

Complex transformation and defense
The Yellow Wallpaper



Transformation

I wipe the drops of sweat from my forehead before they run into my eyes. Four hours of frantic work for nothing. Four hours just to see the life drain from her hopeless eyes. I knew before we started the surgery there was little chance of her recovery, yet I still fought for her life. I dread having to go out to inform her family that their daughter did not make it. Shaky handed, I remove my sanitary garments and walk to the parlour where her family is waiting, huddled together. As I relay the news her mother drops to the floor, wailing inaudible words, her husband embraces her on the floor. I mumble a numb apology and leave the distraught family to console each other.

I find some solitude to allow myself to process the preceding events. My mind wonders to the state of my dear wife and I begin to fill with dread as my thoughts contemplate the seriousness of her illness. It is so obvious that her mental state is deteriorating more with each day, but how can I treat an illness I can't even diagnose? I fear it will send her into an even more desperate state if I discuss with her my true emotions. I am too scared her illness will get out of control and I will not be able to help my poor wife. For now I think, it is best to let my wife believe her illness is that of a nervous condition; nothing too serious.

Defence

The Yellow Wallpaper, written by Charlotte Perkins Stetson, was first published in 1892. The short story is written in journal entries which are secretly written by a woman who is suffering from what is supposed to be a 'nervous condition' according to her husband, John, who is a physician. During her entries the woman mentions how her husband patronizes her and controls her, and does not take her condition seriously.

The textual features that have been used to create the short story, allow for an invited reading that suggests the relationship between the woman and her husband is patriarchal. Through the woman's journal entries, her husband is portrayed as condescending and controlling. The woman however, shows that she is aware of her own illness despite her husband's insistent dismissal of her worries.

undermine the economic, political, social, and psychological oppression of women", as defined by feminist critics such as Mary Wollstonecraft and Virginia Wolf (Tyson, 1999). Many feminist critics argue that women are oppressed by men economically, politically, socially, and psychologically, women are marginalised in a patriarchal society and gender issues are present in "every aspect of human production and experience" including literature (Purdue Uni, 2020). When looking at the base text through a feminist criticism lens, it is obvious that the woman is oppressed by her husband through the way he treats her and how she is restricted from doing many things like work and exercise.

Feminist critic, "Hélène Cixous argues that language reveals...*patriarchal binary thought*" where the woman occupies the side of the binary which, "according to patriarchal thinking" is "[considered] inferior" (Tyson, 1999). This binary is also present in the base text when John is referred to as "practical in the extreme" when the woman refers to herself as "sensitive" and "silly". The notion that anything a woman says is not taken seriously by the patriarchal society is also evident in the base text. The woman expresses her desire to "say what [she] feels and thinks" but she is refrained from doing so because "John will think it absurd". Another critic, Luce Irigaray, maintains that:

"when a woman dares speak in her own way, " 'she' sets off in all directions leaving 'him' [the patriarchal man] unable to discern the coherence of any meaning. Hers are contradictory words, somewhat mad from the standpoint of reason, inaudible for whoever listens to them with ready-made grids, with a fully elaborated code in hand" (Tyson, 1999).

This theory also relates to the husband's ability to send his wife to an insane asylum for speaking her mind which is what prevents her from doing so.

The transformation provides a resistant representation of gender characteristics by challenging stereotypical views of masculinity. This has been created by positioning the reader to feel empathy for John as he expresses a deep concern for his wife and defends his "ignorance" to her health as preventing her from worrying. This has been achieved through the structuralist

Close textual analysis under New Criticism, which focuses on “the text itself” explains how the invited reading was created (Tyson, 1999). New Criticism was proclaimed by John Crowe Ransom in a series of essays called *The New Criticism* which was published in 1941. In his essays he argued that literary criticism should become “more scientific, or precise and systematic” (Mambrol, 2016). He believed that the “emphasis of criticism must move from historical scholarship to aesthetic appreciation and understanding” (Mambrol, 2016). Ransom insisted that the “real aim of criticism” was to “define and enjoy the aesthetic or characteristic values of literature”, thus ignoring anything that is not the text itself (Mambrol, 2016). Tyson sums this up by saying:

Its meaning is as objective as its physical existence on the page, for it is constructed of words placed in a specific relationship to one another—specific words placed in a specific order—and this one-of-a-kind relationship creates a complex of meaning that cannot be reproduced by any other combination of words (Tyson, 1999).

