

PSYCHOANALYTIC READING OF THE YELLOW WALLPAPER BY CHAROLLETE PERKINS GILMAN

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ABSTRACT. *“The yellow wallpaper” authored by Charollete Perkins Gilman at the start of the 19th century is considered as a champion of feminist literature. It is interpreted as the story of women suppressed in phallogentric society. It is popularly celebrated as tale of woman winning her due place in a society where men rule and women obey. My research focuses on psychoanalytic reading of this powerful short story. It is trying to probe deep down into the psyche of the protagonist of the story and obviously writer of the story. The feminists interpretation celebrate it as liberation of women in 19th century by their husbands, brothers and men in several other roles in their surroundings.*

Keywords: queer; psychoanalysis.

1. Introduction. “The Yellow Wallpaper” revolves around the woman named Jane (the name is only later revealed in the story). She tells the story in the first person “I” and has recently ascended to the status of motherhood. Her husband being a doctor feels she is somewhat disturbed (a possible postpartum depression) and wants to take her for change so they move to an old colonial mansion. We are told by the narrator that she is confined by her husband to an attic room with “barred” windows. At the beginning of the story we get the impression that she is not very happy about the shift. “There is something queer about it” she tells us. Slowly, the isolation grows on her and she develops an intimacy with the wallpaper of the room, which is yellow in color. Soon the intimacy changes into obsession and she sees a woman trapped in the wallpaper. “It is like a woman stooping down and creeping behind the pattern.” (125).

She readily aligns herself with the woman in the wallpaper. She thinks the woman is barred and in shackles and needs to be liberated. In the final scene we see her peeling of the paper from the wall in order to set free the caged woman and ends up creeping on the floor on all four. A horrifying scene that is forceful enough to be classified as gothic, sending shivers down to the spine of readers how she is driven to insanity by indulging with the wallpaper. psychoanalysis have some conspicuous and unorthodox explanations.

2. Psychoanalytic Critique. In psychiatry, a thought disorder (TD) or a formal thought disorder (FTD) occurs when an individual has serious problems with thinking, feeling and behavior. The symptoms can include false belief about self, others, paranoia, hearing or seeing things that other people don’t see and disconnected speech. Freud termed it as psychosis. According to Freud, the unconscious is not the reservoir of wild drives that has to be conquered by ego, but a site where a traumatic truth resides, the site of unconscious drives. Everybody should have the audacity to reach the site of their truth, with the understanding that the truth can be shocking enough to drive one crazy. Zizek quotes Lacan as follows:

“What awaits me there is not a deep truth that I could identify with but an unbearable truth I have to learn to live with. For Lacan, psychoanalysis is not theory or technique or technique of psychic disturbances but a theory to practice which confronts individual with most radical dimension of human existence. It does not merely enable human beings to accept the repressed truth about himself or herself, it explores the dimension

of truth emerges in human reality. In Lacan's view pathological formations like neuroses, psychoses and perversions have the dignity of fundamental philosophical attitude towards reality." (3).

Freud came to view the personality as having three aspects, which work together to produce all our complex behaviors. The id, ego, and the super ego, all three components need to be well balanced in order to have good amount of psychological energy available and to have reasonable mental health. In reality, these components are not always at ease with each other, and one component always dominates the others. According to psychoanalytic view, this psychological conflict is an intrinsic and pervasive part of human experience. The conflict between id, super-ego, negotiated by ego, is one of the psychological battles all people must undergo. The id functions according to pleasure principle. It is the source for libido. The ego is rational part of the mind that operates on reality principle and the super-ego stand for parental and societal values. It stores and enforces rules. There is an eternal battle between the id (desires and wishes) and ego and super ego, and when fighting the battle one has only two options: to win or to yield. Unfortunately, both, winning the battle and succumbing, are equally painful. Lawrence says in his "Introduction to his Paintings", "the history of our era is the nauseating and repulsive history of the crucifixion of the pro creative body for the glorification of the spirit, of the mental consciousness". (1936 569)

FINDINGS OF RESEARCH:

The id is a storehouse of wishes and desires and according Freud, humans employ a number of defense mechanisms in order to suppress them. These suppressions do not fade away completely; in fact, they continue to exert a powerful influence on human mind. If we look into the narrator of "The Yellow Wall Paper", it is evident that there is a disturbance in the unconscious of the narrator. The id has been ruthlessly repressed; still it is trying to pop up its head. As soon as she enters this house she says that there is something "queer" about this house. She is a new mother but in the entire story she never nurses her newborn, very unnatural of a mother, she has definitely some ripples in the unconscious of which she is afraid to confront openly; so she wants to write about it and feels good when she writes about it; but when this emotional and intellectual vent is denied she deteriorates. Indeed, Jane's writing is marked by her conflicted relations to it. Several times, she says that writing makes her feel better: "I think sometimes that if I were only well enough to write a little it would relieved the press of ideas and rest me". (Gilman 6). However, she also claims several times that writing exhausts her: "I did write for a while in spite of them : but it exhausts me a good deal, having to be so sly about it or else meet with heavy opposition" .

