Sexist Views of Women in the Medical Profession

& The Rest Cure in The Yellow Wallpaper

Do you remember when you were a kid and you got in trouble for something that you did and your parents would either gave you a timeout, sent you to your room, or grounded you? Do you have memories of having to stay in your room, sit in a corner, or stay inside, watching as all of your friends were outside playing? Thinking back, you probably got really bored because the time just seemed to stretch on and last forever as you sat in solitary confinement. But eventually your punishment was over and you were able to be free once again.

This situation may be considered only a small taste of what the people of the 1800s had to endure during the Rest Cure, though there just may still be a connection between these two situations. This childhood punishment consisting of solitary confinement is similar to what people that had to endure the Rest Cure felt, except on a whole other level. The Rest Cure treatment was referenced in the short story, “The Yellow Wallpaper”, written by Charlotte Gilman Perkins and published in the year 1892. The historical and biological background of the author and the time period of the mid to late 1800’s helps readers of the short
story “The Yellow Wallpaper” gain a better historical and cultural understanding of her work and brings out the concerns and issues of the time period. In the short story, author Charlotte Gilman criticizes the “Rest Cure” treatment, which was mainly prescribed by doctors to the women of the time. Doctors mainly prescribed the Rest Cure to the women of the time because of the male doctor’s unscientific stereotypical biases toward women. Sexist views of women and the strong structure of patriarchy within the story and within the time period are evident by examining and analyzing biographical background of the author, the doctors and their portrayal in the short story, and different historical documents. These examinations and analyzes will illuminate the misogynist perspective of the medical field, treatment of women, expose the oppression of women by doctors, and lack of appropriate medical treatment given to women of the time period.

Before going on with the rest of the essay, it is important to understand what the Rest Cure was, what the treatment involved, and the history behind it to be able to fully understand “The Yellow Wallpaper” and its historical context. According to the Science Museum History of Medicine’s (located in South Kensington, London) website, the length of time that a patient was prescribed the Rest Cure really varied, from anywhere from a couple weeks to two months, though the narrator in “The Yellow Wallpaper” was prescribed the Rest Cure for almost 3 months. The cure often involved isolation from other people, even friends and family. It consisted of lying in bed and getting as much rest as possible. Patients were often overfed and were often fed meals high in meat and
a fatty, milk based diet. Some patients were even force-fed, cleaned, and turned over in bed by another person. Patients were often forced to be dependent on another person and were often treated as an infant. Sometimes doctors used massage, muscle therapy, and electrotherapy to keep muscle tone and blood flowing. Patients were often prohibited from reading, writing, sewing, talking, or doing anything that involved intellectual thought. The name of this cure, the Rest Cure, does not sound so calm, peaceful, and relaxing as the name of the treatment suggests. As one may expect, Gilman did not react very well to the treatment and had a negative reaction to it, though many women did. According to Poirier, many women including, “Mitchell’s treatment of Jane Addams, Winnifred Howells (daughter of William Dean Howells), Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and the use of his treatment on Virginia Woolf caused cries of protest from all these women or their families” (Poirier, 15). There were many women of the time who protested the rest cure and its negative effect on them.

There is a connection between the short story and Gilman’s own past and experience that she had with the Rest Cure. In the short story she depicts Mitchell as a doctor who has bad intentions and the Rest Cure as a treatment that is torturing. Through writing the short story, Gilman criticizes the infamous Rest Cure treatment because of her own negative experience with it that also caused her to become insane. According to Stiles, Gilman herself in real life endured this Rest Cure treatment in the spring of 1887 prescribed by Dr. Mitchell (Stiles, website). She had a similar experience to the narrator in her short story, “The Yellow Wallpaper”, which is why some scholars call her short story a semi-
autobiography (Stiles). Dr. Mitchell diagnosed Gilman with nervous prostration, or in Dr. Mitchell's words, “a temporary nervous depression - a slight hysterical tendency” at the age of 26 after giving birth to her first baby. Present day, she probably would have been diagnosed with postpartum depression, considering she didn't really seem anxious and depressed until after giving birth to her baby and becoming a family. In her autobiography, *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman* (1935), Gilman describes her experience with Dr. Mitchell and his Rest Cure:

