The Psychological Approach To The Yellow Wallpaper

Written in June of 1890, The Yellow Wallpaper brought to light a woman dealing with nervous diseases. Not only had she encountered a mental disorder but the treatment prescribed to her was just as harsh, if not harsher, than the mental disorder she had faced. The Yellow Wallpaper explores a woman in the late 1800's trying to conquer her mental disabilities whilst dealing with an abusive and dismissive husband. The Yellow Wallpaper took a look at old and obsolete sexist medical ideologies as well as late 1800's medical practices for mental disabilities and the effects of it. Not only does the story look at an outdated medical practise, the story also tackles issues women faced in 19th century society such as the public perception of mental illnesses. Aside from the heavily themed feminist approach, the main character fights against male-centric thinking as well as societal norms. The Yellow Wallpaper also explores how disregarded and the close mindedness of depression was dealt with and treated by physicians and society.

Originally from Hartford, Connecticut, Charlotte Perkins-Gilman was a well-known humanist, feminist, and writer throughout the late 1800's and early 1900's. Her father had abandoned the family at a young age and she never felt the true love and warmth of her mother. She struggled with depression soon after the birth of her first child, Katharine. Gilman wrote in her diary about her continual and advancing struggle with depression. She wrote about being sick with "some brain disease." Gilman was treated with "rest cure," a remedy designed by Dr. Silas Mitchell. Mitchell had instructed her to live a domestic life. She was to have her child with her at all times and she was told to lie down for an hour after each and every meal. She was also specifically told to never touch a writing utensil for as long as she lived. Gilman gave Mitchell's remedy a shot, but her depression only continued. She began to exhibit signs of suicidal thoughts. She spoke many times about pistols and chloroform. The couple had decided to separate in order for Gilman to heal herself without having an effect on the life of her husband, Walter.

She spent time in Rhode Island during 1888 with her daughter. It was then that her depression began to lift. She noted in her diary that she began to feel a change in her attitude and the way she felt and in how she acted. She eventually returned home and sold her home she had inherited. She moved to Pasadena, California with her friend, Grace Channing. This was the time her depression had prominently began disappearing.

In 1932, Gilman was unfortunately diagnosed with inoperable breast cancer. As a result, Gilman took her own life on August 17, 1935. She died quietly and quickly when she took an overdose of chloroform. In a suicide note she had left, she stated that she "chose chloroform over cancer."

The Yellow Wallpaper begins with the main character, who was never named, and a journal entry about a house where the narrator and her husband had traveled to during their summer getaway. The narrator wondered to herself how someone could afford to purchase a property like the one she had stayed in. As the story goes on, she expresses her feelings about how her husband belittles and dismisses her and her illness. She mentions that he pays very little attention to her. He does not allow her to write or work. She is not allowed to do anything active. She believes that keeping herself occupied would distract her from her illness. The narrator later reveals that she had kept a secret diary to document everything that had happened.

Throughout their summer stay, she learns to hide the notebook in better and more secretive spots. She writes that she wishes she could do any sort of activity that would keep her busy. She also mentions how her husband's alarming attitude and how he has become increasingly more vicious. She soon finds herself becoming quite fond of the yellow wallpaper, the same wallpaper her husband had refused to repaper earlier on. Throughout the story, the pattern in the wallpaper had become clearer to her. She believed it was a woman looking down on her behind the main pattern of which appears to be steel bars, that of a cage.

She is eventually trapped in the room with a growing obsession with the wallpaper. She even believes she can smell it at one point. Her sleep schedule gets thrown off because of her obsession as well. Finally, she has fully figured out the wallpaper. Her theory is that at night, the woman in the wallpaper appears to be shaking the bars, trying to set herself free. During the day, she crept around the room.

