

Love and Marriage

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Love is blind. Women around the world expect that marriage means a dependable, loving, and caring relationship between two people, and they are correct. But, because of this expectation, women sometimes place themselves in a fantasy world that puts a blindfold over their eyes, and covers up the reality of an unhealthy relationship; “feelings of love lead to a suppression of activity in the areas of the brain controlling critical thought. It seems that once we get close to a person, the brain decides the need to assess their character and personality is reduced” (“Science Proves That Love Is Blind”). Once the brain enters this state of suppression, women become too emotionally dependent, are no longer able to think logically, and their mental health is at risk. The following women from these similar literary works — exemplified by dramatist, Susan Glaspell's, “Trifles;” by short-story writer Charlotte Perkins Gilman's, “The Yellow Wallpaper;” and Ernest Hemingway's “Cat in the Rain;” and by the poet Adrienne Rich's “Aunt Jennifer's Tiger's” — are all affected by their suppression over time. All of these women illustrate how someone becomes emotionally and psychologically unstable as each finally opens their eyes to the mistreatment from which they are suffering.

Unhappy marriages can be caused by too much control from one partner over another, a lack of love and attention, and excessive anger and discord. In Glaspell's, “Trifles”, Mrs. Wright, who was once called Minnie Foster, is trapped in an unhappy marriage, and falls suspect to her husband's murder. Her neighbor, Mrs. Hale, describes the Wright's house as not being very

cheerful. The once young and vibrant Minnie, who no longer exists, is now reincarnated into her personal items in the kitchen. The weather is so cold that it cracks open her fruit jars, which is symbolic of the icy, and unfriendly essence the house imposes upon her soul, causing it to split, as well as the distance and hate that begins to form between herself and her husband (Wikipedia “Trifles”). Glaspell writes that Mr. Wright “was a hard man,” and to live with him was “like a raw wind that gets to the bone.” She uses a simile here to convey an image of Mr. Wright's cold and distant demeanor. She also uses the metaphor “men's hands aren't always as clean as they might be” to suggest that Mr. Wright may have seemed decent to others, but to Mrs. Wright, he was nasty and negligent. We are led to believe by the discoveries of the other two women in the play that Mr. Wright killed his wife's songbird by strangulation. This final act awoke Minnie — who was a choir girl many years ago and saw a bit of her old self in this singing bird — and drove her to the breaking point, which caused her psychosis. She finally realized what kind of man her husband was and simply could not cope with it any longer. Therefore, she took away his life the same way he took away the only happiness she had left, by strangulation.

In a separate but similar marriage, from Hemingway's “Cat in the Rain,” the American girl is trapped and unhappy with her husband in a hotel room. Hemingway illustrates the rainy day she glances out on, through the window, to symbolize her loneliness and depression. Her husband, George, is negligent of her wants and needs. It is interesting that George is given a first name and his wife is only referred to as “American girl,” or “Signora.” Hemingway purposely did this to emphasize the feeling of insignificance the wife is feeling. And, we know she is feeling this way when the Padrone bows to her in the hotel lobby and she temporarily feels supremely important, yet still small at the same time (Hemingway 85). She is not used to receiving that sort of attention, so despite that brief recognition and feeling of greatness, she feels

intimidated because she has been mentally and verbally abused to the point of having low self-esteem. When she attempts to open up emotionally, and communicate her desires with her husband, he condescends to her by retorting “oh, shut up and get something to read” (Hemingway 85). Hemingway uses this language to convey his controlling and inconsiderate behavior. This leads his wife into a repetitious rant of the things she desires most. Having these delusions, by way of her imagination, is the only way she can experience some happiness.

Consistent with these relationships is the marriage in Gilman's, “The Yellow Wallpaper.” The husband, John, is a controlling physician who orders his wife not to work, write, or have any stimulation whatsoever. She is not even allowed to spend time with their newborn. Again, we see that the narrator is not given a name in order to establish that her identity is not considered important. Gilman states that John has diagnosed her as having “temporary nervous depression — a slight hysterical tendency” and confines her to the topmost bedroom of their summer rental, limiting her access to the rest of the house. Because she is told to take prescription pills every hour, she is too drugged up to understand reality (Gilman 392). She expects that John is treating her well because he loves and cares for her, but he abandons her at home, day and night, and refuses to give into any suggestions or compromises she tries to make, especially concerning renovations to the house. Her hatred for the yellow wallpaper quickly becomes an obsession because it is her only stimulus. She doesn't realize that the ripped off pieces of wallpaper, that are exactly her height, and the smudge marks on the walls are all from her; and, that the bars on the windows, and the nailed down bed are both set in place so she cannot injure herself. Her thoughts become irrational and ludicrous, and she too slips into psychosis, like Mrs. Wright in “Trifles.”

