

# The ignominy of insanity

Literature, American Literature



Mental illnesses have always carried a stigma with their name and their history as people who suffer from these disorders have always struggled to face the misconception and the shame that came from being involuntarily affected by such disorders. In each story, the authors, Charlotte Perkins Gilman and William Faulkner, use the theme of insanity to bring attention to problems within their eras regarding the topic of mental disorders and isolation. Gilman's story, *The Yellow Wallpaper*, deals with how a woman's mental state gradually declines as she is forced to remain in isolation to cure what was thought of as a "nervous condition" back then. Faulkner tells the story of Emily Grierson in *A Rose For Emily* and how she, longing for companionship and love, is driven to insanity as isolation take a toll on her. Gilman uses the theme of insanity in order to shed light on mental illness treatments for women at the time, also using the main character as a symbol for oppression faced by women before the 20th century. Faulkner uses insanity in a way that demonstrates the devastating mental effects caused by extreme isolation, focusing on Emily's alienation and what it led to.

Charlotte Gilman had been diagnosed with a "nervous condition"; similarly, the unnamed narrator in *The Yellow Wallpaper* says she is suffering from a "temporary" nervous condition that her husband, John, does not seem to fully acknowledge. John, an experienced physician, says it is nothing to worry about, and provides her with a common treatment given to women diagnosed with such conditions— isolation. This plotline fabricated by Gilman brings attention towards the topic of ethical treatments for both women and mental disorders during this time. In the beginning of the short story, the unnamed narrator states, "If a physician of high standing, and one's own

husband, assures friends and relatives that there is really nothing the matter with one but temporary nervous depression,—a slight hysterical tendency,—“what is one to do?”. Gilman’s word choice for describing her condition adds to her own uncertainty of her state, as her outside environment becomes the main influence in her mentality. The males in this story all seem to be ignorant of the narrator’s problem right from the start, adding to the symbolization of female oppression. Women were no more than just housewives and companions during the time that this story was written; that is, around the 19th and early 20th centuries. Their problems were overlooked and as a result of being constantly locked inside their houses, women were more prone to hysteria than men were. However, the treatment given to women suffering from hysteria were usually very ineffective, causing the problem to worsen rather than be solved. Gilman brings this information into the spotlight as she describes her character progressively losing her mind while being isolated from social interaction— that is, besides her own husband, child, and sister-in-law. The wallpaper is a key element that plays in the role of her mind slipping into insanity, as it is there that she finds companionship in a woman “trapped” behind the wallpaper patterns, and later, comes to believe that it is in fact her own self inside the walls.

Faulkner uses Emily’s story to bring attention to the ill effects of isolation and what one’s environment is capable of. Emily is subjected to the constant gossip from the townspeople as the story progresses, ranging from pitiful remarks to sarcastic comments. In fact, it is them who give the reader their own interpretation of Emily as a sacred, yet pitiful, symbol of tradition, but even then, the neighbors check and criticize her every move. Rather than give aid,

they further pushed Emily into isolation with their remarks and rumors, distancing her further away than what she had been before the death of her father. She was left completely alone and to her own mercy, for all her potential lovers had been driven away by the only protector and family Emily had. The narrator of the story states, “ We remembered all the young men her father had driven away, and we knew that with nothing left, she would have to cling to that which had robbed her, as people will.” Faulkner’s usage of the word “ robbed” leaves an open view to Emily’s character development, open to the reader’s own interpretation; it could be that her father was to blame for her loneliness. Perhaps, this had been a warning about Emily’s obsessive longing for companionship, as she had clung to her dead father for three days before letting him go and having the corpse buried. Similarly, when Emily poisons Homer Barron, it must have been an act of helplessness rather than malice. Emily’s persistence even after Barron’s rejection must have left no choice in her mindset but to have him stay by force— murder. Emily was pushed, not to the brink, but further into the depths of insanity by neighbors and own long-term isolation.

In earlier centuries, the term “ insane” would describe someone who was mentally disturbed. These labels were more common for females, as they were often disregarded and not taken seriously. Because of these views people had towards women with disorders, treatments were not quite reasonable or ethical. Charlotte Perkins Gilman is able to demonstrate the effects of isolation as a treatment, and how it had extreme deteriorating effects on the female brain as time progressed. Rather than becoming better, they got worse. Likewise, William Faulkner uses Emily’s story to show

the problem with overlooking one's mental state. Emily had fallen into a deep depression after she was left by her father; she had been pushed further into it with the townspeople's talk, and to top it off, she had little to no interaction with the outside world for years, driving herself to the point of madness. Both of these authors were capable using their characters, actions, and word choice in order to describe both the causes and the destructive effects of mental disorders effectively.