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Intro to Literature

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Madness

What is madness? In psychology madness is often caused by events that occur around people. Traumatic events or situations can drive people to become crazy. Without knowing how to adapt to the situation the people can become crazy. The actual definition from Merriam Webster is “a state of severe mental illness, and behavior or thinking that is very foolish or dangerous”. I think this definition is fitting for what I will discuss. I am going to compare the madness in both “The Yellow Wallpaper” by Charlotte Perkins Gilman and “The Raven” by Edgar Allan Poe. The “Yellow Wallpaper” fits Merriam Webster’s definition because it involves the severe mental illness she develops because her madness is a cause of her illness. The woman in the yellow wallpaper suffers from postpartum depression, and she continues to get madder because of the conditions in the story, and how her illness worsens because of the conditions. “The Raven” falls under the foolish or dangerous behavior in my opinion. I believe this because it’s not a mental illness that the main character suffers from. His behavior that is foolish is his thinking. He thoughts and despair are driving him mad. It’s more about himself than an actual illness. External and internal factors that are in “The Raven” and “The Yellow Wallpaper cause the reoccurring theme of madness in both of these texts.

“The Yellow Wallpaper” and “The Ravens” main characters are affected by external factors around them that contribute to their madness. The first aspect that they share is the environment that they are surrounded by. Such as in “The Raven”, Poe starts off by giving the

reader a sense of the environment. Poe states “Once upon a midnight dreary,” (Poe L 1).

Midnight is considered the time of night where it is the darkest. Then the word dreary intensifies the feeling of the main character. He is sitting alone in his house at midnight, in winter, thinking about the loss of Lenore. Overall the environment around him is leading him further into madness. Then continues to state “Ah, distinctly I remember it was in the bleak December” (Poe L 6). . December is known to be a cold month, where the animals and humans tend to stay inside for warm and comfort. Knowing this information, it intensifies the characters sadness and emotion. This is an example of how the environment affects the mental state of the character in “The Raven” but there is a similar example of this in “The Yellow Wallpaper”. The woman in the “The Yellow Wallpaper”

The second part of external factors is the events that happen around the characters in the story that helps the progression of madness. In “The Yellow Wallpaper” the set of events that starts the chain of her madness getting worse is her having a child. She develops postpartum depression, and things start to go on the downhill after she is separated from her newborn. Her husband is a physician and what he recommends for her is the “rest cure”. Silas Weir Mitchell was the creator of the “rest cure”. He was a neurologist and he developed the rest cure to treat things such as hysteria, neurasthenia, and other nervous illnesses. Usually the rest cure lasted from about 6 to 8 weeks. Best rest was enforced, and they were fed on a fatty, milk diet. Patients were also force fed if it was necessary. Patients were also prohibited from talking, reading, sewing, and other activities. In Mitchell’s point of view, it took mothers out of a potentially toxic social environment. Also the rest cure was seen as a way to make independent and outspoken women bend to male authority. Overall it was not what the mothers needed. The reading also mentioned Mitchell. The woman’s husband talks about Mitchell. The woman states that “John

says if I don't pick up faster he shall send me to Weir Mitchell in the fall." (Gilman pg. 482).

The creator of the rest cure was mentioned, and the woman acknowledges that is supposed to be much worse than her husband. The woman needed a different treatment than the rest cure. To prove this point I am going to reference the Mayo Clinic and some of the activities and treatment that they suggest for treating postpartum depression. The Mayo Clinic states:

“Make healthy lifestyle choices. Include physical activity, such as a walk with your baby, in your daily routine. Try to get adequate rest. Eat healthy foods and avoid alcohol.

Avoid isolation. Talk with your partner, family and friends about how you're feeling. Ask other mothers about their experiences. Breaking the isolation may help you feel human again.

Ask for help. Try to open up to the people close to you and let them know you need help. If someone offers to baby-sit so you can take a break, take them up on it. If you can sleep, take a nap, or maybe you can catch a movie or meet for coffee with friends.” –Mayo Clinic

The reason why it is important to state what modern day practices are is because of the things that the main character goes through in “The Yellow Wallpaper”. Some of the things that the main character is forced to do by her husband conflict with the modern day treatments of postpartum depression. Such as the Mayo Clinic talks about avoiding isolation when treating postpartum depression, is the exact opposite of what happens in the “The Yellow Wallpaper”. Her husband recommended the rest cure, and then moves into a giant house to treat her in. He then proceeds to isolate her. The first example of isolation is the room in which the woman stays in the house. Gilman states “It is a big, airy room, the whole floor nearby, with windows that look all ways, and air and sunshine galore.” (Gilman pg. 479). The room is huge, but that also increases the feeling of isolation of the woman. The more space she has, the more she can feel isolated. Also the fact that she is in the nursery which is isolated at the top of house. Also there are

bars on the windows, which make her feel imprisoned with nothing left except for her thoughts. Another aspect that the Mayo Clinic pointed out is talking to people. The woman needs someone that she can express her feelings, but she states that “John is away all day, and even some nights when his cases are serious.” (Gilman pg. 480). She needs someone to discuss her thoughts with but her husband is always away at work. The woman herself even states “But I must say what I feel and think in some way- it is such a relief.” (Gilman pg. 483). The woman even agrees that expressing her thoughts in some manner helps relieve her somewhat. So the beginning treatment that her husband prescribes and enforces starts to cause the madness that she starts to experience. The external factors are her husband, and how he decided to treat her illness. “The Raven” also shares the aspect of events that lead to the main characters madness. The Yellow Wallpaper has more instances of events that led to the madness of the main character, but “The Raven” still has an important event that shapes the characters thoughts. The main event that affects the main character is the death of Lenore. Based on the text and his emotions for Lenore you can assume he was in love with her. Also when he is talking to the raven he states “Tell this soul with sorrow laden if, within the distant Aidenn, it shall clasp a sainted maiden whom the angels name Lenore.” (Poe pg. 820 L.L 93-94). He describes her as a sainted maiden, and it gives me the impression that he was romantically involved with her.