The narrator finally decides to destroy the wallpaper. She peels, tears, and rips the wallpaper off. The day after, she finds herself alone and enters a chaotic stage where she begins biting and tearing the paper to try and set the woman she sees in the wallpaper free. In the end, the narrator has become the woman in the wallpaper. She is trapped in her own mind which resembles the steel bars the wallpaper woman was trying to set herself free from.

The narrator had lost her sense of reality and had come to a better understanding of her own inner reality. In an attempt to dismiss her growing frustration with the rest cure, she focuses herself onto neutral objects, such as the wallpaper. Her negative attitude and feelings distort her surroundings. This made everything seem dark and sinister as she becomes more and more fixated on the wallpaper. As her fascination with the wallpaper grows, she slowly becomes more dissociated with life. The dissociation process begins when the narrator reveals her secret journal. She keeps her true thoughts away from the rest of the world. The narrator had begun to slip into her own world.

Towards the end, when the narrator realized she had identified with the "woman" in the wallpaper, she understands that there are other women who are forced to creep around and hide within the wallpaper. It is not the woman in the wallpaper that needed help, it is the narrator that needed help. Essentially, the narrator had to lose herself to have been able to find herself.

The narrator had been diagnosed with neurasthenia disease, also known as "nervous exhaustion.," the same condition the author, Charlotte Gilman, had gone through. Neurasthenia is a condition that is characterized by physical and mental exhaustion with headaches, irritability, depression, fatigue and extreme anxiety as symptoms. The specific cause is unknown but is associated with depression and/or emotional stress. This condition shares similarity with chronic fatigue syndrome.

The disease was first discovered in the late 1800's when nervous illnesses became well-known in North America as well as Europe. The term "neurasthenia" was coined by George Beard. The term was to designate a syndrome of mental and neural weakness and exhaustion which were accompanied by symptoms such as fatigue, anxiety and depression.

The nervous diseases were associated with a wide variety of symptoms. Symptoms included lightly-colored urine, swelling of the stomach, fainting, strong and irregular heartbeats, giddiness, convulsive crying, and melancholy. Essentially, any sign of dissatisfaction would

have been treated as a “nervous disease.” It was known that men could suffer from these diseases as well, however women typically dominated a high percentage of diagnoses. Women were said to have been the primary victims due to their inferiority to men, physically and mentally.

During the 1900’s, the thought of the nervous diseases in women had gone through a transformation and had become categorized as “hysteria,” a new disease amongst the community. Hysteria was quickly presented as a feminine ailment. Activity in the uterus such as menstruation, sexual intercourse or childbirth was believed to accentuate a female’s vulnerability to the disease. Certain physicians suggested that hysteria may have been linked to abnormal sexual activity. The disorder was typically understood to result from emotional sensitivity or nervousness.

In an effort to battle and contain her nervous disease, the narrator had been prescribed the “rest cure.” The rest cure was built around the idea of spending a certain period of time in inactivity or leisure with intent on improving physical or mental health. Dr. Silas Weir Mitchell created the rest cure in the 1800’s. The intent of the cure was to treat hysteria and neurasthenia. It had become widely well-known and used in the United States and the United Kingdom as well. The rest cure had originally been used on veterans during Civil War time. The cure typically called for a high-calorie diet, as it was thought that weight gain symbolized improved health. The cure also called for massage therapies as well as electrical stimulation of the muscles. This helped the muscles to not waste away or degenerate. Dr. Mitchell gained much notoriety for his work at Philadelphia’s Turner Lane Hospital where he had helped with the discovery of causalgia. Dr. Mitchell was highly praised for his work with veterans. Shortly after, Dr. Mitchell had shifted his attention on “nervousness” and the women suffering from it. Patient’s began flocking to Philadelphia’s Turner Lane Hospital to see Dr. Mitchell. Dr. Mitchell’s were typically upper-class white females who were well acquainted with his prior work during the Civil War. A fellow neurologist and colleague of Dr. Mitchell, George Beard, stated that he believed the illness was a result of the evolved brain as well as the nervous system. As most of Dr. Mitchell’s patients were female, the cure had gained a reputation for having been prescribed more times for women than it had been for men. More often than not, it was used to treat anorexia nervosa. In other cases, the cure was used to treat insomnia as well. In many cases, the treatment sought to better patients as well as keeping them out of asylums. The cure had also been fairly controversial as some patients and doctors claimed it was worse than the disease.

