The Yellow Wallpaper: Crash Course Literature #407

Crash Course: Literature
https://youtube.com/watch?v=rtepIKeNHPU
https://nerdfighteria.info/v/rtepIKeNHPU

Hi, I'm John Green, and this is CrashCourse Literature. So, for the last few weeks we've been talking a lot about dystopias, imaginary societies gone wrong. Like, George Orwell's *1984* is a world of war, surveillance, and mind control. *The Handmaid's Tale* portrays a toxic landscape in which healthy women are forced to produce offspring for the ruling class. *Candide* showed us the best of all possible worlds, which was terrible. And, *Parable of the Sower* takes place in an alternate universe where a sloganeering, strongman president presides over a country experiencing intense social disorder thanks to climate change. Fortunately none of that stuff has happened, yet.

But, today we're going to talk about our final dystopia of the series, *The Yellow Wallpaper* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and it's about a dystopia that already happened. First published in 1892 in the New England magazine, this story is less of a "what if" dystopia than a "this is happening to me" call to action. So, at first glance the life that Gilman describes in this story might not seem that bad; a young woman is married to a doctor, and spends all of her time in a country mansion, and I mean all of her time. But, make no mistake about it, the social order in this story is in some ways as oppressive as the others that we've examined. Gilman's narrator is imprisoned within her marriage and her social order, and, also, her house. And, she eventually goes insane trying to preserve her perspective. Today, I want to talk about Gilman, who was a feminist, humanist, sociologist, novelist, poet, and essayist. I also want to talk about perspectives on mental health, and how they've changed between Gilman's era and ours. And, of course, I'm going to talk about yellow wallpaper. Soon enough, you're going to see it everywhere.

[Intro Music]

So, Charlotte Perkins Gilman had a fascinating life. She was born in Hartford, Connecticut in 1860, and she lived with her mother and brother, after her father abandoned the family. And, although she moved from school to school, her childhood was really intellectually rich, largely because of her three brilliant and famous aunts: Isabella Beech Hooker, suffragist and abolitionist, Harriet Beecher Stowe, best-selling author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and Katharine Beecher, education reformer an advocated for Native American rights. With some financial help for her ne'er-do-well father, Charlotte enrolled in design school. Later, she supported herself by illustrating advertising cards and tutoring; so, you know, she did know something about wallpaper patterns.

In 1884 she married Charles Walter Stetson and gave birth to a daughter, Katherine, and in the years after her daughter's birth, Charlotte experienced a series of what were called at the time nervous disorders. In 1887, she visited a specialist, who encouraged her to try a "rest cure," and this involved living as domestic a life as far as possible, having but two hours intellectual life a day and never touching pen, brush, or pencil again. After three months of this so-called treatment, she quote, "came so near to the borderline of utter mental ruin that I could see over." Gilman wanted to warn others of the dangers of this rest cure, and her story, she explains, was not intended to drive people crazy, but to save people from being driven crazy; and, it worked.

We'll get to that working bit in a second, but back to her life. So in 1888, Charlotte left her husband and took Katherine with her to Pasadena, California. Her professional life flourished; she organized social reform movements, she represented California at the suffrage convention in Washington DC, she became a lecturer and edited a series of magazines. She also wrote essays, poems, a novella, and, by far her most famous story, *The Yellow Wallpaper*. Much of her work focused on women's unequal status in marriage and their need for financial independence. And, she achieved financial independence and also equal marriage in her second marriage. Eventually, she was diagnosed with breast cancer, and as she had lived on her own terms, she also died on her own terms. She was an advocate of euthanasia, and she chose chloroform over cancer, committing suicide in 1935.

I wanted to focus a little on Gilman's life story to emphasize that this was a person who experienced severe, disabling mental illness, and whose treatment ended up making it much worse; and yet, who still went on to live a long, fulfilling, and productive life. I think it's really helpful to read *The Yellow Wallpaper* with that background.

