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Barred then Freed

In "The Yellow Wallpaper" by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, readers are exposed to Jane, the protagonist who spirals into depression and overall disarray as the story progresses. While at first Jane seems to be an unbelievable, unrealistic portrayal of a woman battling depression, readers soon realize her struggles are uncomfortably understandable. As a young adult often pressured to suppress creativity and instead follow a safe, job-guaranteed path, I as well as other readers can relate to the oppression Jane faces. Her character faces many changes, both mentally and physically throughout the story. As a result, Jane is a superb example of a developing character.

In order to understand Jane's development because of her depression, readers must first understand the cause of her depression. Jane recently gave birth to her first child, and ever since his birth she has presumably developed post-partum depression and a general state of nervousness. While the birth of her child caused the depression, it further develops because of her relationship with the antagonist in the story, her husband and doctor, John. John, as a doctor, "scoffs openly at any talk of things not to be felt and seen and put down in figures" (Gilman 1). Because of this quality, John cannot see the realness in her condition, simply because he cannot see, feel, or even properly diagnose her. In addition, he constantly refuses to treat Jane as an equal. Instead, he demeans her and gives little value to her opinions about

her own condition. For example, he calls her names such as a “blessed little goose” and “little girl”, making her feel like a child unable to think for herself (Gilman 2). Furthermore, he constantly shuts down her ideas without giving them any thought because of his assumption that there is no way she *could* be right. He also undermines her condition, insinuating that she makes up her suffering in her head. In his defense, John does not mean to be so insensitive: in training and schooling to be a doctor, his studies probably only reaffirmed the idea that women are inferior and need someone to take care of them. He does love Jane but was probably raised to treat women unequally. Regardless of his reasoning, John tries to be successful as Jane’s doctor and as a result cannot see the seriousness of her condition, and he ultimately fails at being a good, truly loving husband. This blindness to Jane’s reality could partially be from ignorance, but also from fear of what could truly be wrong with her. As her husband who really does mean well, John realizes deep down that his wife does have something wrong with her. However, he does not want to believe that she has an illness, so he just ignores it and tells himself and her that she continues to get better. Unfortunately, by avoiding the problem and forcing Jane to avoid activities she loves, John persists as the biggest cause for Jane’s steepening loss of reality. He controls her almost to the point of *owning* her, and because of this, Jane’s depression spirals further.

Because of John’s controlling attitude and rules, Jane cannot express herself through ways that she finds fulfilling, namely, writing. In this case, Jane’s inability to write due to John’s rules could be classified as an external conflict: John does not want her to write and tire herself, and because of this rule Jane develops resentment towards John. However, Jane prevails as an obviously smart and observant person. She notices beautiful and disturbing details about the

house when they move in, and realizes almost right away that John's treatment does nothing to help her. For instance, she writes, "Personally, I believe that congenial work, with excitement and change, would do me good. But what is one to do?" (Gilman 1). Hence, she *knows* that laying around, resting, and being banned from interaction with other people only hurts her, and ultimately the inability to express herself contributes to her drive to madness. She goes on to write, "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." (Gilman 1). Perhaps, however, it is not the writing that exhausts her; writing gives her life. However, the *opposition* tires her: the pure fear of getting caught makes writing not even worth the risk.

Finally, contributing to the development of Jane's depression is her lack of purpose in life. This lack of purpose could be classified as an internal conflict: she is a mother, but remains nervous around her baby and therefore has no drive to take care of him. Understandably, this inability consistently makes her feel bad about herself and forces her to become even more unmotivated to take care of the baby because she feels she cannot adequately do so.

Additionally, she has not one, but two other women helping out around the house: Mary with the baby, and John's sister Jennie keeping up with the housework. As a result, the more these women perform Jane's 19th century wifely and motherly duties, the more she slips from reality. Jane's mother and family even come to visit for the Fourth of July, and Jane still cannot lift a finger: "Of course I didn't do a thing. Jennie sees to everything now" (Gilman 3). However, once the wallpaper catches her attention and she discovers the woman in the wallpaper, she devotes all of her attention to getting her out. Therefore, this woman inside the wallpaper serves as her new and only purpose in life.

Once readers realize the reasoning behind Jane's mental downward spiral, it becomes easier to understand her physical actions that develop throughout the story. Subsequently, when John and Jane first arrive at the new house, she notices almost immediately that the house had peculiar characteristics: "Still I will proudly declare that there is something queer about it" (Gilman 1). Furthermore, as the story progresses, Jane repeatedly comments on the strangeness of the yellow wallpaper in her and John's room, and eventually her imagination forms a woman shape behind the wallpaper, ultimately symbolizing her feeling of being trapped. She even writes that the woman lives not only behind the wallpaper, but behind bars: "At night in any kind of light, in twilight, candlelight, lamplight, and worst of all by moonlight, it becomes bars! The outside pattern, I mean, and the woman behind it is as plain as can be" (Gilman 6). This motif of a woman trapped behind the wallpaper and bars directly relates to Jane's feelings about herself. As a smart, creative, and round character, Jane's feelings of suppression lead her to channel her creativity elsewhere, and thus the woman behind the wallpaper is created. Because of her initial lack of purpose, she finds a new direction of purpose in trying to help the woman escape from the wall. She loses herself in this purpose and becomes very unaware of her actions, to the point where she crawls around the room frequently to get close to the woman and does not even realize where the "smooch" from her shoulder being rubbed on the wall comes from (Gilman 7).

The climax of the story occurs when Jane realizes she only has one day left to get the woman out of the wall. She finally comes to the conclusion that she is the woman behind the wall, and spends hours urgently stripping off as much wallpaper as she can around the room. When John comes up the stairs, eventually unlocks the door, and finds Jane attached to a rope

and "creeping" around on the floor, he faints. She exclaims, "' I've got out at last,' said I, 'in spite of you and Jane. And I've pulled off most of the paper, so you can't put me back!'" (Gilman 9). Thus, this scene shows the full development of Jane's character: she has finally gotten so sick of her situation and lack of control that she takes matters in her own hands and frees herself from her restraints. Moreover, her true realization of freedom comes whenever she writes, "Now why should that man have fainted? But he did, and right across my path by the wall, so that I had to creep over him every time!" (Gilman 9). Ultimately, Jane has finally stolen the upper hand from John, and she, not he, holds the control now. She finally realizes how good freedom feels and that she never wants to return to their old situation.

No better character could exemplify a developing character than Jane in "The Yellow Wallpaper". Readers follow her transition both mentally and physically, from just seeing an outline in the wall of some sort of odd shape to stripping the wall frantically to get herself out. Readers can easily sympathize with Jane, but on the other hand, despite her crazy state of mind she proves strong enough to take care of her oppressive situation by herself. She truly comes full circle: from an initial lack of control and purpose to finding her purpose and taking control of her situation in the end, Jane portrays a woman who was once trapped behind bars but is now free.