Title of Paper

Throughout history, people have had high hopes in trying to gain equal rights in society. In the United States during the nineteenth century, women aspired towards the freedom to do what they wanted and make names for themselves. However, due to the fact that it was only right for the men of the household to make an income; while at the same time being the head of the household, women were seen as inferior human beings. Women began to speak out about the rights they deserved. One feminist, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, spoke out about the fact that women needed to be able to show that they can support themselves, instead of being restricted to housework and being undermined by society. In the short story “The Yellow Wallpaper,” Charlotte Perkins Gilman uses literary devices to emphasize the need for women’s rights in the nineteenth century.

Gilman uses symbolism to create double meanings throughout the text, “The Yellow Wallpaper,” thus showing the underlying message of women’s desire for freedom. For example, after the main character, Jane, becomes fascinated with the wallpaper in her bedroom she says, “Sometimes 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” (Gilman 13). Jane believes that the wallpaper holds many women behind it,
trying to break free. Calum Kerr believes symbolism is used throughout the text as well. He states, “After failing to convince John of her condition, she focuses on the wallpaper as if it holds a key to understanding herself. On one level the wallpaper represents the oppressiveness of her marriage; on another level it offers freedom from such oppression” (Kerr 70). Kerr believes that the wallpaper allows Jane to understand herself and the life that she is living.

Personification is used by Gilman to illustrate how the wallpaper comes to life and is more than just a decoration in Jane’s eyes, sending her a message of the need to be independent. The wallpaper comes to life in the mind of Jane when she says, “I never saw so much expression in an inanimate thing before, and we all know how much expression they have! I used to lie awake as a child and get more entertainment and terror out of blank walls and plain furniture than most children could find in a toy-store” (Gilman 10). Jane does not believe that the wallpaper is just a decoration, but instead thinks it has humanistic quality. Kerr further establishes the personification of the wallpaper when she writes, “At first, in daylight, she sees the suggestion of a pattern in the wallpaper; then, at dusk, the pattern becomes clearer; finally, in the moonlight she discerns a woman trapped beneath the paper. She then identifies with the woman and realizes that the source of her own power lies in her imagination” (Kerr 69). Kerr clearly illustrates the various aspects of the wallpaper and how it comes to life for Jane.

Jane’s point of view throughout “The Yellow Wallpaper” is critical to expressing the need for feminism throughout the world. Jane believes that women should be allowed to do as they please, resulting from the fact that she was oppressed by her husband. She hints throughout the story that every woman should have freedom and a say
in what they want. Her point of view is profound when she says, “...John has cautioned me not to give way to fancy in the least. He says that with my imaginative power and habit of story-making, a nervous weakness like mine is sure to lead to all manner of excited fancies, and that I ought to use my will and good sense to check the tendency” (Gilman 5). Jane feels the need to be live by her own standards, as many other women should have in the nineteenth century. Rula Quawas states, “…true womanhood with its four attributes ‘piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity’ all put together they ‘spelled mother, daughter, sister, wife—woman’ Only those women who adhered to such qualities were believed to be happy, contented and powerful in their home…” (Quawas 1). Quawas is saying that the only way for women to seek happiness was to be a support system, not an individual in their families’ lives.

Gilman’s use of imagery allows the reader to visualize the inner meaning of the wallpaper and its relationship to the struggle for women’s rights. Any reader can imagine the message the wallpaper brings forth as Jane thoroughly describes it throughout the story in ways such as, “There is a recurrent spot where the pattern lolls like a broken neck and two bulbous eyes stare at you upside down. I get positively angry with the impertinence of it and the everlastingness. Up and down and sideways they crawl, and those absurd, unblinking eyes are everywhere. There is one place where two breadths didn't match, and the eyes go all up and down the line, one a little higher than the other” (Gilman 6). Jane’s description allows readers to paint a picture of how terrifying and mysterious the wallpaper actually is. Greg Johnson is in agreement when he says, “Gilman's heroine identifies wholly with the raging ‘madness’ of the double she discovers locked within the tortured arabesques of the wallpaper” (Johnson 523).
Johnson believes that the wallpaper is made up of more than just a complex pattern, and is instead a passageway to Jane’s mindset throughout her stay at the summer home.

