

Art as a Remote Dreamland: Private Worlds of the Fairer Sex in Three Short Stories

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Abstract

The focus of the paper is on the women protagonists of three shortstories by three major writers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Kate Chopin and Katherine Mansfield through their short stories “The Yellow Wallpaper”, “The Story of an Hour” and “Miss Brill” respectively, try to present a divided world – the external (outer world of reality) and the internal (inner world of the ‘self’) – and there comes an interplay of ‘appearance’ and ‘reality’ throughout the stories. The paper tries to find out how the private worlds or spaces areconstructed by the protagonists with the support of art, in order to escape from the traumas their lives offer, and also examines the efficacy of the same with regard to the mental state of the protagonists. It attempts to see the way by which desperate life situations lead the women to find a possibility of escape or haven in art through imagination, and also how the same fails to provide a permanent solution for the disillusionment they face in their lives, thereby refuting the usual notion of permanence or complete fulfilment in art.

Keywords: appearance, reality, self, imagination, art, escape, permanence

The representation and recognition of female minds have been a crucial point of discussion beginning from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. With various thinkers and writers like Virginia Woolf, Simon de Beauvoir, Elaine Showalter and Judith Butler, the question of sex/gender division, the concept of ‘man’s language’, the need to create a public space for women, etc have been continuously debated and talked about, with a strong defiance of the patriarchal norms and rules. Modern writers, with innovations in style and presentation, try to focus on these issues in a quite different way from that of the others who preceded them. The twentieth century witnessed the birth of an entirely new mode of representation – the stream of consciousness method – that enabled the writers to bring out their genuine feelings from an insider’s point of view in an unbroken stream of thoughts.

Writers like Virginia Woolf, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Kate Chopin and Katherine Mansfield, who wrote in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, expressed women's 'insider' perspectives from various subject positions in strong opposition to the patriarchal representations and in fact revolutionized the art of representation itself. Gilman and Chopin, the American writers and Mansfield, the New Zealand writer brought in a new sensibility with their short fictions and novels having women protagonists, as they provided the patriarchal world an alternative possibility of looking at the 'women's world', which was genuine, original, and diverse, that remained untainted by the false and fake expressions of androcentric texts.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman, who denied her being tagged as a 'feminist' rather preferred being called a 'humanist', was a sparkling figure as a social critic, a non-fiction and fiction writer in America. Her most famous *Women and Economics* (1898) and the short story "The Yellow Wallpaper" were wholeheartedly accepted by readers round the globe and she was hailed an 'active feminist'. Kate Chopin, another major figure of the nineteenth century rose to acclaim with the publication of short-story collections and novels, especially the works like *A Night in Acadie* and *The Awakening*. With an unconventional style of writing and powerful characters and plots upholding various social concerns like a woman's role in marital life, man-woman relationships, the concept of woman's freedom and female sexuality, she soon became an undisputable figure of the century among others. Katherine Mansfield, from New Zealand, had the privilege of maintaining her dignified position as the sole woman writer of considerable fame for quite a long period in her country. Mansfield, often taken to be a British writer due to her education in London, is credited with making the genre of short story popular in England when it was not even much heard of. While some of her stories carry innocence, memory and nostalgia about childhood, homeland and relationships, others hold the tender, naïve and subtle emotions that lurk in the hearts of women, journeying through the private lands of their minds. Collections like *The Garden Party and Other Stories* and *Bliss and Other Stories* testify to this fact. This paper aims to focus on three stories – "The Yellow Wallpaper" by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, "The Story of an Hour" (or "The Dream of an Hour") by Kate Chopin and "Miss Brill" by Katherine Mansfield – and tries to see how a contrast is built between the external world and the internal world (which is the mind, the 'self') in the case of the women protagonists. It can be seen that the division leads to an equation, where the private worlds are formed with the aid of art and imagination, as a way of escape from the painful living situations.

