



## AN ANALYSIS OF THE IMAGE OF THE WOMAN IN "THE REVOLT OF THE MOTHER" AND "THE YELLOW WALLPAPER"

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### **Abstract:**

Many writers are focused on the theme of feminism to write their short stories or novels. In some of the short stories where feminism is the main theme, I would mention: *The Story of an Hour*, *The Revolt of the Mother*, *A Respectable Woman*, and *The Yellow Wallpaper*. These short stories highlight the role of women in the family and their relation with the other members. In this article, I want to focus on the role of women in marriage and their relation with the husband and the children in the short story written by Mary W. Freeman entitled *The Revolt of the Mother* and in *The Yellow Wallpaper* written by Charlotte Perkins Gilman. I am going to make a comparison and contrast between the role of the woman in *The Revolt of the Mother* and in *The Yellow Wallpaper* by mentioning the role of women in marriage. There is a difference between the woman of the nineteenth century and the women of today. There are many aspects that are different and most of them have changed for better. One question to be made is whether the role of women in the marriage has changed for better or worst. This is a question that will receive an answer after studying and comparing the role of women in the society, the changes that she has undergone and the effects of these changes. Some of the changes can be considered as a progress of the society but some others can be considered as the loss of some moral issues.

**Keywords:** *The Revolt of the Mother*, *The Yellow Wallpaper*, women, rights, strength of women

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## 1. Analysis of the *Revolt of the Mother*

The *Revolt of the Mother* emphasizes the rebellion of women in order to take what belongs to them. In this story, the mother whose name is Sarah acts different from other women because she believes that she is doing the right thing. The reason why she acted so was because she had always had the dream to live in a decent house with her children. She did not obey to her husband when he said not to move into the other building. Her disobedience was noticed by all the people who live in that rural area and they all prejudged her for this action. It was her love for her children that gave her the strength to face to her husband and all the society.

In the *Revolt of the Mother*, the main theme is the distinction of traditional gender roles. When Sarah at first accepts Adoniram's building of the barn shows the traditional belief that her duty is to follow her husband. She had been waiting for the house for 40 years because Adoniram had promised to her. Sarah shows herself brave and clever because she expresses her feelings to her husband but he refuses to talk about it. She does not mention this subject for the moment and waits until they build the barn. As soon as she has the opportunity, she moves in the new building with her children.

Adoniram is the traditional male in that society. He was the head of the family and he was the only person to take decisions. He is not a communicative person and he does not want to discuss important matters with his wife. He symbolizes all men of that time and their position in the family and in the society. He is the father and all the other members should obey to him. He is an example for his son, with who he has a closer relation than his daughter. His son will be raised similar to his father and he will be superior to his wife and children.

In this short story, we notice binary oppositions such as: male and female relation, individual and the society. The husband and wife do not have a very close relationship since they do not discuss with on another important issues of the family. They refer to each other without using their names but saying "mother" and "father". The society plays an important role since it does not support the woman who did not obey to her husband. They judge her and consider her act as a "revolt". In this situation, she is alone against that society who cannot understand her feelings. The society where she lives is a male dominant society and the duty of women was to obey to her husband for everything that he says.

Sarah symbolizes the traditional role of women. She cleans her house, she cooks, she takes care for her children, especially for the daughter. In that period mother had to take more care for girls and fathers for boys. This was a kind of transmitted role from generation to generation. Sarah is the house wife with her duties and so will be her daughter when she gets married. She is a victim of that society who decides some rules that should not exist at

all. She has got married to a "hard man" and could not disobey to him. Adoniram is the head of the family, so has been his father in his family and similar will be his son. The son has a closer relation with his father. Therefore, he is informed for the decisions that his father makes and he does not reveal the secret to his mother.

The *Revolt of Sarah* can be related to the revolt of those women who struggled to win the right to vote. Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton worked a lot for women's rights. They thought that they could not gain their right until they had the vote. When Susan B. Anthony voted in the 1872 presidential election, women in the United States did not have the right to vote and Anthony was arrested. She has a battle to give herself and other women the right to vote which should belong to them.

## 2. An Overview of the *Yellow Wallpaper*

This short story is about a woman who started suffering from neurasthenia, two years after giving birth to her daughter. Jane, who is the narrator of the story is married to John and is dominated by him. He locks her in a room and she was not allowed to do anything but just rest. He especially forbids her from creative work of writing which was her passion. At first, the ugly wallpaper makes her nervous and she could not recover. Later on, she sees the figure of a woman in the wallpaper and creates a kind of relation with her. She considers the woman being imprisoned who tries with the strength of her heart to free herself.