Then on to the internal factors that are associated between both of these readings. One of the first aspects that each character struggles with internally is their subconscious creating these hallucinations of images that reflect that conscious thoughts. The main character in “The Raven” is despairing over the death of a woman named Lenore who could be assumed to have been his lover. The interesting aspect of madness in The Raven is that the main character is the one causing himself to go mad. The first aspect that shows the character’s madness is the raven. Poe

states "I was napping, and so gently came rapping. And so faintly you came tapping, tapping at my chamber door. (pg. 838 L.L 21-22). This is one of the reasons that the raven is part of his madness. He fell asleep, and suddenly he hears these noises. The text states that he was "But the fact is I was napping, and so gently you came rapping."(Poe 838 L. 21). He is basically lucidly dreaming, or in a dreamlike state. There is no evidence that even woke up. He is dreaming in my opinion, and he created the raven in this dream. Then there is how the raven can speak, that fact makes the character mad to even be hearing a raven that can talk. The raven is the outlet from which the main character expresses his madness in *The Raven*. When he first meets the raven he asks a question of "Tell me what thy lordly name is on the Night's Plutonian shore!" (Poe L 46). From which the raven says the word that he will repeat for the rest of the questions that the narrator asks him. The raven replies "Nevermore". (Poe 839. L 48). So at the beginning the narrator was effected by external effects of Lenore dying, but that changes at this point in the story. The madness starts to come from himself at this point. Some of the internal factors are his subconscious and his conscious. He is conscious of his despair that is felt over, Lenore which causes his subconscious to create the raven. The raven is his despair over losing Lenore, and he drives himself further into madness because of it. The raven is subconscious way of exploiting the despair that his conscious mind is experiencing. He knows that the raven will only respond with one answer and yet he still asks the raven questions like "Tell this soul with sorrow laden if, within the distant Aidenn, it shall clasp a sainted maiden whom the angels name Lenore." (Poe pg. 820 L.L 93-94). His mind wants to hear Nevermore. That's why his subconscious created the raven. He knows the raven is going to say Nevermore yet he still continues to push himself into self-madness. The death of Lenore may have set these chains in motion, but he's the one created the madness that happens in the story. The madness that he experiences is cause by the dream

like state that he is in. Overall the raven is just a hallucination of his mind. His mind is troubled, and his subconscious creates image of the raven. Next is the internal factor of hallucination in “The Yellow Wallpaper”.

In “The Yellow Wallpaper” the main character suffers from postpartum depression. Postpartum depression occurs when a mother is separated from her newborn child. The woman slowly starts to become mad in this story. At first she just dislikes the wallpaper. She states “I never saw a worse paper in my life.” (Gilman pg. 479). She really doesn’t think much at the beginning besides the fact that the wallpaper is awful. Her opinions of the wallpaper start to change as the story and her madness progresses. Soon after the beginning she begins to see eyes in the wallpaper. She states “Up and down and sideways they crawl, and those absurd, unblinking eyes are everywhere.”(Gilman pg. 481). This is the beginning of her subconscious creation of the woman inside the wallpaper. The image in the wallpaper starts to get clearer for the woman. She states “There are things in that paper that nobody knows but me, or ever will. Behind that outside pattern the dim shapes get clearer every day. (Gilman pg. 483). Her saying this supports my theory of the woman in the wallpaper being a creation of her subconscious. When she stated that nobody but her knows, it shows that she creates the woman in the wallpaper. Also you can see the progression of her madness, as she starts to see the woman in the wallpaper clearer every day. She continues to state “The front pattern does move-and no wonder! The woman behind it shakes it! (Gilman pg. 486). Her delusions of the woman are getting worse. The woman in the wallpaper is starting to taker form. It less about the wallpaper now, but what lies behind the wallpaper. Near the end of the story, the women is concerned about the women in the wallpaper escaping. She states “If that woman does get out, and tries to get away. I can tie her!” (Gilman pg. 488). Her madness has escalated to where the woman from the wallpaper is

just real, but apparently trying to escape. Then at the end of the story she reaches the peak of her madness. She becomes the woman from the wallpaper. She states “I’ve got out at last... in spite of you and Jane. And I’ve pulled off most of the paper, so you can’t put me back.” (Gilman pg. 489). At the end you learn the woman’s name was Jane, but she is no longer Jane. She has completely taken over the role of the woman in the wallpaper. It goes from her subconscious creation to becoming her conscious mind. She used to see the woman, but then she becomes the woman. Overall Jane created her own madness from internal factors.

In Conclusion, the characters became mad due to external and internal factors. Both characters were affected by the environment that they were surrounded with. They also shared the creation of hallucinations. Both of them created hallucinations as a way to express their feelings. Their conscious and unconscious mind drove them to madness. The circumstances may have been a bit different, but they both dealt with their situation in similar ways. They were driven to madness from the external and internal factors that surrounded their situation.

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