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English Final Essay: Thematic Interpretation

The short story “*The Yellow Wallpaper*" is written by the author Charlotte Perkins in which she highlighted the issue of mental illness while offering a critique of traditional gender roles that were defined during the Victorian period in the late nineteenth century (Stetson). The historical context of the story and patriarchal structure of nineteenth-century household was depicted by the story of a man named John, a physician, and his wife, the narrator of the story. In the story, the narrator's brother was also a physician, but her sister-in-law was a housekeeper. The story "*The Yellow Wallpaper*" is the depiction of how gender roles played a vital part in society. According to the author, the defined gender roles hinder the chances of women to attain higher education or be independent; rather, it was considered ideal for women to stay at home. In contrast, men were admired and expected to continue attaining higher education so that they could start a career and ultimately support their families. Although, in the time mentioned in a story, there were a few women who were allowed to attain higher education, yet they were limits in their profession. Gender roles made it difficult for women to be in certain careers. The story also highlighted how narrator and her husband were trapped in a relationship in which gender roles were defined and how these roles doomed their relationship.

The story also focused on the issue of mental illness and how people neglect this issue by discussing the narrator's nervous condition as she gradually lost the sense of reality and was misunderstood and misdiagnosed by her husband. According to the narrator, "If a physician of high standing, and one's husband, assures friends and relatives that there is nothing the matter with one but temporary nervous depression—what is one to do?" (Stetson 3). While analyzing the issue of mental illness from the historical perspective, it was evident that nineteenth-century medical establishment was not familiar with the issues that women were facing and were therefore unable to understand how to treat a woman with mental illness. The author also highlighted that despite treating the mental illness with therapies and medication, the only solution physicians had was to let the patient rest so that a patient can regain control over a situation that they did not comprehend. In recent years there has been a lot of research conducted on postpartum psychosis, yet in the past, people used to consider this illness as hysteria. Likewise, the author's husband also thought that his wife had hysteria.

After reading the passage, the symptoms of the postpartum were clear as the narrator remarked that "It is fortunate Mary is so good with the baby. And yet I cannot be with him; it makes me so nervous" (Stetson 6). The narrator also raised awareness regarding the issue that most of the women in the nineteenth century were facing. According to the narrator, male doctors never listened to their female patients that were the major cause of misdiagnosis. With the aid of her story, the narrator is patronizing attitudes that she was fighting against by illustrating the ways by which gender roles had impacted both women and men. In the story, John, the narrator's husband, was a respectable doctor whose opinion was considered worthy and was taken seriously. On the other hand, the narrator was presented as an overemotional woman whose opinions were not worthy enough to be taken seriously.

The author Conrad Shumaker in his critical analysis of the story “*The Yellow* *Wallpaper*," also discussed that in the story the word imaginative was used to depict narrator's condition, and the word can be considered as decidedly gendered that depicted women as weak and her opinions as less worthy (Shumaker 583). In the story, as well, when the narrator was wallpapering her room, her husband stopped her as, according to him, she could recover early and would take charge of her roles as a mother and wife if she could control her creative urges. This depicted how men used to suppress women by making women believe that they were favoring them. As the narrator of the story, after listening to her husband's advised accepted that she was ill and said "I meant to be such a help to John, such a real rest and comfort, and here I am a comparative burden already". The story also highlighted that in past men were supposed to function as decision-maker and as a thinking partner in marriage while women were supposed to function as a caretaker. Due to this reason, the narrator's husband never let her speak and think for herself. When she asked for anything or shared her views regarding anything, John ignored her and called her by names such as "Blessed little goose," and "Little girl" (Stetson 2). He also used to say, "I am a doctor, and I know everything" (Stetson 12). This is because the narrator's husband identified himself as a rational and intelligent partner in the marriage and assumed that he was more aware of his wife’s condition.

However, if John listened to his wife rather than being overconfident, he might be able to help his wife. Due to gender roles, the author was forced to assume that her husband knew everything, and therefore, she questioned herself instead of him. Her condition worsens day by day due to John's neglect, and at the end of the story, both husband and wife faced the consequences of being trapped in fixed gender roles developed by the stereotypical thinking of the people in our society.

**Works Cited**

Shumaker, Conrad. "Too terribly good to be printed": Charlotte Gilman's" The Yellow Wallpaper." *American Literature* 57.4 (1985): 588-599.

Stetson, Charlotte Perkins. *The Yellow Wallpaper*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1980.