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Intro to American Literature 217

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The Grapes of Words: Solitude, Mental Health, and the Therapy of Writing

Hello everyone and welcome back to this week's episode of The Grapes of Words where we dive deeper into American literature and literary analysis. This week we're taking a look at two very influential women writers Emily Dickinson and Charlotte Perkins Gilman who have helped shape American literature as we know it. We will be diving deeper into their works "The Yellow Wallpaper" and Dickinson's poems 260 and 445 analyzing the role of solitude, mental health in women, and the therapeutic effects of writing correlated with these ideas. As always thank you for listening to The Grapes of Words and I hope you enjoy it.

Mental Health has begun to be a big priority for many Americans today as we see awareness of mental health increase in things such as mental health month. We have more accessibility to therapy and meditation practices than ever through apps such as Headspace and Sanvello and mental health hotlines. And our current pandemic has only put more of an emphasis on the importance of taking care of the mind and body.

This hasn't always been the case though. As literature shows us the changes through time Charlotte Perkin Gilman's short story "The Yellow Wallpaper" paints for us the image of what not taking care of our mental health looks like. As mentioned before Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" is a short story written in journal entry format and falls under the genre of realism depicting the psychological and social reality of the characters within the story. The story could

also fall under the genre of gothic fiction as it has many elements of mystery, suspense, and drama. Though wherever you might place Gilman's work its captivating symbolism and vivid imagery of the mind is entirely revolutionary for its time especially considering the mental health of women more specifically. This image can also be painted more clearly by our woman shadow figure in the story who is trapped behind bars in the wall which we will explore more a little later.

Elaine R. Hedges in her essay *Afterword* states ``For aside from the light it throws on the personal despairs and the artistic triumph over them, of one of America's foremost feminists, the story is one of the rare pieces of literature we have by a nineteenth-century woman which directly confronts the sexual politics of the male-female, husband-wife relationship." It is this male-female, husband-wife relationship concept that relates heavily to the mental health of women and men's reign over such things. The whole story is about the deterioration of the narrator from beginning to end. In an interview Gilman, when asked why she wrote the short story states that she wanted to "save people from being driven crazy" stemming from her own personal experience with constant and severe nervous breakdowns and almost going crazy herself. But the underlying role of the woman's mind and role in society in the story cannot be missed especially when introduced to John, the male-husband character of the story. Introduced by our narrator as "John is a physician, and *perhaps* - (I would not say it to a living soul, of course, but this is dead paper and a great relief to my mind -) *perhaps*, that is one reason I do not get well faster. You see he does not believe I am sick!" (pg. 511). Already, John does not give great first impressions. The funniest thing about John is the fact that he is a physician of all things and yet, there is nothing else John could possibly be. Gilman's irony in making John a qualified character in medicine and not being able to identify when someone as close to him as

his wife, is sick, is entirely part of Gillman's feminist genius and only further elaborates her message of the craziness that can happen where there is no free will in the life we so choose to live. And as proven in the short story, it is this limitation or lack of choice that leads to the slow decline of our minds. But this has more to do with our woman narrator more than anything because John isn't the one on retreat to cure a "sickness" he apparently doesn't have. And if the roles were reversed in the story, John would certainly receive a different kind of treatment just for being part of the gender hierarchy society holds to even to this day.

This is just proven more by, as mentioned earlier, the woman behind bars that our narrator notices. As described in the story "The faint figure behind seemed to shake the patten, just as if she wanted to get out" (pg. 517). It is the urgency of this figure trying to get out of someplace she is stuck that is so striking. Not only is this woman symbolism for the mind as she is locked behind the wall but also stands in for the image of women and lack of freedom women have. Seen as the quiet type, the submissive type, the type to not be believed in because how could a woman possibly be sick? How could a woman, a mother, the caretaker of the house suffers from mental health issues? She is the glue in the family and when that glue falters, the whole family comes unstuck. This is seen more at the end of the story but begins its building from the very first line.

In Hedges same essay as earlier, it is also stated "The story is narrated with clinical precision and aesthetic tact. The curt, chopped sentences, the brevity of the paragraphs, which often consist of only one or two sentences, convey the taught, distraught mental state of the narrator." Not only does Gilman's characters urge us to become more open-minded but her writing style suggests the same thing. I include this piece about her writing style because I think it further emphasizes how important it is to consider not only our own mental health but others as

well. By opening our minds, we can get rid of the stigma around women's mental health but also better understand and open up to all beings. To save not only ourselves but for everyone from the craziness as Gilman wanted.