I was put to bed, and kept there. I was fed, bathed, rubbed, and responded with the vigorous body of twenty-six. As far as he could see there was nothing the matter with me, so after a month of this agreeable treatment he sent me home with this prescription:

“Live as domestic a life as possible. Have your child with you all the time…
Lie an hour after each meal. Have but two hours’ intellectual life a day.
And never touch pen, brush, or pencil as long as you live.” (96)

Basically Weir Mitchell was trying to force Gilman back into the role of wife and mother without any time for herself. He gave her barely any time to be intellectual or to express herself in writing. After trying to follow Dr. Mitchell's advice for a couple months, Gilman wrote that she “came so perilously near to losing my mind. The mental agony grew so unbearable that I would sit blankly moving my head from side to side” (96). She became so bored that her mind started to turn
against her and she slowly began to become insane, similar to how the narrator did in her short story. After finding out more information about the Rest Cure and Gilman’s experience with it, it is not surprising that Gilman structured her short story as an attack on this inappropriate, ineffective, and cruel course of treatment. “The Yellow Wallpaper” is an illustration of the way a mind that is overwhelmed with anxiety and depression can worsen and begin to become its own enemy when it is forced into inactivity and not allowed to do healthy activities. But beyond criticizing the specific Rest Cure technique described in the story, Gilman also wants to criticize any form of medical care that ignores the patient’s concerns or that considers her only as a passive object of treatment. In this way, Gilman’s past and experience with the rest cure help her showcase the misogynist perspective of the medical field, treatment of women of the time period, expose the oppression of women by doctors, and lack of appropriate medical treatment given to women.

In “The Yellow Wallpaper”, Dr. Mitchel was the doctor that the narrator’s husband threatened to take the narrator to if she didn’t get healthy and improve from her “nervous anxiousness”. The narrator wrote in her journal that, “If I don’t pick up faster he (the narrator’s husband) shall send me to (Doctor) Weir Mitchell in the fall. But I don’t want to go there at all. I had a friend who was in his hands once, and she says he is just like John and my brother, only more so!” (Gilman, 80). In the previous quote, the narrator saying her husband threatened to take her to Dr. Mitchell and that he is just like John and her brother except worse, was directly criticizing her husband and brother about their profession. But the
narrator was also criticizing Dr. Mitchell directly because she is pretty much straightforwardly saying he is a bad doctor and that she doesn't want to get treated by him. Interestingly, according to Suzanne Poirier, Dr. Mitchell was also one of “the most well-known and well-respected doctors and medical authorities of the time” (Poirier, 1). Gilman obviously didn’t think this for herself, but much of society saw him as prestigious and thought highly about him and his unique medical techniques. Dr. Mitchell was the infamous doctor who actually created and developed the “Rest Cure”, which was prescribed for women of the time period. According to Anne Stiles, “While the Rest Cure is today associated with nervous women, it actually began as a treatment for injured veterans during the Civil War. When Mitchell began his private practice, he repurposed the cure as a treatment for nervous invalids of both sexes” (Stiles, website). Later on, the Rest Cure was also widened for the treatment of hysteria and other nervous illnesses, becoming a common medical practice of the late 1800’s and early 1900’s in the United States and in the United Kingdom. Dr. Mitchell also wrote multiple books about the Rest Cure that he developed and some of his other medical practices that he used. He was the doctor that treated the author of “The Yellow Wallpaper”, Gilman herself.

Dr. Mitchell’s treatment according to today’s standards is categorized as sexist, since the rest cure was almost always applied to women. This was because women were thought of by many especially men to be biologically and mentally different than men; guided by their hormones, were seen as really emotional, and mentally unstable. According to Poirier, “Historians have further
noted that, because women were deemed sickly and emotional creatures, such traits were even idealized as part of the beauty of fragility of femininity” (Poirier, 2). In these times, women who were seen as sickly, emotional, and fragile were seen to fit the ideal of femininity. The Rest Cure treatment was supposed to cure what many people, mainly men, termed “diseases of the female mind”. The rest cure was directed at females mainly due to a lack of understanding regarding women and because of certain sexist views and stereotypes of women. Dr. Mitchell's diagnosis and prescribed “Rest Cure” for (mainly) women of the time, helped Gilman illuminate the misogynist perspective of the medical field, treatment of women of the time period, expose the oppression of women by doctors, and lack of appropriate medical treatment given to women.

