

A Room of Her Own, to Write Fiction: Female Authors' Throes for Authorial Ownership in the 19th and 20th centuries

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1. Introduction

There remains no doubt that the early feminist waves beginning in the late 19th century, have achieved many great things for women such as the betterment of their circumstances, chances at obtaining adequate education and a right to vote. Still, there is one more critical feat that is in part hidden from the limelight, overshadowed by other issues in regards to women's rights, which is women's pursuit of creative endeavours, namely writing. An observation into the situation of women throughout history reveals that only highly privileged women were able to put pen to paper, and even these women were often interrupted or demeaned – wittingly or unwittingly – by those around them (Aronson 282). Furthermore, it can also be noted that while women writers were few in number before the 19th and 20th centuries, women in general were heavily featured in literature as either subjects to be considered or as principal characters. These indicated works and their portrayals of women are worthwhile to consider in further detail as they reveal the general attitudes that women were subjected to, which in turn can indicate how women as members of society felt and were treated. This research aims to shed light on the arduous situation of women writers in the 19th and 20th centuries by probing into their lives, writings and hardships they had to face. This will be conducted through the analysis of several literary pieces such as *The Yellow Wallpaper* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman and *A Room of One's Own* by Virginia Woolf amongst other works of considerable importance. These works include fairy and folk tales, novels written by female authors during the Victorian era and fiction written about women during the world wars. These writings will be examined through a cultural lens, and their effects on influencing how women were seen in society will also be revealed. Moreover, this work also argues for the act of writing as a statement piece in itself, as for many women it served as an act of defiance against the patriarchal norms of their time. A woman wishing to create literary work during the 19th and 20th centuries and cement herself as equal to celebrated male authors of her time such as Poe or Irving had a difficult time doing so, as there stood many factors against her such as her lack of education, self-governance and her unfavourable stance in a patriarchal society.

2. Historical Background

The study of historical facts proves to be worthwhile in any area of research, but it is especially of prime importance when looking at such a considerable mass as women in society. First, the study of historical circumstances reveals why were women writers so few in number in the first place, but it also sheds light on why the ones who did exist chose to operate in the ways they did. In the upcoming sections the life of a normal, middle class woman will be

examined in substantial detail. Moreover, it will also be shown how this had an effect on women who tried to give way to their creative pursuits, and the tangible ways this shows up in women's writing.

2.1 The Life of the Average Woman

The ways in which women spent their days before the many movements for the betterment of their lives in the 19th and 20th centuries can be summed up in a few words: isolation and silence. A full-scale consideration of the life of an average woman and its development would surpass the bounds of this research, thus only the time periods that directly affected the woman writers that this work focuses on will be expanded upon.

First, for a significant amount of the 1800s, women lived in a way that characterised much of their lives in previous centuries as well: the basic expectation of a “good woman” was that she would remain in the bounds of domesticity, take care of her husband and children and of the matters around the house. This was kept up to such an extent that in the 19th century a clear line could be observed between the public and the home spheres, where the men would socialize, intellectualize and take care of matters outside of the home, while the women would be essentially foreclosed from public affairs (Wright 3). Moreover, the split between genders was not only reinforced in society, but in legal matters as well – as in both England and America a married woman's legal existence was essentially effaced by coverture, which was a legal doctrine that prohibited women from obtaining or selling a property, drafting a will, or taking control of any wages that were earned by the woman (Geddes and Lueck 1079).

Second, while women were confined to the home sphere, it did not mean that they had absolute freedom in the house. In fact, it was common for women to lack spaces that were entirely reserved to themselves, spending most of their time in shared spaces of a house such as the common room. This lack of space for women is one of Virginia Woolf's main arguments in *A Room of One's Own*, a work that is highly regarded as one of the most fundamental texts that advocated for the rights of female authors. According to Woolf, only few privileged women had access to spaces that they could call their own, and even these had come with their limitations:

In the first place, to have a room of her own, let alone a quiet room or a sound-proof room, was out of the question, unless her parents were exceptionally rich or very noble, even up to the beginning of the nineteenth century. Since her pin money, which depended on the goodwill of her father, was only enough to keep her clothed, she was

debarred from such alleviations as came even to Keats or Tennyson or Carlyle, all poor men...from the separate lodging which, even if it were miserable enough, sheltered them from the claims and tyrannies of their families (61).

