English 4351

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Assignment 2

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Topic 3: The isolated condition of the heroine of "The Yellow Wallpaper" rivals the that of Joe Christmas from *Light in August. Although* their reasons differ, both characters suffer from loneliness.

Anonymous and Alone

Joe Christmas is agreeably one of the most isolated characters in American fiction. However, I defend that the Narrator (Wife) in Gilman's “The Yellow Wallpaper”is a solid rival. Both Joe and the Wife do not have a definite name, and therefore no self-defining identity. What little the story reveals about them is constructed by surrounding characters and the judgement of society. They are slaves to history, race, and gender, trapped by an imprisoning stereotypical era. Both characters spend their lives fighting to be understood and respected. Joe, like the Narrator, finds himself "like a caged animal going over and over the same ground" (Kazin 170). The Wife also creeps repeatedly throughout her room; her personality is clawing for freedom. They are a human form, yet faceless, each yearning to escape the barred wallpaper of their lives. Neither character is successful, as death and madness become the respective end of Joe and the Wife. Their isolation results in Joe’s physical and the Wife’s psychological death; both are unrecognized as unique members of the human race.

At the orphanage, they rename Joseph as Joe Christmas. Named only for the day of his abandonment, he knows nothing of his background or his roots; he is like raw clay on which society moulds their concept of his identity:

And that was the first time Byron remembered that he had ever thought how a man's name, which is supposed to be just the sound for who he is, can be somehow an augur of what he will do if other men can only read the meaning in time. It seemed that none of them had looked primarily at the stranger until they heard his name (Faulkner 33).

Joe is an immigrant, never seen “full face, but always as a silhouette, a dark shadow” (Kazin 167). The other men watch him work at the sawdust pile and speculate about his background. They offer their ideas amongst themselves and wonder about his unusual name, yet never bother to converse with him or show interest, much like John in "The Yellow Wallpaper." He is forthcoming with his prognosis about his wife's depressed condition yet fails to consider her insights: "John does not know how much I really suffer. He knows there is no reason to suffer, and that satisfies him” (Gilman 5). Symbolically, Gilman does not give the narrator a name; she is merely a case study, not a woman or a wife. Joe and the narrator are only perceived on a superficial basis by those around them and are void of what they require for personal completion: “Everyone wants to play God to the orphan Joe Christmas” (Kazin 178). This manipulation is congruent to John playing God with his wife's mental condition. This societal intervention brings about ultimate loneliness from which neither character can persevere. Joe Christmas dies without becoming "someone," while the Narrator in "The Yellow Wallpaper" descends into emotional demise without being allowed to create the "someone" she desperately wants, and needs, to be. Comparing emotional and physical death is somewhat controversial, yet will John’s wife ever recover from her madness? It will take an immense about of rehabilitation to restore her mind and soul, an opportunity that is unattainable for a nineteenth-century female. The wife is surrounded by family who starves her of recognition and artistic freedom. Unlike Joe, her "face" is apparent, and it is her spirit that remains invisible. She is alone in a house full of people. I can attest that in the final months of my abusive marriage, it is an emotional reality to be alone in a household full of people. It is loneliness of soul-imploding destruction to exist within a cage of human degradation. In the realm of solitude, the narrator of "The Yellow Wallpaper" is an excellent parallel to Joe Christmas.

Solitude is something that, to the observer, Joe Christmas doesn’t seem to mind. His co-workers observe a tough, diligent millworker. He does not complain, he does not bare his thoughts. His childhood reveals a lack of love that forms his repellent exterior, including the southern racism toward the Negro race which renders them subhuman, inferior. Being part Negro, Joe Christmas is a “prisoner of his own history” (Kazin 174) as well as an "incarnation not only of the ‘race problem' in America but of the condition of man" (Kazin 185). Knowing the negativity with which society receives him, Joe becomes an introvert: “running away from a past that he cannot escape” (Kazin 182). His circumstance leaves him with no choice except complacent solitude. I think that reading *Light in August,* as a Canadian, in the twenty-first-century fuels the compassion that we have for Joe Christmas. Although racism unfortunately still exists, it is heartbreaking to revisit the racial severity in the American South.

Further to racism is the oppressive attitude toward women in the nineteenth century. In “The Yellow Wallpaper,” John is inattentive to his wife’s psychological needs, she is as much a victim as Joe Christmas. He is a slave to racism living in “the stillness of personal darkness” (Kazin 172) while the Wife is a slave to gender, seeking freedom from the prison-bar pattern of the yellow wallpaper, and her dominating husband: “John…has no patience with faith, an intense horror of superstition, and he scoffs openly at any talk of things not to be felt and seen and put down in figures” (Gilman 3), and “He hardly lets me stir without special direction” (Gilman 4). Joe Society dictates both of their predicaments, and both withdraw into abnormal behaviour. Again, reading “The Yellow Wallpaper” as a Canadian woman in the twenty-first century evokes compassion for the loneliness that the narrator of this story must endure. I understand situations of mental illness exist and are becoming more understood as time passes, but being reminded of the restrictions placed upon female artists in past generations reiterate just how horrific the Wife’s isolation must have been.

The narrator of “The Yellow Wallpaper” experiences descent into insanity through deprivation and neglect of her creative mind. To me, this is equally cruel as the unacceptable treatment of Joe Christmas because of his racial heritage. Both wear scars of emotional abuse, and both of their personalities are stifled, forbidden to blossom. Kazin makes a striking reference to Joe’s situation that closely resembles the entrapment of the narrator in “The Yellow Wallpaper” where Joe’s death is “enacted as within a circle round which he runs in an effort to catch up with himself” (Kazin 160). He is like a caged animal with no choice but to wait for death. The narrator, too, is in a mental cage as insanity sets in when she sees the shadow-woman: "But nobody could climb through that pattern – it strangles so" (Gilman 13). She has slipped into isolation just like Joe; in their minds, they can be as they wish, free man or respected artist.

To be lonely is a wound to the soul. Both Joe Christmas and the Narrator battle internally against stereotypical imprisonment and are unsuccessful. Ironically Joe’s agonizing death allows him the freedom he so desperately desires: “He is concerned only with the process of self-discovery, or of self-naming, even of self-legalization” (Kazin 185) and “has attained the stillness that will finally allow us to see him” (Kazin 180). Moreover, the Wife in “The Yellow Wallpaper” attains release through madness, as the degradation of her spirit releases her from John and her physical body, permitting us to finally view her artistic soul: “I kept on creeping just the same, but I looked at him over my shoulder” (Gilman 16). Although mad, she is now looking back on what once imprisoned her. Metaphorically, she is free, yet the tragedy of her mental state qualitatively rivals the solitude of Joe Christmas' physical isolation. Isolation obliterates them both in body, mind, and soul.

List of Works Cited

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Gilman, Charlotte Perkins. “The Yellow Wallpaper.” Alexandria: Orchises Press, 1991.

Kazin, Alfred. "The Stillness of the Light in August." Ed., by permission of the Wayne State University Press. Copyright 1958.