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The Psychological Isolation in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper"

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Abstract:

This paper examines how Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860-1935) depicts the effects of isolation, physical and psychological, on the heroine in her story "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892). By using the first person narration which is a subjective style of writing, the writer reveals the thoughts and feelings of the narrator as she tries to fight against psychological pressures which she could not cope with. Furthermore, the paper examines the reasons which lead to the woman's breakdown, mainly her isolation from people, her need for communication and the way of treatment she receives from her husband. Her domineering husband looks upon her as a weak and an inferior person. He deprives her of practicing any activity. As the narrator is forced to withdraw from society, she looks for something to occupy her mind with. Gradually, she becomes interested in the yellow wallpaper. She stares at the pattern and finally decides that it represents a woman trapped behind the bars. She begins to peel the paper off the walls to liberate the woman. The writer describes the different stages of the woman's deterioration, exposing the different factors which contribute and lead to her madness. Meanwhile, she gives a message warning women of the results when they do not fight back to assert their individuality. Therefore, the story's value lies in the fact that the writer presents this Timeless subject.

العزلة النفسية للبطلة في قصة ورق الحائط الاصفر

لشارلوت بيركنز كلمان

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المخلص:

يتناول البحث كيفية تصوير الكاتبة شارلوت بيركنز كلمان (١٨٦٠-١٩٣٥) لتأثير العزلة النفسية والجسدية على بطلة قصتها "ورق الجدران الاصفر" (١٨٩٢) واستخدمت الكاتبة اسلوب رواية القصة من خلال بطلتها لجعل البطلة تكشف عن افكارها ومشاعرها ومحاولاتها الوقوف امام الضغوط النفسية التي لم تستطع مواجهتها. ويتناول البحث فضلاً عن ذلك الاسباب التي ادت الى انهيار البطلة وخاصة عزلتها عن الناس وحاجتها الى التواصل واسلوب تعامل زوجها معها، فزوجها المتسلط ينظر لها كشخص ادنى منزلة منه ويحرمها من ممارسة اي نشاط.

وحيث ان الرواية اجبرت على الانسحاب من المجتمع، فإنها تبحث عن شيء تشغل عقلها به وتدرجياً، يبدأ اهتمامها بورق الجدران الاصفر الذي يغلف جدران الغرفة فتقضي وقتها في التحديق في التصاميم الموجودة على الورق فتراها وكأنها تمثل امرأة فتبدأ بتمزيق ورق الجدران لتحرير تلك المرأة. وتصف الكاتبة مراحل مختلفة من التدهور العقلي للمرأة كاشفة عن العوامل المختلفة التي تسهم في ذلك وتؤدي الى جنونها وفي ذات الوقت توجه الكاتبة رسالة تحذير الى النساء اللواتي لا يحاولن بإصرار تأكيد تفردهن لذلك فإن قيمة القصة تكمن في تناول الكاتبة لموضوع غير محدد بزمن او بفترة معينة.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper", which was first published in the January 1892, is considered as a representation of the dilemma of a woman who is fighting against the psychological pressures which aim at eliminating her role in life. The writer depicts subtly the different stages of the woman's deterioration which lead to her final breakdown. It is evident through the heroine's description of the suffering that there are many factors which contribute and lead to her collapse. The writer focuses on the heroine's confessions by presenting her story in the form of a diary, a subjective record of her intimate feelings in the different phases of her sickness, her physical and psychological isolation, which increases gradually as she loses contact with the world around her. The writer chooses to tell her story by using the first person narration. The heroine is the narrator of the story. This way of narration is subjective, because the narrator is taking part in the events and, as the story unfolds, the heroine reveals many details about her life and her relationships with others.

The story opens with the narrator recording her impressions after moving to a country-house. The place was recommended by her husband who is a doctor. He believes that she recuperates better in solitude after her suffering from Post-Partum Depression.¹ Through these impressions, the narrator reveals "literal and figurative confinement experienced by nineteenth-century women."² She was confined to that country house, but she suffers from other confinements. Anna Gebala points out in her essay, "Madness and Psychic Duplicity in *Jane Eyre* and *The Yellow Wallpaper*", that the woman is "entrapped also in a more abstract sense of this word, as she cannot make her own decisions."³ She cannot choose the room in which she sleeps, for her husband does that, she cannot go outside her room, she cannot visit people, for her only visitors are her husband and Jennie, her sister-in-law, who acts as a guard and a nurse rather than a companion.