The narrator's own brother and husband were also doctors who seemed to hold sexist views and were part of the patriarchy. So not only were they both seen by society as superior due to their gender, but also because of their job, as a physician. Due to their gender, both the narrator's brother and husband also had a higher education, social status, and made the money in the family. But due to the fact that they were also both doctors, put these men on a whole other level both financially and socially from the narrator. Though in the beginning, John (the narrator's husband) may seem like a bad guy, but the narrator's perspective does not allow us to see him as completely cruel. John’s treatment of the narrator goes terribly wrong, but in his defense, he was only trying to help her, not make her worse. The main problem is John’s sexist attitude and oppressive authority he has with his combined role as the narrator's husband and doctor. John is so sure
that he knows what is best for his wife that he is blind to what is actually going on and he totally disregards her own opinion and feelings of the situation. This causes the narrator to feel forced to hide her true feelings, which in the end, only makes things worse. This sense of authority is evident when the narrator near the beginning of the story explains, “If a physician of high standing, and one’s own husband, assures friends and relatives that there is really nothing the matter with one but temporary nervous depression – a slight hysterical tendency – what is one to do?” and goes on to add “My brother is also a physician, and also of high standing, and he says the same thing” (Gilman, 76). Later on, on the same page the narrator says she disagrees with both of their ideas and says “Personally, I believe that congenial work, with excitement and change would do me good” (Gilman 76). The narrator writes this in her journal, but is too afraid to directly say this to her husband. In this quote by the narrator, John’s status as both a doctor and husband are of higher class and status and due to this, the narrator figures her husband might be right or at least feels she must accept what he says as true and do what he says. Throughout the story, her husband seems to be ignoring the signs that she is mentally unstable and does not listen to what she says she wants or needs. The connection between a woman’s inferiority in the home and her inferiority in a doctor/patient relationship is clear and quite evident in the character of John, who is not only the narrator’s husband, but also her physician. By having the character of John play both of these roles, Gilman implies that both forms of authority (husband and doctor) can be easily abused and can be used to take advantage of a woman. Even though
in this case, the husband/doctor means to help, he does not fully understand his wife or her emotions. During this time period, women were often seen as silent subjects of the doctor authority, are treated like an infant, or can even be taken advantage of. Poirier would agree and would add, “The combination of honest medical ignorance coupled with cultural biases served to give women little latitude in their individual needs and even less voice in assessing the health care they received” (Poirier, 2). The doctors and their role in the short story helped Gilman illuminate the misogynist perspective of the medical field, treatment of women of the time period, expose the oppression of women by doctors, and lack of appropriate medical treatment given to women.

So now you have heard of the Rest Cure and know what it is and why it was used. The historical and biological background of the author and the time period of the mid to late 1800’s helps readers of the short story “The Yellow Wallpaper” gain a better historical and cultural understanding of Gilman’s work and brings about the concerns and issues of the time period. Through writing the short story, author Charlotte Gilman criticizes the “Rest Cure” treatment, which was mainly prescribed by doctors to the women of the time. Sexist views of women and the strong structure of patriarchy within the story and within the time period are evident by examining and analyzing biographical background of the author, the doctors and their role in the short story, and different historical documents. These examinations and analyzes exposed the misogynist perspective of the medical field, treatment of women, exposed the oppression of
women by doctors, and lack of appropriate medical treatment given to women of the time period.

Now try to put yourself in Gilman’s shoes, except a more modern example that is possibly more relatable. Imagine if your parents gave you a timeout, sent you to your room, or grounded you for two whole months. Visualize having to stay in your room, sit in a corner, or stay inside for the whole summer watching as all of your friends were outside playing and your were not allowed to join them because you had to stay inside. Think about how bored you would be. Envision just staring at the clock, hearing it tick tock away. Time just seems to stretch on hours on end and last forever. How would you feel? Wouldn’t you start to go crazy too? Think about it.
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