The passage above clearly depicts how dreadful the situation of a typical woman was. Moreover, it helps in understanding the effect of the coverture law in an everyday basis and how poor men had benefits that were in contrast not available to women. In addition, Virginia Woolf provides an insightful account into history as a female author herself who had to go through struggles that were similar to the women before her. It is also true that Woolf cites works of historians in *A Room of One's Own*, but using her words gives a more authentic account into how a female author perceived her own circumstances and her predecessors'.

In conclusion, the life of an average woman made it difficult to go after creative endeavours and to engage in any pursuits that required prolonged focus and concentration. Women in general were given little privacy, as they had little to no money and no private space that they could call their own if they were not in highly privileged positions. Due to this, the women who did write did so in spaces that were shared with other members of the household, which meant that these spaces were prone to interruption. Furthermore, women were also sheltered and their existences were tied and limited to the home sphere, which in consequence meant that their talents and geniuses could not flourish as their male counterparts'.

2.2 Effects on Women's Fiction

The present section discusses how the aforementioned historical background affected the way in which women wrote. These effects are observable in multiple facets of women's writing. As an example, the genre women have chosen to write in, the themes and topics that they have discussed and their styles of writing are all ascribable to historical conditions.

Othering is a concept that is often used in relation to women. Generally, it makes a distinction between two groups, to make one feel inferior or alien to another. This sense of Othering is clearly demonstrated in literary depictions of women, on which following sections of this research will expand upon. Correspondingly, some scholars argue that the Western literary tradition supports patriarchy and that women do not fit into this tradition hence they are alienated or Othered. In *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar explain that literary history was dominated by men to such an extent that many theorists ignored its patriarchal nature, and "assumed literature had to be male" (47).

Due to the aforementioned factors, many women writers in the 19th century and before tended to reach for a few predictable genres. All things considered, one of the most popular genres that gained traction with women writers was the novel. Jane Austen, Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley and sisters Charlotte, Emily, and Anne Brontë are just a few women writers who wrote novels and whose works have earned them a solid place in the literary canon. There are several reasons that can be accounted for this choice. First, the 18th century saw a general rise in the novel as a genre. In his influential work *The Rise of the Novel*, Ian Watt attributes this growth to rise in public literacy and the novel's accessibility and lower prices than those of other works, such as the French heroic romances, which were published in high-priced folios (41). Moreover, Watt also notes that libraries, which housed a substantial amount of novels, also gained popularity around 1740 and made reading accessible to a wider range of the public, many of whom were women (42). Consequently, it is not dubious to deduce that many women could have gained inspiration from the novel's popularity and accessibility, and decided to write novels themselves.

Another reason for why women writers reached for the novel in opposition to other genres could have been due to some of its characteristics. First, due to its young age, the novel as a genre was not as hard set in its rules and regulations as other genres, such as the epic or a poetic play, which meant that women could participate in its shaping as a genre (Woolf 90). Not only that, but the nature of the novel was also more compatible with women's lifestyle and living arrangements, as generally the writing of fiction required less concentration than the writing of a play or a poem (Woolf 77). It is important to note that while women writers purposefully gravitated towards genres that required less concentration to make writing easier in a household that granted them little privacy, their circumstances and limitations are still perfectly reflected in their writing. One notable example where this is clearly demonstrated is in the writing of Charlotte Brontë, and the novel *Jane Eyre*, which can be looked at as a product of Brontë's anger towards the place of women in society. In fact, Brontë even verbalizes this anger in the novel:

Women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties, and a field for their efforts, as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a restraint, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer...It is thoughtless to condemn them, or laugh at them, if they seek to do more or learn more than custom has pronounced necessary for their sex (160).

