

The theme of a woman's alienation from her own identity has been raised not once since feminist thought first emerged. However, few authors have managed to make it in such a symbolic manner as Charlotte Perkins Gilman does it in her short story "The Yellow Wallpaper". Written very much like a stream of consciousness of the main character, a married woman spiritually entrapped by her husband, the story reveals the challenges and limitations which a woman faces. The narrator's obsession with the wallpaper in her room has a deep symbolism, which stands for the loss of meaning and sense of living by her.

It is worth of note that the symbolism in the story is presented by the author as being dynamic and changing throughout the narration. It can be easily traced how the main's heroine mood and personality transforms as well. At the beginning of her narration she is quite please with her existence because she believes that her husband's restriction towards her is his way of caring. Like many women of her time, she is passive about her life; she does not have any personal wishes and is totally dependent on her husband. However, she does not realize this until she becomes physically isolated in the room with yellow wallpaper. In this sense, this yellow wallpaper which is outside makes her open her eyes to what is going on inside her. Her depression at the beginning which develops into insanity reveals the inner conflict that she has about her husband and the life she has to lead.

Indeed, she has no personal voice in the male world and finds it impossible to prove herself to her husband and brother who are physicians and diagnose that she has a neurosis. "But what is one to do?" is a recurrent phrase that she pronounces when speaking of other people's will imposed on her. The author's making her male surroundings doctors is quite symbolic because they determine what is normal and what is not for her. Hence, the situation stands for the author's contemporary society where men dictated their will and patterns of behavior. It is also symbolic that the narrator is forbidden to work although she is not happy about the fact: "Personally, I believe that congenial work, with excitement and change, would do me good. But what is one to do?" (Gilman 2). Keeping the woman away from any activity stresses that she is merely an object and has no chance to express herself. In fact, this is the first factor that causes the heroine's insanity.

When the narrator first sees the wallpaper in her room, she feels that "the color is repellent, almost revolting (Gilman 9). However, she has to put up with it and live in the place where she feels uncomfortable. Her husband John refuses to change the wallpaper because she does not want to disturb her neurosis. Indeed, the behavior of the man is illustrative of the essence of their relationship: everything he does is for her sake; however she cannot have her own wishes. The woman feels that her husband chokes her with his own hands, and staying in the room with the yellow wallpaper is another symbol of her imprisonment. Her permanent studying of the patterns on the wallpaper is like staring at the grate of her cage.

While she goes on staying in the room, she cannot escape the inner truth about her life that she has avoided to see before. The yellow wallpaper becomes something like a screen in the cinema where she starts watching what is going on in her inner world. So, when a sub-pattern reveals beneath the outer layer of paper, it is more than just the woman's madness and frustration. It is her meeting with the true horror that she has inside, so it is quite symbolic. The heroine tries to resist this revelation and finds rational explanations for her emotional states because she realizes that her authoritative and practical husband does not share her perception of the world. Indeed, for John she is much like wallpaper too as he is not interested of any layers that are beneath the general pattern.

Hence, it is his superficial understanding of his wife that causes the tragedy to happen. On a more global scale, John is a representative of male society that is not interested in the woman's soul and sees her only as an object. Although John seems to love his wife and do his best to make her recover, he is far from understanding her and sharing her emotional life. As a result, she hides what she feels and her intentions from him. In the course of time, the gap between them becomes more and more significant, which he does not notice however. The final scene of him finally discovering his wife's insanity is a real shock for him because he has missed her transformation. The reason for what has happened alienation in the family as a social institution and as a spiritual interaction.

The sub-pattern which emerges from the basic pattern of the wallpaper is worth of special attention for its symbolism. The heroine sees "a woman stooping down and creeping about behind that pattern"(Gilman 12). What seems to be insanity at first sight is in fact a revelation of truth. The wallpaper works a magic mirror that reflects the essence of the character's life. In the course of time she starts seeing a great number of these creeping women and feels that she is one of them. Her identity is unraveled in a twisted and aggressive way. What has been hidden is coming out and crashes everything like she tears down the wallpaper from the walls.

Through this symbolism, the author demonstrates how women break free of the chains that have restrained them for centuries. This liberation is painful and involves the crisis of the marriage as it is revealed by the character's final alienation from her husband. Overall, the yellow paper reflects the transformation of a female identity which is caused by an unhealthy social system that prevents woman from being herself.

Works Cited

Gilman, Charlotte Perkins. "The Yellow Paper", Forgotten Books, 2008