



Peeling Back the Paper

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In this reader-response analysis of Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s classic “The Yellow Wallpaper,” Baylee Tassej argues that the emotional connection between the narrator and reader augments the story’s central themes of control, mental wellbeing, and entrapment. The essay was written for Writing II with Dr. Ben Wetherbee.

CHARLOTTE PERKINS GILMAN’S “The Yellow Wallpaper” is a short story primarily set in a colonial mansion that the narrator’s husband, John, has rented for the summer. Through the story’s diary-like structure, the narrator remains anonymous in name, but the reader is submerged into the mind of a woman whose mental health is questionable, to say the least. Through careful analysis under a reader-response lens, the depth of this story can be broken down to fully understand the literary elements at play with common themes of control, mental health, and the feeling of being trapped.

The fact that the story is presented as the narrator’s journal supplies an intriguing sense of narrative flow. The narrator interacts with her journal as if talking to another person, which allows the reader to get more involved. She goes even further to personify the paper she is writing on by saying, “but this is dead paper and a great

relief to my mind” (79). An anxious atmosphere emerges for the reader because of how fragmented and choppy the sentences are. The narrator starts a new entry by saying, “I don’t know why I should write this. I don’t want to. I don’t feel able” (85), expressing the narrator’s state of mind and how rushed her writing had to be to keep it hidden from John. Her “ideal” reader is someone who the narrator feels comfortable confiding in (see Rabinowitz 134-36). This story isn’t necessarily pointed towards an ideal reader due to its transcription in a journal, but if it were to have one this would be it.

When first introduced to the story, the reader is already made to feel a bit uneasy about the dynamic of the narrator’s marriage to John. There is an apparent factor of control at play with their relationship, though the narrator seems to shrug it off for the most part, saying, “John laughs at me, of course, but one expects that in marriage” (79). If the story were told through third-person narration rather than first-person, the reader would see John laughing at his wife and not taking her seriously. It would seem like a pompous thing for him to do. With access to the narrator’s thoughts, the reader sees the different side of things, but is again surprised when the narrator turns to excusing her husband’s degrading actions by saying calling them “expected.” John has almost complete control over the narrator since he is “a physician of high standing” (80). He orders her to not have any intellectual stimuli so she can properly heal from her illness. The reader can also perceive how brainwashed the narrator is. She interrupts her own thoughts in her diary with those of John, saying, “—but John says the very worst thing I can do is to think about my condition” (80). She doesn’t hesitate to interrupt herself, and she doesn’t even finish her thought.

The narrator, although possibly mentally unstable, can be considered reliable due to her genuine nature. The short story might be a little biased in the way that the reader is only seeing the events unravel through the narrator’s point of view, but the way things are presented indicate the narrator is being honest about her condition.

The narrator is aware of her illness, as seen when she says, “You see, he does not believe I am sick! And what can one do?” (80). The “he” in this quote refers to John; the narrator feels helpless because her own husband does not take her condition seriously, while she professes that she does. The narrator also seems pretty well-educated. She knows the principles of design; this is shown when she starts to break down the wallpaper's elements, saying, “this thing was not arranged on any laws of radiation, or alternation, or repetition, or symmetry, or anything else that I ever heard of” (84). The reader can also note that she is not interested in factual accuracy: “I take phosphates or phosphites—whichever it is” (80). So, although the narrator is intelligent, she isn't too worried about jargon and technicalities. This makes her come off as someone who is easy to relate to, maybe not through her illness, but through her humanity.

The most peculiar aspect of the story is how the narrator develops throughout, all because of the yellow wallpaper she has to stare at on a daily basis. At first, she has a growing hatred towards it, pointing out all of its flaws, but as the days go by she begins to obsess over it, trying to solve it like a puzzle. She even says, “Life is very much more exciting now than it used to be” (88). You could say that her lack of intellectual stimuli makes it so the wallpaper is the only thing keeping her afloat, or maybe that she is only saying the things she says because of her illness, or maybe a good mixture of both. It becomes most difficult to consider the narrator reliable is when she introduces the woman in the wall: “The front pattern *does* move—and no wonder! The woman behind it shakes it!” (89). She really does believe this. She remains trustworthy in that she isn't necessarily lying; she is just not the healthiest person to be reading an account of events from.

As the story comes to a close, the reader is left wondering what exactly happened. The narrator has torn the wallpaper off to free the woman behind it and surprise her husband: “I want to astonish him” (91). The story cleverly ends with the narrator performing a reenactment of what the woman behind the wallpaper did every night.

Her husband comes in and all she says is, “Now why should that man have fainted? But he did, and right across my path . . . so that I had to creep over him every time!” (92). This raises the question, was the woman in the wall a projection of the woman stuck in the room writing this diary? It is highly likely, but with the diary format comes the realization that the reader may never know for sure. It is all left to interpretation and depends on how much the audience is willing to trust the narrator.

The strategic layout of “The Yellow Wallpaper” adds a lot of room for emotional connection between the narrator and the reader. If this story were told in any different way, the prominent themes of control, mental health, and the feeling of being trapped would not be as effective. The narrative point of view allows for further interpretation of information provided in the diary, and in turn allows for a look into the eyes of a mentally, physically, and emotionally trapped person. ►►

►► WORKS CITED

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