The treatment typically went on for the duration of six to eight weeks. The cure was described as being quite harsh as it involved being isolated from friends, family and the outside world. The treatment had called for spending much of one’s time lying in bed. The treatment also enforced a strict dairy and milk-based diet. Patients were to have been force-fed, should that have been the case. Nurses aided patients in bathing and feeding. Doctors also wanted to maintain muscle tone, therefore massages and electrotherapy were prescribed. Based on the intensity of the treatment, talking, reading and writing were forbidden.

Dr. Mitchell had believed the goal of the rest cure was physical as well as moral. The treatment boosted the weight and blood supply in patients. It also disconnected the patient from toxic situations at home. The implicit goal of the treatment was to break the patient’s will. Well-known, famous women were known to have been prescribed this treatment. This includes Charlotte Perkins-Gilman and Virginia Woolf. Gilman, who was Dr. Mitchell’s most well-known

patient, and other famous women spoke out about the harshness of the cure. Not only did they speak out against the cure but they spoke out against the doctors practising it as well. Feminists began arguing the cure enforced an obsolete and oppressive impression that women should surrender without question to male authority as it was “good for their health.”

Women were clearly upset with the harshness and horrendous nature of the rest cure. Women who believed men with neurasthenia had it easy. Dr. Mitchell had also developed the West cure, a much less harsh treatment for men. The West cure comprised of a trip to the west side of North America along with rigorous activities such as chopping wood. This was an attempt at reinvigorating their physical strength and mental capacities. In Dr. Mitchell’s 1891 publication, we wrote that “Some such return to the earth for the means of life is what gives vigor and developing power to the colonist of an older race cast on a land like ours.” (Wear and Tear: Or Hints for the Overworked, 1981.) Even though, the rest cure and the West cure utilized different tactics, they both aimed at the same problem. Both were developed to treat neurasthenia.

During The Yellow Wallpaper, the narrator had shown signs of two other nervous diseases as well. These signs are most present when the yellow wallpaper began affecting the narrator. Fatigue and depression are closely linked to symptoms of neurasthenia. Her mental and emotional distress are signs of nervous diseases. Due to her having given birth recently and being a new mother, her mental instability highlights hysteria.

Hysteria was a common diagnosis for women in the late 1800’s and early 1900’s. Anxiety, fainting, sexual desire, insomnia, irritability and loss of appetite comprised some of the many symptoms that came along with hysteria. This medical disorder is no longer recognized by medical practitioners.

The narrator is forced to adopt a diagnosis that suggests her depressive restlessness is due to her weak nerves, an emotional inability, and the fact that she is a female. Whether or not her diagnosis is true to her symptoms and either of three diseases, the narrator was forced to undergo a treatment that would subdue her everyday activities. The treatment also emphasized her inferiority to men as the medical ideology back in the 19th and 20th centuries were quite sexist and oppressive. No longer is that the case as this type of practice has been dropped since the 1920’s.

Essentially, the rest cure was designed to relieve women of their mental and psychological illnesses in an effort to make them fit enough to have been able to tend to their families. Many patients were delighted and pleased by Dr. Mitchell’s work and took on the cure. Though, in some cases, some found it helpful while others found it worse than the illness they had been facing. The rest cure prescribed women to do minimal activity, leaving no room for ambition or aspiration. The cure was deemed out-dated and obsolete and has not been used for quite some time. Gilman, who after writing The Yellow Wallpaper, sent a copy out to Dr. Mitchell. After reading, Mitchell changed his views and altered the intenseness of his cure and the way he treated women with mental illnesses.