As for the story itself, well, let's go to the thought bubble. *The Yellow Wallpaper* is the first-person narrative of a 19th century woman suffering from a mental breakdown after giving birth. In a secret diary this narrator describes her setting as "a colonial mansion, a hereditary estate, I would say a haunted house, and reach the height of romantic felicity-- but that would be asking too much of fate!" This narrator is confined to a room with barred windows. It's possible that she's in an asylum, but the physical setting is less important than another landscape, the shifting consciousness of her mind. The narrator knows that she perceives reality differently from her husband, who is also her doctor. At first, she chalks this up to the expected difficulties of male-female relations. "John," she writes, "laughs at me, of course, but one expects that in marriage." This expectation of marriage is, of course, troubling in its own right, but there's an even darker side to their dynamic; John has almost complete control over his wife's body.

The narrator's descriptions may be at times unreliable, but there are a few things we do know: she recently had a baby, she recognizes that she is sick, John belittles her, saying that she suffers from a temporary nervous depression-- a slight hysterical tendency. Meanwhile, he prescribes her a scheduled prescription for each hour in the day of phosphates or phosphites, the narrator doesn't know which, and a regimen of tonics, and journeys, and air, and exercise. Also, John forbids his wife from writing, working, or socializing, and it quickly becomes clear that these so-called cures are exacerbating the narrator's condition, as she is left with very little to do except stare at the yellow wallpaper. Thanks thought bubble.

So today, we would probably say that the narrator is experiencing postpartum depression and/or postpartum psychosis. These are conditions that can result from a drop in hormones, like estrogen and progesterone, and are intensified by the two central experiences of new parenthood, sleep deprivation, and anxiety. Postpartum psychosis can include the depressive symptoms of postpartum depression, along with confusion, disorientation, hallucinations, and paranoia. Today these conditions would be treated with medication and therapy and other medical interventions, but whatever treatment John gives to his wife in *The Yellow Wallpaper* definitely does not work. If Gilman's story were an argument, this line from it would be its thesis: "John is a physician, perhaps that is one reason I do not get well faster."

Admittedly the 19th century wasn't a golden age for psychiatry, but even so, John is exceptionally bad at treating mental illness. At the start of the story, Gilman's narrator craves more society and stimulus. She writes that she "must say what I feel and think in some way." Forbidden from communicating with a living soul, she secretly confesses her thoughts to dead paper in a journal. And in her writing, she projects her mental disintegration onto the patterns that she sees on the walls. "I never saw worse paper in my life," she writes, explaining that it contains "one of those sprawling flamboyant patterns committing every artistic sin." Still, she finds this pattern compelling: "it is dull enough to confuse the eye in following, pronounced enough to constantly irritate and provoke study... And, when you follow the lame uncertain curves for a little distance, they suddenly commit suicide-- plunge off at outrageous

angles, destroy themselves in unheard of contradictions." Of course, this also describes the narrator's interior landscape, but it also describes the story, right? Like initially, her narrative seems dull. I mean plot summary: woman stares at wall. But, then it becomes confusing. The wallpaper seems to be moving, we aren't sure where this narrator is or if we can trust her, and then something becomes pronounced enough to provoke our further study. Are these romantic descriptions of a house, a delicious garden, or it's tattered decor? Are they intimate descriptions of a failing marriage, the desire for connections? Or are they veiled suicidal musings? Or, maybe, they're attempts to find a meaning in an extremely limited experience, like Offred opening her hand in the sunlight in *The Handmaid's Tale.*

