A Comparison Of The Strategic Writing In Gilman's The Yellow Wallpaper And Other Stories And Friedan's The Feminine Mystique

Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Betty Friedan are two of the most prominent figures in the American women's right movement. Both prolific writers, they influenced society by successfully bringing their concerns and criticisms of it to public knowledge. Friedan and Gilman are each represented by numerous books and publications, which cover a wide range of subjects and genres in their efforts to promote the rights and social status of women in the country. These two authors are commonly viewed in very similar lights given their subject and social views. However, closer analysis of their most well-known works reveals significant differences in their writing styles, reasoning, and literary techniques. Gilman's The Yellow Wallpaper and Other Stories and Friedan's The Feminine Mystique illuminate the strategic thought processes behind each author's legacy.

Perhaps the most obvious difference between these works of Gilman and Friedan is the immediate genre they write in. Gilman's short stories are intended to create examples of the problems women face in society, and often highlight characters that help alleviate and challenge these problems. The Three Thanksgivings contains one such example. In this story, Gilman acknowledges that many older women are expected to rely on their children and neighbors, or to remarry if they are widows and have suitors. Often, as is the case with Mrs. Morrison, it is taken for granted that an older woman's money should be given to male in-laws or a new husband. Many don't even consider the possibility of an older widow supporting herself and growing her own assets without family help. Mrs. Morrison's children don't just invite her to stay for Thanksgiving – they request that she move in with them, permanently. So great is the assumption that her independent widowhood is but a temporary state that her longtime friend Mr. Butts makes a constant habit of asking her to marry him. When Mrs. Morrison tells him frankly that she has no desire to do so, he mentions that her deceased husband was a good man but is gone now, and says, "Now you might as well marry me," mimicking the general views of most Americans at the time.

In this context, Gilman's writings in The Yellow Wallpaper and Other Stories can be seen as a collection of parables, instilling lessons and values through demonstration by fictional characters. As well as problematic elements, Gilman shows her readers examples of good characters and actions that properly challenge aspects of gender inequality, such as Ford Mathews in The Cottagette. Initially given no remarkable character traits, Gilman eventually treats Ford as a perfectly good person merely for requesting that the woman he wishes to marry put her own interests above the standard tropes of society, an action that gets Malda (the main character and focus of his love) to ask, "Was there ever a man like this?" In this last line, Gilman asks if what Ford Mathews does is ever done by real men in American society. The story points out that, merely for the sake of pleasing a man, enormous effort was made: a kitchen was added on to a house, a roommate's mother was invited there to live and help, and the tediousness of this new company as well as the new work of cooking and of keeping a home grown by the presence of said cooking and said roommate's mother and all the other company and activity that resulted from these things… were all stresses carried by the narrator.

The alternative option of Malda continuing to create the art that she loves and Ford simply doing some of the cooking is obviously more practical and pleasant. In fact, most of the complications that arise from the decision to begin cooking are unnecessary to begin with, and are merely the result of common thinking at the time: that a woman needs to perform lots of work when keeping a house, that an older mother's role is often to assist in her children's homemaking (a theme more specifically explored in Three Thanksgivings), and that a woman would be naïve to believe that she can successfully find a husband and maintain a marriage while prioritizing her own interests over housework. Throughout this collection of stories, Gilman never directly tells her readers what problems they might be causing, or how to fix it. Instead, she opens their minds in a less threatening manner, by making them consider whether her scenarios are fantasy renditions of society or accurate representations. If a man reading The Cottagette became offended by Gilman cheekily suggesting that most American men were not willing to do the simple good that Ford Mathews does ("Was there ever a man like this?"), all he would have to do to prove her wrong would be to follow the easy example she sets.

