

"The Yellow Wall-Paper": A Twist on Conventional Symbols by Liselle Sant

Reflecting their role in society, women in literature are often portrayed in a position that is dominated by men. Especially in the nineteenth century, women were repressed and controlled by their husbands as well as other male influences. In "The Yellow Wall-Paper," by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, the protagonist is oppressed and represents the effect of the oppression of women in society. This effect is created by the use of complex symbols such as the house, the window, and the wall-paper which facilitate her oppression as well as her self expression.

It is customary to find the symbol of the house as representing a secure place for a woman's transformation and her release of self expression. However, in this story, the house is not her own and she does not want to be in it. She declares it is "haunted," and that "there is something queer about it." Although she acknowledges the beauty of the house and especially what surrounds it, she constantly goes back to her feeling that "there is something strange about the house." Her impression is like a premonition for the transformation that takes place in herself while she is there. In this way the house still is the cocoon for her transformation. It does not take the form of the traditional symbol of security for the domestic activities of a woman, but it does allow for and contain her metamorphosis. The house also facilitates her release, accommodating her, her writing and her thoughts. These two activities evolve because of the fact that she is kept in the house.

One specific characteristic of the house that symbolizes not only her potential but also her trapped feeling is the window. Traditionally this symbol represents a view of possibilities, but now it also becomes a view to what she does not want to see. Through it she sees all that she could be and everything that she could have. But she says near the end, "I don't like to look out of the windows even - there are so many of those creeping women, and they creep so fast." She knows that she has to hide and lie low; she has to creep in order to be a part of society and she does not want to see all the other women who have to do the same because she knows they are a reflection of herself. "Most women do not creep by daylight," expresses the fact that they need to hide in the shadows; they try to move without being seen. The window is no longer a gateway for her; she can not enter to the other side of it, literally, because John will not let her, (there are bars holding her in), but also because that world will not belong to her. She will still be controlled and be forced to stifle her self-expression. She will still be forced to creep.

More immediate to facilitating her metamorphosis than the house itself is the room she is in and the characteristics of that room, the most important being the yellow wall-paper which also plays a double role: it has the ability to trap her in with its intricacy of pattern that leads her to no satisfying end, bars that hold in and separate the woman in the wall-paper from her. But it also sets her free. She describes the wall-paper as being the worst thing she has ever seen: "the color is repellant, almost revolting; a smouldering unclean yellow, strangely faded by the slow-turning sun." She is stuck in this room and the only thing she has that allows her to escape is the wall-paper. She cannot go out, because her husband has taken such control over her activities that all she can do is sit and watch this paper. She also says in her first reference to it that, "I should hate it myself if I had to live in this room long." She becomes absorbed in the patterns of the paper and tries to follow them to an end.

In this process she has begun her transformation, allowing herself to be completely drawn in to her fantasies and not being afraid of what is happening to her. John, her husband, tells her to resist them, but she does not. Her awareness of the changes in her and her efforts to foster them and see them through to an end demonstrate a bravery that is not often acknowledged in women. She is going mad; this is the mad woman in the attic, but she is not scared. She also realizes, finally, that the image in the wall-paper is not another woman; it is herself as well as all women in general and therefore all the women trapped by society.

These complex symbols used in "The Yellow Wall-Paper" create Gilman's portrayal of the oppression of women in the nineteenth century. Her twist on traditional symbols that usually provide a sense of security and safety adds to this woman's own oppression, contribute to the trapped feeling. Gilman pushes this to the limit by taking those characteristics closely associated with women and uses them against the narrator, to assist in her own oppression.





Guide to Grammar and Writing