

The Joy That Kills: A Comparative Feminist Study of Fleeting Freedom in Gilman and Chopin

Akanksha Singh

Research Scholar, Department of English and Modern European Languages, University of Lucknow.

ABSTRACT

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" and Kate Chopin's "The Story of an Hour" introduce two heroines, Louise Mallard and Gilman's unnamed narrator, who struggle against the suppressive nature of the societies around them. The denial of their desires which causes them extreme mental and physical anguish is the traditional norm of a society. By exercising control over their bodies and minds, a patriarchal society pushes these two heroines to put up an ultimate fight for their autonomy. The two short stories also elaborate on the suffocating experience of confinement and repression that women faced in the Victorian era. It also involves the demonstration of the acutely distinguished gender roles, where a woman's role as a wife and mother plays an important role in maintaining her status quo in society. The rigidity of these roles puts a certain pressure on a woman as they are expected to always maintain a comfortable, entertaining, and harmonious environment in the house. This paper aims to unfold the idea of freedom for a woman from patriarchal constraints by elucidating the psychological suffering of the heroines. Moreover, the comparative study will also extend what ephemeral female autonomy achieves for these two women and the meaning behind this fragile as well as treacherous road to psychological awakening.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Self-assertion, Psychological suppression, Female autonomy, Individuality.

Introduction

Victorian society established clear spaces for women to operate in, and substantially domestic duties define the image of an ideal woman. It is considered natural for women to be confined to the domestic sphere as they are morally superior but physically weak compared to men (Hughes). Not only this, but women are also presented with restricted opportunities for education. The only kind of education that is viable for them includes sewing, cooking, dancing, singing, and music. In short, they are to be successful in all kinds of endeavors that could help them attract a good husband. The idea behind the notion is to acquire an acceptable, graceful and feminine manner (Hughes). As expounded by Simone de Beauvoir in 'The Second Sex', "female human being is not necessarily a woman; to be so considered she must share in that mysterious and threatened reality known as femininity" (351). Correspondingly, the limited opportunities surrounding employment make it difficult for women to be financially independent. The only jobs considered suitable are teaching or nursing and even those are undervalued as well as underpaid. There are unreliable records of women's work contribution, gendered notions of how a man's work is highly relevant (Anitha and Pearson), and widely circulated belief that a working woman undermines the role of a wife as well as a mother.

The lack of political representation comes from the forethought of a woman's exclusion from public arena as a moral act. It is only tackled in the late Victorian era or when the suffragette movement in the early 20th century allowed women to vote and be part of public office. The battle, however, continues in terms of legal doctrine such as the Matrimonial Causes Act (1857) stating incorrigible conditions for women who wish to obtain a divorce. Kosofsky mentions John Smikins who discloses the biased state of the law which "gave men the right to divorce their wives on the ground of adultery. However, married women were not able to obtain a divorce if they discovered that their husbands had been unfaithful." In order to obtain a divorce, a woman is required to provide evidence of husband's adultery along with cruelty. It further complicates

matters by illustrating the almost negligible chances of acquiring custody of children, showcasing the limitations of legal rights for women. Even the Married Women's Property Act (1870) only allowed a somewhat limited control over property and earning passed to a woman upon marriage. For instance, the only property owned by a woman constitutes the wages and other inheritances she earns after marriage. This leaves the individual assets owned by a woman before marriage to be under her husband's custody by default (Duddy).

On account of a woman's body, all the discrepancies are pitched to her lacking reproductive organ which Showalter refers to arise as the common female malady or hysteria. She exposes the prejudiced psychiatric discourse where "women did not have access to the pages of the professional journals that discussed the statistics and theories of insanity" (Showalter 60). In alignment with the proposed decrees, the two selected short stories provide a deep insight into issues involving discontented marriage, medicalization of female psychological suffering, fragmented narratology, and temporal achievement of selfhood.