I've always been fascinated by how the narrator tries to understand her situation in terms of principles of design. Like, after she studies one breath, or strip, of wallpaper, she concludes that its pattern is "not arranged on any laws of radiation, or alternation, or repetition, or symmetry, or anything else that I ever heard of." I think anybody who's experienced mental illness can relate to that. For her, each of these breaths exists as an isolated column of fatuity; in other words, it's meaningless. A pattern only emerges when she considers the strips next to one another. Dim shapes appear to resemble a woman stooping down and creeping about behind that pattern. The wallpaper also changes as the light changes. At night, the woman in the wallpapers captivity behind bars becomes as plain as can be. So, of course, does the narrator's own captivity. And, also, wait, hold on, full disclosure, I'm about to go full Freudian, which I know is like a frustration and annoyance to many of you who are not, like, hardcore lit-crit people. but just walk with me on this one. So, the paper has this peculiar odor that creeps all over the house, and is stronger after a week of fog and rain. Her husband might explain it as a combination of glue and mold intensified bu humidity, but smells travel through the olfactory bulb closely connected to the regions of the brain that handle memory and emotion. That's why smells always remind us of moments from our past, and it seems to me the narrator's fixation on this smell could be what Freud called the return of the repressed, or unconscious material rising to the surface. And, maybe that's part of why the narrator becomes determined that nobody discovered the wallpapers meaning except herself. Although she had initially craved conversation, she decided that it does not do to trust people too much, especially with her most frightening thoughts.

I mean, after all, having previously trusted people with her frightening thoughts has landed her in this situation where she has to stare at yellow wallpaper all day. And then, eventually, the narrator begins to suspect that many women are trapped inside this paper; "I think there are a great many women behind, and sometimes only one, and she crawls around fast, and her crawling shakes it all over." The narrator longs to free this woman or women. On her last day in the house, she locks her door, throws the key into the garden, and tethers herself to the bed which she also bites. She rips at the wallpaper and thinks that it would be an admirable exercise to throw herself out the window. Then, she wedges her should into a smudge that runs along the lower part of the wall, and walks hunched over along the periphery of the room, a kind of reenactment of the woman stuck behind the wallpaper. John enters the room at last, and then faints at the sight of his wife; yet, she continues her laps, crawling over the body of the man who had oppressed her. "I've got out at last," she announces, "in spite of you and Jane?" Getting out at last involves rejecting societal norms and defying John, and breaking free of Jane, a character not mentioned until this point who may be herself? But, then comes this question mark, which complicated everything and makes it ambiguous.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman transformed her experience of enduring this rest cure into a story that invites us to reconsider gender dynamics and the treatment of mental health disorders. At the times of its publication, the story may have inspired concrete change, too. In an article published in 1913, Gilman claims that her story, quote, "has to my knowledge, save one woman from a similar fate - so terrifying her family that they let her out into normal activity and she recovered. But, the best result is this. Many years later I was told that [my own doctor] had admitted to friends of his that he had altered his treatment of neurasthenia since reading *The Yellow Wallpaper*." Stories affect the world in mysterious ways and it *The Yellow Wallpaper* helped end the practice of separating the sick from the world, then I am grateful.

But, I think the story has served another far more personal function. It has given form and expression to many people's experiences with mental illness, including, I have to say, mine. It's a story that explores the ways that physiological brain disorders can be hurt or helped by treatments, and by the way the social order imagines and talks about mental illness. And, although we are no longer embrace rest cures, we still have a long way to go when it comes to talking about mental illness without the stigmatization that can worsen suffering. But, then also mental illness and the way it's discussed isn't the only yellow wallpaper out there. I wonder, what is the wallpaper that constrains you and who else do you feel might be imprisoned by its pattern? How might you escape? How might you tell your story to influence others? Those questions haunted me when I first read Gilman's story in high school, and they shaped a lot of the ways that I think about writing today. More than 20 years later, I'm still asking them. Thanks for watching. I'll see you next time.

[Outro Music]

CrashCourse is filmed here in the Chad and Stacy Emigolz studio in Indianapolis, and it's made possible by your support at Patreon. Patreon is a voluntary subscription service, where you can support CrashCourse directly though and monthly donation to help us keep it free for everyone forever. We make CrashCourse wih Adobe Creative Cloud, you can get a free trial at a link in the description. Thanks to everyone who supports us on Patreon, and to all of you for watching, and, as we say in my hometown, don't forget to be awesome.