

The Person under the Paper

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In the 1800s, before the feminist movement gained power, women found themselves easily trapped in the pattern of society and its expectations. Their value was undermined by their expected inferiority and, therefore, they were given no opportunity for self-reliance. Crawling around in this small room in society's house, women's minds were forced by this unwelcome suppression to break down the bars that held them in their place. With time and effort, women were able to tear down the walls of conformity and consistency that imprisoned their true identities. This new power, found in releasing themselves from their expected role, allowed women to slowly creep their way over man's superiority. Through the methods of nonconformity and inconsistency provided by Ralph Emerson's "Self-Reliance," Charlotte Gilman uses "The Yellow Wallpaper" to portray the power of the feminist movement in giving women the opportunity to gain self-reliance.

As the journey of life begins, everyone learns the same implied rule of society: it is much easier and safer to blend into the world in which you live by conforming to its rules and expectations. Emerson, however, did not agree with this view. He felt that one should be able to stand up for one's self in the face of contrary popular opinion. He states this in the very beginning of "Self-Reliance": "Look to no one outside yourself" (1555). This is the lesson that the unnamed woman in "The Yellow Wallpaper" will come to learn through the confinement of her summerhouse bedroom. Her namelessness infers her own lack of identity. She knows herself only as John's wife and not as her own independent person. She knows that she is ill, but her

medically esteemed husband thinks that she has only a "slight hysterical tendency." She states, "You see he does not believe I am sick!" (Gilman 608). She follows the will of her husband because she does not succeed in her attempts to contradict his reasoning. As Emerson believes, "this conformity makes [one]...false in all particulars" (1559). By this conformity she loses her identity and becomes merely an extension of her husband with no outward will of her own. She does, however, voice her opinion through the journal that she keeps even though "[John] hates to have me write a word" (Gilman 609). She knows John would think it's crazy, "but I must say what I feel and think in some way-it is such a relief!" (Gilman 613). Her submission to her husband's wants has her "clapped into jail by her consciousness," as Emerson would put it (1557). She is not free to let her opinion out for fear of the consequences of standing up to the power and opposition of her husband; she knows that "he would make fun of me" (Gilman 616). In order to overcome the superiority of her husband, she must listen to her inner voice, and let it speak for her not only in solitude but also in the face of her adversary.

It is hard to maintain the opinion that you have in the face of a greater power that has an opposing opinion. As Emerson explains, "the voices which we hear in solitude grow faint and inaudible as we enter into the world" (1557). In her room, John's wife is free. She knows what she wants, but her needs get lost underneath her husband's domineering opinion. She tries to confront him, but loses her argument as usual: "I told him that... I wished he would take me away" (Gilman 614). He responds unsympathetically by saying that they could not leave before the lease was up and they have no reason to leave before then anyway (Gilman 614). John's control over his wife demonstrates Emerson's statement: "You will always find those who think they know what is your duty better than you know it" (1559). His wife knows exactly what she wants, and is always left unsatisfied in knowing that she will never attain her proper needs while

under John's surveillance. After all, as Emerson states, "It is easy in the world to live after the world's opinion; it is easy in solitude to live after our own; but the great [woman] is [she] who in the midst of the crowd keeps... the independence of solitude" (1559). Like the woman that she sees in the paper, John's wife also conforms to the pattern of the world she lives in when in the presence of her husband. It is only when she is alone that she allows herself to be truly exposed: "I fancy it is the pattern that keeps her so still. It keeps me quiet by the hour" (Gilman 615). In the daylight the woman in the wallpaper cannot be seen because she blends in so well with the design of her world; but at night, when no one can see her, she shows her true self and her want to break free of the pattern behind which she conforms (Gilman 615). Conformity, however, is not the only method through which Emerson believes one attains self-reliance.

We do not want to disappoint those who know us by acting contrary to our ways of acting in the past; therefore, consistency "scares us from self-trust" and so discourages the pursuit of self-reliance (Emerson 1560). Ensuring that one has this innate need for consistency is society's way of being able to anticipate one's actions before one acts. In this way social rules can maintain their control over the population. In many ways John's wife's thoughts of jumping out of the window show her desire to be free of his control over her and defy his expectations of her. She says, "I am angry enough to do something desperate; to jump out of the window. [But] I wouldn't do it. Of course not. I know well enough that a step like that is improper and might be misconstrued" (619). But Emerson asks, "Is it so bad to be misunderstood?" (1560). She does not do it for the same reason she does not defy his judgment: a fear of exposing her desire for inconsistency. Emerson believes that "with consistency a great soul has simply nothing to do. He may as well concern himself with his shadow on the wall," which is exactly what John's wife does (1560). This is a large part of the reason that she goes crazy and begins to identify with the

imaginary woman in the wall. She is trapped in her room with nothing to do but stare at the wallpaper and think about her plan of escape from her mental and physical confinement.

At this point in the story, the woman in the wall is coming out. This wallpaper woman resembles John's wife's inner woman breaking through (Gilman 619). Her actions are becoming more and more defiant of consistency. She has found a method of escape—that of her own mind. In the last scene her husband finds her crawling on the floor in her room. She is no longer concerned with conforming to any will but her own, and she finds great satisfaction in saying, "I can creep around as I please!" (Gilman 619). Although she broke through her husband's bars of confinement by physically degrading her body by creeping along the floor, she ultimately rose above his power by doing so. He was shocked by her inconsistent actions when he saw her, and he was taken aback by her sudden nonconformity to his expectations of her behavior. This is the first moment that he truly sees his wife because she is no longer covered beneath the figurative wallpaper that masked her true character. He asks her, "What's the matter? For God's sake, what are you doing?" (Gilman 619). She does not even stop creeping along the floor to answer him (Gilman 619). In no way would he have any effect on her newfound victory over his and the rest of society's mental and physical boundaries over her. She simply "looked at him over [her] shoulder" and says, "I've got out at last, in spite of you ... and you can't put me back!" (Gilman 619). With this remark he faints (an obvious sign of defeat), and she claims her victory by "creeping over him every time" she crawls around the room (Gilman 619). She, at last, has become fully self-reliant.

John's wife no longer needs anyone to tell her when or how to act. She finds what Emerson said she would find: "the sacred integrity of [her] own mind" (1557). Part of Emerson's theory of self-reliance says that "the power which resides in [her] is new in nature, and none but

[she] knows what that is which [she] can do, nor does [she] know until [she] has tried" (1556).

This is the message that the author of "The Yellow Wallpaper" wanted to get across to the women of her time. Charlotte Gilman was active in the feminist movement in the 1800's, and she realized that every woman has this power in her to overcome the position of inferiority that she, ultimately, allows herself to be kept in. Gilman was an advocate against the "economic dependence [that women had] inside marriage," and she tried to "offer solutions for the inequities in women's lives" through her publications (607). In Gilman's mind, every woman was trapped behind the yellow wallpaper of subordination (607); they only dared to shake the bars when no one was looking, and crept about so as not to be caught in defiance of the pattern in which they were expected to remain unnoticed. The feminist movement was the first step for women as a whole to reach self-reliance; it was like peeling away the first layer of wallpaper that imprisoned them. The ideals of feminism removed the outer bars of the unnecessary need for women to depend on men, along with the need to conform to the will of the world. The power that feminism evoked gave women the courage to be inconsistent and daring in their beliefs. Like John's wife tearing down the wallpaper in her room, feminism was a long, slow process that met with much criticism (Gilman 607). However, in the end, women such as John's wife succeeded in becoming exactly what men did not want them to be: self-reliant.

Works Cited

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