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The Underlying Meaning

In the short story titled “The Yellow Wallpaper,” Charlotte Perkins Gilman illuminates a wife’s internal depressive struggle. Through the use of internal dialogue, three rhetorical appeals, and point of view, Gilman illustrates the main character’s sink into extended madness. Throughout the fictional story, the narrator horrifically accepts and embraces the boundaries of madness.

One of the major rhetorical techniques Gilman uses is the narrator’s internal dialogue. She often asks herself questions such as “what is one to do?” pondering upon the wallpaper that keeps her trapped in her deteriorating mental state (Gilman 648). The struggle of the narrator to explore the meaning and things behind the wallpaper, allows the audience to grasp her inner feelings fully. Furthermore, the thought process assists the audience in understanding her own thoughts and feelings. She feels that some living being, perhaps a woman is trapped behind the wallpaper, which actually shed lights on the fact that she was trapped in the room, as her husband asked her to rest well. Generally, this technique creates a hook that intrigues the reader to keep reading and explore the struggle of the narrator, as well as lady trapped behind the wallpaper. In addition, by presenting the short story in the first person perspective, the audience can see the plan of action: “… so I take pains to control myself” (Gilman 648). The author has utilized the first person perspective to shed light on the thought and feelings of the narrator, who is being driven towards madness. By using the rhetorical technique of the first-person perspective, Gilman provides information for people to fully understand the story as the narrator felt and experienced it. Not only does the first-person point of view allow the audience into the life of the narrator, but it also proves Gilman's credibility. From prior research, Gilman has been through depression just like the main character in the short story. Therefore, the use of ‘I’ in the short story makes her story more appealing as she is just sharing the experience of the narrator.

In addition to using a first-person perspective in the short story, Gilman uses exclamation marks to emphasize the narrator's descent into madness. When reflecting on her general feelings, the narrator states, "This paper looks to me as if it *knew* what a vicious influence it has! (Gilman 649)”. The use of the exclamation mark stresses the point and suggests the narrator has a growing obsession with the yellow wallpaper that the husband does not recognize. It is assumed that the husband does not know about her wife's obsession because he goes into shock when he sees her on her limbs. It seems that this story would have been different if told by John, the narrator’s husband. The contrasting personalities of the narrator and John make this story unique as the husband thinks that his wife needs rest, while resting, which is actually being confined to a room, pushes the narrator towards madness. He is described as being "queer," and the audience has knowledge that the narrator is being driven towards madness (Gilman 653). John is oblivious of the true effect of the yellow wallpaper on the narrator’s mental health. He does not understand that she felt alone and trapped in the ugliness of the room. Without the true feelings of the narrator and John’s oblivion, the story would not have been as significant (Gilman 653).

Throughout the short story, Gilman illustrates the narrator’s descent into madness with the use of shorter sentences within the inner dialogue. At the beginning of the short story, the narrator speaks in longer and more detailed sentences: “It makes me think of English places that you read about, for there are hedges and walls and gates that lock, and lots of separate little houses for the gardeners and the people" (648). The longer and more detailed sentences allow the audience to recognize the narrator is trying to see the house as a positive change in her life, and that she takes the time to think rationally. However, on the last day of living inside of the house, the narrator is seen using short and choppy sentences: “How he does call and pound! Now he’s crying for an axe” (Gilman 656). The audience now has the knowledge that the narrator has reached her breaking point through the change in pace, which is her mental condition is not sane and positive as it was in the initial description. In this example, the narrator has finally made up her mind and is ready to carry out her plan of freeing the woman who is trapped behind the wallpaper, and she ensures that nothing stops her by locking the door and not letting anyone in the room.

One of the main appeals in this short story is pathos. Gilman utilizes pathos in a dark sense. The details of the “little distance” from the master bed to the yellow wallpaper, makes the narrator think of “suicide” (Gilman 648). It makes the readers think about suicide because it is the distance between a healthy mind and a mind driven towards madness and suicide is often the last attempt to end the insanity. In our current society, there is a strong stigma that suicide is extremely negative and the last resort of life. The narrator in the story states this expression at the very beginning of the short story, which makes the audience feel pity. The emotion of pity is an example of pathos. It allows for the reader to feel and think along with the narrator who in return makes the story more relatable that we are also confined in one or the other way, which becomes the leading cause of insanity. Furthermore, the audience often feels resentment towards John as he “laughs at me [the narrator] so about this wall-paper” (Gilman 649). The strong feeling that Gilman allows the readers to have makes the audience have sympathy for the narrator’s situation. Why does he make her live this way? Why doesn’t he help her? He makes the narrator live like that because he thought that was in her favor, without making an effort to know about her wishes, feelings, and thoughts.

In addition to the pathos, Gilman uses many rhetorical questions that invoke thought. For example, when John did not believe that the narrator was sick, she felt disbelief, but “… what can one do (Gilman 647)?” Furthermore, when the narrator was making her plan to uncover the meaning of the yellow wallpaper she questions, “Did not that sound innocent?” (Gilman 653). The audience wants to console the narrator. She is not the bad person in the story; however, she is just trying to save another lady, which is trapped behind the wallpaper.

The conclusion of the short story includes a lot of rhetorical devices as well. First, Gilman starts with disturbing details: “… I can creep smoothly on the floor, and my shoulder just fits in that long smooch around the wall...” (Gilman 656). The disturbing imagery alludes to the dialogue between John and the narrator: “For God’s sake what are you doing!” (Gilman 656). The obsession of the narrator with wallpaper proves decent into madness when Gilman leaves the audience on the biggest hook in the entire short story: "And I've pulled off most of the paper, so you can't put me back" and "But he did, and right across my path by the wall, so I had to creep over him every time!" (Gilman 656). Although Gilman does not provide the audience with the main conclusion, the figurative language used in these examples allows the audience to form their own conclusion. In the end, it is known that the narrator has pulled off the skin on her face. She allowed and embraced the dark mentality. The insanity of the narrator is what makes John “faint” (Gilman 656). Gilman did not provide the exact answer to the conclusion to make the audience think. Was the narrator mad enough to do that to herself?

The main rhetorical device in this entire piece was the actual color of the yellow wallpaper. Why did Gilman decide that the wallpaper needed to be yellow? There are two theories. First, yellow represents happiness and positivity: the inconsistency between the narrator’s mental state and the wallpaper is huge as she thinks that it is some kind of confinement. Secondly, the yellow could have represented jaundice. According to research, “60% of infants in the United States” have jaundice (Gillott). From this disease, it is known that the affected have yellow-brown skin.

In conclusion, although Gilman does not provide a direct answer to why the wallpaper was yellow, it was a major concept of the story. She wanted the readers to explore the message on their own. Though Gilman's use of many rhetorical devices, figurative language, and inner dialogue, the audience is able to grasp the story of the “Yellow Wallpaper,” that confining the women to their homes, without their will is actually pushing them towards insanity.

Works Cited

Gillott, Caroline. “Jaundice: Causes, Symptoms, and Treatments.” *Medical News Today*, 31 Oct. 2017, www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/165749.php.

Gilman, Charlotte P.S. “Yellow Wallpaper.” *U.S. National Library of Medicine*, https://www.nlm.nih.gov/theliteratureofprescription/exhibitionAssets/digitalDocs/The-Yellow-Wall-Paper.pdf

Documentation Statement

For the first revision, Kim told me to make more concise word choices to help the underlying meaning. In addition, she marked that I had some troubles with the MLA formatting. For the second revision, the writing center helped me to get rid of my repetition of phrases and change the second body paragraph. The sheet for the writing center is attached to the second revision.