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The Damaging Effects of Gender Roles in The Bell Jar and “The Yellow Wallpaper”

The short essay “The Yellow Wallpaper” by Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Sylvia Plath’s novel, The Bell Jar, tell the story of two women slowly slipping into a mental breakdown, though the two are not as mad as they seem. Many evident and important similarities exist in the lives of Esther and the unnamed narrator of “The Yellow Wallpaper,” which imply that these two stories of ‘mad women’ are not simple accounts of mental illness, but indications of an underlying problem. In Susan Bordo’s 1993 analytical essay, she examines mental illnesses common to women during certain eras to argue that these illnesses are a reflection of and objection to the ‘traditional’ gender roles of their times. A comparison of the essay and the novel, in conjunction with Susan Bordo’s critical essay, shows a connection between traditional gender roles and mental illness. An examination of the struggles with mental illness witnessed in both female protagonists in “The Yellow Wallpaper” and The Bell Jar demonstrates the overwhelmingly negative effects of imposing traditional gender roles upon women. The two protagonists struggle to fit into their designated roles as ‘wife and mother’ and ‘future housewife’ and succumb to madness in protest of these externally imposed expectations.

Esther and the narrator face the impractical reality of rebelling against traditional gender roles due to the long history of societal acceptance for these cultural norms. The 19th century saw a revival of Victorian feminine ideals: delicacy, passivity, submissiveness, and temperamental emotions (Vicinus). “The Yellow Wallpaper” perfectly demonstrates a woman’s pressure to

conform to these ideals. The narrator displays her submissiveness and fragility through the repetition of the phrase “but what is one to do?” (Gilman 647-648), though she continually disagrees with her husband, John, and his method of treating her illness. The traditional gender roles in the 19th century kept women from expressing themselves and men continually wrote women off as erratic and capricious (Bordo 2366). These exaggerated ideals for women persisted into the 1950s, where domesticity and the stereotypical ‘perfect’ housewife characterized this period.. Esther, in The Bell Jar, struggles to accept these roles as mother and wife as something she should strive for. When thinking about what marriage would be like, she says that waking up every morning to cook and clean while her husband was at work “seemed a dreary and wasted life for a girl with fifteen years of straight A’s” (Plath 84). Though she has an enviable internship in New York, a promising future, and a line of potential suitors, Esther becomes disillusioned when she realizes what future awaits her.

The two mental illnesses depicted in the novel and essay can be better understood through Susan Bordo’s work, “Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body.” It can be inferred that the narrator suffers from hysteria, a disorder common in the late 19th century characterized by “easy fatigability and often lack of motivation, as well as feelings of inadequacy” (Bordo 2367). The narrator experiences exhaustion, dissociation with those around her, feelings of failure as a wife and mother, and inability to write or express herself. Agoraphobia, similar to hysteria, includes a “loss of mobility, loss of voice, [and] inability to leave the home” (Bordo 2365), which are characteristics attributed to Esther in The Bell Jar. Esther confines herself inside, dissociates from those around her, and faces the inability to find the words to express herself through writing. Esther and the narrator’s disorders dramatize the gender stereotypes typical of their era. Susan Bordo asserts that these mental illnesses are a

reaction to overwhelming pressure to live up to traditional gender roles. Instead of outright rejection of these gender roles, the women become “caricatures” of these societal ideals instead (Bordo 2365). For the narrator, this equates to hyper-fragility and exaggerated helplessness. Esther, faced with the reality of becoming the stereotypical housewife, confines herself to her home and loses her identity and her voice (writing) because she feels it will soon be stripped away anyways. She ultimately attempts suicide in order to escape the overwhelming pressure from her mother, friends, and professors. The authors use these stories of mental illness as a critique of these gender roles.