Gilman's fiction usually carries living sketches of characters picturesquely portrayed, (especially that of women) that delves deep into their psyches and tries to offer wider perspectives and visions based on key social concerns. The critic M. Rama Devi sees

Gilman's fiction "as a protest" against "andro-centrism which keeps women both literally and figuratively imprisoned in the home" (Devi 74). "The Yellow Wallpaper" by Gilman, which has been debated and discussed by many a thinker, offers a horrifying, gothic-styled picture of a nameless woman, from the first-person point of view, who is literally locked up in a room. Written in a journalistic style, as a series of diary entries, the story draws the intrinsic workings of the woman's mind, who, though initially speaks as a sane person, later starts breaking off her levels of sanity and ends up in the extremity of nervous breakdown. She takes the readers into her confidence and begins to talk about the big house in which she, her husband John and his sister Jennie live in, a place which her husband thought would offer a possible cure for the 'hysterical' tendencies and 'nervous condition' exhibited by her. Though many a time she talks of her husband in good terms, like, "He is very careful and loving, and hardly lets me stir without special direction" (Gilman 3) each time she utters a statement, which at the first glance may appear to be a compliment, it is followed by an understatement with an ironical touch as is seen above. Her husband who is a physician takes her condition to be "a temporary nervous depression" (Gilman 2), wishes her to recover, for which the house has been chosen and she has been asked not to involve in any artistic or intellectual activity, which is thought to aggravate the disease.

The clear-cut contrast between her inner 'self' and the appearance that she puts on externally is quite clear from the diary entries she makes which get unveiled as the story. When she passionately talks about her likeness towards the house and its strangeness, his reaction is one of mockery and one with a tone of condescendence as he takes her words to be mere blabber or fancies of a diseased person. As the narrator puts it, "I even said so to John one moonlight evening, but he said what I felt was a DRAUGHT, and shut the window" (Gilman 3). The way she pretends before her husband and puts a façade in order to shroud her real self is clear when she writes, "...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" (Gilman 3). Throughout the text, one can see that the woman is desperately trying to present a false self before her husband and sister, which is why she pretends to be happy before them, withdraws from a full-fledged writing and tries to maintain a poise of 'self-control'. For him, if she gets involved in thoughts and imagination, that would lead to some 'excited fancies' (Gilman 5) which would ruin her health even more. Gilman, who was refuting the 'rest cure' method of Weir Mitchell (Gilman's physician who observed that if a woman is intellectually stimulated, she would be broken down both physically and psychologically) through the story, makes John the prototype of Mitchell. Here, the patriarchal tendency to subdue and suppress the womenfolk is satirically and ironically portrayed. When she and her husband shift to the upstairs of the house, and the woman finds

it depressing to be in the midst of the yellow wallpaper – which comes as the element of ‘art’ apart from writing – that is described as “a smouldering unclean yellow” (Gilman 3), what she says is, “I should hate it myself if I had to live in this room long” (Gilman 3). Her words,

But these nervous troubles are dreadfully depressing.

John does not know how much I really suffer. He knows there is no REASON to suffer, and that satisfies him. (Gilman 4)

show the desperate condition she is in, that mark the way her husband belittles and illtreats her.

Having seen the contrast between the two worlds – the inner and the outer – one can look at the way the narrator tries to build up a private space on her own, as she wishes to assert herself, undisturbed by any outside stimulations such as her husband (who stands for the patriarchal power) and her sister. The boredom, loneliness and monotony that she experiences amidst her intolerant husband and sister thus lead her to be within a private space, for which she resorts to art and imagination. The wallpaper in the attic, which was a nursery earlier, comes up as the entity of art. Initially, the narrator expresses her dislike towards the colour and the pattern of the paper, but later she finds it as the sole companion in the attic, along with the nailed bed on which she is lying. One can see the way she develops interest in the pattern of the paper that gradually turns out to be an object of obsession. The way her mind switches, from a feeling of hatred to that of love, is quite evident in these juxtaposed sentences:

I get positively angry with the impertinence of it and the everlastingness. Up and down and sideways they crawl, and those absurd, unblinking eyes are everywhere...

I never saw so much expression in an inanimate thing before, and we all know how much expression they have....The wall-paper, as I said before, is torn off in spots, and it sticketh closer than a brother--they must have had perseverance as well as hatred.(Gilman 5)

How art becomes a point of solace and how it starts instilling a feeling of kinship is evident here. It is in fact the boredom and disillusionment that the woman faces in her life – with a physician husband who sees himself as superior and denies her right to self-expression – that pulls her into this kind of an attraction. Perhaps, this distant dreamland acts as a source of private happiness and joy, something that the narrator unconsciously feels to possess for opening up a world of self - fulfilment. This sense of relief is echoed in her words:

I don't know why I should write this.

I don't want to.

I don't feel able.

And I know John would think it absurd. But I MUST say what I feel and think in some way--it is such a relief!

