

Course: English Literature (Second Year)

Lesson One: “The Yellow Wallpaper” (1892) Analysis

Lecturer: Dr. Nihad LAOUAR

I. Historical context: Charlotte Perkins Gilman was writing at the very beginnings of the Progressive era (1870-1917) in America, a time when many writers were using their art to contribute to a national conversation about social and gender issues. As far as women’s rights are concerned, Gilman advocated for the acceptance and support of women working outside the domestic sphere. Her famous work “The Yellow Wallpaper” (1892) offers a symbolic imagery of women’s imprisonment in the domestic realm. This short story serves as a critic of the “rest cure” treatment created by Dr S. Weir Mitchell, a leading specialist in nervous disorders. The “rest cure” treatment was prescribed mainly for women as Mitchell believed that depression and anxiety originate from too much mental activity and not enough attention to domestic affairs. For Gilman, this course of treatment turned out to be a disaster. Prevented from working, she soon had a nervous breakdown. Writing this short story through Gothic lenses, allows Gilman to criticize her position as well the position of many women of the 1890s who were forced to stay at home and remain inactive as a way of further reinforcing their domestic role which eventually suppresses their creativity.

II. The “Yellow Wallpaper” As a Gothic Short Story:

The “Yellow Wallpaper” is a Gothic short story because of the remarkable depiction of the deterioration of the human mind as well as imprisonment, given that “madness” and “imprisonment” are both Gothic elements. In the 18th century, the writer Ann Radcliffe established a standard for the Gothic novel. Radcliffe’s central Gothic themes often revolve around a young woman who is presented as a persecuted victim and courageous heroine. The heroine of the Gothic novel, hence, is often imprisoned in one of the secret rooms of a Gothic castle and from which she tries to escape and free herself. The physical imprisonment of Gothic heroines by the male patriarch in a castle serves as symbol of women’s confinement in the patriarchal societies of the 18th as well as 19th centuries. Likewise, Gilman’s short story “The Yellow Wallpaper” depicts a woman who is in a vulnerable position and who like Radcliffe’s Gothic heroines is imprisoned by

her husband John who puts her under “the rest cure” treatment which leads her to lose her sanity in the end.

III. Summary and Analysis:

The Yellow Wallpaper is written as a series of diary entries from the perspective of a woman (the narrator) who is suffering from post-partum depression and was prescribed the “rest cure” which promotes rest and total inactivity. The narrator begins by describing the large house that she and her husband, John, have rented for the summer. John is characterized as an extremely practical man who works as a physician. Their move into the country partially originates from his desire to expose his suffering wife to its clean air and calm life so that she can recover from what he sees as a slight hysterical tendency.

First Entry: The narrator begins with a description of the house “A colonial mansion, a hereditary estate, I would say a haunted house” (Gilman 1). This statement hints at the fact that there is something strange about the house and foreshadows the fact that she will herself become haunted. John laughs at her suspicion and she says “one expects that in marriage” (Gilman 1). John’s laughing at her and the narrator’s sarcastic response here reveal the strained dynamic of their marriage that promotes men’s authority over women.

John in this story embodies a typically male view of the world who is pragmatic, stoic, dismissive of anxiety, in contrast to his wife, and does not take her emotional concerns very seriously. The cure he has prescribed resembles that which the author experienced in real life, and restricts her self-expression outside of traditional gender roles.

It is noticed in the story that when John approaches his wife, she hides her diary. It can be said that her act of hiding her only form of self-expression is a means of rebellion against John’s orders both as her husband and her doctor.

Second entry: When the narrator tried to convince John to change the wallpaper, he laughs at her and refuses to renovate the house calling her a “blessed little goose” (Gilman 4). The language used by John in responding to his wife’s request is condescending and elevates him to a more

superior position to that of his wife. Another example of belittling his wife appears when he treats her like a silly child as he says “What is it, little girl?” (Gilman 8).

Third Entry: While John is away, the narrator walks in the garden or lies in her room, staring at the wallpaper. The narrator’s obsession grows in her enforced isolation, and her need to make sense of the wallpaper is a symbol of her inability to express her own inner life as well as her need to be creative.

Fourth and fifth Entries: The narrator feels unable to write as she feels too weak, but she needs to express herself in some way in order to find relief. She has lost strength, and John administers a whole range of treatments. She tries to convince him to let her leave the house and visit her cousins. John ignores her demands as he believes she is exaggerating. Her failure to convince him to leave shows that she is trapped by her husband’s authority that continuously suppresses inner desires of being sociable and creative.

Sixth Entry: As the story progresses, the wallpaper has become a place where the repressed inner life of the narrator is expressed. She is now experiencing insomnia and hallucinations.

The narrator dwells on the irritating lack of regularity in the wallpaper, which defies her “like a bad dream” (Gilman 9) resembling a fungus. She explains that at night the pattern becomes bars, and she sees the mysterious figure of a woman behind them. The figure puzzles and intrigues her, as she lies in bed. The wallpaper’s puzzling patterns continue to symbolize the changeable nature of the narrator’s sickening mind. This is also represented in the fungus image that is unclean, ill and ugly. In addition, the woman, trapped behind the bars of the pattern, acts like a double of the narrator herself. This means that the woman in the wallpaper is trapped in the same manner in which the narrator is trapped within the story.

Entries Seven and Eight: As she grows obsessed with the wallpaper, the narrator starts to see improvement of her mood and uncovering the secret of the wallpaper became her only purpose in this house. This can be seen in the way that she no longer attempts to express her inner life to John.

Entry Nine: The narrator discovers that the mysterious figure in the wallpaper moves and shakes the bars as she it tries to break through. Here, the link between the mysterious figure and the

narrator becomes clearer. Likewise, the narrator is trapped in the house and she is desperate to escape from societal conventions that are exercised against her by John.

Entry Ten: The narrator confides in the reader that she has seen the mysterious woman escape the wallpaper during the day. The narrator identifies further with the woman in the wall, and reveals that she herself has begun to ‘creep’ around the room during the day while John is away.

Entry Eleven: The narrator is determined to remove the top pattern of the wallpaper from the one she sees underneath. Now the narrator has turned completely inward, hiding her discovery because her last desperate means of self-expression becomes this mission to free the figure behind the wallpaper.

Entry Twelve: This is the last day of their time in the house, and the narrator arranges to be alone in the room overnight. As soon as the moon appears, she begins her attempt to free the mysterious figure. The narrator is obsessed, driven to finish the task of removing the wallpaper. She refuses to leave the room. She locks the door, throws the key onto the front path, and gets to work removing the paper. As the narrator descends completely into a mental breakdown, she now identifies completely with the mysterious woman, seeing herself as that woman. In other words, the two women have become one, in that the woman behind the wallpaper is an image of the narrator. In addition, she notes that there are so many creeping women: “I don't like to LOOK out of the windows even--there are so many of those creeping women, and they creep so fast... I wonder if they all come out of that wall-paper as I did?” (Gilman 14). The question she asks here could imply that many women are trapped in the domestic sphere like the narrator and from which they are all trying to break free.

In the final scene of the story John arrives at the door and tries to break it down. The narrator tells him that the key is outside under a plantain leaf, repeating it over and over until he opens the door. When he enters, she says "I've got out at last," said I, "in spite of you and Jane. And I've pulled off most of the paper, so you can't put me back!" (Gilman 14). John faints at the sight of her creeping along the wall, and she continues to creep in a circle around the room, forced to go over his prone body with each turn. Her act of going over his fainted body shows a sense of triumph against the traditional patriarchal society symbolized in the character of John.