Through the novel *Jane Eyre*, the frustration that was felt by Brontë and many other women of her time is revealed. This shows that not only were women constrained by the positions they were in, but also the fact that they were aware of the unfairness of them. Moreover, it seems as though while their male counterparts felt as though women were inferior, these women knew that they were equal to men and that they could have achieved just much as the men did if given adequate opportunities.

There were also women whose writing has thrived despite of their circumstances. One such example is Jane Austen, who has written many notable novels such as *Pride and Prejudice* and *Persuasion* which are well-celebrated and loved to this day. These novels are loved for their study of character and themes that are relevant to this day such as the question of one's reputation, family and class. Despite the brilliance of these works, Austen seemed to be uncomfortable to show her writing to the members of her household and wrote in secret. In a memoir written by her nephew James Edward Austen-Leigh, the following is noted about Austen's writing process:

How she was able to effect all this is surprising, for she had no separate study to retire to, and most of the work must have been done in the general sitting-room, subject to all kinds of casual interruptions. She was careful that her occupation should not be suspected by servants, or visitors, or any persons beyond her own family party. She wrote upon small sheets of paper which could easily be put away, or covered with a piece of blotting paper (102).

Austen's circumstances were typical of her time, taking into account the lack of a private space and the frequent interruptions that it caused. She also kept her writing mostly to herself, apart from a few trusted family members. Notwithstanding, her novels do not seem to reflect this as it is observable in the works of other women, nor does the quality of her writing suffer due to the circumstances they were produced in (Woolf 78).

Finally, historical circumstances had a clear and definite effect on women's fiction. These effects largely manifest in the type of fiction many women gravitated towards both in reading and writing, which was the novel. In a 18th–19th century woman's interruption prone daily life, writing a novel was easier than other types of fiction, as it required less focus and the original train of thought could have been regained easier. Nonetheless, women's frustrations often were palpable in their works, for example in *Jane Eyre*, where the anger of Charlotte Brontë towards the treatment of women seeps through the lines. There existed also miraculous

cases where the author's circumstances virtually had no effect on their writing, such as in the writing of Jane Austen.

3. Depictions of Women in Literature

The way in which women have been represented in literature is a topic that has been covered extensively, but one that is necessary for the purpose of understanding the basis of women writers' standpoints, motivations and experiences – for one's writing is often a concoction of these. It is also vital to note that as previously mentioned, throughout the course of history, a considerable part of a woman's life was controlled, overseen and dictated by men and the patriarchal society. The case is the same in regards to the representation of women in literature, as if one attempts to delve deeper into this topic they soon will be confronted with takes on women from all walks of life from the pen of their male counterparts. Moreover, oftentimes the whole world of the average woman was a construction that was created by men. As Eva Figes states “We are born into a world where the great discoverers, philosophers, artists and scientists have almost all been male. Male law-makers, male conquerors, even the God perpetuated in tradition, who still somehow haunts the early days of childhood, is male. Our whole code of morality was formulated by men.” (18-19). This piece of information is pivotal to consider when attempting an analysis on literary depictions of women, as the aforementioned tendency can also be sighted in writing. In *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf also came upon a similar discovery while conducting a research for a lecture about women and fiction: there existed many books that were written about women by men and moreover, all kinds of men, regardless of their social-, economical- or educational standings felt compelled and entitled to share their thoughts about women (31). For these reasons, depictions of women also shared great variety, but there are nevertheless some overarching trends that can be observed.

Moreover, taking note of the ways in which women were depicted in the corpus of writings of their time is also important as literature has a consciousness-shaping effect. Time and time again the course of history revealed that controlling a nation's literature was a crucial step in influencing the persons of that nation. An infamous example of this phenomenon is *The Protocols of the Meetings of the Learned Elders of Zion*, a fabricated anti-Semitic publication which got popular in the early 20th century, and was used as a justification for many harrowing acts committed in connection to the Holocaust (Zia-Ebrahimi 321–322). Indubitably, the literary depictions of women cannot be compared to the horrors that the aforementioned text had brought upon, it nevertheless serves as a worthy example to demonstrate just how much of an impact literature can have in certain cases.