Throughout the text, John, the husband, repeatedly dismisses the woman’s concern asserting his dominance saying “I am a doctor, dear, and I know” (Stetson, 1892). The woman also writes that she is “afraid” of her husband because he might “take her away” meaning if John believes that his wife is ‘crazy’ then he has the power to send her to an insane asylum. This reinforces the control that the male had in a relationship which was prominent within that time in history (Stetson, 1892).

The woman is also called “little girl” and “little goose” by her husband. Using New Criticism to analyse these phrases, the word ‘little’ means something small and possibly insignificant, the word ‘girl’ means immature and undeveloped and the word ‘goose’ means something is silly or inane, suggesting that this is how John views his wife. When the woman recalls her husband saying that she is “absolutely forbidden to work” it explicitly shows the control John possesses, which positions the reader to feel angry towards his controlling nature and have sympathy for the woman.

The textual features also work to reinforce traditional gender roles where the male is inherently dominant over the female. Feminist criticism addresses “the ways in which literature (and other cultural productions) reinforce or

notions that aims to see the big picture not stated. This allows readers to interpret a point of view which challenges hegemonic masculinity by providing a point of view which expresses fear and emotion. The transformation also draws from the base text to challenge binary oppositions. According to Claude Lévi-Strauss, binary oppositions are “two ideas, directly opposed, each of which we understand by means of its opposition to the other” (Tyson, 1999). Good

The base text explicitly illustrates the binary between genders – the woman is very submissive and genteel, while the man is controlling and dominant and his word has more power than his wife’s. The transformation addresses this by removing the ‘binary’ relationship and bringing ‘feminine’ traits into the ‘masculine’ character from the base text. Insight into his thoughts and emotions, by using statements such as “fill with dread” and “too scared” provides a mix of both feminine and masculine qualities in one character, thus eradicating the traditional binary opposition of male/female. According to the structuralist theory put forth by Ferdinand Saussure, “the human mind perceives difference most readily in terms of opposites, which structuralists call binary oppositions” (Tyson, 1999). This would have contributed to the invited reading and therefore has been subverted in the transformation.

Looking at the transformation through the gender criticism lens, which evolved from feminist criticism, it “examines how sexual identity influences the creation and reception of literary works” (Kennedy & Gioia, 1995). Feminist

criticism also aims to “[analyse] how sexual identity influences the reader of a text” and “[examine] how the images of men and women in imaginative literature reflect or reject the social forces that have historically kept the sexes from achieving total equality” (Kennedy & Gioia, 1995). Carl Jung believes that all men have a ‘feminine’ interior because they are forced to repress their ‘feminine’ traits which he explains by saying: well

No man is so entirely masculine that he has nothing feminine in him. The fact is, rather, that very masculine men have – carefully guarded and hidden – a very soft emotional life, often incorrectly described as ‘feminine.’ A man counts it a virtue to repress his feminine traits as much as possible, just as a woman, at least until recently, considered it unbecoming to be ‘manish’ (Brod & Kaufman, 1994).

The base text to transformation supports Jung's thesis. In the base text John comes across as cold and uncaring for his wife's mental state, however this can be assumed to be him 'repressing' his "feminine" traits which is shown in the transformation. In the transformation, John does not repress his "feminine" traits, instead he acknowledges his love for his wife, and acknowledges his lack of control over her fate as he is "scared her illness will get out of control" and he will not be able to help her.

Carl Jung's thesis also stems from psychoanalytical theory proposed by Sigmund Freud. "The goal of psychoanalysis is to help [people] resolve [their] psychological problems, often called disorders or dysfunctions ... the focus is on patterns of behaviour that are destructive in some way" (Tyson, 1999). People develop defences which can include "selective perception, selective memory, denial, displacement, projection, regression, fear of intimacy, and fear of death" (Tyson, 1999). In the base text the husband embodies traditional male roles but this is likely a suggestion of his defences he has created including selective perception, denial and fear of both intimacy and death. The transformation eliminates John's defences by allowing him to acknowledge the seriousness of his wife's condition and admits to feeling "fear" and "love" which are considered feminine traits.

The complex transformation utilises various text-centred and world-centred theories to eliminate the male dominance and the male/female binary. The transformation applied structuralist theory, gender criticism and psychoanalysis, to produce an invited reading where the male challenges hegemonic masculinity by demonstrating "feminine" characteristics. Through this the transformation was able to subvert both the binary aspect and gender roles.

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