

The yellow wallpaper essay essay sample

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During the late 1800's many women developed postpartum depression – a severe, long-lasting form of depression that occurred after childbirth, causing symptoms such as insomnia and despondence. At this time, mental health was a subject that was overlooked, leading to various mental disabilities being ruled as “madness” or “schizophrenia”. The treatment for postpartum depression was called the “rest cure”, which isolated women and put them on strict bed rest, causing their conditions to deteriorate rather than improve.

The societal stigma of patriarchy also contributed to this deterioration, as authoritative male figures suppressed women, preventing them from being able to recover, and instead only gave way to the imminent paranoia. In Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story, “The Yellow Wallpaper”, the narrator's internal and external conflict demonstrates her gradual descent into a state of madness as Gilman critiques the conventional disregard for mental illness and the suppression of women in a patriarchal society,

The narrator is subjected to the “rest cure” in order to treat her postpartum depression, however the strict isolation and oppression cause her to feel entrapped and silenced, as she is discouraged from expressing her feelings. Negligent societal views on mental illness are revealed, as she starts to voice her thoughts about the repressive nature of her treatment: “I sometimes fancy that in my condition if I had less opposition and more society and stimulus — but John [her husband] says the very worst thing I can do is think about my condition” (1).

The narrator interrupts herself mid-thought, revealing her internalized conflict in whether to articulate her concern, or accept the world's view on depression. Forced to conceal her emotions, the narrator's isolation causes her anguish. Furthermore, the narrator struggles to express her misery as John feels there is nothing wrong with her, "... these nervous troubles are dreadfully depressing. John does not know how much I really suffer.

He knows there is no reason to suffer and that satisfies him" (2), manifesting common societal views towards mental illness. Despite the narrator's apprehension about her mental health, John insists she is recovering, depicting the lack of regard to psychology in the 19th century. The narrator's conflict induced by the "rest cure" proved to be far more detrimental to a woman suffering from this overlooked anxiety disorder, by detaining her to both mental and physical solitude.

Underlying gender stereotypes and patriarchal domination contribute to the narrator's descent to madness, as John's belittling demeanor influences her to become submissive and ignore her illness. Because the narrator is a weak woman reliant on her husband, only concerned about what "John says", she is initially unable to develop a sense of individuality (1). Her dependence causes her to reluctantly comply with the treatment prescribed by male figures in her life.

She listlessly accepts that "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? My brother is also a physician, and also of high standing,

and he says the same thing” (Gilman 1), exhibiting the male dominance and female subordination present in society. Furthermore, John’s character exemplifies the male view towards females in the nineteenth century.

He disregards his wife’s opinion about her health and discourages her from expressing her feelings. It is suggested that the narrator does not agree with her husband’s, and the other doctor’s’ treatment of the condition, but she does not dare speak against him, as “ John says the worst thing I can do is to think about my condition” (Gilman 1) Unable to voice her concerns about her own mental health, the narrator resorts to writing in a journal in order to preserve any sanity she has left. Even then, the narrator explains, “... he hates to have me write a word” (Gilman 2).

John’s continuous suppressive behavior towards the narrator reveals his lack of concern for her health, suggesting he does not want to be proven wrong by a woman so he prompts her find fault within herself. He controls her thoughts and ideas by not allowing her to speak of them, as well as her creativity by not allowing her to write. As the narrator feels increasingly trapped in a world that does not allow her to live life freely, she becomes “ angry enough to do something desperate” (Gilman 9), suggesting her deteriorating mentality.

The narrator’s external conflict with John’s controlling disposition illustrates the clear imbalance in power between men and women, gradually withdrawing her from reality and intensifying her mental precariousness. In order to expose the societal dogmas about psychology and gender in the

late 1890's, Gilman reflects her personal experience with depression through the narrator's progressive paranoia.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman explains how she was able to overcome her depression and avoid near madness, by writing "The Yellow Wallpaper", "It was not intended to drive people crazy, but to save people from being driven crazy, and it worked" (Gilman: Why I Wrote The Yellow Wallpaper). Gilman's ordeal of going through depression and "nervousness" is symbolic through the narrator's various descriptions of challenges she endures as a woman who is deemed to be "hysterical".

Because she suffered from a mental illness, just like the narrator, Gilman was prescribed the "rest cure" by the famous male doctor, Weir Mitchell. Both Gilman and the narrator experienced adverse effects from the treatment, as it subjugated and demoralized women by isolating them and only worsening their depression. To contextualize the story, Gilman includes female suppression as a factor that contributed towards the deteriorating condition of both herself and the narrator.

Gilman parallels John with her doctor, Weir Mitchell, highlighting how both men imprisoned the women through the rest cure. Like the narrator, Gilman obeyed orders from a "wise man" for some time before she noticed that she "came so near the borderline of utter mental ruin" that she could see over" (Gilman). However, she realized that isolation was doing her more harm than good, so she was able to break free and write a short story, exposing the effects of the "rest cure", unlike the narrator whose internal and external struggles drive her to madness.

“The Yellow Wallpaper” explores societal stigmas of gender inequality and mental illness during the nineteenth century, revealing the effects of these principles through the author’s use of a first person narrator. The personal account of a woman suffering through postpartum depression exposes the reader to the treatment of mentally ill women, describing the disregard and “treatments” that they tolerated.

Gilman depicts her personal struggle through the character of the narrator, illustrating the ignorance towards mental illness in the nineteenth century society, and showing the female suppression that was present through the narrator’s relationship with her husband. Overall, this story displays how patriarchy and traditional beliefs regarding psychology engender internal and external strife, ultimately driving a woman suffering from illness to insanity.