As it was alluded to previously, literary depictions of women operate on a much smaller case in comparison to other consciousness-shaping publications, but they nonetheless have similar effects. This sentiment also seems to be echoed by Virginia Woolf as well, when she argues that while women were failed to have been given a space in literature as writers, they have penetrated the contents of writings:

Imaginatively he is of the highest importance; practically she is completely insignificant. She pervades poetry from cover to cover; she is all but absent from history. She dominates the lives of kings and conquerors in fiction; in fact she was the slave of any boy whose parents forced a ring upon her finger. Some of the most inspired words, some of the most profound thoughts in literature fall from her lips; in real life she could hardly read, could scarcely spell, and was the property of her husband (51).

At first glance, the quote above might seem to contradict what has just been claimed about women, as in literature they had remarkable roles, yet women in society seemed to have been all but forgotten, swept under by the tradition that favoured men. However, the message that fictional women conveyed in these writings proves in a different fashion, as it remains that if women were to be given too much power or importance, they would cause the man's ruination, against which men are often illicitly warned in these works.

3.1 Early Depictions of Women

Fairy and folk tales are one of the oldest forms of entertainment, passed down from generation to generation. They are heavily associated with women in two ways, as a lot of these stories were passed down by mothers and grandmothers to children, and because they often featured women as their characters. These characters are depicted in two primary ways and are dual in nature, with the woman either functioning as a force of evil or as goodness embodied. As feminism got more wide-spread and popular, scholars of the second and third feminist waves disagreed on what these female characters meant for women, noting that they could both function as reinforcement of a harmful notion or as a source of empowerment (Al-Barazengi 47–49). This work aligns in thought with the interpretation of fairy tales by second wave feminists, who saw fairy tales as a force supporting the passivity and victimization of women.

As mentioned previously, female characters in folk and fairy tales can be sundered into two main groups: the evil, wicked woman and the good, pure one. Both of these groups share one characteristic with each other, which is the fact that the women are defined in their relation to men – meaning that the “good woman” is often in wait for the rescue or a kiss of a true love

from a masculine figure; while the wicked woman turned out this way because she either lacked the means to seduce one, her love was taken by a more beautiful woman or she was done wrong by a man.

The “good woman” can be characterized by a few words in these early depictions of female characters which are compliance, submission, benignity and adolescence. There are many female figures that play this role such as Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, Snow White and Red Riding Hood. If taken at surface value, these stories and interpretations of women may seem innocent, but they reinforce some hard-set values that should exist in a woman. As an example in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, the principal character Snow White flees from her evil stepmother who is determined to kill her because of her beauty, and gets entangled with some dwarfs who take her into their house. However, the dwarfs had their own conditions under which Snow White could stay with them, which were that she takes care of the house and cooks for them. Similarly, Sleeping Beauty is punished by an evil fairy as an act of revenge against her family, and is to sleep for a hundred years until a handsome prince shall wake her up from her dream and set her free. There are many renditions of this tale, for example by the Grimm brothers and Charles Perrault, just to name a few, however the key element of Sleeping Beauty being a young and beautiful but passive woman remains.

These set expectations for good women reinforce patriarchal ideas by sending a message that a woman should wait for a man to save her and not take agency. Furthermore, she should also be grateful for her saviour and take upon housework as her duty. According to Lois Tyson who was highly acclaimed for the publishing of *Critical Theory Today*, a work that provides an in-depth look into the most important approaches of literary criticism, noted the following about some classic fairy tales and their depictions of women:

In all three tales, a beautiful, sweet young girl (for females must be beautiful, sweet, and young if they are to be worthy of romantic admiration) is rescued (for she is incapable of rescuing herself) from a dire situation by a dashing young man who carries her off to marry him and live happily ever after. The plot thus implies that marriage to the right man is a guarantee of happiness and the proper reward for a right-minded young woman (89).

As Tyson notes, these female characters share some similarities in them being young, sweet and pretty, which are noted to be qualities that should be sought out when choosing a romantic partner. They also share naivety and amenability as defining characteristics. In addition, a large

amount of these stories end in marriage, cementing it as an ultimate goal and the grand prize for women, which again reinforces the fact that a “good woman” does what the patriarchy tells her to do so.