But the effort is getting to be greater than the relief. (Gilman 7)

The narrator starts to identify herself with the wallpaper. The patterns on the paper merge and fuse to form the image of a woman in the eyes of the narrator, and the woman is seen as trying to get her way out of the pattern – ‘shaking it’ – which is just like the way the narrator herself has been imprisoned in the attic (with the window bars and nailed bed setting up the atmosphere of an actual captivity) and is trying get out of it and liberate herself. Though this initial act of identification creates a feeling of insecurity in the narrator, (as she says that ‘the colour is hideous’ and ‘the pattern is torturing’, (Gilman 9)), later she is found to be in a mad obsession for possessing the woman and freeing her from behind the wallpaper. This ardent desire that is generated is the result of the power of imagination. The narrator happens to find an alter-ego, a second ‘self’ among the lines and patterns on the paper and it is her own need to escape and liberate that is been reflected, projected forth and manifested as a woman on the paper. This private world that the narrator creates for herself thus proves to be a source of inexplicable joy for her:

Life is very much more exciting now than it used to be. You see I have something more to expect, to look forward to, to watch. I really do eat better, and am more quiet than I was. (Gilman 10)

At the same time, one can see that the contrast between ‘appearance’ and ‘reality’ is still maintained. The narrator, who had earlier wanted her husband to take her away, now undergoes an inexpressible bliss, which she does not intend to share with him. “I had no intention of telling him it was BECAUSE of the wall-paper--he would make fun of me. He might even want to take me away” (Gilman 10) is what she thinks.

Now some major questions arise as to the way the escapist narrator and her artistic destination work. Does this art prove to be a permanent solution for the trauma the narrator experiences in her life? Is it able to give a sense of complete fulfilment or perfection that would make the fleeting, transient realities of life escape? Does the private haven she has found end up as a real source of happiness? If one examines the ending, one can find that the narrator has become more and more aggressively assertive, as she says,

I think that woman gets out in the daytime!

And I'll tell you why--privately--I've seen her!

I can see her out of every one of my windows!...

I don't want anybody to get that woman out at night but myself. (Gilman 11)

The art and its effects are seen to outgrow the realistic domains of her thought and now the feeling gets transformed into that of a revenge – the privileged image on the wallpaper that

creeps on her own and the dis-privileged 'self' that seems to remain behind the bars – that gets on to the brink of losing sanity. The art that was expected to liberate her chained soul starts gaining a gigantic proportion (losing the sanctified purpose of liberating the individual), turns out to be an obsessive influence that gets onto the level of madness, that makes her stay bound within the closed room. She finds it 'safe' to "get back behind the pattern when it comes night" (Gilman 14) and simultaneously finds it "pleasant to be out in this great room and creep around" (Gilman 14). Whichever be, the image of being captive remains intact. The narrator is seen as losing (or almost lost) the sense of discretion as to distinctively choose between art and reality, and reaches a schizophrenic, all-lost state of listlessness and hysteria. The final image of her creeping all over the room and even over her husband's body shows the pathetic depletion of her 'self' and the obstruction of her identity, that push her into a state of rootlessness.

It can be seen that though initially the wallpaper and her imagination are thought to bring solace to her mind, later it ends up creating a counter effect as something that takes away one's self and cognition beyond the receptive levels of sanity. Though the narrator finds her moments of fulfilment during the course, the final image of her listlessly creeping all over the floor underscores the pathetic state than the states of glory or triumph as she is soon going to end up imprisoned than breaking off the chains that have been clutching her soul, thus deprived of the desire of a complete self-fulfilment and self-realisation. The story becomes an apt depiction of the dichotomy that exists between the outer self and the inner self (the distinction that gets totally lost by the end), the blurring of the boundaries of appearance and reality, and the devilish impact of art and its utmost failure in liberating the 'self'.

Kate Chopin's fiction is seen as both revolutionary and unique as she came up with certain concepts and ideas which were considered to be quite ahead of her time. The critic Uberoi quotes Joan Zlotnick's words in the latter's article titled "A Woman's Will: Kate Chopin on Selfhood, Wifehood, and Motherhood", that Chopin's fiction is "a call to self-discovery" and that her characters display "a desperate quest for freedom" (Uberoi 35). Kate Chopin's oft quoted story "The Story of an Hour" presents Louise Mallard, a young woman, whose life gets shaken and comes to a heart-breaking end, once she understands about her husband's death (which is later proven to be wrong). Louise, though desperately searches for freedom, arrives at a poignant end, striking a chord of sadness in our hearts. Like in the case of the narrator of "The Yellow Wallpaper", Louise has also been putting up a pretension of happiness in her marital life. Her genuine, inherent feelings about her husband, the frustration that she had been undergoing in her marital life due to lack of freedom and the relief that she experiences when the dominating figure of her husband is found to have destructed forever, get conveyed through the insider's perspective offered by the writer. The contrast between

her external appearance and the inner thoughts is evidently portrayed through her private pensive moments. Her reaction on learning about her husband's death is stated as:

She did not hear the story as many women have heard the same, with a paralyzed inability to accept its significance. She wept once, with sudden, wild abandonment...When the storm of grief had spent itself she went away to her room alone. She would have no one follow her. (Chopin 198)

Just like it happened for the hysteric narrator in "The Yellow Wallpaper", here too, the woman is driven by an ardent desire to withdraw into her own self, for which she seeks the touch of art and imagination.

