

RESEARCH ARTICLE



ELABORATE CONSTRUAL OF *THE YELLOW WALL PAPER*: IN THE CONTEXT OF AMERICAN REALISM

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ABSTRACT

The paper aims to interpret the short story *The Yellow Wall Paper* written by Charlotte Perkins Gilman within the context of the American realism. It examines the characteristic features of American Realism & its influence on the theme and narration of the short story. The realistic interpretation of the text in more than one context provides alternate assumptions to analyze the writer's work in different perspectives.

Keywords: American Realism, Gynocriticism, Realistic technique, Psychoanalysis

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INTRODUCTION

Charlotte Perkins Gilman wrote an autobiographical short story *The Yellow Wall Paper* in the realism technique and for literary critics the characters of her story became one of the most important characters as it opens up for several interpretations of the text. If the text is read without interpretation, it appears to be a simple story of the disturbed mindset of the author who was suffering from temporary nervous depression and how she dealt with it. In the course of her ailment she was constantly been supported and nurtured by her physician husband. At the end, doctor was fainted by seeing the condition of his creeping patient. It appeals to the reader's at mental, physical and emotional levels and towards the end; they sympathize with the character of *The Yellow Wall Paper*. The short story

was examined from feminist perspective prominently in the context of American Realism that presents writer's real life experience moment by moment in realistic technique.

American Realism emphasized on reality and verisimilitude of the characters and portrayed their characters as more important than the plot in their work. It sought to depict everyday lives of ordinary Americans in various contexts authentically in conversational style. Charlotte Perkins Gilman wrote short story in first person account *The Yellow Wall Paper*. It's considered as an important realistic story in the history of English Literature. The subject matter of the story was drawn from author's real life experience; a distinctive quality of American Realism. *The Yellow Wall Paper*, the title of the short story was not showy and sounds unpretentious for the readers, creating

curiosity about the ordinary yellow paper on the wall. Generally by the title one can guess about the book but no one can guess the yellow wall paper as an autobiographical short story by its title. In the story she was suffering with temporary nervous depression and her husband was giving medical treatment for her sickness. Here, self-awareness about her illness and also sure about the cure was her realistic quality. She strongly believes to restrain her from writing would do no good to her health. Her husband was persists to continue his treatment to confine her in a room without work for her better health. Realistic point of view differs for men and women for the same issues significantly portrays in the *The Yellow Wall Paper*.

Does *The Yellow Wall Paper* symbolize narrator's psychology or a gynocriticism on John's oppression of the author's individuality? This question in the text was perpetually arduous for the literary critics to answer in one conclusion. There are numerous interpretations of in depth psychoanalysis of the character's psychological familiarity with the yellow wall paper. Changing description of the yellow wall paper reflects the change in the character's mindset in the story. Peter Barry defines, "Psychoanalysis itself is a form of therapy which aims to cure mental disorders "by investigating the interaction of conscious and unconscious elements in the mind." (Barry 92) The study of the character's mindset is the real challenge to interpret within the context of American Realism. So, precisely the influence of realism during the author's time can be observed in *Facing Facts: Realism in American Thought and Culture*:

Increasingly aware of their isolation and vulnerability amid the gusty whims of a leveling age, the nation's intellectual and moral aristocrats were motivated as much by their fears of the new as they by their hopes for renewal. (Shi, 15)

The study of the short story focuses on the narrator's psyche and the creative process of the text. In *The Yellow Wall Paper* narrator was psychologically disturbed due to imposed isolation as she was advised to take rest that made her most restless in her

perceived ailment. In the short story writer gets more and more familiar with yellow wall paper as it was the only companion for her in the room. These lines are from the short story.

I'm getting really fond of the room in spite of the wall-paper. Perhaps BECAUSE of the wall-paper. (Gilman 15)

The yellow paper was providing different thoughts to the narrator and later she identifies with it. The critic of Psychoanalysis examines how the characters in the text are motivated by their desires, fears, needs, and conflicts of which they are unaware in the progress of the story. In psychoanalysis the critics study the mind of the characters to search for the answers, why do they behave in the way they behave in the story?

Elaine Showalter coined Gynocriticism that is - "it is a criticism which concerns itself with developing a specifically female framework for dealings with work written by women in all aspects of their production, motivation, analysis, interpretation and in all literary forms, including journal and letters." (Abrams 123) In *The Yellow Wall Paper* narrator says these lines-

John does not know how much I really suffer. He knows there is no REASON to suffer, and that satisfies him. (Gilman 10)

Her statement clearly states lack of empathy between the husband and wife in the story. It also adversely affects the doctor- patient relationship as she thinks her husband fails to identify the cause of her ailment. "I suppose John never was nervous in his life. He laughs at me so about this wall-paper!" (Gilman 10) She feels John was very practical in his life. He mocks at her life and at wall paper alike and hence dismissed it as non-serious issue for him. "John says if I don't pick up faster he shall send me to Weir Mitchell in the fall." (Gilman 15) Here this sentence can be seen in realistic lens as John stops her to have natural interactions with him, and so for her only- silences. He keeps on reminding her that she needs rest and if there is no improvement in her health, he will send her to Dr Mitchell though he knew her fear for this doctor. John threatens her and controls her mind.

