

Typical Life of American Wife of the late 1800s: An Analysis of Kate Chopin's "Story of an Hour" and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper"

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Abstract

The life of the typical American women in the late 1800s was strictly confined to the four walls of a house. For a wife, marriage, husband and family were the destiny. She had no legal political right or voice in public sphere. They were not supposed to involve in any intellectual pursuits but only in domestic chores like cooking, sewing, cleaning etc. The condition of women in any class (upper, lower or middle) was more or less same. Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Kate Chopin were noted American writers of nineteenth century. Both writers outrageously expressed their strong views on women, marriage and sex. They were revolutionaries of their time. This paper is going to analyse how Kate Chopin's "Story of an Hour" and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" depict typical public expectations about marriage and women of late 1800s. It also distinguishes the representation of women and wife in the nineteenth century patriarchal American society.

Keywords: American wife, Woman, Late 1800s, Patriarchy, Inequality

Introduction

In the 1800s, women usually stayed at home. They cleaned the house and cooked and sewed. They didn't often go out to work. The young girls were not allowed in schools. They didn't need to educate because women stayed at home. No women went to university. The man was the head of the family in those days. It was men's responsibility to feed, clothe and protect their family. His wife and children belonged to him. His wife's money and all her things belonged to him too! Women's popular literature of that period was full of advice about and encouragement for proper housekeeping. These advices say women are destined to keep the house clean, nurture their children and take care of their husband. During this century a very few writers like Kate Chopin and Charlotte Perkins Gilman came with their radical literary expressions.

Kate Chopin began writing fiction in 1889 and her short stories and essays enriched with the themes of love, independence, passion and freedom of women. Still she is remembered for her realistic plots and characters. Her short story "The Story of an Hour" is first published in 1894. As the title suggests it the story of an hour and the story show the things happened in the life of Louise Mallard within one hour. In the beginning of the story, Mrs. Louise Mallard, a heart patient was informed about the death of her husband Mr. Brently Mallard in a railroad accident by her sister Josephine and her husband's friend Richards. The grief stricken Louise locks her in a room and weeps. Later she realizes something happening, "wonderful and terrible at the same time. She is free. Free! Body and soul free! (Chopin 19)." Mrs. Mallard gets excited for the opportunity to live a life full of freedom for herself. She repeats the word free. Josephine comes to Mrs. Mallard. Mrs. Mallard opens the door, they walking down the stairs, where Richards is waiting. Unexpectedly Mr. Brently comes in through the front door. He is completely blank and not aware about the accident or death news. Josephine screams, and Richards fails to block

Louise from seeing him. Mrs. Mallard collapses. Doctors arrive and pronounce after diagnosis that Louise died of a heart attack brought on by happiness.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman wrote "The Yellow Wallpaper" in 1890 and published in 1892 in *New England Magazine*. During her lifetime, the role of women in American society was restricted both socially and legally. At the time of its publication, women were twenty-six years away from gaining the suffrage right. Perkins Gilman used the experience of her marital life, her postpartum depression and the experience of doctors she met during her illness as the source of inspiration for "The Yellow Wallpaper". The first person narrated story is a collection of journal entries written by a woman whose physician husband, John has rented an old mansion for the summer. As a part of treatment, the unnamed protagonist is forbidden from working or writing, and is encouraged to eat well and get plenty of air, so she can recuperate from what he calls a "temporary nervous depression – a slight hysterical tendency (Gilman 4).", a diagnosis common to women during that period. The narrator devotes many journal entries to describing the wallpaper in the room and she obsessed with its color, texture and design. She describes when she stays in the bedroom the wallpaper appears to be more mutata, especially in the moonlight. Gradually she hallucinates to a figure in the wallpaper behind the pattern and it eventually comes to creeping on all fours. Believing she must free the figure of woman in the wallpaper, the woman begins to strip the remaining paper off the wall. The narrator refuses to unlock her door, when her husband arrives home. When he returns with the key, he finds her creeping around the room, rubbing against the wallpaper. He faints, but she continues to circle the room, creeping over his inert body each time she passes it, believing herself to have become the woman trapped behind the yellow wallpaper.

