Position of Women in Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *The Yellow Wallpaper*

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Abstract:
Published in 1892, Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper”-a kind of epistolary was based on her own personal experience with postpartum depression and treatment received by Dr. S. Weir Mitchell, pioneer of the rest cure. Gilman uses her short story to make determined statements about feminism and individuality. She does so by taking the reader through the terror of woman’s neurosis, her entire mental state characterized by her encounters with the wallpaper in her room.

“It (The Yellow Wallpaper) was not intended to drive people crazy but to save people from being driven crazy”

- C.P. Gilman

Published in 1892, Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper”-a kind of epistolary was based on her own personal experience with postpartum depression and treatment received by Dr. S. Weir Mitchell, pioneer of the rest cure. Gilman uses her short story to make determined statements about feminism and individuality. She does so by taking the reader through the terror of woman’s neurosis, her entire mental state characterized by her encounters with the wallpaper in her room.

Before commencing one must recall the time period during which the short story was written. It was the 19th century better known as the Victorian period in English literature, the features of which could be seen in America and Europe. It was a time when men began moving out to go to work in factories, office or shop as industrialization crept in and women engaged in household chores. The Victorian era then in a sense clearly demarcated separate spheres concerning men and women. A woman was now clearly believed to be able to perform only household activities and thereby not permitted to vote or engage in any such outdoor works which were primarily male oriented. Gilman as an advocate of woman empowerment strives to depict this state of women in her work ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’… Gilman herself wanted such roles for women which would bring them in equivalence to men. In her famous non-fiction work ‘Women and Economics’ (1898) she states that women should move out and work hard. They should also try to become financially independent of men. Moreover, she went on to make a bold statement that both men and women should share the household duties. In the story it becomes apparent that the women allow herself to be inferior to men, to hide her anxieties and fear in order to preserve the façade of a happy marriage. On the other hand, John’s assumption of his own superior wisdom and maturity because he was a “high standing” physician leads him to misjudge, patronize and dominate his wife all in the name of “helping” her. Infact, he fails to understand
his imaginative wife by attempting to burden her with his rational views and by declaring her writing off-limits till she is “well again”. 

Along with prohibitions against writing, John usurps power in countless other ways: he is against her idea of moving downstairs into another of “pretty rooms”, rejects his wife’s appeal to change the wallpaper, refuses to allow her to visit relatives, instructs her to get back into bed, threatens to send her to the physician if she doesn’t “pick up faster”, dismisses her concerns about her treatment and denies her request to return home early. It is for this critic P.W. Hades notes that the narrator is in more then one sense “arrested” by her condition. She is literally under “house rest”, isolated “three miles from the village” in an attic of a rented “colonial mansion” there her progressive “breakdown” is meant to be “arrested” by collusive medical and familial interventions. She is also mentally “arrested” drained by the dominant nineteenth century social expectation that mother’s must be self-sacrificing angels.

It is here that the “Yellow Wallpaper” comes to her as an ultimate rescue, which soon becomes her obsessive fantasy the only place she can retain some control and exercise the power of mind. It becomes a source on which she can vent out all her anger which she had collected within herself against the unjustified domineering patriarchal attitude. The wallpaper has a “vicious influence” on her, she soon gets fond of the room “perhaps because of the wallpaper”. It has “a recurrent spot where the pattern lolls like a broken neck and two bulbous eyes stare at you upside down”.

This image is symbolic as it is a projection of her, the life that is being choked out of her through John’s interdiction.

Thus, John throughout the text emerges though unknowingly as a typical patriarchal head suppressing his female counterpart. Gilman to maintain this negative image gives various references such as the “great immovable bed” being “nailed down” imparts a sense of John’s power to demand at his pleasure, conjugal relations with his wife. Even in the end John’s attempt to break the “beautiful door” has sexual innuedos attached to it. Infact, the title-“The Yellow Wallpaper” itself is an anagram for “the lowly appear well” imparting to its reader’s the image drawn by societal norms for the fairer sex which is not always true. Infact, the readers might think that it is only the protagonist who matches with the female position of the Victorian times until one is introduced to John’s own sister in a statement which itself clearly echoes the position of women during nineteenth century. “There comes John’s sister… She is a perfect and enthusiastic housekeeper, and hopes for no better profession.”

Soon, her preoccupation with the yellow wallpaper increases which is well evidenced from the fact itself that the word “pattern” has been used twenty four times. She observes the wallpaper day and night assuming sometimes a single woman and sometimes many of them trapped in it. By the end of the story, she imagines women creeping out from it and roaming about in public though in a hidden manner. When finally it is her last day she “chooses to act out” and resolves to finish the wallpaper.
which may also symbolize killing or destroying of her bitter past). Hence, the yellow wallpaper almost becomes animated. Once she has destroyed the wallpaper and as she appropriates herself as the same person inside the wallpaper she starts behaving in the same manner—“getting angry enough to do something desperate” where she starts creeping “smoothly on the floor”. But John is unable to accept her behavior and fails to understand the situation due to which he faints. The narrator loses her hold on reality—I’ve got out at last...now why should that man have fainted? But he did, and right across my path by the wall, so that I had to creep over him every time”

Thus, though the narrator has been declared insane, readings vary as some consider it a form of triumph and some defeat. But a close reading reveals the narrator’s triumph in the end as she is finally able to release her rage by the deliberate act of rebellion against her husband John. No wonder, critic Richard Feldstein argues “the narrator’s regression becomes purposeful—acunning, craziness, a militant, politicized madness by which the narrator resists the interiorization of authority...rechannels her effort into the symbolic sphere...by finding another effective means to register her dissatisfaction.”

Bibliography:
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