

## Roots of Feminism

Throughout the past two centuries, feminism has been a vital movement for all women. Whether it was owning land, voting, or even having a job, achieving any sort of independence proved difficult in the beginning. Over time, women became more assertive and continually fought for equality. Even today, women face oppression and ridicule from men simply for not meeting their standards. In the short stories “Sweat” and “The Yellow Wallpaper,” this topic of feminism is explored in great detail. Though they differ in character and time period, these two stories present feminism in a strong way, showing that even under the foot of men, women can still make something of themselves.

During the late 1800s, Charlotte Perkins Gilman played the role of a societal outcast; she did everything she could do to resist the conventions of the time period she grew up in. At the same time, she was highly respected as a writer and speaker. In fact, “her vast corpus of writing influenced feminism for generations, and her works offer intellectual historians a remarkable window into questions of gender and sexuality in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries” (Levine 509). In “The Yellow Wallpaper,” it’s clear how her experiences inspired her to create a widely appreciated story. Despite a “painful and lonely childhood,” a rough marriage that stifled her creative ambition in favor of motherhood, and a deep struggle with depression whose “rest cure” treatment pushed her to “the edge of madness” (509), Gilman’s story tells of all the struggles of being a woman in a beautiful way.

In the story, the narrator, an unnamed woman, and her husband John move into a nice house for the summer. She informs readers early on that she feels all wrong about the house, despite how lovely it may seem. Though John is a physician, she claims that “he does not believe

I am sick” (511)! Instead, John diagnoses her with a sort of nervous depression and slight hysteria. Among the instructions he gives her to feel better, which she follows reluctantly, is that she must not write at all. Bothered by this sentiment, the narrator says, “Personally, I believe that congenial work, with excitement and change, would do me good. But what is one to do? 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 (512). Not much later, she also says she gets “...unreasonably angry with John sometimes... But John says if I feel so, I shall neglect proper self-control; so I take pains to control myself—before him, at least, and that makes me very tired” (512). Here, readers can begin to pick up on how John is subtly manipulating his wife into submission. Not only does this mirror how Gilman felt as a result of her marriage and similar treatment, but he is also preventing her from doing the one harmless thing that helps her feel better.

As the story continues, the narrator speaks of the bedroom wallpaper. Unlike the rest of the house, she describes it in horrifyingly grotesque ways, claiming that it is “one of those sprawling flamboyant patterns committing every artistic sin” (512). Throughout the story, the narrator becomes more and more haunted by this wallpaper to the point where she starts to go mad. First, she asks John if they could move to another room, but he dismisses her and tries to convince her that the yellow wallpaper room is really the best one for her. He even asserts that there’s no sense in taking it down despite how much it clearly bothers her. The narrator then tries to see if they can leave to spend time with family, but he again shuts her down, saying the treatment he puts her through is working. Eventually, the narrator becomes obsessed with the paper to the point where she is possessive of it. She loses all sense of reality, claiming that she is

the woman trapped inside the paper until she “frees herself” and crawls all over the floor mindlessly. All the while, she continuously attempts to speak to John about her fears, saying “John does not know how much I really suffer. He knows there is no reason to suffer, and that satisfies him. Of course it is only nervousness. It does weigh on me so not to do my duty in any way! I meant to be such a help to John, such a real rest and comfort, and here I am a comparative burden already” (513)! Because of his blatant oppression of her, the narrator is forced to take matters into her own hands, waiting until everyone's gone to write and tear apart the wallpaper. This descent into madness leaves John unconscious on the floor and the narrator free from his grasp, albeit not so sane anymore.

In this story, it is clear that the narrator struggles with expressing her feelings due to John's words and this silly “rest cure” that he puts her through. He simply never listens to her until it is far too late. The narrator of this story takes a major risk every time she writes and as a result, she becomes hungrier for freedom. She confides her feelings in the wallpaper and manages to fight through not only her sickness but also the treatment. In a way, this idea could be considered a bit paradoxical; her own independence led to her downfall. However, this isn't exactly the case. The narrator of this story fought for her right to write and to speak and be heard; in the end, she found what she wanted, but not in the sense she would have hoped for or even expected.

Many decades later, Zora Neale Hurston made her way into the writing world with various stories, including “Sweat” and “Their Eyes Were Watching God.” As an African American woman, Hurston dealt with additional struggles and injustices. After her mother's death when Hurston was eleven, she discovered what the term “racism” truly meant. Despite

never finishing grade school, Hurston did manage to climb her way through college and achieve some remarkable goals for her time. Of course, she was not without opposition. Due to all the excitement of the Harlem Renaissance, she faced troubles with some of the men of her time, including Langston Hughes. (949). Despite this though, she made her way and produced some amazing work in the face of racism and sexism.

