

Depiction of Gender Inequality in Literary Works

Introduction

It goes without saying that writers wrote the majority of literary works under the influence of their environment. This includes their communities and the activities they were participating in. Others were motivated by the political affairs that were the most prevalent at that time. *The Story of an Hour* by Kate Chopin and *The Yellow Wallpaper* by Perkins Gilman are some of the literary works that were written as a deliberate need for the authors to express their thoughts on particular issues that were common in the society of that time. Moreover, they were written in order to represent a critical review of gender inequality in the society during the late 19th century. The presence of gender inequality will be widely discussed in this paper. The discussion explores particular issues relating to male superiority or female inferiority that provoked the writers to express their thoughts in the literary works. The discussion goes back to 1890s, when the issues arose in the stories and established the influence of the society on the literature of this period.

Discussion

Gender inequality was quite prevalent in the 19th and 20th centuries. By the end of the 19th century, countries that were engaged in the slave trade were getting used to the idea of abolishing slavery. Although the black women received freedom, they were not equal to the white men and so the society was not eager to make them equal to the men. Moreover, the black woman was inferior to the white woman. The two stories being discussed depict various forms of gender inequalities present in the society of the 1880s and prove that writers were motivated by the issues affecting the society during that time.

The Story of the Hour

The story is about a woman, Louise Mallard, who is sick as she was “afflicted with heart trouble” (Chopin, 1894, p. 1). She is also facing emotional and other psychological issues, which is mentioned throughout the book. For example, she learns about the death of her husband that led her to reveal her feelings towards him. Throughout the story, the reader sees a woman, who is not capable of making her own decisions. In fact, she is so fragile that bad news may cause a heart attack. That is why the author states that “Great care was taken to break to her as gently as possible the news of her husband’s death” (Chopin, 1894, p. 1). Although one may feel that news relating to death would shock her anyway, the story reveals the fact that a woman was regarded as a person who was unable to execute tasks without the guidance of the man. Having locked in her room, she states that “There would be no powerful will bending hers in that blind persistence with which men and women believe they have a right to impose a private will upon a fellow creature” (Chopin, 1894, p. 12).

The society in the 1890s believed that the women were not capable of making their own decisions. Therefore,, they used to choose the leaders that would govern them. There were millions of American women who did not have the right to vote, which is also known as the women suffrage. It is not until 1919 when all women in the USA received the right to vote with the adoption of new legislation (Lane, 1989, p. 961). This is why the protagonist of the story seems to reveal some positive feelings towards the death of her husband as she would no longer be inferior to him. She feels that even though she is not in a position to make great decisions regarding her country, she can make decisions regarding her own life. The society of the 19th century had little respect for women. Without a doubt, there were many groups that advocated for the rights of women in many areas. However, women continued to remain inferior for a longer time even after the beginning of the 20th century. Consequently, the heroine is happy about the thought of her newly acquired freedom.

The story further reveals the inferiority of the women even in their own homes and marriages. The story clearly expresses the thoughts of the men's superiority in marriages. For example, men are providing the family with basic needs while women stay at home and take care of the household. Even in the story Mrs. Mallard is at home when she receives the news instead of being at work. Being the head of the family means she is more influential while making decisions (Lane, 1989, p. 960). Being the head of the family, her husband had the right to change the will of his wife as his decisions were to be final, which was popular in the late 19th century.

The society of the 19th century refers mostly to the Christian religion. The Bible states that the wife should be submissive to the husband (McGuire, 2009, p. 999). Many people interpreted that the wife had to be inferior to the man; therefore, her will be only prevailed if it did not contradict to her husband's ideas. Although the statement in the Bible has provoked heated discussion over the years, Chopin tries to show the drawbacks of such beliefs. They had such a strong influence on women that they breathed a sigh of relief when their husbands died. It is significant to understand that there were also some women who earnestly mourned for the loss of their husbands. However, majority of them mourned because they did not know how to live without their husbands. Many women got married at a tender age and did not have much experience in comparison to the men. They moved from their parents' homes to that of their husbands. When their husbands died, they either remarried or spent much time to learn how to live on their own. Mrs. Mallard was only one out of the large group that yearned for the freedom (Gorsky, 1992, p. 55).

Chopin shows that later women were interested in obtaining freedom from their husbands and the other males, which one may see in the text. The heroine closes herself in her room and looks outside the window, which is a symbolic sign of how her life would be after burying her husband. She enthusiastically watches the view from the "tops of the trees" that were

“new with spring” to “the notes of a distant song” and “sparrows twittering in the eaves” (Chopin, 1894, p. 5). She mourns her husband and “the face that had never looked save with love upon her, fixed and gray and dead” (Chopin, 1894, p.11). However, she chooses to focus on the freedom. She states that “she saw beyond that bitter moment a long procession of years to come that would belong to her absolutely” (Chopin, 1894, p. 11). There were many women that looked forward to become actually free, which took many years to make their dream come true. Therefore, there were both old and emerging groups that advocated for women’s rights. The most prominent groups of this time included women advocating for the suffrage. This explains women’s involvement in such forms of literature (Gorsky, 1992, p. 68).