Related to the captivating writing group next to Gilman is Emily Dickinson. Dickinson wrote poetry for the masses revolving around concepts of nature, love, and death. Though most of her poetry wasn't published until her death in 1886 it is her mysterious fascination with life and her ability to transcribe that in her poetry that ensnares readers. It is also the curiosity revolving around Dickinson's life that makes her so revolutionary. Known for being a "recluse" of some kind it seems Dickinson is no stranger to solitude. During a time, such as the pandemic, it is also understandable why Dickinson might have wanted it this way, and yet, it is only in solidarity that we crave the company of others. In her poem "I'm Nobody" or poem 260 we see Dickinson reaching out for connection, someone who is familiar and comfortable with solidarity and yet provides company. In the line "Are you - Nobody - Too? Then there's a pair of us!" we can further see Dickinson reaching out for that connection that humans all need. But further into the poem, there is the line "How dreary - to be - Somebody! How public - like Frog" that doesn't sound like Dickinson wanting connection at all. Instead, it sounds as if existing is entirely too much, which might explain the need or want for solitude which is prevalent in her poetry. This is also similar to Gilman's work as we see our main narrator existing in solidarity as she writes in her journal. She is isolated from John, her child, and everyone else in her life. To add to the conversation of the role of solitude in these writings is Lynne M. Patnode who in her work *The compensations of Solitude in the Work of Emily Dickinson and Sarah Orne Jewett* states "Typically, the isolation of a woman in this culture is brought about through an unhappy experience leading to rejection of or by the male world." Again, it is shown that the male figure

reigns over our women writers here. Though there are few suggestions that infer some of Dickinson's poems are correlated with love affairs (and not just with men) and as readers, we never really know the intentions behind the author's writing but the role of solitude in Dickinson's poem doesn't seem too romantic to me. Instead, as Patnode references in her work "A woman's solitude becomes an opportunity to explore her own resources. She deals with the intense anguish of her isolation by discovering inner strength, an innate nobility that allows her to transcend her circumstances in a manner particularly adapted to her peculiar characteristics." It is here that I think Dickinson's solitude is a way of "transcending" into her inner artist which makes her a stronger and bolder woman. Our main narrator in "The Yellow Wallpaper" doesn't just become crazy by the end, but she also becomes unafraid of toil and ultimately ends up making her own choices despite everyone else.

Solitude intertwined within these works is essential to the way we understand not only the writings and writers but how we also come to terms with our own inner strength and connections with others and our environment. Dickinson's "I'm Nobody" shows readers that solitude is just as important as connection as it helps transform, grow, and shape who we are as people. This also directly connects to our mental health talk earlier. I bring this up because both mental health and solitude are on different sides of the same coin especially concerning women in literature and society. And as stated earlier, the effects of such limited choices or feelings of lack of freedom just for being a woman can be detrimental and yet, how could our woman work through such a stigma as that?

As mental health and solitude are not too far from one another, neither are the coping mechanisms we install for ourselves to combat some of the negative impacts each of these concepts provides. Judith Harris in her work *Signifying Pain: Constructing and Healing the Self*

Through Writing states “For each, language is often a labor of unburying the buried.” and as she continues to examine the therapeutic effects of writing it makes me wonder if writing was an act of unburying for both Gilman and Dickinson. As we clearly see in Gilman’s work the narrator uses writing to work through the events and feelings that happen throughout. Even though she isn’t technically supposed to be writing at all she tells us readers “[I] and am forbidden to ‘work’ until I am well again. Personally, I disagree with their ideas. Personally, I believe that congenial work, with excitement and change, would do me good. But what is one to do?” (pg. 511-512). I also disagree with their ideas but as shown, writing for our narrator helps with dealing with her nervous breakdown, working through male superiority and translates Gilman’s intent of the story very well. Not only does Gilman’s character work through these things but Gilman herself uses her writing as a way of dealing with life and its baggage. We know from her same interview where she talks about why she wrote “The Yellow Wallpaper” that she was going through her own nervous breakdowns and writing her short story as she describes “The little book valued by alienists and as a good specimen of one kind of literature” not only saved her but others as well.