The room in which her husband places her was formerly a nursery room first, then a playroom and gymnasium. The narrator notices that the windows are barred, an aspect which makes the room look like a prison. John Bak points out that the room contains "external instruments of restraint suggestive of a prison or a mental ward."⁴ She does not feel comfortable in this room. The external description of the place intensifies her interior confinement. Lorelee MacPike points out that living in such an atmosphere makes the heroine look like "a prisoner who is to be forever imprisoned in childhood, forbidden to 'escape' into adulthood."⁵ Her husband forbids her from doing any activity including writing because

it is an exhausting task. The narrator secretly kept a diary recording her horrific experience while she remains confined for months to a double bed nailed to the floor of the room. As a result of this confinement, she expresses her "claustrophobic rage by enacting rebellious escapes."⁶

One thing attracts her attention more than any other is the yellow wallpaper. She finds that the colour is "repellent, almost revolting, a smouldering unclean yellow, strongly faded by the slow-turning sunlight."⁷ The woman slowly becomes obsessed with the wallpaper. She finds that it has certain peculiarity, because she imagines that there are shapes on it. As she loses connection with reality, she begins to analyze these shapes, "This wallpaper has a kind of sub-pattern in a different shade, a particularly irritating one, for you can only see it in certain lights, but in the places where it isn't faded and where the sun is just so, I can see a strange, provoking, formless sort of figure, that seems to skulk about behind that silly and conspicuous front design."⁸ She stares at the pattern and finally decides that it represents a woman trapped behind the bars which surround the walls, "the faint figure behind seemed to shake the pattern as if she wanted to get out."⁹ Since she does not find anything interesting in reality, she finds compensation in occupying herself with looking at the figure on the wallpaper, noticing that the shape of the woman changes. As her mental state deteriorates, she decides to pull out the wallpaper in order to let the entrapped woman out. This woman symbolizes "a counterpart to the main heroine. Both of them are imprisoned, and both of them try to violate the restrictions by which they are surrounded."¹⁰ She reflects the narrator's need for understanding and communication.

The narrator struggles against her loneliness and the pressures around her and looks for distraction which she finds in her attempt to write her diary. In this way she rejects her husband's control and tries to find her own space and her own private world. The diary is an expression of her "own fragmented sense of the self."¹¹ It reflects her loneliness and her need for understanding, but the process of writing does not prove to be an effective cure. In fact, it makes her condition worse and marks further stages in her mental deterioration. Her disturbed mentality is revealed in her style of writing. As she goes on to describe her situation in the story, the sentences become shorter and disconnected. The narrator begins to imagine that the woman from the paper sometimes leaves her place and creeps around the country". It is the same woman, I know, for she is always creeping, and most women do not creep by daylight. I see her in that shaded lane creeping up and down. I see her in those grape arbors,

creeping all round the garden."¹² The narrator's choice of writing her diary is not a good alternative for the actual communication with people. Beverly A. Hume states that "instead of being freed by this aesthetic and potentially liberating confrontation, however, she is defeated, destroyed and driven to madness."¹³

The narrator's withdrawal from reality comes as a result of her inability to cope with the pressures practiced on her by her husband who works as a physician. He is always controlling, domineering, and patronizing. She yields to him as he subjects her to different treatments and prescribes different kinds of medicine. In spite of his efforts to help her to get better he fails, because he neglects her basic need for communication and psychological support more than medical intervention. She realizes his failure, "John is a physician, and perhaps-(I would not say it to a living soul, of course, but this is dead paper and a great relief to my mind)-perhaps that is one reason I do not get well faster."¹⁴ It is John who chooses the country-house for her thinking that she will recuperate fast there. John [the husband] does not allow her to write thinking that is an exhausting effort, and he does not allow her to go out and keeps her alone. She realizes that he is not supporting her psychologically but she tries to find a justification for his way of dealing with her and his inability to understand her suffering, «John is away all day, and even some nights when his cases are serious."¹⁵ Her husband does not exert an effort to understand his wife's behavioural changes which are associated with psychological disorder, instead, he avoids facing the problem by locking his wife in a room. Adam Leed states that "John thinks of her as a mystery that he is unable to solve. So instead of confessing this inability, he hides his wife in the room. He thinks he is solving the mystery but in reality he is giving his wife a chance to solve it on her own."¹⁶

The narrator's submission to her husband's power leads her to feel frustrated and depressed and that is reflected in her confessions, "Dear John! He loves me very dearly, and hates to have me sick. I tried to have a real earnest reasonable talk with him the other day, and tell him how I wish he would let me go and make a visit to cousin Henry and Julia."¹⁷ She expresses her feelings of loneliness because of her husband's failure to help her out of this dilemma and she realizes that she can not get help from her brother who is a physician too; therefore she sinks in her imaginary world. Jeanne King and Pam Morris suggest that the narrator's husband and her brother represent "the power that men possess over women ... to prescribe what they may or may not, to diagnose, to name what is sickness and health, abnormal and normal."¹⁸ Her withdrawal into