In opposition, there are clear warning signs that signify a “bad woman” – ambition, great intelligence, aggression and vanity are all attributes that are condemned in an ideal woman, according to these tales. This is shown in how these tales treat characters that possess some or all of these qualities, as they are usually punished in the end. The Evil Queen in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* is shown as petty and vain and as someone who is terribly envious of the beauty of her stepdaughter. Similarly, powerful women were also framed as maleficent. This is shown in the amount of literary caricatures that exist about Queen Victoria, who ruled England from 1837 to 1901. One of the most notable caricatures is the Queen of Hearts, the main antagonist of Lewis Carroll’s *Adventures of Alice in Wonderland*. This Queen is shown to be mean, short tempered and fond of executions, which in turn installs great fear in her subjects. According to the claims of Eric C. Brown, Queen Victoria can be observed in both Alice and the Queen of Hearts, with the former signifying the young and inexperienced Queen and the latter the older. Brown also notes that the Queen of Hearts figure has been recognized as a figure with no real power, which could also in extension be projected to Queen Victoria (44–45). This also highlights the co-dependent relationship between fantastical women and women in the real world – as these dangerous characters were made up as a warning against a woman having too much power and disobeying patriarchy, and coincidentally a female monarch was represented as a ruthless and ill-tempered ruler.

These depictions of “bad women” and the characteristics that are given to them also send a subconscious message to women. In similar fashion to the “good woman” – who gets rewards, such as a happy marriage or a good husband if she obeys the patriarchy – a woman who does not do what is socially expected of her will ultimately face criticism. According to Tyson, depictions of women as evil creatures can also be explained in a similar vein, as “if a woman does not accept her patriarchal gender role, then the only role left for her is that of a monster” (89). It is evident then that a woman who dares to go against the grain should not be surprised by pushback, but be expectant of it. Consequently, these messages must have instilled a fear in women which would explain why many of them were afraid to act in any way that was out of the norm. This would also provide a part in explaining why the fight for the rights of women was such a difficult and long road.

3.2 Woman as the Other

The next section discusses Othering, a phenomenon that often comes up in consideration of literary depictions of women. In the *International Encyclopaedia of Human Geography*, Jean-François Staszak describes society's need for Othering as "to choose a criterion that allows humanity to be divided into two groups: one that embodies the norm and whose identity is valued and another that is defined by its faults, devalued and susceptible to discrimination" (1). Taking into account how women were shunned away into the domestic sphere and were given less rights than what the average, non-privileged man had access to, it can be easily deduced how women were discriminated, or Othered. However, this phenomenon is also carried over into the corpus of literature about and featuring women.

First, it was mentioned that depictions of women tended to steer towards two directions, with one of them being the good, angel figure and the other the malicious, bad woman. It is crucial to note that all of these women were Othered to an extent, despite of how they were in sooth seen as. Moreover, Othering is also twofold in its usage of space, as it both appears physically as in tangible distance from the woman but also in more abstract, textual terms.

The concept of the woman as the Other was coined by Simone de Beauvoir in her influential work, *The Second Sex*. Beauvoir makes a differentiation between the "Subject" and the "Other", stating that the Subject is the norm, the essential and that the Other is different, the non-essential. *The Second Sex* argues that women are seen as inferior just for being women, and that the patriarchal nature of the world constantly posits the woman to a subordinate position. Moreover, the man gains meaning from differentiating between himself, the Subject and the woman, the Other (Beauvoir 7). There exist countless examples of women depicted as the Other in literature. First, a monstrous woman is always depicted as the Other – sirens, witches and other mythical creatures who are women are seen as dangerous, as threats to male authority. Medusa is a classic example of this dangerous woman. Second, female characters such as Bertha Mason, the narrator of *The Yellow Wallpaper*, and Cathy Linton are seen as women who have lost their minds, which again posits them as the Other, a deviation from what was seen as normal, since "good women" could not be mad, have a temper or struggle with their mental health.

