences breathtaking relief upon hearing of the assumed death of her husband: “She said it over and over under her breath: ‘free, free, free’” (Chopin). Although she feels slightly guilty for feeling joy instead of sorrow, Mrs. Mallard revels in the idea that “[t]here would be no one to live for” anymore, and instead “she would live for herself.” However, this feeling of freedom is short-lived, as is the false assumption of her husband’s death; Mrs. Mallard’s heart fails and she falls to her death upon the sight of her husband walking through the front door. Does her instantaneous death symbolize her eternal freedom from an oppressive marriage? Or does it instead represent a form of punishment for her happiness of the thought of her husband’s death – re-emphasizing the attempt to “keep women in their place?”

Ironically, while all three authors are elite, literary, educated women, they are still socially isolated and bound by sexist norms in society. Thus, Woolf, Gilman, and Chopin mirror the oppressed women in their stories; in a way, these authors make acknowledgeable statements about life from their perspectives by writing about upper-class women who still lack the opportunity to be viewed and treated as equal individuals, despite their economic statuses. Similarly, all of the authors must have felt emotionally tied-down to their husbands as they were simultaneously constrained by society – much like the struggling women in the stories. Therefore, the authors can almost be viewed as portraying nuances of their own personal struggles in the third-person.

From Woolf to Chopin, the subordination of women in a gender-stratified society puts a damper on their traditional intellectual and social development. Like slaves, women from earlier centuries were viewed and treated as mere accessories to American culture. Fortunately, similar to any other frivolous trend, the concept of the inferiority of women continues to outdate itself.

Works Cited

Chopin, Kate. "The Story of an Hour." 1894.

Gilman, Charlotte Perkins. "The Yellow Wallpaper." Boston, MA: Small & Maynard, 1899.

Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One's Own*. Harvest: San Diego, 1989, pp. 41- 57.