Jane finds herself in the woman of the wallpaper. They are both imprisoned by the dominant male and the society. In the end of the story, she creeps around the room and peels off the wallpaper. She thinks that feminists may have to hide in the shadows for now but they will rise up. The main character feels sad because she has been locked in that room just because this was the "rest cure" that her husband had given to her. She was so unhappy and she was not allowed to raise up her own child. Jane was prohibited to write because the doctor thought this would make her worst. The reality was completely the opposite because she continued writing in a secret way and she recovered. In this story, we notice the role of women in the late nineteenth century which was inside the domestic sphere.<sup>ii</sup>

### 2.1 Main themes

#### 2.1.1. Female Imprisonment in the Domestic Sphere

The *Yellow Wallpaper* symbolizes the female imprisonment within the domestic sphere. She was a woman whose traditional role was to take care of the children.<sup>iii</sup> However, she was not

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<sup>ii</sup> Gilman, Charlotte Perkins. "Why I wrote The Yellow Wallpaper", pg. 34

<sup>iii</sup> Johnson, Greg, "Gilman's Gothic Allegory: Rage and Redemption in The Yellow Wallpaper", pg. 102

allowed to exercise the only profession of raising up her own child. Jane finds herself and all the women in the world similar to the woman in the wallpaper. She was imprisoned by her husband and she wanted to get freedom. This has happened and will happen to many women. However, she has the belief that in the future women will have an important position in the society. She believes that soon they will gain the freedom that they are looking for.

*"For many years, I suffered from a severe and continuous nervous breakdown tending to melancholia—and beyond. During about the third year of this trouble I went, in devout faith and some faint stir of hope, to a noted specialist in nervous diseases, the best known in the country. This wise man put me to bed and applied the rest cure, to which a still-good physique responded so promptly that he concluded there was nothing much the matter with me, and sent me home with solemn advice to "live as domestic a life as far as possible," to "have but two hours' intellectual life a day," and "never to touch pen, brush, or pencil again" as long as I lived. This was in 1887." (Gilman, Charlotte Perkins. Why I wrote the Yellow Wallpaper. Page 23. [usapetal.net/.../why-i-wrote-the-yellow-wallpaper/](http://usapetal.net/.../why-i-wrote-the-yellow-wallpaper/)*

John, who symbolizes the traditional male, has imprisoned his wife into a domestic prison. All women had to live in that domestic sphere that was determined by their husband and all the society. They were expected to clean the house, to cook and take care of the children. John was a doctor and he believes that the "rest cure" will be the perfect cure for all the women in such a condition. He often refers to her as "little" and does not take her words seriously. Similar to all other men, he does not consider his wife as independent.<sup>iv</sup>

### **2.1.2. Creativity vs. Rationality**

From the beginning of the story, the narrator's creativity is set in conflict with John's rationality. The narrator of the story shows that she is able to use her imagination and her creativity, and to write a story of her life. She wrote a story which will have an important significance for other women in the world who will read it. John does not recognize the creativity of his wife. Therefore, he decides for her the "rest cure" as an attempt to remove the narrator's creativity. He wants her to give up writing in order to recover from her mental disorder.

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<sup>iv</sup> Edelstein, Sari. "Charlotte Perkins Gilman and the Yellow Newspaper" pg.92.

### 2.1.3. The Importance of Self-Expression

The narrator although having mental disorders, is forced to hide her anxieties and fears in order to seem happy with her husband. She is prohibited to express her real feelings that she experiences inside the room with the woman in the wallpaper, because she has to seem calm and as if she is recovering. She has to act according to the "rest cure" and she cannot even express the necessity for her freedom, the need to write, and the love for her child. She has to live a passive life and even without thinking a lot. Because this would break the rest cure. She keeps a secret journal which she considers as a "relief" to her mind.

## 2.2 Symbols

### 2.2.1. The Symbol of Sunlight and Moonlight

These are very significant symbols and they have a great importance for Jane and her feelings. Sunlight is associated with the superiority of John. He is the person who orders the schedule and he decides what Jane will do during the day. As we notice this situation is more than a prison for Jane and for the woman in the wallpaper. Sunlight symbolizes men because they have the freedom to go wherever they want, differently from women who have to stay inside the house or even inside a single poor room. Moonlight symbolizes the period of the day when Jane feels somehow free. Most of the women dream for a better life during the night. Moonlight is a symbol of femininity because under the moonlight their only duty is to dream. They do not have to do the housework, to cook, or to take care for the children.

