“The Yellow Wallpaper”: Film Adaptation Versus Story

The 1989 BBC television film version of Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s short story “The Yellow Wallpaper”, seems to carefully consider the importance of the original storyline while also incorporating some notable differences. There were certain aspects of the plotline which were better represented within the movie and vice versa. Varying elements of the narrative are emphasized within the film and the original story, presenting viewers with the opportunity to change their initial perception/understanding and or to make new connections. The differing mediums each have their own individual advantages in portraying the haunting themes from Gilman’s, “The Yellow Wallpaper”.

Both the film and the original short story from 1892 contain discrepancies as well as exclusive strengths, which are clear in direct comparison. For instance, Gilman’s story is written in first person point-of-view, while the 1989 TV movie is depicted in third person point-of-view. In the initial story, the narrator freely speaks to the reader, providing a sense of personal connection to her actions and even thoughts. Charlotte Perkins Gilman places a greater emphasis on her main character and her private ways of thinking, yet the film adaption disperses its focus to more so accentuate the importance of the background characters. The attention towards the supporting characters in the film gives the audience deeper context, however this also slightly distracts from the intended universality of the original story. The more details revealed about the personal lives/feelings of meager characters such as John or Jennie, the less relatable they are to extensive viewers/readers. The ending of the film even includes snippets of a speech John gives for his work, which is not included in the original storyline. Another key difference in regards to the crucial connection between the audience and the storyline is found within the narrator’s name. The text does not specifically name the storyteller, allowing the reader to simply see her as a worldly being in which one can potentially relate to. On the other hand, the film gives its main character the name, “Charlotte”, which, in my opinion, wrongfully hints that the story is a slightly dramatized biography based on the life of Charlotte Perkins Gilman. “The Yellow Wallpaper” was originally intended to be a relatable protest against unfair treatment of women, therefore the use of a no-named narrator within the story is much more effective.

The overall depiction of the characters in the text and the movie are quite identical, though still with multiple significant distinctions. John, the main character’s husband, in both the story and the motion picture is conveyed as belittling and insensitive. However, within the film it seems he is more or less gentler, this is demonstrated through several scenes, specifically in which he shares a bed with Charlotte, dances with her, and at moments even seems to attempt intimacy. Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s original story heavily emphasizes the great distance between John and his wife, incorporating miniscule details such as their seperate sleeping situation; meanwhile the movie seemed to humanize his character more so, giving the viewers a clearer representation of his emotions, reactions, and general behavior. The mental state of the narrator is a major component of “The Yellow Wallpaper”, the text version regularly mentions her obsessive nature towards the wallpaper. Although Charlotte’s state of mind is still a crucial focus for the film adaption, there seems to be a more direct, consistent focus upon the occurrences around her and her responding actions, rather than the haunting appeal she feels specifically for the wallpaper. Gilman’s text describes the ghostly woman behind the wallpaper’s creepy stripes carefully and vaguely, granting the reader the creative freedom to

conceptualize her however they please. Nonetheless, the BBC film almost immediately reveals their interpretation of this mysterious woman, heavily blurring the lines between delusion and reality. As a viewer, this left me confused, continuously attempting to conclude whether or not this eerie woman is supposed to be understood as imaginary. When first reading the text, the hazy ending left me slightly puzzled, I found that the film's ending provided a concrete visual for me to base my imagination off of while also successfully connecting the point that the woman trapped in the wall was in fact, Charlotte the entire time.

Working within the medium of motion pictures comes certain advantages, there are some elements which the crew for the BBC TV movie version used in their favor. To be specific, the use of awkward, uncomfortable camera angles, suspenseful music, as well as the overall visual elements (lighting, set design) aided in displaying the plots important themes. For example, forty-five minutes into the film, the director uses an extreme close up with the help of tense background music, to show Charlotte's mother-in-law intensely confronting her, to which then Charlotte faints. The dramatization of the storyline, particularly within the depiction of mental illness is critical to the TV film adaption; her breakdown is fluffed up with excessive worrisome behavior such as sneaking around at night, throwing numerous fits and eerily staring at her husband in his sleep. The initial story however affirms that the narrator simply represses her feelings and thoughts so much so that she eventually goes mad.

Though both mediums for this particular story have their own individual areas of accomplishment, I personally felt Charlotte Perkins Gilman's original 1892 text version is the most successful. She includes an appropriate extent of vagueness, keeping the story timeless and relatable as well as moderately guiding the reader's imagination without fully taking over. The 1989 TV movie followed the key points of the narrative quite impressively while also making intelligent use of their visual and auditory advantages. However, it was lacking in important areas such as universality, due to their distributed spotlight which emphasized the influence of the background characters. Personal relation between reader and narrator is essential to the purpose and reasoning behind Gilman's initial writing of her short story, "The Yellow Wallpaper."