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THE YELLOW WALLPAPER: A PSYCHOANALYTICAL PARALLELISM
BETWEEN CHARACTER AND AUTHOR

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ABSTRACT

A literary work always carries the impression of its author. Every piece of writing reveals something very essential about the person who creates it. However, some works of literature are considered to be autobiographical sketches of their authors. The Yellow Wallpaper was written by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and this short story has a strong, resemblance with her life. Similarities between Charlotte's life and the protagonist of the story are very evident. The protagonist suffered from depression after giving birth to a child, and she was on the rest cure. Charlotte Perkin Gilman also suffered from the same kind of depression and she was advised a similar cure by the Doctor. So, it can be realized that every thought of the protagonist in the story is the thinking pattern of Charlotte. This story has been open to many interpretations but I want to interpret it through psychoanalysis. I intend to explore the similarities between Charlotte Perkins Gilman and the protagonist of this story based on psychoanalytic theory in general and defense mechanisms in particular.

INTRODUCTION

Literature is full of such examples when poets, dramatists, or novelists used their writings to narrate the stories of their lives. They created situations and characters which resembled them, and the situations they have been through. Charles Dickens was one of the most prominent English novelists of the 19th century. A glimpse of his childhood can be seen in his novels. For example, the character of Oliver in Oliver Twist is the manifestation of Dickens' childhood in workhouses.

Charlotte Perkin Gilman had a difficult childhood. Her father left them and her mother taught her not to expect affection from anyone. She was an imaginative girl but her mother barred her from imagining. She used to spend most of her time in the public library and became a writer herself. Her first marriage took place in 1884 when she was 23 years old, and after giving birth to a child she suffered from severe depression. She was suggested a rest cure by famous neurologist S. Weir Mitchell. She followed the advice and even stopped writing, but the condition of her health got worse. She wanted to write instead of fulfilling the responsibilities of motherhood. She also despised the male-oriented world, dependence on males, and being instructed by them. She hated the domestic hard work with no time and energy left for the writing. Consequently, she divorced her husband and left the child with him (Mayne, 2011).

After getting done with this she resumed her writing. She mentioned in her diary that she started to feel that her depression was vanishing. She wrote enthusiastically and actively participated in the feminist movement. She urged women to be self-sufficient especially in financial matters (Parker, 2013). Although she was bisexual, she got married again in 1900 with her cousin George Gilman. George died in 1934 and the next year Charlotte was diagnosed with breast cancer. Instead of dying a painful death, she committed suicide in 1935.

The Yellow Wallpaper was written in the first person. The whole story is narrated by a woman who has recently given birth to a child. She is suffering from postpartum depression. For the recovery of her health, the family has rented a colonial mansion and moved in. Her husband John is a doctor himself but he has put her on a rest cure. He has asked her not to do anything but take a rest. She is not even allowed to do any writing or meet people. The room in which she lives is wrapped with yellow wallpaper. She repels the yellow wallpaper initially. Due to loneliness, she gets fixated on the yellow wallpaper. She keenly begins to observe the patterns of the wallpaper. Gradually she loses interest in the outer world. All the time she keeps staring at the wallpaper. She discovers a shadow is entrapped behind the pattern (Garcia, 2014).

She does not share anything about the moving patterns of the wallpaper and the existence of a shadow behind them. Later on, that shadow takes the shape of a woman. The moving pattern of the wallpaper and the shadow of the woman is her hallucinations. When she is alone in the room, she sees that shadow emerges from the wallpaper and creeps on the floor and walls of the room. She feels her life getting exciting due to that wallpaper and that shadow of the woman. She becomes so much obsessed with the shadow that she also begins to creep into the room. She feels as if that shadow of woman is seeking its freedom. She thinks that, by tearing off the wallpaper, she can set the woman free. So she tears off the wallpaper. She locks herself in the room and creeps most of the time. Finally, when her husband discovers her doing this she tells him that she has finally got out. She has finally attained freedom.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The protagonist and the settings of *The Yellow Wallpaper* explain what Charlotte Perkin Gilman went through in the phase of depression. This short story has already been interpreted through Marxism, Feminism, and Deconstruction. However, it elaborates the inner world of the mind thoroughly. So, I intend to explore the similarities between Charlotte Perkins Gilman and the protagonist of this story based on the Freudian conception of defense mechanisms.

Jane F. Thrailkill, in *Doctoring "The Yellow Wallpaper"*, discusses what are the possible impacts on the physical appearance of a woman when she is not heard or understood. She has first built this assumption and then she applies it to the protagonist of the story. The continuous negligence on the behalf of her husband did not only affect the psychology of the wife. It also made her physically more fragile and vulnerable (Thrailkill, 2002, p.530-32).

