1999

The Yellow Wallpaper and the Monster Within

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“The Yellow Wallpaper” and the Monster Within

by Christy Richards

A bright, yellow wallpaper with a loud design is hardly likely to be compared with a living, breathing human; however, that is exactly what Charlotte Perkins Gilman does in her short story “The Yellow Wallpaper.” She accomplishes this by using specialized diction in the description of the wallpaper’s pattern, sub-pattern, and smell. Gilman uses words with human connotations when describing the wallpaper in order to show the narrator’s increasing delusions that mark a decline into insanity.

The most obvious part of the wallpaper is its loud and complicated pattern. It is very striking because it appears to possess human features: “[T]he pattern lolls like a broken neck and two bulbous eyes stare at you upside down” (paragraph 64). The “broken neck” and “bulbous eyes” give the impression of a grotesque body as horrible as a monster’s, but human nonetheless. The physical appearance of the wallpaper is so strong, in fact, the narrator comments that she “never saw so much expression in an inanimate thing before” (paragraph 66). Perhaps most unsettling about the wallpaper’s pattern are its clearly destructive tendencies: “[The pattern’s curves] suddenly commit suicide—plunge off at outrageous angles, destroy themselves in unheard-of contradictions” (paragraph 33). But the pattern is not merely satisfied with committing suicide or destroying itself; it also harms others: “It slaps you in the face, knocks you down, and tramples upon you” (paragraph 142). These are truly vicious characteristics which, unfortunately, are all too human.

But the wallpaper’s human qualities are not purely restricted to the tangible pattern; they can also be seen in the sub-pattern which seems incoherent at first: “[T]he interminable grotesque seems to form around a common center and rush off in headlong plunges of equal distraction” (paragraph 100). But as time passes, the sub-pattern grows more human: “I can see a strange, provoking, formless sort of figure that seems to skulk about behind that silly and conspicuous front design” (paragraph 78). The skulking figure is reminiscent of a person’s image. By degrees, the human characteristics of the sub-pattern are revealed with shocking clarity; now the vague figure becomes “a woman stooping down and creeping about behind the pattern” (paragraph 121). Suddenly, the
sub-pattern has come alive with human movement – there is a woman who is vigorously crawling about on her hands and knees. The sub-pattern then, like the pattern, is displaying very human traits.

The wallpaper is so entirely human that even its smell reflects its lifelike qualities: “[The smell] creeps all over the house” (paragraph 173). Thus the wallpaper’s odor, like the woman in the sub-pattern, is crawling about everywhere. But it is not restricted to creeping; it is also discovered “hovering,” “skulking,” “hiding,” and “lying in wait” (paragraph 174) much like a spy. And, like a spy, it is following the narrator everywhere: “If I turn my head suddenly and surprise it – there is that smell!” (paragraph 176). So ubiquitous and relentless is the odor that it even plagues the narrator at night: “I wake up in the night and find it hanging over me” (paragraph 179). With the vigor and the stamina of a real person, the smell pursues the narrator wherever she goes.

Gilman has an important reason for giving the wallpaper human characteristics; she wants to show its impact upon the imaginative mind of the narrator. Spending so much time alone with the wallpaper, the narrator begins to attribute certain human traits to it, particularly to the sub-pattern. The woman in the sub-pattern begins to manifest characteristics like those of the narrator. For example, they are both trapped against their wills in environments similar to jail cells. In the bedroom the “windows are barred for little children,” (paragraph 31). Similarly, “by moonlight [the outside pattern of the wallpaper] . . . becomes bars!” (paragraph 149), which “[t]he faint figure behind seemed to shake. . . .” (paragraph 127). So, in a way, the narrator is projecting her predicament onto the imaginary woman that lives in the sub-pattern. As the narrator sinks further into insanity, the sub-pattern becomes more and more like her. Soon the distinction between the narrator and the wallpaper woman blurred so much that the two become like one. As the curtain falls on this fascinating drama, the narrator is crawling about the room on her hands and knees just as she had seen the wallpaper woman do countless times before. The conversion is complete and the effects are irreversible.

Gilman is very careful in her word choice when describing the yellow wallpaper in order to depict it as lifelike as possible. This is clearly reflected in its grotesque, horrible pattern, in its creeping woman sub-pattern, and in its ever-present smell. Furthermore, the wallpaper’s traits demonstrate the narrator’s increasing paranoid
tendencies which spiral downward into insanity. An intuitive reader could perhaps trace the narrator’s mental decline from the beginning; nonetheless, the ending still leaves the reader numb with shock. Charlotte Perkins Gilman writes a story with an ending that is both predictable and totally unexpected—both realistic and uncomfortably jarring. But the wallpaper serves as more than just an avenue to the narrator’s eventual insanity; it is a living, breathing character in every aspect of the word.

A student at Coastal, Christy wrote this essay for an English 113 assignment. She will be transferring to East Carolina University to major in English and plans to become a writer.