Unlike Gilman's tendency to utilize fictional representation, Friedan focusses on tangible evidence in her writing. The very principle behind The Feminine Mystique is discussing a "problem that has no name" that became visible after interviewing middle-aged women about their lifestyles, their families, and their feelings regarding them. Friedan speaks with numerous women who appear to be correctly following an optimal feminine lifestyle. However, they share with her a common feeling of tedium and desire for a more interesting life. Popular belief held that higher education was a likely source of this problem. After all, if women should be feeling happy and fulfilled being nothing more than housewives, then teaching them the skills for anything else could only serve to distract them from their feminine destinies. Friedan shoots down this notion by sharing interviews with women from several different levels of education, from girls who never went to college to a Ph.D holding housewife, all of which seem to share the same concerns regarding the structure and direction of their lives. Friedan also references empirical studies that lend scientific support for her ideas, such as the Kinsey studies regarding the correlation between education level and sexual satisfaction among married women. Early published results of this study indicated an inverse correlation but were later contradicted by the study's conclusion. The harmful initial message had already been spread and was popularly believed even after it was shown to be false in the scientific literature. Friedan mentions Dr. Kinsey by name at least 56 times in The Feminine Mystique; in addition to his direct results showing that higher female education (viewed as antithetical to femininity) was actually beneficial to their livelihood, she also discusses his conclusion that most men over 55 married for longer than 15 years were having an affair, and reasons that this is at least partially due to the growing sexual divide between American husbands and their wives. Another powerful point Friedan makes is that the Feminine Mystique structures what men desire, or at least think they desire, in a wife. Using A Doll's House (and, briefly, Lolita) as examples, Friedan implies that the pure, uneducated, unchallenged, stay-at-home woman endeared by society is actually incredibly childlike, which could be especially persuasive due to the uncomfortable nature of such a fact (though Friedan never directly says this). And by discussing the observation (again made by Kinsey) that, due to their lack of much else to look forward to, women were increasing in sexual desire and appetite so much that their husbands were unable or unwilling to support it completely, Friedan forms a clear argument that the Feminine Mystique harms men as well as women.

Furthermore, Friedan draws attention to the dismissive way in which many Americans confronted "the problem that has no name," referring several times to "solutions [or silly

choices] that no one could take seriously," such as drafting women as nurses or babysitters. Such statements, Friedan implies, are not merely humorous; they discredit the problem entirely by making it seem equally as ridiculous. Throughout The Feminine Mystique, Friedan calmly but assertively explains why the American feminist movement is still valid and critically important for the health of the nation. Gilman, on the other hand, utilizes a completely different strategy in The Yellow Wallpaper and Other Stories. Instead of explaining, she suggests. This difference is likely a product of the authors' times: when Friedan wrote The Feminine Mystique, she was supported by the previous successes of women like Gilman and was able to more clearly assert her ideas since they were now an established part of the national conversation. Its past success lent the feminist movement credence. But Gilman had much less to work off of. Women could not even vote when she published most of her works, and therefore she had to tread carefully. Had Gilman spoken as directly and assuredly as Friedan, the two most likely outcomes would certainly have been humored dismissal of her ideas or a more direct rejection of them. Of course, all periods of feminist history are populated by prominent figures who did just this, and through their vocality a path to equality was blasted. But Gilman understood two very profound truths regarding social change: that people will reject those who invalidate their prior beliefs, and that one must provide a reason for people to expose themselves to new ideas.

In order to avoid invalidating those she attempts to win over, Gilman sometimes utilizes fundamentally good, well-meaning characters to demonstrate harmful actions. Even when Mr. Butts repeatedly harasses Mrs. Morrison and displays his economic superiority, it is stated that "He meant no unkindness, his pride was honest and unveiled." It is simply his adherence to regrettable social norms that taints his character. Perhaps the best example can be found in the collection's titular story. John, the husband to the main character and narrator of The Yellow Wallpaper, is entirely well-meaning and clearly cares for his wife tremendously, going as far as to rent a home and even allow her to remain separated from their new child, whose arrival seems to have been detrimental to her mental health. But John is so assured in his medical practices, specifically that of the rest cure, that he chides and ignores his wife when she makes requests for mental stimulation, when Gilman's own experience with the treatment place it as the exact opposite of what patients truly need. This rest cure, which ultimately drives the protagonist to madness, is based on the misplaced confidence of psychologists and the resulting pseudoscience regarding the psyche of women. However, it is administered by a wonderful man. By creating such a dichotomy, Gilman effectively tells those reluctant to embrace feminism, particularly men, that their characters are valid and their intentions pure. Essentially, she flatters; you are no less misguided than prominent psychologists, she says. Gilman also creates bad characters, of course; Turned follows a completely different formula than the one just described. But this reluctance to insult her potential new allies is nonetheless a hallmark of her stories.