a world of fantasies is an indication of her inability to cope with the pressures that her husband is practicing on her and a rejection of the role that he assigned to her. King argues that if her sickness is the result of "her alienation from the role society expects her to play, then her insistence that she is ill is an evasion of that reality."¹⁹ In fact, her sickness is an escape from the demands imposed on her by her husband and society, «You see he does not believe I am sick! And what can one do? If a physician of high standing, and one's own husband, assures friends and relatives that there is really nothing the matter with one but temporary nervous depression, a slightly hysterical tendency, what is one to do?"²⁰ Her final breakdown is a rebellion, a "potent metaphor for feminine anger."²¹ She expresses this anger in her clinging to write her diary, in spite of her husband's orders, because through it she asserts her individuality, her freedom to express herself and her independence. In her essay, "Feminist Criticism, 'The Yellow Wallpaper, 'and the Politics of Colour in America", Susan S. Lanser states that the narrator chooses to write her diary, because the process of writing "constitutes a kind of sanity in the face of insanity of male dominance."²² It is her own special and secret activity which is unshared by others.

The narrator is unable to assess her relationship with her husband. At the beginning of the story she believes in his good intentions «dear John gathered me up in his arms, and just carried me upstairs and laid me on the bed and sat by me and read to me till it tired my head."²³ But as she loses contact with reality, she reveals different feelings for him, «the fact is I am getting a little afraid of John."²⁴ She was afraid of his treatment of her, of his domineering behavior, and of his attempt to force her into a state of inactivity which makes her feel useless and inferior. When she loses her freedom and determination, she feels that she is sinking into a void.

At the end of the story, she begins to tear down the wallpaper and set the mysterious woman free, which symbolizes her desire to free herself and the other woman. She begins to think that she is part of the wallpaper pattern and crawls along the floor following the pattern. Her husband returns home to find her crawling along the floor. He faints across her path, and she continues to crawl over him. This ending image shows "a conjunction of erotic and aggressive impulses, a conjunction which once again suggests that by identifying herself with the wallpaper's shadow-woman, the narrator has firmly installed herself in the realm of the imagery, the realm of haunted house."²⁵ At that moment the narrator revolts against all kinds of restrictions which aim at eliminating her role in

life. She gives vent to all the repressed feeling of anger and condemnation.

The act of crawling indicates that the woman has lost her sanity, but it has a symbolic significance. Denise D. Knight points out that "crawling on one's hands and knees is emblematic of the crudest form of servility."²⁶ It is an act of surrender to a stronger part, it is an act of defeat. Carol Margaret Davison suggests that John's "diagnosis of his wife's 'minor' problem is disproved in this subversive conclusion. At the cost of her sanity, she emerges victorious in their undeclared battle over her diagnosis. Despite this drastic and tragic exchange, however, a strong liberty is associated with her situation."²⁷ She overcomes both her confinement and others' attempts to silence her. She triumphs over her husband and male-dominated society and achieves "a greater sense of self as she acts out her madness."²⁸ The narrator loses her sanity entirely when she begins to identify herself with the woman from the wallpaper. Anna Gebala states that "Only when she transfers her madness to the main heroine and joins her into one person, the narrator attains victory and starts to creep over the body of her unconscious husband."²⁹ The final act is a rebellion against the patriarchal authority represented by her husband and the role which he assigns to her.³⁰ Furthermore, it reflects her inability to cope with the pressures which her husband is trying to impose on her.

The story depicts the conflict between the narrator who tries to assert herself as a free and an independent person and a man who assigns a limited role to her. In the end, she rejects his ideology which represents the male ideology in the nineteenth century. She opposes his opinion that she should live in a tranquil environment isolated for months. She knows that her condition would improve if she could occupy herself with useful work. As Charlotte Perkins Gilman states in an essay entitled "Why I wrote 'The Yellow Wallpaper'", that "work [is] the most important activity in defining a sense of self, because what we do is greater than what is done to us."³¹ Writing a diary represents a kind of work for the protagonist which makes her life meaningful and provides an outlet for her pent-up emotions.

It is noteworthy that the writer of the story passed through a similar experience in her own life. Gilman states that she herself "suffered from a severe and continuous breakdown."³² Like the heroine, she was prevented from writing. She found herself unable to accept the role which was assigned to her to act as a mother and wife only. She rejected that role and rebelled against male authority by ceasing to seek the counsel of her doctor and divorcing her husband.³³ She included part of her personal

experience in her story, but she chose an unhappy ending by having the protagonist lose her sanity, an end which has more effective impact on the readers, because it reflects the horror of a woman who has been isolated from society and her final collapse. The story gives a message to women that "though they may feel isolated and abnormal, their experience is not singular. This realization alone can be liberating."³⁴ This message is part of the success of the story which deals with a timeless subject. The name of the narrator is not mentioned because she is a representative of many women who suffer silently from isolation and persecution. The play sheds light on the male-female conflict through presenting the dilemma of a mentally disturbed woman. She is alienated from her husband who represents the male values in the nineteenth century. The tension between them increases as the events develop. Instead of rejecting her husband's authority openly, she isolates herself further from him and builds for herself an imaginary world of illusions. This does not provide her with a solution but it leads to her final breakdown.