In the story “Sweat,” Delia Jones is a determined and extremely hardworking woman who does hard labor washing clothes for the white men that live nearby. Her husband, Sykes, is a cruel man who abuses her and openly cheats on her with a woman named Bertha. Despite being happy with her work and thankful for the things she has because of it, Sykes continues to be rude to her and tries to stop her from working. After a while, Delia gets fed up and says, “Looka heah, Sykes, you done gone too fur. Ah been married to you fur fifteen years, and Ah been takin’ in washin’ for fifteen years! Sweat, sweat, sweat! Work and sweat, cry and sweat, pray and sweat! ... Mah sweat is done paid for this house and Ah reckon Ah kin keep on sweatin’ in it” (951). She surprises Sykes by quickly taking up a pan and threatening him with it, causing him to eventually leave her alone. As the story goes on, Sykes acts out even more, openly cheating on Delia with Bertha and letting her buy whatever she wants in a store while Delia is in view. She knows this has been going on and says things like “oh well, whatever goes over the Devil’s back, is got to come under his belly. Sometime or ruther, Sykes, like everybody else, is gointer reap his sowing” (952). Things finally take a turn for the worst when Sykes plays a dirty prank on her by placing a rattlesnake in her laundry basket. Eventually, that same snake bites Sykes and she does nothing to help him. In the face of her abusive relationship, she stands up for herself and leaves him behind.

In this story, Delia is caught between a rock and a hard place. She suffers under Sykes' rule and the oppression of the white men who, though aren't directly mentioned to be cruel, they force her to do their cleaning for them. As a black woman, she can't go to the police with her troubles for they would never listen to her, so she is all on her own. On top of that, Sykes openly cheats on her and scares her all for fun. In short, Sykes is a jerk who cares nothing for Delia or the things she's done for him. Despite all of these things, Delia fights for her freedom and works hard to keep the few things she has. In the end, when she allows the snake to kill off Sykes, this moment can be taken as cruel and drastic. That said, the circumstances of this story give rise to Delia as a feminist figure.

In both of these stories, feminism is the primary, overarching theme that connects the narrator of "The Yellow Wallpaper" and Delia of "Sweat." For each character, the notion of feminism plays into their sense of freedom and causes them to rise from beneath the feet of men. In the narrator's case, she deals with a husband who presents himself as overly caring and protective, when in reality, he is reducing her to nothing. The narrator breaks away from his manipulation in her writing and tries to find solace in it. Though she does not openly defy his orders, she is deliberate in everything she does. She refuses to be shackled by his treatment of her, even going so far as to claim that she is afraid and distrustful of John (PN). On the other hand, Delia's problems were with an overly cruel husband who made no secret of his treatment of her. The fact that he takes pleasure in terrifying his wife and being with another woman while Delia is aware further shows how bad of a person he is. Despite his awful nature, Delia can't leave him or even report him; she simply doesn't have the power as a black woman in her day. In both of these stories, the men, John and Sykes, have different ways of acting towards their wives

yet the result is still the same. Both women are under the influence of these men and take it upon themselves to free themselves from this rule.

Of course, John and Sykes aren't the only factors that work against the two women. The narrator in "The Yellow Wallpaper" deals with a mental illness and as a result is considered hysterical. John babies her, calling her a "little girl" and in essence strips her of all choice in any matter (517). He tries to keep her bedridden "for her health" even though what she really needs is real medicine. The fact that John is a physician is even worse; he doesn't meet her needs and tries to ignore the problem which eventually becomes so great that it consumes her. By this time, it is too late for John to do anything and the narrator has achieved independence in the worst possible way. As for Delia, her race is a key element in why she has many hardships against her. She has no way out of her life so she makes the best of it until Sykes starts bringing around Bertha. For her, that was the final straw and she subtly begins to take steps to stop the cycle of oppression. She cannot go to the police or the white men she works for, so she is in essence by herself in the matter. When the snake enters the picture, she gets an idea; though not entirely moral, she takes a huge risk by carrying out the task of letting Sykes die. In those days, her race could easily have gotten her into far more trouble, but she is clever enough to avoid such things. Both women have so much stacked against them and yet they prevail.

In each of these stories, the two women face immeasurable circumstances that leave them to commit drastic actions. Despite their strange and perhaps immoral actions, both women act with feminist views in mind and eventually find happiness and independence in their own way. Through each time period, their stories are different and yet they experienced similar struggles. They fought for themselves and their rights against all odds. Even today, women face oppression

and ridicule from men simply for not meeting their standards. In both “Sweat” and “The Yellow Wallpaper,” feminism reigns supreme in the characters of the narrator and Delia. In the end, both women earned exactly what they wanted.

## Works Cited

Levine, Robert S., et al. *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*. W.W. Norton & Company, 2017.