Seizure of Space and Speech

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's best remembered, semi-autobiographical short story "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892) introduces an unnamed narrator who moves to a colonial mansion with her physician husband, John. She is confined to a room with barred windows, which she only leaves on rare occasions, in order to attain necessary amount of rest to cure herself. John abstains his wife from doing any kind of "work" which is symbolic of her desire to write. The only personal connection that the narrator finds is with the wallpaper which serves as a replica of her confined condition as, "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 653). On the other hand, Kate Chopin's "The Story of an Hour" (1894) which was initially published as "The Dream of an Hour" follows Louise Mallard, who is afflicted with

heart disease. The news of her husband, Brently Mallard's death is presented very carefully and gently by her sister Josephine and her husband's friend Richard. At once, a cry escapes Louise's mouth and later she shuts herself in her room. A sudden rush envelops her as for the first time the window in her room shows the world beyond, full of life and opportunities, something she has always yearned for. Both the heroines struggle with spatial confinement in the hands of the male authorial figure in their life. While Gilman's narrative explicitly embodies literal confinement in regard to the architecture and setting of narrator's room, Chopin hosts a silent swirl of emotions inside Louise which solidifies her psychological entrapment. John and Brently are described as "very careful and loving" (Gilman 227) and "the face that had never looked save with love upon her" (Chopin 211) respectively. However, the constant neglect, isolation and surveillance faced by the heroines in marriage is a testimony to their psychological breakdown, which is pathologized, conveniently, to fit the patriarchal medical discourse.

Louise's heart condition, for instance, can be seen as a pathway to discussing the long-term suppression of her desires which eventually lead to illness. Her weak heart and eventual demise are interpreted as over the top exhilaration of finding out her husband is actually alive and well. The irony only justifies what happens when power of determining discourse and disease rests upon the prejudiced political, social and cultural principles about a woman's body. Gilman, correspondingly, draws from her own post-partum depression during the birth of her daughter to unmask the trajectory of labelling women "hysterical" and "nervous" beings who, under simple circumstances, used to exaggerate things just to get the attention of others. She was driven to madness as a result of the popular S. Weir Mitchell's "rest-cure", a frequently prescribed help by Victorian doctors to cure hysterical women. John and narrator's brother, as a physician, personify Mitchell by promoting and subjecting the very treatment to the narrator which eventually worsens her condition. He exercises full authorial power over his wife's physical and mental requirements which leaves

no space for any objection. Ellen L. Bassuk explores the symbolic meaning of the treatment by labelling it “sadistic, controlling, and intrusive” (245). What started as loss of personal space is followed by loss of ownership over one’s body as stated in the lines, “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 can one do?” (Gilman 226). In accordance with this, the repetitive nudge towards “order, control, and self-restraint” (Bassuk 249) forbids any emotional outlet and the pretense only proceeds to exhaust the narrator.

Psychological Awakening and Fragmentation

Amidst the external control, both the heroines hope to get back one’s individuality which leads to distinct psychological outcomes. Louise after receiving the news of her husband’s death and being left completely alone in her room, finally tastes the “elixir of life” (Chopin 212). Her mind and body in synchronicity ripple with the mantra, “free! free! free!” (211). She extends her being with a certain sweet possession of nature as expressed in the lines, “spring days, summer days, and all sorts of days that would be her own” (212). The depiction of the “sound, the scent, the color that filled the air” (211) drips with sensory emancipation along with the growing “self-assertion which she suddenly recognized as the strongest impulse of her being!” (212). Her reclaimed selfhood challenges the loss of female identity when engulfed by marital responsibilities. The room which must have limited and domesticated her, suddenly sparks a series of epiphanies which she plans to materialise in course of time. However, it is this brevity of time that in parallel shortens her steps towards self-cognizance.

Gilman’s narrator, alternatively, descent into incoherence as the narrative proceeds. The patterns on the wallpaper distresses her the most along with its infuriating color which is “repellent, almost revolting”

(Gilman 228). Unlike Louise's sensory delight, Gilman's narrator is tortured by her cramped surrounding, color, and even the smell which she refers to as "yellow smell" (237). The composition harbors certain repetitive and fanatical mentions of the wallpaper which mirrors the fragmentation of narrator's psyche. Similarly, the patterns slowly become a projection of her imprisoned condition as noted in the lines, "the faint figure behind seemed to shake the pattern, just as if she wanted to get out" (234). This growing recognition with the yellow wallpaper and eventual madness translates to the only form of revolt against the patriarchal constraints. Just like Louise, the narrator momentarily tastes freedom as she tears down the wallpaper and creeps over her collapsed husband again and again. She is in a delirious state as she exclaims, "I've pulled off most of the paper, so you can't put me back!" (241) much like Louise who has a "feverish triumph in her eyes, and she carried herself unwittingly like a goddess of Victory" (Chopin 212). While Louise's physical health fails her in the face of psychological awakening, Gilman's narrator's psychological health completely shatters under the physical pressure to conform. The route to their respective freedom, thus, exists but only in an erratic state which is also visible in the way their narratives are structured.

