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Shelby L. Dana

Brigham Young University - Provo, shelbylynn623@gmail.com

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Shelby Dana

ENGL 295

Dr. Gideon Burton

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Always the Feminine Fool

For some reason, women and insanity seem to go hand in hand. Absurd mothers-in-law, crazy ex-girlfriends, mentally unstable cat ladies down the street, and Taylor Swift's "Blank Space" music video—all are prime examples of strange behavior that has somehow come to be seen as normal. How do women get away with it? Is there some DNA strand that is exclusively feminine labeled "bonkers"? Even the Greeks had a notion of this when they coined the root of the word "hysteria", *hysterikos*. It means "of the womb, suffering in the womb" (McCormack). While this may seem entertaining or merely a funny coincidence, women have been cast as irrational throughout history, often undeservedly.

Author Charlotte Perkins Gilman set out to exploit the negative effects of this stereotyping in her short story, "The Yellow Wallpaper." She wrote the work not only to expose the oppression women face in married life, but the crippling assumption of their incapacity to think and act rationally. Gilman shows this by the way her protagonist is diagnosed, treated, and ignored. The ultimate madness of the narrator proves her point: that women act irrationally because it is expected of them, not because it is an integral part of their nature.

"The Yellow Wallpaper," by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, tells the story of a young woman who is brought to an isolated, Gothic house by her husband, John, after the birth of their first

child. The woman is unnamed, which suggests the universality of her predicament and the idea that she could represent to any female of the time period. The narrator sees herself as sick, but only temporarily. John, on the other hand, deems her “temporary nervous depression—a slight hysterical tendency” (Gilman 486) as meriting a more drastic rest cure. The narrator/patient is placed in solitary confinement in her room for an undetermined amount of time. Her bed is bolted to the floor, the windows are barred, and a hideous yellow paper covers the walls. The narrator is forbidden to write, although she believes it would help her condition, so she does so anyway by keeping a secret diary in which she records her feelings, thoughts, opinions, and later delusions. The story then goes on to detail the narrator’s descent into insanity. She feels she must hide her condition from her husband and displays only the behavior he wants to see; when he is around, she eats and rests often, so he believes that she’s improving.

This, however, belies the insanity that has taken hold of her mind as she obsesses over the yellow wallpaper in the room. She begins to imagine a woman trapped inside the paper. She follows the woman’s movements during the day and tears the paper off in strips in an attempt to free her. “The front pattern does move—and no wonder! The woman behind shakes it!”(Gilman 494) The narrator identifies with the woman in the wallpaper and readers can interpret this as the resentment she feels towards filling the role of insanity expected of her. Her husband treats her as if she were mad and she lives up to his expectations. The story ends with John discovering his poor bride creeping around the room on all fours and she triumphantly exclaims the following: “‘I’ve got out at last,’ said I, “in spite of you and Jennie. And I’ve pulled off most of the paper, so you can’t put me back!” (Gilman 497) With this, John is forced to deal with the monster he’s created.

For author Charlotte Perkins Gilman, this story was all-too personal. The work was written after Charlotte herself dealt with mental issues that were brought on by family life, then misdiagnosed and mistreated. She was a bright mind in her youth, having received a college education after countless arguments with her parents over whether formal education was fitting for a female. Charlotte never wanted the “housewife” role suggested for most women of her day.

At times she saw herself as engaged in a tragic tug-of-war between “The World and The Woman”—and the best she could hope for was an uneasy truce. At times, she felt immersed in the larger world; at other times, she felt imprisoned in her flesh, achingly aware of every bump, bruise, and boundary. (Davis xviii)

Charlotte longed to make a difference in the world. In her biography, she discusses how she wished to live life to its maximum potential and do a vast amount of good there. She saw the role of a wife and mother as intellectually crippling, but because of the societal opinions of the day, her options were limited. This would lead her to take on a feminist voice later in life. Before that, however, Charlotte opted to try out the marriage and family route. It was there that she discovered the stigma of mental instability that is so quickly assigned to women in times of struggle.

Charlotte based the main character of “The Yellow Wallpaper” on her own experience with family life. She married a man for whom she had some affection, despite her vows to remain single all her life, and was soon with child. It was then that she began to be afflicted with what would now be classified as post-partum depression. Her biography describes the ordeal as follows:

Two years after the delivery, she recalled her physical labor as “easy . . . enough” but identified mental anguish as her downfall: “[I] had terrible fits of remorse and depression all through the time, but thought nothing of them as I had had the same in the two years torture called courtship. [I] began to show ‘nervousness’ in the month’s confinement. [I] had wild and dreadful ideas which I was powerless to check, times of excitement and times of tears.” (Davis 81)

Her experience mirrors that of the narrator in the story. Instead of diagnosing the problem as a mental illness that could be overcome with proper treatment, doctors of those days were quick to label her issues as “neurasthenia . . . an umbrella category including within it mood disorders” (Davis 83). Along with that, “nervous women were often also or exclusively diagnosed with hysteria” (Davis 83). Her case wasn’t helped by the fact that another popular belief circulated that “women’s purportedly voracious reproductive organs were thus portrayed as drawing energy from other areas of the body and especially from the mind” (Davis 83). All of these societal influences combined against her to create a not only a physical confinement but a mental prison as well. Like the narrator, Gilman’s illness was misdiagnosed due to incorrect and sexist beliefs of the day. Instead of receiving proper corrective treatment, both women were subject to crippling bedrest that worsened the disease.