Notes

¹ In her essay "Postpartum Depression: What Pediatricians Need to Know", Linda H. Chaudron defines postpartum depression as a group of depressive symptoms that occur to women during the first year following child birth, these symptoms include brief psychotic disorder beginning within 4 weeks of delivery. (*Pediatric in Review*, vol.24, No.5, May 2003), P.154.

² Anna Gebala, "Madness and Psychic Duplicity in Jane Eyre and 'The Yellow Wallpaper'." An internet source (www.scrwis.wsjo.pl/katalog)

³ Ibid.

⁴ John S. Bak "Escaping the Jaundiced Eye: Foucauldian Panopticism in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 'The Yellow Wallpaper.'" in *Studies in Short Fiction* 31.1(Winter1994), p.41.

⁵ Lorelee MacPike, "Environment as Psychopathological Symbolism in 'The Yellow Wallpaper'" in *Captive A Imagination. A Casebook on 'The Yellow Wallpaper'*, ed. Catherine Golden, (New York: The Feminist Press, 1992), p.138.

⁶ Susan M. Gilbert and Sandra Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), p.85.

⁷ Charlotte Perkins Gilman, "The Yellow Wallpaper" in *The New England Magazine*, Vol.0011, issue 5 (January 1892) P. 649.

⁸ Ibid.,P.650.

⁹ Ibid.,P.652.

¹⁰ Gebala, p.21.

¹¹ Catherine Golden, "'Overwriting' the Rest Cure: Charlotte Perkins Gilman's Literary Escape" from S. Weir Mitchell's *Fictionalization of Women: Critical Essays on Charlotte Perkins Gilman* , ed. Joanne P. Karpinski (New York:G.K.Hall,1992), p.193.

¹² Gilman, "The Yellow Wallpaper", in *The New England Magazine*, P.654.

¹³ Beverly A. Hume, "Gilman's 'Interminable Grotesque': The Narrator of 'The Yellow Wallpaper'" *Studies in Short Fiction* 28(Fall 1991),pp.479-480.

¹⁴ Gilman, "The Yellow Wallpaper",P.647.

¹⁵ Ibid.,P.649.

¹⁶ Adam Leed, "In Control", An internet source (www.facultystaff.vwc.edu)

¹⁷ Gilman, "The Yellow Wallpaper.",P.651.

¹⁸ Jeannette King and Pam Morris, "On Not Reading Between the Lines:Models of Reading in 'The Yellow Wallpaper,'" *Studies in Short Fiction* 26:1(Winter,1989),p.27.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Gilman, "The Yellow Wallpaper", P.648.

²¹ Denise D. Knight, "The Reincarnation of Jane: 'Through This'-Gilman's Companion to 'The Yellow Wallpaper'" *Women's Studies* 20(1992),p.290.

²² Susan S. Lanser, "Feminist Criticism, 'The Yellow Wallpaper, 'and The Politics of Colour in America." *Feminist Studies* 15(Fall1989),p,418.

²³ Gilman, "The Yellow Wallpaper",P.652.

²⁴ Ibid.,P.653.

²⁵ Janice Haney –Peritz, "Monumental Feminism and Literature's Ancestral House: Another Look at 'The Yellow Wallpaper'", *Women's Studies* 12(1986),p.120.

²⁶ Knight,p.290.

²⁷ Carol Margaret Davison, "Haunted House/Haunted Heroine: Female Gothic closets in 'The Yellow Wallpaper,'" *Women's Studies* 33, (2004),p.66.

²⁸ Lisa Galullo, "Gothic and the Female Voice: Examining Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 'The Yellow Wallpaper' ", an internet source(www.yale-edu/ynhti/curriculum)

²⁹ Gebala.p.25.

³⁰ In her essay "The Changing Role of Womanhood :From True Woman to New Woman In Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 'The Yellow Wallpaper'", Deborah Thomas points out that "Prior to the twentieth century, men assigned and defined women's roles. Although all women were effected by men determining women's behavior, largely middle class women suffered. Men perpetrated an ideological prison that subjected and silenced women. This ideology , called the cult of True Womanhood, legitimized the victimization of women." (www.itech.fgcu.edu/faculty)

³¹ Quoted in Angie Pazhavila "The Female Gothic Subtext: Gender Politics in Carlotte Bronte's 'Jane Eyre' and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 'The Yellow Wallpaper'" *Lethbridge Undergraduate Research Journal*,1:2(2007).p.6.

³² Ibid,p.7.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

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