Walled In and Poisoned: Female Subjugation, Isolation, and Madness in “The Yellow Wallpaper” and “A Rose for Emily”  
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Abstract

“The Yellow Wallpaper” (1892) by Charlotte Perkins Gilman and “A Rose for Emily” (1930) by William Faulkner are two classic texts that reveal so much about the subjugation and isolation that women have had to experience. These two stories provide a compelling narrative of how women are driven to madness by patriarchal subjugation. Perkins’ story is told from a first-hand account, while Faulkner’s is told from an outsider’s point of view. The difference in point of view allows different voices to be heard and serve different literary and socio political agendas. A psychoanalytic and feminist critical reading also provides a deeper understanding of how both protagonists are affected. As a woman rights activist, Gilman wrote the story based on her own experiences and therefore intended her story to produce real social change. In contrast, Faulkner, a male author from the South, can only offer readers a limited understanding of how both protagonists are affected. As a woman rights activist, Gilman wrote the story based on her own experiences and therefore intended her story to produce real social change. In contrast, Faulkner, a male author from the South, can only offer readers a limited understanding of how both protagonists are affected.

Subjugation and Isolation

Subjugation and Isolation in “The Yellow Wallpaper”:
- The narrator, Jane, in “The Yellow Wallpaper” is subjugated/controlled by her husband, John, who is also a doctor. She is struggling with postpartum depression and says, “yet I cannot be with him, it makes me so nervous” (Gilman 649) about her newborn baby. As a result her husband prescribed her the “rest cure” without issuing her an official diagnosis.
- The “rest cure,” coined by S. Weir Mitchell, requires patients, primarily women, to have a strict regimen of bed rest, isolation, and no creative or intellectual activity for weeks. Meaning she is prohibited from writing in her journal.
- Her husband disregards her concerns about her health and infantilizes her by calling her “little goose” and “little girl” as a way to assert his power over her.
- The narrator is not allowed to go out and must stay in her eerie bedroom the whole time. The room consists of torn off yellow wallpaper, a nailed-down bed, and barred windows.

Subjugation and Isolation in “A Rose for Emily”:
- Emily Grierson is a Southern belle whose father has driven away all of her male suitors because “none of the young men were quite good enough” (Faulkner 4).
- She has no female figures in her life and is always under her father’s supervision until he dies.
- The townspeople place a spotlight on Emily her entire life and alienate her because of her family’s history of wealth and snobbish lifestyle.

Madness

Madness in “The Yellow Wallpaper”:
- Because of her lively imagination, the narrator begins to focus on the yellow wallpaper and sees a woman trapped within the wall. She is not allowed any other means of activity and must resort to becoming obsessed with the yellow wallpaper.
- The narrator writes that the woman behind the wallpaper “crawls around fast, and her crawling shakes it all over,” and “that woman gets out in the daytime” (Gilman 654).
- Unfortunately, after tearing down the wallpaper the narrator loses herself in the process. She is left in a worse state than when she initially got there. She goes mad and starts creeping around the room and over her husband, who faints, all while declaring freedom and victory.

Madness in “A Rose for Emily”:
- Emily Grierson buys arsenic when Homer Barron, a Northerner, comes back to town. They had a dark desire to murder Homer Barron. Necrophilia is the result of Emily’s desire for power.
- It was not unusual for Emily’s father to be so detrimental controlling since it was the norm. Emily rebels against the traditional gender roles when she takes Homer as her eternal lover. She poisons him literally as a way to gain control of her life.

Findings

“The Yellow Wallpaper”:
- The Symbolic Order is a safe space for people who cannot fathom that their ideologies are made up and not universal truths. John is this type of person. Without the patriarchal’s ideology, he loses all power over the narrator.
- The narrator’s escape from the Symbolic Order is symbolic because she breaks away from society’s chains of oppression but at the cost of her sanity. She reverts to the childlike Imaginary Order in the end when she begins to crawl all over the floor.
- The narrator is “legally a child; socially, economically, and philosophically… the narrator’s work threatens to destroy her status as a mere child by gaining her recognition in the adult world; this is reason enough for her husband to forbid her to work” (MacPike 287).

“A Rose for Emily”:
- One finds out that Emily buys arsenic to murder Homer Barron after his return. Emily “killed Homer largely to placate society, although that, in her deranged mind, also secured him as her lover forever” (Dilworth 251). Emily allowed the id portion of her consciousness to take over as she gave into the dark desire to murder Homer Barron. Necrophilia is the result of Emily’s desire for power.
- It was not unusual for Emily’s father to be so detrimental controlling since it was the norm. Emily rebels against the traditional gender roles when she takes Homer as her eternal lover. She poisons him literally as a way to gain control of her life.

Different Purposes

“Two Rose for Emily”:
- Charlotte Perkins Gilman wrote “The Yellow Wallpaper” in first-person. Her mission was to tell of her struggles with the “rest cure” and advocate for autonomy. The narrator’s story is more personal.

“A Rose for Emily”:
- William Faulkner was a male author and claimed that his story had no socio political agenda. He also wrote the story in a first-person point of view as well but through a collective narrator, the townspeople.

References

Faulkner, William. A Rose for Emily. 1930.

Psychoanalytic Criticism:
- The Real is “the uninterpretable dimension of existence; it is existence without the filters and buffers of our signifying or meaning-making systems” (Tyson 31).
- The Imaginary Order is “the world that the child experiences through images rather than words… it is a world of fullness, completeness, and delight because with the child’s sense of itself as a whole comes the illusion of control” (Tyson 27).
- The Symbolic Order is where “language is first and foremost a symbolic system of signification, that is, a symbolic system of meaning-making” (Tyson 27). This is where society’s ideologies and biases exist.

Sigmund Freud’s theory of the super ego, id, and ego.
- The super ego is “the psychological reservoir of our repressed aggressive desires,” and the id is “devoid solely to the gratification of prohibited desires of all kinds - desire for power” (Tyson 25).
- The ego is the “conscious self that experiences the external world through the senses” (Tyson 25).

Feminist Criticism:
- Lois Tyson writes, “traditional gender roles cast men as rational, strong, protective, and decisive; they cast women as emotional (irrational), weak, nurturing, and submissive” (81).
- The traditional gender roles are imposed on the two protagonists which lead to their subjugation.

Method