Paula A. Treichler, in *Diagnosis and Discourse in "The Yellow Wallpaper"*, highlights the conventional women's diseases in the times when this short story was written. Later on, she relates those diseases to the protagonist's situation. She has also mentioned the use of language by Charlotte in the short story. What metaphors have been used? How the selection of words differs regarding the occasions in the story (Treichler, 1984, p.65-67).

Carla B Frye, in *Reflections on "The Yellow Wallpaper"*, elaborates that side of literature that can be used to tackle the emotional and physical response to the treatment. How much this story is referred to in the "Medical literature"? How the mental disease of the protagonist is taken in psychology and hat psychological terms can be used to describe the condition of the protagonist? (Frye, 1998, p.830-32).

Wolter, in *The Yellow Wallpaper: The Ambivalence of Changing Discourses* specifically discusses the feministic aspect of this short story. The conditions of the women, when this story was written, have been discussed thoroughly. Then the author sheds light on Charlotte's life and what led her to write this story. After giving an account of Charlotte's life and the context of this story, the author has highlighted its significance from a feministic point of view (Walter, 2009, 198-99).

Debbie Barry, in *Analyzing the Yellow Wallpaper*, mentions the psychological and psychoanalytical imagery in the story. She has, later on, pointed out the use of symbolism and imagery in the story. The symbolic significance of room and yellow wallpaper in terms of psychology. How the room, view, and lonely country have psychological connotations. The author has stressed on this point that every image and symbol beside the characters make this story psychologically rich (Barry, 2013, p.22-25).

Roethle, in *A Healthy Play of Mind: Art and the Brain in Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper"*, discusses the strong relation between literature and psychology. He proves this relation by mentioning the example of *The Yellow Wallpaper*. He has discussed those parts of the story specifically in which the psychological

aspects of the story become more evident. He has laid the stress on interpreting the literary works from psychological angles. His basic purpose of quoting the examples from *The Yellow Wallpaper* is to present a fine example of collaboration of literature and psychology (Roethle, 2020, p.150).

Shumaker, in "Too Terribly Good to Be Printed": Charlotte Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper", with a feminist touch comes out with this analysis that Charlotte became the patient of hysteria after giving birth to a child. The hysterical tendency is evident in her writings. The treatment of hysteria also became a part of her writings. The author further narrates how depression and other mental disorders became the cause of her writing this short story (Shumakar, 1985, p.588).

As mentioned above, the protagonist and the author have been discussed as separate entities. At some places, the protagonist is being discussed from a psychological point of view, and somewhere the biography of Gilman is being reviewed. My topic highlights the psychological link between Gilman and the protagonist of her story. How the mental disorder of the protagonist is the mental disorder of Charlotte Perkin Gilman. I want to highlight psychoanalysis as the bridge between Gilman and the protagonist. They must not be considered different from each other. They should always be discussed together and especially in the context of psychoanalysis.

METHODOLOGY

It is a qualitative research work and the theory which I am going to refer to is Psychoanalytic theory. The text which I have chosen for my research paper is Charlotte Perkin Gilman's short story *The Yellow Wallpaper*. The mental conditions of the author and the protagonist of the story bear remarkable similarities. Individually the psychological issues of the character have been discussed. However, no connection is developed with the biography of the author. Where the biography or the mental state of the author has discussed then their connection with the character is neglected. If literature is the expression of life, then can't the authors reflect the glimpses of their lives through the characters? Can't the mental agonies of the characters, be the mental agonies of those people who create them (Hudson, 1956, p.05). This research paper addresses these questions and justifies this stance that the mental disorder of the protagonist is the disorder of Charlotte Perkin Gilman.

I will analyze the similarities between the mental sickness of the character and the author based on psychoanalysis. They can't be separated from each other. The sources which I will be consulting for data collection are books of psychology, literature, and articles. My approach to collect data will be to look for the common tendencies of mental disorders between the character and the author. I will search for such resources in which the psychological comparison between the author and the protagonist of this story has been discussed. No other works of Charlotte Perkin Gilman carry such a strong resemblance to her personal life and her state of depression. Possibilities are there that the protagonist was just a fictional character. It was created for the sake of a story. But this research paper aims to interpret the similarities between the protagonist

of the story and the author based on the psychological defense mechanism propounded by Freud in his psychoanalytic theory.

In the field of Psychology, Psychoanalytic theory is a procedure for treating personality disorder. It was used to investigate the unconscious part of the human mind. By a thorough investigation of the unconscious of a patient, that person could be relieved from repressed thoughts and emotions. Dreams reveal our unconscious part of the mind and every person and object in our dreams stands for something. The same is the case with literature, there are no direct statements given in a literary work. In novels, poetry, and play an author does not speak directly. So, we can assume that a text also represents the unconscious aspect of an author's mind. By investigating the characters, symbols, images, metaphors, etc. we can comprehend the unconscious mind of the author. So this is how we develop a link between psychoanalytic theory and literature (Berry, 2002, p.89-93).