The similarities between the two protagonists’ lives suggest that these two works of literature are not simple accounts of a sick person’s struggle with mental illness; but, rather, distressing signs of an overarching and much larger problem. Their similar slow progressions into mental breakdowns have already been established. However, another strong similarity between the two works is their titles. The yellow wallpaper in Gilman’s essay creates a quasi-prison and symbolizes the narrator’s feelings of being trapped by her overbearing husband and the idealized Victorian femininity. Further, the image of a bell jar, as both the title of the novel and an important metaphor used by Esther herself, symbolizes the feeling of being cut-off from the world, protected from the outside due to one’s delicacy. Another important connection is the author’s use of their works to critique psychiatric medicine, a field historically dominated by men. John has complete authority over his wife’s medical care and recovery. From his professional diagnosis as a doctor, he declares, “there is really nothing the matter with [her] but temporary nervous depression” and she is “absolutely forbidden to [write]” (Gilman 648) until she gets better. He confines her to the room and discourages her from writing or talking about her condition by waving it off as a basic depression. Esther encounters something similar with

her male doctors. Dr. Gordon, a psychiatrist, displays the same lack of empathy as John when seeing Esther and she fails to make any progress. John and Dr. Gordon, both doctors, represent the pervasive presence of patriarchy in society, where men dominate the public sphere and women's voices are silenced. It is not until Esther sees a woman doctor, Dr. Nolan, that her voice is actually heard and the treatment options allow for self-expression and growth. The narrator in "The Yellow Wallpaper" is not so fortunate and it remains unknown whether or not she recovers from her breakdown. These individual similarities between the works could constitute an entire literary analysis paper on their own, however, studied together they provide evidence that the authors aim to attack a larger problem. The cages that trap the two women reflect society's constraining gender roles, the high expectations to fill those roles, and the smothering of one's ambitions, hopes, and expressions.

To the reader, the protagonists appear to be rational and sensible in their discontent with the world around them. This is due in part to Gillman and Plath's extremely informal writing styles and the use of first person narrative that allow the reader to peer into the heads of these two women. Furthermore, the stories are structured so that there are very slow progressions into insanity that draws the reader in and makes them believe that 'going mad' is the only viable option left for these two women surrounded by social pressures. The authors manipulate and guide the reader's perception of Esther and the narrator through the first person point of view. The reader can only infer the thoughts and feelings of other characters and relies on the protagonists for all information and details. However, Plath and Gilman expertly write the two 'mad women' as the only sane individuals in the story, therefore building a great level of trust between the character and the reader. The flow of narration in "The Yellow Wallpaper" reads like a series of private diary entries that the narrator only shares with the reader. The effect of

this is an inflated trust in the narrator and a severe distrust of John and his motives. In The Bell Jar, Esther's perspective provides a filter through which the reader understands the plot of the story. Much of the story is actually recollections or an inner dialog with herself. Again, this helps build trust with the reader because she is seen as a young girl thrust into terrible circumstances. Even when the narrator 'creeps' around the perimeter of the room over and over and Esther finds herself in a mental hospital determined that suicide remains the only option, the reader trusts what they say and do. The two protagonists should be untrustworthy narrators due to their diagnosed mental illnesses; however, the authors use the trust between the narrator and reader to assert that the women's madness is more of a protest against society than an actual illness or mental disorder. The use of first person narrative adds to the author's overall goal of critiquing gender stereotypes by creating reliable narrators that protest so strongly though their 'madness' against the gendered system that attempts to control and belittle them.

The Bell Jar and "The Yellow Wallpaper" tell the stories of two women's struggle to fit into society's gender roles and how that struggle leads to mental illness. The authors use the stories of Esther and the narrator to criticize gender roles and their constraining quality. The works display many similar characteristics, specifically in women's experiences and the manner in which they are diagnosed and treated. These works have real world implications as well. The authors use their works to criticize the treatment of mental illness and the refusal to link it with gender roles and pressures many women face. Gilman and Plath, through their fictional works, describe a widespread problem that many women face. An analysis of these works concludes that gender roles have a severely negative impact upon women's mental health. Therefore, imposing gender roles upon women, as seen in The Bell Jar and "The Yellow Wallpaper," has adverse effects on their mind, body, and spirit.

Works Cited

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