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Woe to the Mad Woman:

How Realism and Modernism Use Mental Health to Discuss Women's Identities

The American woman plays many different roles in literature. Perhaps one of the most fascinating roles to explore is that of the mad woman, or even the scared woman. There is much to learn in studying what seems to make female characters "unstable" and why they (might) be helped in the end. The perspective of the mad woman even crosses literary periods, bridging Realism and Modernism through an obsessively close eye towards certain characters. But what makes these women "crazy," and why? In this essay, I will argue that Realism and Modernism both use mental illness to advocate for women's rights through implementing psychological realism, focusing on characterization to drive plot, and contrasting with the popular community to challenge traditional expectations.

The first element that bridges Realism and Modernism is the tool of detailed characterization. Across both of these movements, authors incorporate meticulously detailed protagonists with strong and rounded abnormal personalities in contrast to a restrictive and flat character. The protagonists in question tend to be female placed in contrast to a male. While such a position in the face of literature might seem derogatory, using women as the focal point of strong and detailed characterization implies that there is something important that character has to say or to symbolize. Thus, in order to understand what a Realist or Modernist text has to say, it can be helpful to begin by examining the characters.

The narrator in Charlotte Perkins Stetson's "The Yellow Wallpaper" is the most blatant example of Realism's emphasis on characterization over plot. The entirety of the story centers

around the narrator's obsession with the wallpaper in the "atrocious nursery" where she stays (649). Stetson's employment of a first-person narrator sets up the story for an intimate description of the protagonist/narrator's thoughts and experiences. The entire plot seems to follow the narrator's experience from utterly despising to ultimately identifying with a female figure she pictures within the wallpaper. The narrator states, "I lie here on this great immovable bed—it is nailed down, I believe—and follow that pattern about by the hour" (650). The permanent and restrictive nature of the bed illustrates the true nature of the narrator's domestic confinement, and her dismissive tone in describing such details showcases how she is not directly aware of her situation. Readers even get a sense of her obsession from her hpyerfixation on the wallpaper for extended periods of time.

Zora Neale Hurston's "Sweat" shows another strong characterization in Delia, particularly in her *lack* of character development. By opening up the story with her laundering profession and immediately introducing her fear of snakes, Hurston sets up everything that she needs for the crisis and revolution of finding the snake and allowing it to kill Sykes at the end. Even the main conflict of the story seems to be the series of Delia's unsuccessful confrontations before she finally gets her revenge on Sykes with the snake. Earlier in the narrative, Delia works hard and moves about the town in avoidance of other people "in her efforts to be blind and deaf" while Sykes cheats on her (Hurston). Ironically, this behavior is what leads to her success in the end, indicating that the consistency of Delia's characterization carries the storyline more than a more clearly defined plot would.

William Faulkner constructs an entire world around one odd citizen in "A Rose for Emily" using a more communal stance. The story itself is told from the perspective of a townsperson recollecting Emily's strange behavior. Although the first-person narrator in this case

does not allow a close examination of the inner thoughts of the story's main character, presenting the information in the form of community gossip allows for a more local and character-centered feel. Faulkner's story emphasizes so much on character that it seems to carry more stream-of-consciousness than a true conflict and resolution; and yet, readers still remain for the entire story to find out more interesting details about Emily.

Beyond the general practice of characterization, both Realism and Modernism work with psychological realism to different degrees. Producing works that center around the inner thoughts and personal relationships of one character—especially one whose mental condition seems to remain the same or to even worsen by the end of the story—sets the stage for psychological realism to have its place in the conversation. Some authors tend to do this by focusing on one character's mental illness, including its symptoms, treatments, and potentially its end.

"The Yellow Wallpaper" again showcases the most detailed encounter with psychological realism. From the beginning of the story, the narrator says of her husband, "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 . . . what is one to do?" (648). This demonstrates that the narrator probably carries some form of a mental illness, and that she is dismissed by the people around her for it. The very plot of the story centers around the increase in the narrator's condition as she imagines a woman behind the yellow wallpaper who creeps around the house. As the narrator's hysteria seems to reach its peak while she rips the wallpaper off, she cries, "'I've got out at last . . . [a]nd I've pulled off most of the paper, so you can't put me back!'" (656). This transformation is so strong that John immediately faints from surprise at the severity of the narrator's condition (656).