As it was mentioned, physical distance as a way of Othering also plays a significant part in depictions of both "good" and "bad" women. One of the most common examples of this is the trope of the young woman, locked away in a desolate place or a castle, where she does not interact with others or only with a scarce few. Fairy tale examples of "good women" include *Rapunzel* and *Sleeping Beauty*. The latter is also interesting from the respect that the heroine is

separated in both space and time, as she sleeps for hundred years. Moreover, she is also unconscious, as the induced sleep more closely resembles a coma-like state, which can also be looked at as a way of Othering, closing off the woman from the outside world. On the other hand, while the “bad woman” is also locked away, it is usually depicted in a much more sinister way. The most common trope that appears in these cases is the “Madwoman in the Attic”, where the heroine usually suffers from some problems regarding her mental health, or she is deemed insane by those around her. Such examples include Bertha from *Jane Eyre*, and also the narrator of *The Yellow Wallpaper* by Charlotte-Perkins Gilman. Interestingly, Othering by physical distance also appears in regards to male characters as well, such as in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* and *The Phantom of the Opera*, however these can also be categorized as Othering the monster, another common type of differentiating groups that did not fit into the norm.

3.3 Modern-Day Depictions of Women, Wartime Changes

The last section discussing the literary representations of women will focus on the early and mid-twentieth century depictions. First, they can be understood as extensions of the early depictions in a lot of ways, but there is also an evolution that can be observed. It is noteworthy to mention that as the years went on, fiction at large was produced more and was also more well-distributed, which meant that a full-scale consideration of how women were depicted during the early and mid-twentieth century would be difficult. This research chooses to focus on the effect of the world wars on literary depictions of women and how familiar tropes were adapted to the changing historical climate.

First, historical context plays a significant part in the development of the ways in which women were depicted. The early 20th century brought a lot of change into the lives of women with the rising popularity of the feminist movement, and also WWI and WWII. It is important to note that the split between the domestic and the public sphere remained at large during the first World War, as while men were sent to the battlefields the women were expected to stay at home and still attend to their duties, but also to support the men from afar. At the same time, while women were expected to retain their innocence at home, not every woman had the privilege to do so, as many Eastern European women in the occupied areas had to face the possibility of death and rape (Keene 23). Many women also decided to join the workforce as a way of helping out during the war and while their work was appreciated, they nevertheless faced discrimination – women who took up the roles of nurses for example, were often not recognized of their authority by male doctors and were disrespected by patients (Keene 24). Similarly, women also contributed a lot in WWII joining the workforce, which was popularized

by such figures as the posters Rosie the Riveter in the United States, which signalled to women that they can also be strong and thrive in physical work (Anderson 36).

Second, in accordance to women's partaking in the workforce and the world wars, the way in which women were represented during these times also saw a change. The wars in general used propaganda posters to their advantage and in consequence a lot of these new ideals of women are also represented in posters. Due to the fact that a lot of women decided to join in the efforts of the wars by becoming nurses, a new type of ideal for women simultaneously emerged. The ideal bears the name "The Madonna Nurse", and conjures up a woman that is innocent and motherly but at the same time desirable figure (R. Brown 43). This woman can be seen as the adjustment of the good and pure, princess-like but homely figure (such as Snow White) of fairy tales to the wartime. The figure of "The Madonna Nurse" did not only decorate propaganda posters, but she also bled into literature with works such as the short story titled "Enfant de Malheur" by Mary Borden (R. Brown 47).

Concurrently, since women had witnessed the horrors that the wars had brought to their doorstep, the pre-war innocent woman just was not a part that could be played anymore. Also, the women who partook in the efforts to help out the soldiers of the war as nurses got burnt out and desensitized. For these reasons, literary representations of women also underwent some changes and women were beginning to be shown as apathetic and pessimistic as well. In "Moonlight", another short story by Mary Borden, the narrator adapts an almost mechanic state as to cope with what she saw during the war and as an effort to survive. The nurse becomes so traumatized by what has happened around her, that she just cannot look at the men that she is supposed to be treating in the same way, she cannot see their humanity (R. Brown 55). Due to this, the gender role and expectations of the nurse also get flipped over – she cannot attend to the caretaker role, who is supposed to help the men survive (R. Brown 56).

