

Daniel Hall

Mrs. Broer

A.P. English Literature and Composition

2024-10-01

Character Analysis of The Wallpaper in “The Yellow Wall-Paper”

Charlotte Stetson creates a character out of the wallpaper in her short story “The Yellow Wall-Paper.” Although the wallpaper does not appear to be as relevant as other characters, nevertheless, it still undergoes several major transitions. This is because the wallpaper is a reflection of the narrator’s mental decline.

At first, the wallpaper and the narrator remain separated, although sharing similar characteristics. For an example, the wallpaper is described as being “dull enough to confuse” yet “pronounced enough to... irritate” (Stetson 648), and at the same time records her mental state as containing a “slight hysterical tendency” and a “temporary nervous depression” (Stetson 648) – which we now understand as postpartum depression. At this stage, she feels as though she is, like the wallpaper, viewed as confusing and dull, unassuming – yet confusing and irritating.

After two weeks in the room, three transformations occur. The first is that she goes from hating both the room and the wallpaper to “getting quite fond of the big room, all but that horrid paper” (Stetson 649). The second is that she begins to fantasize of people walking the paths through the rental property as a result of her isolation. Finally, she also begins to see manifestations within the wallpaper, specifically eyes which shift positions and “a strange,

provoking, formless sort of figure, that seems to skulk” (Stetson 650). This is the point where the isolation of being within a nursery begins to break the narrator down.

In the following journal entries the narrator expresses further changes. Here, she starts to feel as though the reason why the room is growing on her is “Perhaps because of the wallpaper” (Stetson 650). Additionally the figure which she previously saw “behind” the wallpaper is now “like a woman stooping down and creeping about behind that pattern.” (Stetson 652). Although a seemingly simple progression in the narrator’s symptom, the emphasis the story brings to the distinction between the wallpaper, the room, and the figure that the narrator sees is carefully crafted as to allow for the ease of rebinding between the narrator, the figure, and the wallpaper.

In the preceding entry Charlotte Stetson gives us two new details about the narrator’s condition. The first being that, through a conversation between the journal author and her husband, there are now just three weeks left on their lease – this is a noticeable detail as many of the entries preceding this create no mention of time, showing how the narrator has given up on such worldly concepts. More noticeably though, she mentions that the figure “seemed to shake the pattern, just as if she wanted to get out” (Stetson 652). Frankly, the mention of time is almost more alarming, there are few entries without a mention of time and Charlotte Stetson choose to make the last mention about a month into their lease – this decision, with the figure’s heightened ability to interact with the environment, truly emphasizes our narrator’s release from reality

Within a journal entry one of the largest shifts “The Yellow Wall-Paper” has to offer is explored. The journal author explores the idea of how both John and Jennie were caught looking at the wallpaper, in an almost fascinated manner, but more interestingly expresses that

“[Jennie] didn't know I was in the room” (Stetson 653). This is interesting as it is not logical for her caretakers to be unaware she is in that room, as she has been confined to that room, unless they are searching for her in the wallpaper. It is possible that her insanity is seeping through, in a *folie à deux*¹ manner, and, as the figure in the wallpaper and the narrator become bound together in her mind, her husband and sister-in-law begin to see her there as well.

Within two journal entries the narrator expresses a new development apart of her symptom. She begins to see the woman crawl around within the wallpaper, the figure also more violently shakes the front pattern and has “so many heads” (Stetson 653). Although not necessarily an immediate development, this is simple foreshadowing for the narrator’s behavior to come. Around the same time, the journal author also expresses a fear that the figure exits at the daytime and that she sees her in the pathways.

On the final day, the journal author attempts to release the figure behind the wallpaper. She pulls at it and tears “yards of that paper” (Stetson 655). In a final bow of her insanity she becomes consumed by the figure in the wallpaper and starts to crawl about the floor as if the figure in the paper, exclaiming that she has “got out at last” (Stetson 656). This results in the the presumed heart attack of her husband, John, leaving readers to assume what is to happen next.

Throughout “The Yellow-Wallpaper” Charlotte Stetson personifies and develops a character through the wallpaper itself. She does this by representing her primary character’s, the narrator, mental decline through the paper and then creating a figure within the wallpaper which becomes one with her main character.

1 Also known as insanity of two, shared psychosis, or shared delusional disorder.