### 2.2.2 Marriage

*"Charlotte Perkins Gilman's vision of male-female relationships is dark and oppressive. For example, the narrator in "The Yellow Wallpaper", who suffers from post-partum depression, is confined to a small room by her oppressive husband. She longs to take strolls outside in the beautiful world and its delicious gardens (Gilman, The Yellow Wallpaper, 833) that she can see from her window. However, as her husband, a doctor, refuses to allow her even the most basic pleasures of life, she goes insane. While Gilman wrote the story to "save people from being driven crazy" (Gilman, Why I Wrote the Yellow Wallpaper, 845) she makes it clear that many marriages were unhappy because they revolved around an oppressive man who could impose his will on the woman." (Gilman, Charlotte Perkins. Why I wrote the Yellow Wallpaper. 844-845.)*

Jane is married to John but she struggles against closing her in the room with the ugly wallpaper. Although he knows that she dislikes the bedroom wallpaper, he does not give great importance to this minor fact. Jane's dislikes for the wallpaper turns into an obsession.

In the end of the story, she identifies herself with the woman in the wallpaper. The woman in the wallpaper has a great effect in the mind of Jane. Jane thinks that many other married women might have suffered in this room but the things with change in the future.

### **2.2.3 The Wallpaper**

The Wallpaper symbolizes the imprisonment within the domestic sphere. During the story, "*The Wallpaper*" serves the narrator as an exercise for her imagination and the place where she notices the figure of the woman. As she is staying inside the room, she feels that the wallpaper is observing everything that she does. During the first days, she feels depressed but later she starts to decode the meaning of that wallpaper and what does it hide. She sees the woman who is struggling to get freedom outside the bars in the pattern. Jane feels similar as being inside the wallpaper as a prisoner. The wallpaper's yellow color has an association with the rigid oppression of masculine sunlight.<sup>v</sup>

### **2.2.3 Compare and contrast**

The two main characters of the two short stories are women. They are similar in some aspect but they are also different. Starting with similarities they both live in the nineteenth century where women should live in the domestic sphere. These two women are very strong to handle the situations in which their husbands put them. When they find themselves in difficult situations, they both think about the future and other women. They are both married to superior husbands who have the right to decide for important issues, to work, to stay outside the house as much as they wish. However, women have to stay inside the walls of the house and do not think of doing something different from what the husband and the society told.

The difference between Sarah and Jane is that Sarah has two children and she can take care of them, whereas Jane has one child and she is not allowed to look after her child. Sarah has a husband who does not tell her everything. Jane has a husband who considers her 'little' not able to take care of many things especially in that psychological condition. In the end of the story, they both manage to survive. Sarah move in the house that she has always dreamed about and Jane recovers from her mental disorders.

## **3. Women in a modern society**

It is normal that the role of women has changed in the society with the passing of the years. They have developed in many aspects of live and in fields that once belonged just to men.

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<sup>v</sup> Lanser, Susan S. "Feminist Criticism, 'The Yellow Wallpaper,' and the Politics of Color in America", pg. 389

Today they are considered as an important part of everyday life and they have a wider role than they had before. The role of women in our society has changed significantly in the past three decades. Women and girls have many more opportunities and they can face different challenges. There are women who have achieved good position in politics, sport, in many aspects in the society.<sup>vi</sup>

### 3.1 Getting married

*"The most fundamental continuity between the nineteenth century and the present is that marriage remains a near universal experience for American women. Just as 95 percent of women married in 1800, 95 percent of both black and white women born before the end of the World War II married. Although demographers now predict that a somewhat smaller proportion of women born recently will marry, they nonetheless expect that about 90 percent of young white and 80 percent of young black women are likely to do so. To be sure, women now delay marriage. And certainly, given these delays in concert with increased rates of divorce, women of all races spend less time in first marriages than they did previously. Yet, reduced mortality and high rates of remarriage (at least among whites) mean women spend more time in marriage than they did in the nineteenth century: In 1800 women spent about 27 years in marriage; now after a peak of 42 years during the baby boom, they are married for an average total of 35 years." (Edited by Freeman, Jo. Women, page 98)*

When women got married in the nineteenth century, they looked to their husbands for financial support. After getting married wives cook, clean, manage domestic routines. Women did not have to worry about the economy of the family because this was the duty that the husband had. Males had to work outside the house and provide for the family. The situation now has changed because women can also work. Women have the opportunity to work and help in the economy of the family in order to provide as much as possible for their children. It seems that women who are financially independent delay their marriage as much as possible. They have the possibility to live themselves without the need of a husband. Therefore, women who do not have a job think that the best way to have financial resources is to get married.