Finally, the early 20th century saw a change in how women were approached in literature. These changes were due to the historical climate of the time, as the first couple of decades of the century were ridden with the two world wars. During these times, a lot of women had to step up and do the work that until then was expected of the men, such as working in the factories and helping out in the medical field. The women who stepped onto the medical field faced difficulties from multiple directions, as the horrors of the wars that they were otherwise sheltered from ran down their spirits and their authority was frequently questioned by the men around them. In literature, these nurses were highlighted as motherly, innocent and pure but were also expected to possess a degree of seductiveness. At the same time, this was not the case

for many women who became burnt-out, traumatized and disillusioned from the horrors of the wars, who in literature were shown as machine-like and detached.

4. An Act of Taking Self-Ownership in Literature

Taking into consideration the treatment of women and also their depictions in literature, it is notable and worthwhile to also explore their acts of standing up for themselves and their rights. It is noteworthy to also bear in mind the fact that there are many acts that can be seen as one asserting themselves and the contributions of women such as Virginia Woolf and Simone de Beauvoir are all also examples of a woman raising her voice for what she believes is right. They have and will inspire many others to come and additionally, this work would not have come about if not for gaining incentive from the words of these women. However, there exists one more work that was substantial for many women in realizing their power and their prerogatives.

4.1 *The Yellow Wallpaper*

In *The Yellow Wallpaper*, Charlotte Perkins Gilman presents the trope of the Madwoman in the Attic in a remarkable way, infusing it with social commentary and the author's own experiences of post-partum depression. This piece of work proved to be an act of courage, self-ownership and a statement for Gilman and the women of her time and cemented the author as one of the pioneers for well-being of female authors.

The narrator of *The Yellow Wallpaper* tells the story of the deterioration of her mental state by a series of journal entries. She is confined to a small room in a rented estate without anything to occupy her as she is forbidden to read, write or meet her friends. According to her physician and husband John, she is suffering from "temporary nervous depression" (Gilman, *The Yellow* 10) and the confinement is the cure for her condition. However, it is clear that the narrator doesn't share the same sentiment and she even tries to spite her husband by writing, but this is too exhausting to be kept up for long. The narrator finds the house frightening from the first encounter as she remarks that it resembles a haunted house. What unsettles her most about the house is the yellow wallpaper in her room and the strange patterns that decorate it. As time goes on, the narrator becomes haunted by the wallpaper and starts hallucinating which eventually leads to a state that can be only described as devoid of sanity.

Throughout the story it is evident that the narrator and her husband do not stand on the same level in any way, as John is both her physician and husband – making the power of John

over the narrator tremendous. Moreover, there is evidence in the text that John is not afraid to use his power, although he does so in a covert way, so that it seems that his actions are for the best and out of love. This is shown in John's patronizing attitude and the belittling language that he is shown using, such as calling his wife "little girl".

Furthermore, the wife is also shown to have great love and aspiration for writing, but her passions get shut down by those around her. John seems especially apathetic towards the narrator's creative power, as he not only laughs at her and diminishes her skills, but believes that writing could aggravate her condition and hence advises that she quits: "He says that with my imaginative power and habit of story-making, a nervous weakness like mine is sure to lead to a manner of excited fancies, and that I ought to use my will and good sense to check the tendency" (Gilman, *The Yellow* 14). From this passage it is revealed that not only the narrator herself is seen as less than, but her work and anything she produces as well. Artistic talents are also depicted in a way where they are trivialized, by the usage of terms such as "habit of story-making", which suggests that the narrator's imagination is overly active rather than that she possesses talent for writing.

