

"personally, i disagree  
with their ideas"

Literature, American Literature



“ Personally, I disagree with their ideas.” One of the opening statements of “ The Yellow Wallpaper” by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, this quote sums up the point of the text. Gilman becomes incensed at the way doctors and society view women. This short story is an up-close account of a woman who suffers from mental illness. It is written in a way that makes readers relate to the experience of slowly going crazy. An important element in the story is the cause of her worsening condition; the narrator attributes it to the way her husband and brother stifle her and prohibit her from writing and having stimulating friends visit. Through this female character, Gilman personally disagrees with the social expectations of the late 19th century. She asserts that women should not be viewed as physically or intellectually fragile, but instead should have the freedom to engage in active pleasures like writing, reading, and scholarly discussion.

Though the narrator does become more and more mentally unstable throughout the story, her character is positively presented. The tone of the writing is light and playful. Many exclamation points are used to convey her excitement, and pleasant words constantly issue forth from her mouth like, “ delicious garden,” “ dear John,” and “ blessed child” (48). Her narrative is directed at the reader, so that the reader feels as if she has been included in an intriguing secret. She confides to us “ I think that woman gets out in the daytime! And I’ll tell you why? privately? I’ve seen her” (53). Her demeanor is so pleasant that it is charming even in the midst of her madness. Its light and inviting nature almost convince us that she is not really that demented. I believe Gilman portrays her like this to comment that she is really a normal, sane person who is suffering from an oppressive environment. The text

suggests that if she were allowed to do the things that she wants to, like engage in “ congenial work [...] with excitement and change,” write with less opposition, and be allowed “ more society and stimulus,” (42) her fits of illness would probably disappear. The amiable nature of the narrator’s personality is key in revealing Gilman’s desire to eradicate Nineteenth Century women of the responsibility for their illness by placing it on society’s repressive views of women.

The source of the narrator’s suppression is her physician husband, which Gilman uses as a symbol of larger society. This is why she describes her husband (as well as physician brother) as men of “ high standing.” These men are supposed to remind us of all men who are professionally educated and respected as authorities during this time. She recounts that she is advised to “ take phosphates or phosphates, [...] and tonics and air and exercise, and journeys, and am absolutely forbidden to ‘ work’ until I am well again” (42). The nature of this prescription for healing is docile and passive. Upon close analysis, it seems that her husband probably believes that her extracurricular activities, like writing and discussing challenging information, has caused her to become sick; this is based on his assumption that women are inherently weak and not able to withstand activities at the same level as men can. The narrator explains that her husband is a physician and “ perhaps that is one reason I do not get well faster” (41). In other words, she thinks if her husband would just let her be and allow her to try to stabilize her mind in the way she senses is best, she would recover better. Gilman correlates the narrator’s increasing delusion with her husband’s advice.

When she asks for more stimulation, he says “ the very worst thing [she] can do is to think about [her] condition” (42). Interestingly, this causes her to transition into her obsession with the yellow wallpaper. Her immediate response is: “ So I will let it alone and talk about the house” (42). Obviously, her husband’s advice is not effective, yet here, we see that it causes much harm. Gilman takes care to construct the novel in this way to say that the way larger society views and treats women’s issues is wrong and very damaging. They should not hold the view that women are fragile and in need of delicate care. Most likely, she would be happy to see women engaging in public discussion forums, participating in recreational sports, and writing novels and short stories.

One reason the husband has erroneous and destructive advice is that he refuses to listen to his wife’s thoughts and requests. On the other hand, he suppresses them. In the middle of the story, the narrator’s physical health begins to improve and her husband is happy at this progress. However, she alerts him that she is “ Better in body perhaps-” But her husband condescends and rebukes her:

This quote shows that Gilman believes that women will be healthier if their voices are permitted to speak and respected. She is warning society that their way of dealing with women is causing them to be sick, and their method to cure this sickness needs to be improved. She demands society to regard women as strong emotional and intellectual creatures who should be allowed the same freedoms as men. Thus, she warns society that it better listen to the requests of its women before it is too late.

Gilman creates this fascinating tale of a woman who slowly grows crazy so that readers can track the influence that her husband's advice plays in worsening her condition. She writes it in the first person so that readers can experience a piece of her situation and be drawn to care. All in all, "The Yellow Paper" is a story Gilman writes to disarm society's faulty understanding that women are fragile and incapable of intellectual stimulation. She subtly demands society to find another approach in viewing women, which in her view is strong, capable creatures who are entitled to creative capacity through writing and stimulating discussion.