What ideas she wants to ventilate then? As one critic quotes it: "a psychological criticism notices patterns of language beneath the surface and understands the text of patient recalling more then she/he realizes" (Schwarz 116). So the analysis of text will lead us to the roots of her depression. The opposition she is talking about may refer to John (her husband) and Jennie (her sister-in-law); it could also refer to the opposition Jane perceives not only from her husband but society also that hushes down any whisper challenging its standards and set rules. Her ego is on the watch. She is fighting a battle, repressing her id, the super ego is what is morally required of her to please her husband and nurse her baby; but some aspect of id stops her from doing so. It is because of this tug of war between id, ego and super ego that she is inert. She is tormented because of this never-ending struggle of keeping the balance turning into neurotic and she starts seeing some pattern in the wall paper of her room.

A Freudian explanation would definitely want to have a flash back of the life of writer of the story. In this case the need for it is further strengthened as the narrator uses "I". Widely the story has been equated with the actual life of Gilman and the rest cure she was prescribed by her physician: it is commonly accepted as autobiographical account of her life. I would like to deviate from this popular view of feminists and pick something from the events of her actual life that explains what aspects of her protagonist is repressing.

Though Gilman was a married woman, it is a known fact she was a bisexual and held emotional and physical relationships with other women. The oppressive nature of sexuality in general during the late 18th and early 19th century would have provided a huge stress for Gilman. Freudian study would not ignore the sexual life style of this woman in reading her masterpiece. She is trying to frame a picture showing her being confined by her husband, but too much stress on her husband and the way he addresses her, "my darling" , "my love", "my baby", "my goose". She is assuring herself again and again that she has a loving husband and is getting all due attention and love. Jane's inability then to fit properly into the symbolic order of phallogocentric society is an inability rooted in her illness rather than her gender. The final scene of the story is not the sight of Jane's triumphant liberation from the bars or of the materialization of her "self -identity" as most readings have proposed.

According to King: "the final scene can be viewed as not intended to be freed from male repression as has

been suggested, but to eliminate her rebellious self which is preventing her from achieving her ego ideal, a destruction of other self". (30-31). Her crawling in the entire room on all fours testifies to the fact that she is now a case of psychoses. "Wall paper" according to a critic, Hume, represents her "repressed other or suppressed self". It is the desire that haunts her socially confirming self. The desire for an uncanny and forbidden self; the unreadable and lawless.

Taking account of the real life attachments and interests of Gilman we can easily find answer to the question why she never attends to her baby. Jonathan Crewe explains that "Gilman uses the word "queer" a time of great cultural change from meaning of "strange" and is "peculiar" to the euphemisms associated with homosexuality thus calling her readers to recognize same sex desire a repressed, not only absent, in normative homosexuality". According to a critic "yellow of the wallpaper symbolizes infantile urine projection venting rage at her mother. This also explains why she is trying to make a very authoritative out of a very caring husband.

In order to attempt to escape the unhappy and undesirable world she creates a fantastic world of her own where she is the need of some companionship. This shadow woman is also an example of Freud's fantasy and displacement. The narrator summons the woman as a link to a place other than that room and displaces her feelings upon her, using her outlet for her strange behavior. She would not succumb to herself until these feelings overwhelm her in the end. The narrator, by projecting her condition to the woman in wallpaper represses and denies her feelings to the extent where she cannot handle them any longer. Jane says "I don't like to look out of the window even, there are so many of those creeping women, and they creep so fast. "most women do not creep by daylight" expresses the fact they need to hide in the shadows without being seen. An illness is the consequence of not being loved and being unable to love. We see both these elements in unhappy childhood and adolescence of Gilman. In her life she struggled hard to find her a place for herself and her fellow woman. She was a well known activist. In the last scene of her story, her heroine says, "I've got out at last" said "in spite of you and Jane and I've pulled off most of the paper, so you can't put me back". The lines can be interpreted the lid, strangling the women, is blown off and they can't be suppressed further. Knight, on the other hand, has interpreted them as narrator's use of her name as third person showing subconscious origin of her resentment towards her roles of wife and mother" (290).

Conclusion. The said research boils down to the conclusion that in face of narrator the writers articulates her own voice. Contrary to the popular interpretation that voice is for championing the cause of feminism the research brings to surface the implicit inclinations of Gilman. She in a very subtle way raises voice for the woman who doesnot satisfies the parameter of 'good women' set by society. Inclinations towards same gender is not certified by any society in even today's world. Gilman has been vocal for herself and women like herself with her tongue in cheeks..

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