“Freudian Psychoanalytic theory is given central importance in literary interpretation, to the distinction between the conscious and unconscious mind. The literary work’s “open” content is associated with unconsciousness. Privileging the unconscious as being what the work is really about and aiming the disentangle the two” (Warren & Wellek, 1956, p.82).

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The first common factor between the character and the author is repression. Freud in his second lecture on psychoanalysis discussed the repression in the following word “The idea which had appeared before consciousness as the wish vehicle of this irreconcilable wish fell a victim to repression, was pushed out of consciousness with all its attached memories, and was forgotten” (Freud & et al. 1991, p.23).

Repression means those forces which help us to forget the unaccomplished desires, unresolved conflicts. However repressed wishes exist and appear into consciousness but in a different form. Freud says

“When that happens it succeeds in sending into consciousness a disguised and unrecognizable subtitle for what had been repressed, and to this there soon become attached the same feelings of anxiety which it was hoped had been saved by repression. This substitute for the repressed idea –the symptom-is proof against further attacks from the defensive ego; and in place of the short conflict an ailment now appears which is not brought to an end by the passage of time” (Freud & et al. 1991, p.27).

The symptom, in this case, is that idea that occurs to the patient. It is the substitute for what had been repressed. Charlotte Perkins Gilman was asked by neurologist S.Weir Mitchell to forget about imagining and writing. It was a big blow to her imaginative faculties. It did more harm than any good. The force of repression pushed her desire of writing out of her unconscious and she became intolerable to the people around her. So, we can say the shadow woman is the symptom of the repressed wishes and desires of Charlotte Perkins Gilman.

We observe the same feelings of anger and disappointment in the protagonist when she was not allowed by John to even write her diary. She followed his advice but it further deteriorated her mental and physical condition. The protagonist also went through the same situation in which Charlotte was. So the shadow woman is also the symptom of the protagonist's suppressed desires. Another common factor between the character and the author is condensation. According to Freud when several people, meanings, objects, and events are combined in a single image. Then that image is the example of condensation. It can also be said that condensation is a phase in which two different wishes are going to be merged. So, the shadow woman is a condensed image. Charlotte Perkin Gilman was not allowed to pursue her passion for writing. She was restricted by a male doctor and her husband. She was asked to rest as much as she could and to avoid getting social. So, we can assume two types of restriction: one was the intellectual and the other was social.

The same condition takes place in the story. The protagonist was barred from any kind of intellectual activity and she was not allowed to meet anyone. As the shadow woman was the condensed image of the unconscious of the protagonist in the story. This story and the shadow of the woman is also the condensed image of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's unconscious. The entrapped shadow woman represented Charlotte's inability to write. Charlotte Perkins Gilman was also a feminist and shadow woman entrapped in the wallpaper was also a manifestation of the dependency of women.

Sublimation is also present in the case of the character and the author. Freud in this fifth lecture says

"We know of a far more expedient process of development, called sublimation, in which the energy of the infantile wishful impulses is not cut off but remains ready for use-the unserviceable aim of the various impulses being replaced by one that is higher, and perhaps no longer sexual. It happens to be precisely the components of the sexual instinct that are specially marked by a capacity of this kind for sublimation, for exchanging their sexual aim for another one which is comparatively remote and socially valuable" (Freud & et al. 1991, p.54).

In Sublimation the repressed wishes are given a different shape. The repressed wishes can be of any nature. They may be the feeling of jealousy, hatred, sorrow, sexual impulses. Such thoughts and feelings are pushed into the unconscious by the forces of repression. However, these repressed thoughts return to consciousness by a transformation in a different form. That new and different form is sublimation. Freud has specially mentioned the return of repressed sexual desires into the consciousness. They take such a form of an image that has nothing to do with sexuality. However, the origin of that image is those repressed sexual desires.

The story *The Yellow Wallpaper* and the shadow woman can be considered the sublimation of Charlotte Perkin Gilman's repressed wishes and desires. These wishes can be sexual and other as well. Charlotte Perkin Gilman's first marriage took place in 1884 and after a year she divorced her husband. This story was

written in 1892. So, we can assume that sexual impulses might have been sublimated in the form of the character and the shadow woman.

While the repressed wishes of writing might have come back to the conscious in the form of the shadow woman in the story. The repressed wishes of independence in the male-oriented world were also sublimated in the form of that shadow of a woman.