If the element of art in "The Yellow Wallpaper" had been the wallpaper, here it is in nature, through her imagination, that she tries to find peace. Once she gets into her room, she creates her own private space where she starts to experience an inexpressible sense of freedom. She becomes quite elated and happy (very unlikely for a woman whose husband is dead) and begins to place her at the core of her imaginary world. All the images that she sees in nature – the treetops signalling "the new spring of life" (Chopin 198), the "delicious breath of rain..." (Chopin 198) and the twittering of sparrows – are those which are brimming with life, zest and vigour, something that is really unlikely to be a joyous sight for a person encountering a grave tragedy such as death. But for Louise, she is beginning to experience a sense of inexplicable liberation that has never been experienced before. All her life had been a drama, a construct, where she had been playing the role of a subordinate wife, under the clutches of a domineering husband. Her inner self gets revealed when the right moment comes, breaking off the bonds that had been restricting her to unveil her soul:

There was something coming to her and she was waiting for it...When she abandoned herself a little whispered word escaped her slightly parted lips. She said it over and over under her breath: "free, free, free!" (Chopin 199)

Life, that had been an unending trauma, begins to offer her beautiful thoughts, hopes and expectations. It is through the act of imagination, finding an artistic haven in nature's lap, that she tries to achieve fulfilment:

There would be no one to live for her during those coming years; she would live for herself... A kind intention or a cruel intention made the act seem no less a crime as she looked upon it in that brief moment of illumination. (Chopin 199)

In her liberationist vision, even death becomes a less serious, less grave aspect. It is indeed the strength that she gained out of an artistic imagination – with full of passion, excitement and joy of the extreme kind – that makes her whisper again, "Free! Body and soul free!" (Chopin 199) and makes her even more obsessed with the revolutionary idea of self-assertion.

It should be noted that, the interplay of ‘appearance’ and ‘reality’ still continues, this time before her sister and relatives. While her sister Josephine thinks that she is grieving behind the closed doors and begs her to open the door for fear of some grave mistake that she might commit, Louise is building castles of desire from inside. As stated, “...she was drinking in a vey elixir of life through that open window” (Chopin 200). The wild imagination on an artistic note grows on just as it was in the case of the chained woman with the wallpaper. While in the previous case, if it was upon the wallpaper that all fancies and figments of imagination were projected forth, dreamed of and reflected, here, Louise welcomes the unending spirit of freedom with the nature as the aide and the imagination projected forth on its positive appeal. She thinks of the “Spring days, and summer days, and all sorts of days that would be her own” (Chopin 200) and wishes that “life might be long” (Chopin 200).

Having told this much about the healing power of art, once again, the question about the possibility of art being a permanent solution for the wounds experienced in life comes up. The ending throws up this relevant question as Louise is found to be dead due to a heart disease – “of joy that kills” (Chopin 200) – while her husband comes alive proving the news of his death to be wrong. Here too as in the case of the wallpaper, art offers its joy, but only for a short period, and takes away the right to a full-fledged joyous life. While the hysteric narrator in “The Yellow Wallpaper” is found to be in a state of lost-identity and lost-self, here the image of death dooms large. The image of loss gains the upper-hand in both the cases. On the one hand, it is true that Louise died at the peak of fulfilment, but the fact that her dreams and desires stay unfulfilled in the realm of mere imagination, makes it a heart-touching tragedy. The story is thus a fine example of not just the interplay of appearance and reality but also of the failure of art in offering a permanent cure for the pangs of life.

The third story taken up for discussion is “Miss Brill” by Katherine Mansfield. Mansfield was indeed an undeniable sensation of the century she lived in. Following an unconventional method, both in theme and form, her stories express realistic, original pictures of the world around her. Her unique skill at combining prose and poem is much acclaimed and as the critic P. Obula Reddy states, “Katherine Mansfield achieves the exact balance between realistic detail, and delicate suggestiveness that the lyric story demands” (Reddy 4).