It is so hard to talk with John about my case, because he is so wise, and because he loves

me so. The fact is I am getting a little afraid of John. He asked me all sorts of questions, too, and pretended to be very loving and kind.
(Gilman 19)

Her fear for John suggests his complete authority over her individuality. "There comes John, and I must put this away,—he hates to have me write a word." (Gilman 9). She was living with her husband in constant unknown fear but even that fear had not blocked her to follow her passion for creativity.

Gynocriticism questions on John's domination over author's creativity that had culminated into author living a crippled life. Who is responsible for her state of mind? - Her creativity as claimed by her husband (psychoanalytic criticism) or the husband creates the circumstances as identified by feminist critics (feministic criticism).

American Realism

American Realism took momentum in literary environment after the US civil war. The growth of democracy and literacy, anti-slavery protests, and development of urbanization and industrialization gave Americans new confidence. It encouraged them to continue their fight against inequality and injustice on general and gender issues with boldness. Representative writers of that time – William Dean Howells (*The Rise of Silas Lapham*), Stephen Crane (*Maggie; The girl of the streets*), Theodore Dreiser (*Sister Carrie*) Henry James (*Portrait of a lady*) Edith Wharton (*The Age of Innocence*) and Mark Twain (*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*) they portrayed the characters and the circumstances of the real experiences in the novels. Identification of Realism in Literature: Literature in realism gyrate on the themes of common people's real experiences and the plots are structured with simplicity and treated with straight forwardness. In realism themes and characters are portrayed truthfully in non-dramatic style. The elements the plot (inner/outer conflicts of the characters) is more important than the plot itself. The usage of language is simple and natural in the works of realism. The climax of the novel always triumphs in its reality.

Realism in *The Yellow Wall Paper*

The short story is based on the Gilman's real experience. After delivering the baby she suffered from temporary nervous breakdown and was being treated by Dr S.Weir Mitchell who prescribed her 'rest cure'. In this treatment the patient will be kept in isolation without any work for them. Doctor monitors their health in normal circumstances by providing them complete rest restricting them to live a domestic life. Gilman as a patient in the story reacted against such treatment and said the same in the story in different language.

So I take phosphates or phosphites—
whichever it is, and tonics, and journeys, and
air, and exercise, and am absolutely forbidden
to "work" until I am well again. Personally, I
disagree with their ideas. (Gilman 6)

She disagrees with the given treatment and offers her suggestion about her health issue. She shared with her husband about the possible option for her fast recovery. She sought for her freedom to live a normal life but he fails to appreciate and support her opinion. The story realistically depicts the male dominance and the female's suppression in the society.

John is a physician, and PERHAPS—(I would
not say it to a living soul, of course, but this is
dead paper and a great relief to my mind)—
PERHAPS that is one reason I do not get well
faster. (Gilman 6)

The story revolves in a room of a rented house. The ordinary description of the house and the surroundings places provides author's sense of familiarity with the vicinity. The story develops in writer's room and her association of thoughts with the yellow paper on the wall. The narratology was simple and honest. In the beginning everything appears to be normal but in her privacy, she gradually creeps into her insanity in her loneliness. Here the proverb "An idle mind is the devil's workshop" suitable to the context. She was denied to live a normal life. Author was deliberately barred from creative writing that led her to visualize herself in the yellow wall paper. Yellow color symbolizes with the rigid oppression of masculine sunlight. She was obsessed with finding a pattern in the wall paper and symbolically it suggests

she see no pattern in her life. Gilman felt creativity liberates mind and soul but if deprived, it struggles and searches for its liberation. The character's tussle for freedom was the central theme of the short story. She was mysteriously connected with the wall paper and disconnected from her writings. It reveals her departures from her sound mind and her entry into new self which was a creation of her mind. In her new identity she identified herself to be imprisoned in the wall paper. Her state of mind was depicted in her self-talk.

I don't like to LOOK out of the windows even—
there are so many of those creeping women,
and they creep so fast.

I wonder if they all come out of that wall-
paper as I did. (Gilman 31)

She did not accept her imprisonment but acts on her circumstances to finally break away from her identification with the wall paper.

"I've got out at last," said I, "in spite of you and
Jane. And I've pulled off most of the paper, so
you can't put me back!" (Gilman 32)

The story ends in wisdom in author's madness and
madness in doctor's wisdom.

Now why should that man have fainted? But
he did, and right across my path by the wall, so
that I had to creep over him every time!
(Gilman, 32)

John's unexpected collapse, unmoved by this; narrator
was creeping all over the room. This movement was
her new freedom.

Conclusion

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wall Paper* was an autobiographical short story written in contemporary context narrated in realistic technique. This realistic approach allows the readers to interpret the text in the given context in order to comprehend the complexities of the characters in the light of American realism.

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