The narrator's condition may seem to frame her as a simple unreliable narrator; however, upon closer examination, her experience allows readers to get insight on a woman seeking identity in a situation where she does not seem to have one to begin with. The narrator spends the whole story unnamed—an act that not only dehumanizes her to some degree to readers, but also seems to reflect her husband's negligence of her autonomy and free will as a person. Her namelessness may lead to why she identifies with the woman behind the wallpaper; that is, in a setting where she is not allowed to have an identity of her own, she literally seeks and finds one within her surroundings. The woman behind the wallpaper may initially seem to add a horrific aspect to the storyline; however, the narrator already has a limited amount of physical locations and social relations to explore in finding her identity to begin with.

While Hurston's "Sweat" does not necessarily showcase a woman with a mental illness, it does explore the nature of a quiet and hardworking woman in the face of an abusive husband, ultimately centering the entire storyline around Delia's fear of snakes. This trait is introduced at the beginning of the story, a fear that is known to be able to make her silent and submissive for long periods of time when presented with a snake. It is this same fear of snakes that allows Sykes' implementation of a snake within the house to serve as the inciting incident. Eventually, Delia's fear of snakes operates as the rising action and climax that cause her to flee from the house and hide. Even the resolution—Sykes' death—comes about from her own stagnation and silence in the face of the snake's attacking Sykes. Delia's fear, along with Sykes' abuse of it, is the foundation for everything that transpires within the story.

As a gossip-central story, "A Rose for Emily" entirely discusses Miss Emily's mysterious and gruesome lifestyle. Her own mental illness is not explicitly named throughout the story. However, it can be assumed that Miss Emily faces some sort of psychological challenge through

her strongly reclusive nature, her solitary indignation to not cooperate with the laws that the rest of the community has to follow, and her strange obsession (and comfort) with keeping the dead bodies of her loved ones.

While the characterization and psychological realism are both fascinating enough on their own when discussing these characters, the greatest strength comes from comparing these individual qualities to the rest of society within each story. This directly places the characters in a position to engage in conversation between society and the individual. By learning what makes each character unique in spite of the people and places around them, the consequences of those differences can be better understood.

First, the narrator of "The Yellow Wallpaper" seems to be unusual because of her isolation from the world around her. She is not allowed to leave the house, or even to write. Her interactions with society are strictly refined to the house in which she is being held, and only through those that her husband allows in. She appears to be oblivious to the full extent of the restrictions around her—including the reasoning behind the bed being nailed to the ground, the bars on the windows, and the strange wallpaper in the "nursery" where she stays. Besides, whether it be disgust or adoration, her entire world centers around the wallpaper. She speaks of John as she says, "He laughed a little the other day, and said I seemed to be flourishing in spite of my wall-paper . . . 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" (653). This shows that while the narrator is aware of her unusual obsession with the wallpaper to some degree, she is still unaware of the severity of her own condition. John, on the other hand, seems to recognize her obsession to an extent and dismisses it.

John's dismissal and attempted control of the narrator's fixation on the yellow wallpaper indicates a deeper denial of her ability to establish her own identity. If the narrator's own fantasies about a woman behind the wallpaper are her attempt at developing her own identity, then John's efforts to subdue her imagination on her quest for identity showcase a reluctance to give the narrator her own autonomy. It would also appear that John and the narrator's community has no interest in helping the narrator with her development.

A similar relationship appears in Hurston's "Sweat" as Sykes attempts to control Delia. A very blatant scene showcasing the community's conversation occurs as the town men discuss Delia's situation. They compliment her physical beauty and critique her apparent wear and health; in turn, the men begin to speak poorly of Sykes' treatment towards her (Hurston 1). It appears that many in the town are fully aware of Sykes' infidelity and abuse to Delia. However, even after voicing how much they would enjoy bringing Sykes his comeuppance, the men decide to feed into their own immediate needs and comforts with seeking food and shade from the heat of the day (Hurston 1). Such a conversation showcases that the community can often be well aware of a woman's mistreatment, and yet still be uninterested or unmotivated in helping her.

In conclusion, one of the most fascinating things about these characters is that their restraint seems to occur within the confines of their own home, and some—like in the case of "The Yellow Wallpaper"—going so far as to identify with their restraints when they can no longer be surpassed. This showcases a great deal of attention between the conflict of literary women and their domestic roles, especially considering that such roles are often enforced by the male figures in the text. Whether by downplaying one's mental illness or capitalizing on her fear, American literature showcases how traditionally authoritative male figures can end up damaging or causing strife with female characters who try to problem-solve throughout their stories.

Works Cited

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