“Miss Brill” by Katherine Mansfield is yet another poignant fiction that leaves a shred of pain in one’s heart. Like “The Story of an Hour”, the story is narrated from a third-person point of view but holds the perspective of the first-person subject position. It conveys the efforts taken by Miss Brill, a loner, to find some kind of self-importance in order to assert her position and place in the world around, and her attempts to grasp a ray of hope to lighten up her drab, dull and monotonous life. Like in the previous stories, here too, an object – which is a fur, of which she is immensely proud of – and a lot of imagination come to provide a

temporary soothing for her boredom and disillusionment. The endearing conversations she makes with the fur, as if to a bosom friend or a lover, and the lone walk she engages in, make us discern the fact that she has been a loner for quite some time and being alone makes her desire for friendship intense. She appears before us as a keen observer of the lives around and her witty comments on the passers-by, the musicians and lovers make one think of the desperate need of the woman to look into others' lives to do away with her utter loneliness. For one deprived of enthusiasm and excitement, it is imagination that works on an artistic note – in this case, observing others and creating an imagined story for them and later dreaming of being on a stage - that provides solace from the dullness of the weary life. This is what is found when she imagines the conversation between two pairs of lovers and also the interaction between a man and an 'ermine toque' (a lady with the peculiar hat) and she finds fun in observing the children playing in the park.

Similar to the other two stories, here too, the woman protagonist resorts to art and its powerful realm of imagination, because of her intense desire to find some kind of meaning or fulfilment in her lonely life. For a middle-aged disillusioned lady as Miss Brill, it becomes necessary to carve out a private space so as to pour out her emotions onto her real 'self'. She dreams that she is part of a play that is being staged, with the people around her as actors like her, and the entire park that she regularly visits every Sunday, as the stage:

They were all on the stage. They weren't only the audience, not only looking on; they were acting. Even she had a part and came every Sunday. (Mansfield 187)

Here one can see that her own life has been transported on to the realm of art, whereby she wishes to forget the monotony of life she has been undergoing. She begins to think of her own 'role' as carrying some importance and even thinks that "...somebody would have noticed if she hadn't been there"(Mansfield 187), which is after all an extension of the façade that she has been putting on for a long time. She imagines herself an actress, with an extreme sense of pride, which in fact comes out of the longing for recognition and respect that broods deep within her. She feels that people around would start recognizing her, even the invalid gentleman to whom she used to read newspapers. Music (the band), another element from the world of art, also influences Miss Brill as she is seen as being actively imaginative along with the high and low notes played which provide an adequate backdrop as well as a space of expression for her thoughts.

It is when she reaches the peak of excitement by seeing herself on the top of the world, as an actress of considerable importance, accompanied by music and the stage, that the harsh blow from the world of reality strikes her. She listens to the conversation made by a boy and a girl, where the boy addresses Miss Brill as "stupid old thing" (Mansfield 188) and expresses his indignation at her presence right there, by uttering, "...Why doesn't she keep

her silly old mug at home?" (Mansfield 188), so loud that Miss Brill is shaken off her throne of dignity and pride. With the final comment made by the girl about her fur -"It's her fu-fur which is so funny...It's exactly like a fried whiting"- the fur, which is her secret pride and much endeared one, Miss Brill completely collapses. For such a sensitive, tender-hearted woman as Miss Brill, one who has been trying to gain confidence and meaning in her way of life by escaping into the colourful world of art and imagination, the intense pull of the rooted world could not be countered. She leaves for home broken-hearted, totally pulled apart from the temporary realm of self-fulfilment.

Here too, the inability of art to provide a permanent space of fulfilment or perfection is shown. The final image of Miss Brill, where she totally collapses into the daunting reality underscores the divisional aspect of the world and the act of creating personal spaces or private worlds by clinging on to the wide realm of art seems to be not yielding the expected outcome which is of a complete liberation.

Art remains a distant dreamland for the three women in the stories. The three women are in fact true prisoners of lives. Their attempts to build private spaces – free, liberated spaces – with the aid of art, seem to be not offering the desired results as art paves way for a short-lived fantasy of self-fulfilment or self-realisation, from which they are mercilessly thrown off to a graver world of reality. Like Keats's nightingale, art or imagination simply becomes a temporary source of bliss and joy, though it gets equated with the desires of their private selves for a very short period of time. Art, as far as these stories are concerned, therefore becomes nothing but a remote dreamland that dawns upon the lives like a firefly that sheds light not more than a few moments.

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