The Yellow Wallpaper

The story by Perkins Gilman asserts many issues identified in the discussion above. The woman in the story seems to “suffocate” in her marriage and life as a whole. She rarely makes her own decisions. Jane, who is a narrator and a protagonist of the story, states that her husband “is very careful and loving, and hardly lets me stir without special direction” (Gilman, 1892, p. 2). Although it appears to be a loving gesture from one point, it is also an act showing the lack of confidence about his wife he does not believe that his wife is sick to begin with. The protagonist’s brother agrees with the Jane’s husband. According to these two men, she does not have any sickness. She only has a “temporary nervous depression...a slight hysterical tendency” (Gilman, 1892, p. 1).

As indicated earlier, the women’s ideas were not understood and shared, as they did not have the right to make their own decisions. This left them helpless and at the mercy of the men in their lives. The woman states “And what can one do” or “what is one to do” when addressing issues that were out of her control (Gilman, 1892, p. 1). Through protagonist’s thoughts in the story, the author shows the thoughts of the women in the society of that time. This was not until

1890s, when the woman was considered to be right when the man agreed with her. Throughout the story, the heroine states that she is not allowed to choose the vacation house and room they will stay. In fact, her husband schedules everything during the last hour. She states that her husband “took all care from [her]” (Gilman, 1892, p. 2).

By the end of the 19th century, almost all women had received at least the basic education. This enabled them to speak their minds in writing. It is clear that the only way she could talk about her true feelings about her life was through the form of journal. She constantly uses the term “personally” when stating her ideas on a particular issue. For example, she disagrees with the ideas of her unreal illness. She also believes that her medicine will give her “congenial work, with excitement and change” instead of depriving her of work (Gilman, 1892, p. 1). This fact also explains why the women of that time chose literature as a source to express issues about the oppression and position in the society, which Charlotte Perkins Gilman also did (Gibson, 1981, p. 2).

The story’s context tends to show the struggles of women both in marriage and the society as a whole. Jane states that “John laughs at me, of course, but one expects that in marriage” (Gilman, 1892, p. 1). This describes that her husband has no regard for her thoughts and makes decisions concerning their marriage himself. The author also allows the reader to assess the situation, which was common in the middle and late years of the 20th century. When Jane shows some control over her thoughts, John’s standpoints and principles are “shaken”. Jane shows this when she states “Now why should that man have fainted” (Gilman, 1892, p. 12). It reveals the fact that men in that society could not handle women’s control over their own decisions and lives. Later, women were able to take control of their own lives, although, it took a long time. However, some societies still impose limits for women up to the present day (Lancer, 1989, p. 416).

As indicated, the story engages some of the author's own experiences. Gilman's prescription was continuous rest, which would help to suppress the depression she had. This particular experience inspired her to write the story (Gibson, 1981, p. 12). At the same time, women were also limited even in the writing of their own feelings in journals. At the beginning of the story, she states that "I did write for a while in spite of them" (Gilman, 1892, p. 1). In other words, a woman was not allowed to do anything that would express any form of freedom or her will. Most of the events take place in the room that her husband has chosen for her. It accentuates some form of a prison. From a societal point of view, this room is a symbol of women's lives. Women were put in their rooms, which they could not leave for personal needs. They only lived within the limitations put by the male dominating in society.

Both Works

Both works present the issues that the women used to go through in the 19th century. Therefore,, it is significant to understand that their life was unbearable. Many people in the American society believed in the Bible as the source of their faith in the Christian religion. Concerning marriage, they believed that a must be inferior to her husband. In honor of the teachings that the Bible gave, men tried to love their wives and show the feelings. Although it may not make much sense in today's societies, the men tried to take care of their wives and their families in the ways depicted in the stories. Women in both stories admit that their husbands loved them. However, they preferred loving them through dominance rather than equality.

Conclusion

These two works clearly depict gender inequality in the society of the 1890s. Writers of literary works had an intention to depict various issues arising in the society in the writings. They wanted to provide a critic, ironical or sarcastic perception of the issues addressed. Both literary works provide a critic of the issues women faced in the society. Chopin shows that they yearned

for freedom like some women grieved over the loss of their husbands. With the women's deprivation of the right to vote, many social events arose due to the fact that women had to do something about the situation. This is one of the reasons why women intended to express their feelings about the problem. Additionally, their decision to fight for the rights was considered to be an activism. While some women preferred to organize movements for the women rights, other writers preferred using literature. Through such depiction of the gender inequality in the society of that time, one may identify the actual state of affairs of the century.