One final difference to note between Gilman's writing and Friedan's can be seen throughout all of Gilman's stories; take a simple line from The Cottagette as an example: "He used to come up evenings and sit on the porch and talk." This line is written in between two paragraphs. It creates a transition between two ideas – the idea of Ford Mathews being a pleasant man who the protagonist likes, and the idea that he has a significant relationship with her – in a distinctly literary way. The method in which Gilman ends the previous paragraph – "I'm sure I did [like him]" – feels like it is drawing towards a conclusion; small and subtle, but appreciated in writing. The next paragraph, however, continues this new idea and builds on it. The narrator describes, "He did [this]. He did [that], and sometimes [would do this]." Of course, all those thises and thats are actually story details, but by substituting them out one can better understand the

structure that Gilman puts into her sentences. This one minor section at the beginning of her story is purposefully designed to create a sentence, “He used to come up evenings and sit on the porch and talk,” that is both the end and the beginning of an idea – a remarkably fulfilling artifact to stumble upon as a reader, and this same technique can be found again not just in “The Cottagette” but in many of Gilman’s other works as well. The stories in The Yellow Wallpaper and Other Stories are short; not intended to contain an exhaustive explanation for why the author believes that society is unjust towards women. Instead of making an extensive argument, Gilman puts her efforts largely into making her writing enjoyable. She creates a literary structure that exudes the feeling of a progressing tale, and by doing so, attracts readers from all genres – because, while a drier essay on women in American society might not be appealing to most, an entertaining story (short, as to be low commitment and manageable) might indeed be. The best thing that The Yellow Wallpaper has going for it isn’t its relatable characters or direct association to real psychological practices – it’s that it’s good; objectively, not just as a social or political piece. It was also one of Gilman’s earlier works. The story has solidified itself as a literary classic and, specifically, helped to define classic horror as a genre – influencing authors like H. P. Lovecraft. And by doing so, it established Gilman as an author for all fans of literature, not just feminists, early in her career. That these are short stories is therefore crucial in analyzing Gilman’s strategy. Had she done the same thing, but written novels instead, her writing would surely have been less popular. Picture the ideal member of Gilman’s target audience: a middle-aged man with some free time, who might have some lingering thoughts, perhaps doubts or questions, on how he has always expected his wife to behave and keep house. Is he likely to begin reading during his lunch breaks The Yellow Wallpaper, a novel detailing the lives of a slightly distressed woman and her caring but misguided husband over several weeks? Of course not. He could probably barely imaging committing to such a thing. But, he just might be bothered to indulge in The Yellow Wallpaper, a frankly gripping bite-sized tale of horror detailing a poor wife’s decent into madness and her helpless recognition of it. By doing so, Gilman increases the chance that people not specifically interested in the women’s rights movement might be exposed to her writing, and when one is attempting to enact social change, it is far more important for one’s ideas to reach those unfamiliar and yet uninterested in them than those who already agree.

In summary, Gilman and Friedan use very different literary techniques in pursuit of the same goal: the acceptance and growth of feminism. While Gilman focusses more on attracting new supporters and legitimizing the concept, Friedan hammers home a continuous flurry of facts and pieces of reasoning to strengthen her cause. Due to their fame, both authors were clearly successful.