The same is the condition with the protagonist of the story. Her repressed wish of writing and living a life free of male instructions got sublimated in the form of the shadow of a woman. She tried to follow the instructions of her husband and the doctor. She pushed all the wishes into unconsciousness through the forces of repression. However, those forces came back to her consciousness by transformation and sublimation in the form of a shadow woman. We also don't get any hint of physical relation between the protagonist and her husband. She mentioned in the story "And yet I cannot be with him, it makes me so nervous" (Gilman, 1997, p.649). So, we can assume that unsatisfied sexual urges were pushed back into the unconscious by the protagonist. However, those urges came back in her consciousness through the shadow woman.

Displacement can also be observed as a similarity between the character and the author based on psychoanalytic theory. Freud in his third lecture mentions

"It deserves our closest theoretical interest since we are able to study in it, as nowhere else, what unsuspected psychical processes can occur in the unconscious, or rather, to put it more accurately, between two separate psychical systems like the conscious and unconscious. Among these freshly discovered psychical processes, those of condensation and displacement are especially noticeable" (Freud & et al. 1991, p.36).

In displacement one person or event is represented by another which is in some way linked or associated with it, perhaps because of a similar-sounding word, or by some form of symbolic substitution. Gilman had to face a lot of obstacles in the pursuit of the style she wanted. In doing all this she experienced physical and mental sufferings. It was her mental suffering that caused her body to suffer. So by writing this story she displaced her miserable existence with the protagonist of the story.

Every thought and word of the protagonist in the story is the thinking pattern of Charlotte Perkins Gilman. Charlotte had just displaced herself with the protagonist of the story. For instance, the protagonist kept saying on various occasions in the story that she was not feeling well. It was the elaboration of Charlotte's misery. At one point in the story the protagonist says "But these nervous troubles are dreadfully depressing. Of course, it is only nervousness. It does weigh on me so not to do duty in any way" (Gilman, 1997, p.649).

However, displacement is not taking place regarding the protagonist only. The shadow woman can also be taken as an example of the displacement of Charlotte. The shadow woman has been shown entrapped behind the patterns of

the wallpaper. So, the entrapment of the shadow can be taken as the entrapment in which Charlotte found herself.

"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 wallpaper as I did. But I am securely fastened now by my well-hidden rope-you don't get me out in the room. I suppose I shall have to get back behind the pattern when it comes night, and that is hard. I don't want to go outside. I won't even if Jennie asks me to" (Gilman, 1997, p.656).

Observe the word "I" in the above-mentioned lines. It is an evident example of displacement. In these lines, she declared herself the shadow woman. She mentioned going back to the pattern. So instead of watching the shadow woman coming in and out of the wallpaper, she was talking about going back in the wallpaper.

Shadow woman is the clear and direct displacement of the protagonist of the story. She was looking for freedom to write, to interact with people, to do work, to go outside. She had the feeling of anger and resentment. So, she started to displace herself with the shadow woman. Her anger and misery were shown through the effort which the shadow woman made to get free.

Projection is another common factor between Charlotte Perkins Gilman and the protagonist of the story. According to Freud, projection is attributing unconscious behavior to someone else. It should be noted that here we are talking about attribution of unconscious behavior. We are not discussing the displacement of an object or person with another person or object. So the things worthy to be noticed over here are unconscious behavior and it is attributing to someone else.

It means that a person is worried about something and he is not acknowledging it or the anxiety which is present in his unconscious mind. But he declares other people to be worried while they may not be. So, his declaration of other people being worried is the projection of his anxiety.

"The protagonist's projection of an imaginary woman — which at first is merely her shadow — against the bars of the wallpaper's pattern fragments her identity, internalizing the conflict she experiences and eventually leading to the complete breakdown of the boundaries of her identity and that of her projected shadow"(Blume, 2005).

The entrapment of the shadow woman behind the pattern is the imprisonment of Charlotte Perkins Gilman in the room when she was on the rest cure. Her efforts to get out of those patterns and to creep around in the room indicated the behavior of misery and despair of Charlotte Perkins Gilman. How much she had to suffer while taking the rest cure and doing no creative work. It can be assumed that she attributed the generally miserable conditions of women of her times to the shadow woman. Charlotte was a feminist and she raised her voice against the oppression of women.

Through her works, she highlighted their plights and emphasized the progress of women. The behavior of misery and pain of Charlotte can also be attributed to the protagonist herself. Charlotte projected her physical and mental agony to the protagonist. In the case of the protagonist and the shadow woman, things are very clear. The shadow woman is the projection of the protagonist's mind. She projected her anguish of being helpless, dependent, and intellectual dryness to the shadow woman.

CONCLUSION

Literature is a strong medium for sharing one's thoughts, ideas, and reflections. Every work of literature carries some kind of psychological law and theories. An author incorporates a psychological theory into his literary creation consciously or unconsciously. Interpreting a literary work through psychoanalytical theory serves many purposes. We can apprehend the purpose of creating that literary piece, characters, situations, and the understanding of the unconscious mind of the author.

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