4.2 *The Rest Cure and Taking Self-Ownership*

For greater understanding of the story and how impactful its creation proved to be, it is crucial to take Gilman's life and experiences into consideration as well. Gilman had to face a variety of struggles during her lifetime, some of which were a difficult upbringing, cancer and postpartum depression for which she consulted Silas Weir Mitchell (Kessler 158). Mitchell was a 19th century physician, who became known for his infamous rest cure - a treatment that consisted of rest, excessive feeding and isolation, prescribed for women who had a variety of traits that could also fit under the umbrella of nervous depression, or by today's terms: nervous breakdown. This rest cure was taken to such an extent that a woman could not get out of bed to feed herself or even to take a shower, all of which was conducted for the woman by a nurse. (Bassuk 247). This shows that Mitchell's prescribed cures were not seen as guidelines or courses of actions that one could decide to take, but that they were enforced quite heavily. Some well-known patients of Mitchell's cure were Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Virginia Woolf, but many more women were prescribed the same treatment by both Mitchell and other physicians of that time (Bassuk 245).

Taking into context the way Mitchell's treatments were conducted and the course of events in *The Yellow Wallpaper*, the negative influence that the rest cure had on Gilman

becomes prevalent. In fact, the reader does not need to read between the lines to find this connection at all, as Gilman mentions Mitchell in *The Yellow Wallpaper*, which speaks volumes of her experience and opinion regarding the physician: “John says that if I don’t pick up faster he shall send me to Weir Mitchell in the fall. But I don’t want to go there at all. I had a friend who was in his hands once, and she says he is just like John and my brother, only more so!” (Gilman, *The Yellow* 16). It is important to mention that Gilman lived in a point in history where a woman writing was out of the norm and scandalous in itself, which means that the explicit mention of Mitchell must have been an act that was the result of a deep, pent-up resentment towards the physician and his methods. It was also a courageous deed as well, since he was no ordinary man but one of great power and influence, which he extorted over Gilman herself at one point.

Additionally, while the explicit mention of Mitchell and the writing of the story is remarkable in itself, Gilman took another step that was astounding, by sending the story to the physician. Later, when asked for an explanation for the birth of *The Yellow Wallpaper* and the actions that she took, Gilman wrote the following:

Being naturally moved to rejoicing by this narrow escape, I wrote *The Yellow Wallpaper*, with its embellishments and additions to carry out the ideal (I never had hallucinations or objections to my mural decorations) and sent a copy to the physician who so nearly drove me mad. He never acknowledged it. [...] Many years later I was told that the great specialist had admitted to friends of his that he had altered his treatment of neurasthenia since reading *The Yellow Wallpaper*. It was not intended to drive people crazy, but to save people from being driven crazy, and it worked (“Why I wrote” 265).

Gilman’s words prove just how impactful and revolutionary this was not just for her, but other women as well. It also shows that the writing process must have taken place with the intention of standing up for one’s self and helping other women as well to not experience what the author had. The impact of the work is also manifested in the fact that it still gets brought up in connection to the rights of women in general, but also of female authors. Furthermore, it also made an impact on future patients treated with the rest cure of Mitchell, who ended up changing his ways although he never recognized the impact of the work to Gilman herself.

In conclusion, *The Yellow Wallpaper* has no doubt stood the test of time and cemented itself as a text that has played a part in bettering the situation of women. The work argues against

Weir Mitchell's rest cure, prescribed for women struggling with their mental health, which included rest and seclusion as treatments. In reality, this cure often made women feel way worse, and often they needed the exact opposite than what was suggested. It would not have come about without the tenacity of Charlotte Perkins Gilman, who had experienced how much harm such a treatment can cause to the mental well-being of a person. The work proved to be helpful for both Gilman and also the women of her time, who were also often affected by such cures.

5. Conclusion

This research attempted to shed light on the circumstances of an average, 19th–20th century woman, and what it would have taken her to pursue writing. It was observed that there were a lot of difficulties standing in the way of female authors such as their lack of privacy, education, and money. Moreover, the literary depictions analysed also showed how women had very concrete shoes that they were expected to fill and that any deviation from the norms could invite criticism, humiliation and backlash. However, there existed brave and courageous women who chose to write regardless of their circumstances. One of these women was Charlotte Perkins Gilman, who wrote *The Yellow Wallpaper* as an answer piece for Weir Mitchell's infamous rest cure, which made life difficult for women who suffered from mental health problems. Apart from Gilman, there were other women writers and philosophers who are credited for fighting for the betterment of the situation of female authors such as Virginia Woolf and Simone de Beauvoir.

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