Typical Life of American Wife in "Story of an Hour" and "The Yellow Wallpaper"

Mrs. Mallard, the protagonist of the “Story of an Hour” enjoys the impermissible independence just for an hour. Her first reaction towards the death news was obviously grief, however the thought of his absence gave her immense happiness, pleasure and freedom. Louise first reaction was quite normal and up to the expectations of the society including Josephine and Richards. In her private space Mrs. Mallard realizes that now she is an independent woman and the thought of freedom brought her immense joy. She tries to suppress the joy she feels. This shows how restricted this pleasure really is. She feels that the fate given her a chance to taste the forbidden fruit and her happy heart pronounces the word ‘free’. Even the physical environment suggests her freedom.

“She could see in the open square before her house the tops of trees that were all aquiver with the new spring life. The delicious breath of rain was in the air. In the street below a peddler was crying his wares... There were patches of blue sky showing here and there through the clouds that had met and piled one above the other in the west facing her window (18).”

Like many other wives in American society during 1800’s, Mrs. Mallard was also in an oppressive married life. She knows that she will cry during the funeral because of her loving husband, but beyond that bitter moment she wishes to embrace the free years belongs to her: “And she opened and spread her arms out to them in welcome (19).” These thought process reveals the inherent oppressiveness of all marriages. Even after Louise death the doctor’s diagnosis of “heart disease” seems appropriate because the shock of seeing Brently was surely enough to kill her. It is society’s expectation that she died of overwhelming joy but the loss of freedom actually killed her.

The narrator of the story “The Yellow Wallpaper” goes rest cure for a long period of time without even leaving the home. The story reveals that this arrangement had the effect of committing women to a state of dependence and ignorance, because at that time women were

expected to be subordinate and obedient to their husbands. The protagonist's husband John discards her concerns and preferences and makes all the decisions about both of their lives. Throughout the story, the narrator is restrained from reading, writing and socializing. These are the things she wants to do. That's why "she hurries to put her journal away because John is approaching (Gilman 7)." The narrator's thoughts reflect the ideals of society when she considers John's sister as a perfect woman, because she is an enthusiastic housekeeper. In the name of rest cure, the narrator is forced to silence her emotional as well as intellectual outlet.

Jane Thraikill points out that the nineteenth-century medical establishment did not understand how to deal with women's mental health issues, often misdiagnosing a whole host of disorders as female hysteria (545). Thraikill explains that physicians employed the "rest cure" as a way to regain control over a situation they did not comprehend. The narrator's "nervous condition" is not hysteria but, rather, probably the result of having recently given birth. The story has a clear picture of male domination in the 19th century. The narrator wishes to socialize with the outside world for her cure, "So I walk a little in the garden or down that lovely lane, sit on the porch under the roses, and lie down up here a good deal (Gilman 10)." but her ideas were treated as irrational and illogical. The life of narrator shows subordination of women in marriage life and she compares herself with the trapped woman in the yellow wallpaper. Her urge to help the trapped woman shows her own intense impulse to get out of the four walls of trapped married life. The journal is the only way of her self-expression. The wallpaper is mysterious as well as domestic and Gilman skillfully uses this gothic, hideous paper as a symbol of the domestic life that traps so many women.

Conclusion

The end of 19th century witnesses many changes including women's shift from domestic life to professional life. Regardless of these changes, throughout the nineteenth century, 95% of married women remained at home with the domestic cult. Society compels

women to 'fulfill their responsibilities'. Most of the 19th century popular literatures contain advice for societies so called 'good woman', 'perfect wife' and 'lovable mother'. But the stories of Kate Chopin and Charlotte Perkins Gilman very clearly picture the life of woman, especially married woman in the late 1800's. Through their radical stories they show the conflict between marriage and independence, freedom and restraint. The stories are their desire to break out the limits imposed upon women. They are against the rigid patriarchic norms and illustrating the ways that rigid gender roles have a negative effect on both women and men.

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