Gilman uses the overall metaphor of Jane’s revelation about the woman behind the wallpaper to express how, like the woman; she also feels the need to be liberated. “Then in the very bright spots she keeps still, and in the very shady spots she just takes hold of the bars and shakes them hard. And she is all the time trying to climb through. But nobody could climb through that pattern -- it strangles so…” (Gilman 13). This quote demonstrates Jane’s deep inquiry involving the woman in the wallpaper and the parallel to Jane and her beliefs about society. Johnson accentuates this metaphor by saying, “…the story as a whole describes a woman attempting to save herself through her own writing, to transform what she calls "dead paper" into a vibrant Gothic world of creative dream work and self-revelation” (Johnson 523). Johnson explains that Jane finds solace in writing about the feelings that she cannot suppress due to the fact she is a woman.

Some believed Gilman, by the views emphasized through the mind of Jane in the short story, only represented opinions about feminism for one woman, not all women throughout the world. Gilman shows us Jane’s take on society, never actually stating the fact that she believes other women feel the same. Jane says, “I am getting angry enough to do something desperate. To jump out of the window would be admirable exercise, but the bars are too strong to even try. Besides I wouldn't do it. Of course not. I know well enough that a step like that is improper and might be misconstrued” (Gilman 13). Jane proves that she is willing to work and try new things, but is restricted because of the time period she is living in and the rights given to her. Janice Haney-Peritz believes, “...it can
not be said that between 1892 and 1973 "The Yellow Wallpaper" was completely ignored. What can be said, however, is that until 1973, the story's feminist thrust had gone unremarked...” (Haney-Peritz 1). Haney-Peritz explains that many people did not see the feminist message that encompassed the entire story, and instead had different takes on it.

However, even though “The Yellow Wallpaper” may be appear to be about one person’s views on women in society, Gilman hints throughout the short story that these feminist views apply to more than one woman. For example, Gilman’s character Jane declares, “I did write for a while in spite of them; but it does exhaust me a good deal -- having to be so sly about it, or else meet with heavy opposition. I sometimes fancy that in my condition if I had less opposition and more society and stimulus -- but John says the very worst thing I can do is to think about my condition, and I confess it always makes me feel bad”(Gilman 2). Gilman is trying to convey that all women in the nineteenth century had thoughts of bigger and better things, but instead were held back by their husbands. “...the text of the imprint of the Feminist Press and explicitly by appending to the text an afterworld in which Elaine Hedges reads the story as a ‘feminist document,’ as ‘one of the rare pieces of literature we have by a nineteenth-century woman which directly confronts the sexual politics of the male-female, husband-wife relationship’ ” (Haney-Peritz 114). This response to the text from Haney-Peritz showcases that the short story directly broadcasts the ideals of all women’s thoughts about feminism.
Many believe that Gilman was subversive throughout the short story “The Yellow Wallpaper.” Although it is clear that she is trying to emphasize the need for women’s rights in the nineteenth century, Gilman turns the story into what can be a psychological thriller. Gilman wanted people to discover the message she was trying to convey, and she did this by embedding her thoughts on society through the main character, Jane. Many women writers, one being Kate Chopin, were frowned upon because they brought up topics that were considered to be taboo. In the novel The Awakening, Chopin brings up topics such as adultery and unfavorable behaviors. After many people read this novel, they thought badly of Chopin. For this reason, Gilman hid the need for feminism to occur behind a mysterious yellow wallpaper to engage readers in her story. Therefore, in the short story “The Yellow Wallpaper”, Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s use of literary devices brings the struggle for women to gain equality in society to life. During the nineteenth century, it was messages like these that were needed in order for people to see what women actually went through. Women were undermined and oppressed simply because of their sex. Fortunately, the increase in feminism helped pave the way for women to finally receive the opportunities to be independent and happy as time went on. In summation, the rights of women needed to be emphasized throughout society in order for others to see that women could do more than just housework, and instead could make a name for themselves.
Works Cited