*"Contemporary women's decision to marry, like that of their historical predecessors, is very much affected by economic considerations. Women with more financial resources, whether personal income or educational credentials are likely to command future income, they are less*

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<sup>vi</sup> Thomas, Deborah. "The Changing Role of Womanhood: From True Woman to New Woman in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper"", pg.202

*likely to get married than other women, whereas the rate of marriage increases among men with greater financial resources. Thus, as Goldscheider and Waite recently found, women use resources, whether from their own employment or from their parents, to "buy out a marriage". Most, however, do not have the resources to "buy out" ". (Edited by Freeman, Jo. Women. Page 99)*

### **3.2 Does the husband help?**

Even in families where both wife and husband work, women have to manage their domestic routines. It is their duty to cook, clean, take care of other member. This is a kind of job that all women are employed "taking care of the house". There are some husbands that help but they do less than their wives. Although employed women devote fewer hours to domestic labor than do housewives, when they turn back at home there are many duties that only she can do. However, today technology has improved and women can do their housework easier. There is prepared food for sale in the restaurant, transportation is available, cleaning and child care are available from paid housekeepers and baby-sitters. However, women are responsible for the education of the children. There is a small number of fathers who help in the education of the children. They think that this is a duty for mothers or they do not know the manners as good as their wives do. The greatest help that males do in the family is the financial support.

### **3.3 Parenting**

Although women have fewer children than they did in the past, childrearing remains a central activity in their lives. Even women who work and have a career spend more time with their children than do their husbands. Husbands try to help somehow but the feeling that women get from rearing the children is a satisfaction that many women do not want to give up. Children continue to be seen by all women as emotionally priceless. Women are more likely to give love and security than receive. They offer unlimited love to their children and they sacrifice important opportunities in order to be with them and rear them up properly.

God could not be everywhere, so he created mother. A Jewish proverb. (Guy R. Odom. *Mother's, Leadership and Success*. page 42)

### **3.4 Women at work**

*"After the World War II between 1941 and 1945, over six million women took jobs for the first time, the majority of them married and over thirty. They performed every kind of job imaginable. None received equal pay with men, and very few occupied positions of executive*



*responsibility. Nevertheless, wages were higher than ever before, some of those at the bottom had the opportunity for the first time to make a decent living, and millions of middle-class women discovered that, notwithstanding what the culture had taught them, they were fully capable of running their own lives and playing an active role in the work force as well as in the home. During the war years, the female labor force increased by 57 percent, and the proportion of women who were employed leaped from 25 percent to 36 percent."* (H. Chafe, William. Women and American Society, page 260)

Nowadays women do not think that they commit a sin if they leave home and take a job. Having a job and being financially independent have a great importance in the way how women organize their life. Compared to those with fewer resources, women who are well educated and who have a well-paid job are less likely to marry, or to have children if they do. They are also more likely to divorce and less likely to remarry. However, women are clever enough to organize their time and to find time for everything, such as for the housework, for the children, or for the husband. A recent (October 2009) report from the Center for American Progress, "The Shriver Report: A Woman's Nation Changes Everything" tells us that women now make up 48% of the US workforce and "mothers are breadwinners or co-breadwinners in a majority of families"

#### **4. Conclusions**

The role of women in the society has changes significantly. Women are not anymore dependent on men and men do not consider them as objects. Of course, that there are a lot of other things to do but with the passing of the time things will become better for women. Women today feel proud of what they are. In addition, men appreciate and value their women and what they do or like to do. Most of them have given to women the liberty to live as they want and to earn their living outside the house. We all know that in America women are more respected and more independent than women are here in Albania. I hope that soon we will have the chance to live the life similar to the American society. So, women will have more possibilities to work and there will not be a limitation in choosing the professions they want. There are still a lot of things to do but women are strong creatures and they will fight everyday more and more in order to win their complete liberty to do things as they desire. People say that women have finally, somehow balanced the sense of equality between the two genders, and that nowadays they are treated the same as men. For approximately the last 100 years women have been fighting for the same rights as men (especially around the turn from 19th to 20th century with the struggle for women's suffrage) and were able to

make changes to the traditionally accepted feminine gender role. However, most feminists today say there is still work to be done.

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