We experience, yet again, a fourth woman who is involved in an unhappy marriage. Aunt Jennifer in Rich's, "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers" has to escape into her world of creativity and imagination to feel happiness, but, "ultimately, the poem is a tale of hopelessness, of a caged bird's inability to sing of freedom because she doesn't know what it is" (Rhodes). This compares exactly to how all of the previous women have felt, caged and unable to be heard. Even her screen-sewing activity is hindered by the enormous amount of stress she endures. Rich writes, "when Aunt is dead, her terrified hands will lie still ringed with ordeals she was mastered by" which means that she is so deep in her depression that she has decided, even in death, she will forever be controlled by her husband, who is just referred to as Uncle (Rhodes).

Intriguingly, all of these works reference a certain type of animal — a feline — and the women, and one of the men, take on these roles. In Glaspell's, "Trifles," Mrs. Wright is originally compared to a canary because "as the women note, she used to sing before she married John Wright. After her marriage, she was prevented from singing, or doing anything else which would have yielded her pleasure, by her husband. Minnie's plight is represented as a spiritual death, symbolized in the strangling of her songbird companion" (Wikipedia "Trifles"). A natural enemy of the canary is the cat. The cat is portrayed by Mr. Wright in this situation, and the bird by Mrs. Wright. Once he figuratively kills his wife by literally killing the bird, transference of roles occurs and Mrs. Wright becomes the cat. The symbol of a cat represents a high level of self-confidence and sexual independence. Cats also symbolize a strong connection to creativity, the unconscious, and intuition. Related to women, this means they become confident in their power and ability to affect change in their lives (Ireland). And, she does just that by taking revenge on her husband by killing him.

In Hemingway's, "Cat in the Rain," it is obvious that the American girl identifies herself with the cat she so desperately wants. The cat is helplessly trapped under a table outside in the rain, "trying to make herself so compact that she would not be dripped on" (Hemingway 84). The girl understands how the cat must feel, lonely and unloved, so she tries to rescue it, but fails and says "it isn't any fun to be a poor kitty out in the rain" (Hemingway 85). Hemingway used that quote as a metaphor for the wife not having any fun in her lonely marriage. Cats are very feminine creatures and as she examines her own feminine features in the mirror, she asks her husband if she should let her hair grow out and she pleads "I get so tired of looking like a boy" (Hemingway 85). She dwells on the thought of becoming like that cat, and attaining her true femininity.

In Gilman's, "The Yellow Wallpaper" it is a bit more difficult to detect the cat like creature, but it becomes apparent once you realize that the narrator is slowly developing into this role. Based on the information that cats represent the ability to initiate change, and that they have a connection to the unconscious, the mental downfall of the narrator is revealed absolutely when she begins to see a cat-like woman trapped inside the wallpaper. Sometimes she sees multiple women and sometimes only one, but she sees her crawling around very fast, and in bright spots she freezes like a cat would freeze in a spotlight (Gilman 399). She also sees these women — or feminine creatures — or cats — creeping around the streets and the garden outside (Gilman 399-400). Eventually, she loses all sanity and actually becomes in her mind, the woman, or cat, which she rescued from the wallpaper, and creeps all around the room (Gilman 402).

The cats in "Aunt Jennifer's Tiger's" by Rich are no mystery to find. They are the tigers that she sews into her screen, full of vibrant colors. Because Aunt Jennifer is oppressed by Uncle, and she cannot have the freedom she so desires, she imagines herself in her tigers. It is

her only escape from reality, and she would much rather live in her fantasy as often as she can. For when she is dead, she will no longer be able to experience that fantasy because she has accepted the belief that she will be oppressed even in the after-life (Rhodes).

All of these women suffer from being controlled, abused, and neglected by their partners. Because of this mistreatment, all four women experience their own downward spirals into a mental illness. However, it is not beneficial for the women to remain in the state of naivety and continue to take the abuse. That will only lead to the same outcome of mental illness in the end. It is good that they each have their own means of escape to some relief from stress, and from the depressing marriages they mistakenly went into under the false pretense that love and marriage is supposed to be happily-ever-after but, because each of the women is emotionally and chemically imbalanced, they cannot keep steady mind frames and therefore lose their grips on reality and slip into a state of false perception.

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