Reclamation of Narrative Ownership

Gilman's first-person chronicle expands into a personal and intimate tone over the unfolding events of narrator's gradual fall into madness. The syntax is somewhat structured and coherent in the beginning but eventually dives into fragmented, repetitive, whirlpool of emotions. This transformation serves as an indication to a different kind of creative language, one that does not follow in step with the patriarchal tradition. Likewise, Gilbert and Gubar refer to the struggle of overcoming the masculine norms of writing as "anxiety of authorship- a radical fear that she cannot create, that because she can never become a 'precursor' the act of writing will isolate or destroy her" (370-71). Chopin's third person narration, however, captures Louise's emancipation under constrictions of time. As the title suggests, her real story manifests only after the news

of her husband's death, leaving her with an hour to actually live it. The narrative, thus, follows the contained, coherent and structured syntax, in contrast to her internal exhilaration, and acts as a substitute to the imposed societal boundaries. Her internal transformation never emerges in bold affirmations or loud dialogues, instead it keeps bubbling under the surface, foreshadowing the precipice of disintegration. The narratology technique and form in both the stories accentuates the unstable course to female autonomy by employing touch of prophesy and irony. Nevertheless, it also cleverly harbors how female liberation crumbles under the weight of a language governed by "patriarchal socialization (which) literally makes women sick, both physically and mentally" (Gilber and Gubar 375).

Transient Touch of Freedom

The representation of temporality of female autonomy moves a step further from articulation and syntax to the usage of real motion of time. Chopin's employment of an hour-long freedom exhibits the only acceptable length of time allowed for Louise to experience liberation from social order. One can assume why the title change from "The Dream of an Hour" to "The Story of an Hour" marks the essential shift to determine the extent of female autonomy. Meanwhile, Gilman's narrator encounters freedom only in the instant of her mental breakdown which also serves as the climax of the story. Both the heroines attain freedom in bits and pieces but never for a sustained or substantial period of time. Just like Cinderella, as soon as the clock strikes midnight, one must forfeit their independence and go back to the staunch social order, diluting any deviation or transgression.

Conclusion

The constituents of ephemeral female freedom surface through the paradigm of nineteenth-century domestic stories as one's personal space, medical discourse, psyche, and narrative gets compromised. The

'joy that kills' is symbolic for the endangerment that comes with challenging conventional gender norms. This emotion elevates both the heroines to a higher understanding of self-awareness and consequently needs to be subdued and ultimately nullified.

Works Cited

Anitha, Sundari, and Ruth Pearson. "19th and Early 20th Century | Striking Women." Striking-Women.org, 2013, www.striking-women.org/module/women-and-work/19th-and-early-20th-century.

Bassuk, Ellen L. "The Rest Cure: Repetition or Resolution of Victorian Women's Conflicts?" *Poetics Today*, vol. 6, no. 1/2, [Duke University Press, Porter Institute for Poetics and Semiotics], 1985, pp. 245–57, JSTOR. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1772132>.

Beauvoir, Simone de. "The Second Sex." *Women's Writing in 19th & 20th Century*, edited by A.N. Dwivedi, Doaba Publications, 2008, pp. 350–66.

Chopin, Kate. "The Story of an Hour". *Women's Writing in 19th & 20th Century*. Edited by A.N. Dwivedi, New Delhi, Doaba Publications, 2008, pp. 210-12.

Duddy, Alice. "International Women's Day: Women's Rights to Own Property." *Habito.com*, Habito, 8 Mar. 2022, www.habito.com/blog/international-womens-day-womens-rights-to-own-property.

Gilbert, Sandra M., and Susan Gubar. "Infection in the Sentence". *Women's Writing in 19th & 20th Century*. Edited by A.N. Dwivedi, New Delhi, Doaba Publications, 2008, pp. 367–384.

Hughes, Kathryn. "Gender Roles in the 19th Century." *British Library*, 2017, www.britishlibrary.cn/en/articles/gender-roles-in-the-19th-century/.

Kosofsky, Anna. "The Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857 | COVE." *Covecollective.org*, 15 Nov. 2020, editions.covecollective.org/content/matrimonial-causes-act-1857-2. Accessed 3 Mar. 2026.

Perkins, Charlotte Gilman. "The Yellow Wallpaper". *Women's Writing in 19th & 20th Century*. Edited by A.N. Dwivedi, New Delhi, Doaba Publications, 2008, pp. 226-41.

Showalter, Elaine. *The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture, 1830-1980*. 1987. Penguin Books, archive.org/details/femalemalady00elai/page/n7/mode/2up.