Much was the similar for Dickinson. In her poem “They Shut Me Up in Prose” readers experience exclamations, utter disbelief, and stubbornness from Dickinson as she writes “Still! Could themself have peeped - And seen my Brain - go round - They might as wise have lodged, a Bird For Treason - in the Pound.” Dickinson’s ability to write such poetry that includes different readings of her work every single time is beyond me but from the first line in the poem “They Shut Me Up In Prose” and Dickinson’s imagery of a bird in the pound “for treason” suggests this poem might be about her writing and how she uses it to combat those who doubt her and her placement in the world. The bird metaphor in the poem might also reference to the freedom Dickinson experiences from writing. It is this type a freedom that is also similar as to

why people keep diaries/journals or other kinds of writing. Writing is the art of unburying everything we hold inside and creating something even more beautiful from it.

Well, that is all for today then. I know there was a lot going on in today's episode but for a short recap: Literature shows us changes through time and it is important to read and talk about it especially concerning today modern topics we experience such as mental health and uncomfortable feelings or experiences we have based on things such as gender, race, and class. Know that you are never alone and that there is always someone there to reach out too when things get hard. It's also important to find things you enjoy doing that make you happy because you deserve to be happy. As always thank you for listening to this week's episode and I'll see you in the next one.

Show Notes

- [Afterward](#) by Elaine R. Hedges – Literary Criticism of “The Yellow Wallpaper”
- Charlotte Perkins Gilman. “The Yellow Wallpaper.” *Norton Anthology of American Literature, 1865-the Present, Shorter Ninth Edition*. 511-523
- Charlotte Perkins Gilman. Why I Wrote “The Yellow Wallpaper”? *Norton Anthology of American Literature, 1865-the Present, Shorter Ninth Edition*. 523-524
- Emily Dickinson. “I’m Nobody” (260). *Norton Anthology of American Literature, 1865-the Present, Shorter Ninth Edition*. 88
- [Signifying Pain: Constructing and Healing the Self Through Writing: Part One - Speaking Pain](#) by Judith Harris.
- [The Compensations of Solitude in the work of Emily Dickinson and Sarah Orne Jewett](#) by Lynne M. Patnode
- [“They Shut Me Up In Prose” \(445\)](#) by Emily Dickinson.

Authors Note

I never anticipated when I started this class or this project how much I would come to enjoy learning and reading American Literature. For this project, I decided to focus on mental health, women, solitude, and writing that really all stemmed from discovering and reading Emily Dickinson for the first time and “The Yellow Wallpaper.” I had such a good time with these units that it’s only made me realize how much I love what I study as an English major and why I’m doing it. I enjoyed it so much so that when writing discussions, and larger papers such as the podcast that it doesn’t really feel like work, instead it’s just fun for me. And so as stated before my inspiration from the project really stemmed from the fun time I had while reading Dickinson and Gilman and I just wanted to take more time to study their works. Though as much as I loved learning about the themes in my podcast and writing about them, just like with everything in life there were challenges. My biggest challenges just really revolved around me overthinking how my voice, thoughts, and multiple interpretations of the pieces I was writing about were translated in my podcast. I considered turning in my project in an audio format which might’ve helped combat, especially voice a little more but I really wanted to practice my writing skills more. So, to combat some of these challenges I just kept writing and re-writing, editing quotes, and finding different sources that I thought worked better with my ideas. I also used feedback to help me revise and overcome these challenges. I think one of the most helpful pieces of feedback I received was all the links to other resources I could use and the compliment that my podcast sounded like a podcast! It helped me feel more confident in the voice of my piece and helped with not overthinking too much about what I was writing. Overall, I had a good experience with this project. At first, I kind of had a hard time just taking the time to sit down and actually write

it but once I did I was on a roll. I wrote most of it in segments and focused on one paragraph at a time which is a method I think I'm going to use in future essays too (Though I know this isn't really an essay which I enjoyed more). I also learned about two phenomenal female writers who have easily become part of my top ten list of favorite authors also while exploring new ideas and topics and viewpoints of mental health and the writing process. Creative writing is also a passion of mine that I enjoy doing in my free time and just analyzing, reading, and taking the time to understand other written works actually makes me more inspired to write my own stuff which was kind of a surprise for me. If I could go back and do one thing differently though I might explore a different theme or add another author into the mix of my work. I found that sometimes I had a hard time trying to organize all my ideas and concepts into a form that made sense not only for me as the writer but also something that wouldn't be too confusing for readers as well. I hope my ideas translated well though.