Luckily, Charlotte Perkins Gilman escaped from the insanity that ultimately befalls the narrator in “The Yellow Wallpaper.” After doctors deemed her ready to re-enter society, she wrote the work as one of the first pieces of feminist literature. While one of the main themes in the story is definitely the oppressive nature of marriage, the message of assumed insanity based on sex is one that cannot be ignored.

By studying more about the theme of insanity projected upon women, readers will discover that Charlotte Perkins Gilman was not the only author of her time to explore the topic. One of her contemporaries, Susan Glaspell, wrote the well-known short story, "Trifles," dealing with similar issues. In this work, two women go to the scene of a murder with their husbands, who both work in law enforcement. Their mutual friend, Mrs. Wright, is accused of killing her own husband and is sent to jail while the couples investigate her home. The men in the story believe Mrs. Wright to be guilty and set out looking for proof that will convict her, but are prejudiced because they think she's simply lost her mind. They leave their wives to attend to trivial matters about the house. While their husbands are gone, the women deduce how and why the crime was committed. However, because of their assumptions about Mrs. Wright's mental state and their lack of regard for the intelligence of their wives, the law enforcement officers fail to convict Mrs. Wright and cannot solve the crime.

This story is another example of the fallacious reasoning that gripped society about the female state of mind. If the men had listened to the opinions of their wives and not merely assumed Mrs. Wright had lost her mind, they would have been able to correctly convict the wrongdoer of the story. In comparison to "The Yellow Wallpaper," if John had assumed his wife to be logical and only temporarily suffering from an ailment, he could have helped her recover properly and saved her from real madness. In both scenarios, a previously-held belief halted progress. This relationship is a further witness to the projected insanity of women that was especially prevalent during the time period.

Gilman also follows a template characteristic of her era in order to reinforce this idea. In "Gilman's Gothic Allegory: Rage and Redemption in 'The Yellow Wallpaper,'" Greg Johnson states the following: "By placing his distraught wife in a nursery, he is merely following the

nineteenth-century equation of non-maternal women—that is, spinsters and ‘hysterics’—with helpless children. Yet he is unthinkingly allowing her the free play of imagination and abdication of social responsibility also characteristic of children” (Johnson 524). During this time, women who chose to follow non-traditional roles were thought of as incapable and unwell. What else could be their reasoning for not wanting children? By equating her narrator with a child in this way, Gilman is able to portray the immaturity assumed of women at that time period. The narrator is portrayed as less intelligent and less rational than her husband in a childlike, under-developed manner. When she has questions about her condition, John, the narrator’s husband, quickly dismisses them as shown in this passage: “‘Bless her little heart!’ said he with a big hug, ‘she shall be as sick as she pleases! But now let’s improve the shining hours by going to sleep, and talk about it in the morning!’” (Gilman 492). The narrator is deemed incapable of understanding her state and her suggestions are brushed off without hesitation.

In regards to her treatment options, readers can see that the narrator has a much better notion of what would be best for her recovery than does her husband. Her instincts to exercise, interact socially, and openly write and share all she is passing through, dismissed by John as lunatic and detrimental, are in fact rational and healthy. The treatment she is prescribed, her “rest cure,” is defined as “a length of time during which the patient did minimal physical activity and had very limited mental stimulation because, as some doctors believed, the condition was brought on by too much going on in the patient’s mind or some kind of hysteria or nervousness” (Chohra). Once again, assumed hysteria causes more damage than healing.

The narrator herself shows another instance of her mental stability at the beginning of the story when she says: “Personally, I disagree with their ideas. Personally, I believe that congenial

work, with excitement and change, would do me good. But what is one to do?" (Gilman 486). She is forced to comply with the then-accepted procedures of how to handle psychologically inept patients. During this time, psychiatric facilities "were not institutions for treatment, but for the separation of mentally ill people from the community, and quality-wise resembled prisons. Treatment of mentally ill patients in psychiatric hospitals of that time was not founded on humane therapy" (Nenadovic 7). Due to the untested nature of psychiatry at the time, the narrator accepts that her doctors are right even though their methods are detrimental. Throughout the story, she longs to be able to engage in a form of self-therapy, her writing, but it is denied her time after time. "I think sometimes if I were only well enough to write a little it would relieve the press of ideas and rest me" (Gilman 488). Writing, a now-accepted form of creative expression and an effective method of psychological release, could have helped her recovery had not her ideas been discounted because of her insanity.

It would be nice to say that this is an issue that earlier generations dealt with and it no longer affects women today. It would be a lovely thing if society held women accountable for their thoughts as rational humans instead of giving them a free pass as "mentally unstable." If men are tired of women playing mind games, behaving inappropriately, and being overly dramatic, they need to stop assuming it to be part of their nature and instead emphasize the logical intelligence that most women really do possess. Some are born mad, some achieve madness, but women have madness thrust upon them.

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