

## **Advanced Higher English** **Dissertation**

**Theme:** Discuss the portrayal of mental health of the female characters in the three novels,

*The Yellow Wallpaper* Charlotte Perkins Gilman

*The Bell Jar* Sylvia Plath

*Girl Interrupted* Susanna Kaysen

**Word Count**

**4449**

*The Yellow Wallpaper* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *Girl Interrupted* by Susanna Kaysen and *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath are all novels which explore the portrayal of the mental health of women. All three novels explore the effect mental health problems have on relationships, the lack of freedom people with mental health problems experience and the way in which society treats those with a mental illness.

In *The Yellow Wallpaper* we see how relationships can be affected through the portrayal of the relationship between husband and wife. It explores how this relationship is affected by the wife's mental health problems. The woman's husband takes control, deciding what is best for her to do to get over the illness and the woman has no say in anything.

"You see he does not believe I am sick! And what can one do? If a physician of high standing, and one's own husband, assures friends and relatives that there is really nothing the matter with one."<sup>1</sup>

The woman's husband does not think there is anything seriously wrong with her and tells people of this. This makes the woman doubt herself as she believes that if her husband is a professional he must be right. This could also suggest that her husband perhaps does not want anyone to think his wife is ill.

Similarly in *The Bell Jar* the relationship between a mother and daughter is affected due to the daughter having mental health problems. Her mother cannot seem to understand her daughter is ill, just as the woman's husband in *The Yellow Wallpaper* does not believe there is something wrong.

"I hadn't slept for seven nights. My mother told me I must have slept, it was impossible not to sleep in all that time."<sup>2</sup>

Esther is having trouble sleeping and when she tries to explain to her mother about her problem, her mother does not believe her and thinks everything is fine.

In *The Yellow Wallpaper* the woman's husband John does not seem to understand his wife is ill.

"John does not know how much I really suffer. He knows there is no reason to suffer, and that satisfies him."<sup>3</sup>

The woman feels her husband, John, is oblivious to how she feels and what she is going through. This also suggests that because her husband does not think there is any reason for her to be ill, then there is nothing wrong with her and so she should be ok but in reality she is suffering.

This attitude is similar in Esther's mother,

"I had a suspicion that my mother had called Jody and begged her to ask me out, so I wouldn't sit around in my room all day with the shades drawn."<sup>4</sup>

Esther's mum does not think there is anything seriously wrong with her and feels she just needs to get out more and acts like her depression is something she can turn off and on when she feels like it. I think her mother perhaps does not want to believe there is something wrong with her daughter as she would possibly feel embarrassed. In *The Yellow Wallpaper* the woman coping with the mental health problem knows she is not well and not any better but still her husband thinks he knows better,

"I don't weigh a bit more, said I, nor as much;

Bless her little heart! said he with a big hug, she shall be as sick as she pleases! But now let's improve the shining hours by going to sleep, and talk about it in the morning!"<sup>5</sup>

This shows her husband's condescending and patronising attitude. She tries to convince her husband that she is not better but still he thinks he knows best and shows his controlling ways by making it clear he will talk, in his time, on his terms.

<sup>1</sup> Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper*, The Feminist Press, New York, 2007, pg10

<sup>2</sup> Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar*, Farber and Farber limited, 2005 pg 122

<sup>3</sup> Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper*, The Feminist Press, New York, 2007, pg 14

<sup>4</sup> Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar*, Farber and Farber limited, 2005, pg 148-149

<sup>5</sup> Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper*, The Feminist Press, New York, 2007,pg24

After Esther gets shock therapy in *The Bell Jar* she is terrified of having to go through a experience like that again and tells her mother she will not go back.

"You can call him up and tell him I'm not coming next week. My mother smiled. I knew my baby wasn't like that. I looked at her. Like what? Like those awful people. Those awful dead people at that hospital. She paused. I knew you'd decide to be all right again."<sup>6</sup>

Again this suggests that Esther's mother thinks her illness is just something that she can turn on and off. Her mother also makes a comment about how she sees people with mental health problems as dead and awful which I do not think will help her daughter get well. Esther's mum and John both think that the person affected with the mental illness is better than they make out to be and I feel that they should stand by their family and let them know they are there for them instead of controlling them and making them feel worse.

Also her husband threatens to send her to a physician if she does not get better which suggests he feels that she can get better if under his control and he thinks by threatening her it will make her have a faster recovery.

"John says if I don't pick up faster he shall send me to Weir Mitchell in the fall. But I don't want to go there at all"<sup>7</sup>

The woman is not happy with this decision and instead of her husband discussing this with her, he threatens her showing a lack of support from him. The similarity of Esther and John's relationship with their ill family member continues as both seem to be discouraging towards their wife and daughter. When Esther's mother visits her in hospital she does not act as if she is there to support her daughter and gets on at her daughter.

"They want you to be in a special ward, my mother said. They don't have that sort of ward at our hospital. I liked it where I was. My mother's mouth tightened. You should have behaved better, then."<sup>8</sup>

Her mum blames Esther for having to move wards due to her behaviour but instead of criticising her daughter she should be letting her know that she is there for her. This could also shows that Esther's mother does not seem to understand that her daughters mental health problem is in control of her and her daughter cannot control it.

Another similarity that becomes clear is that the three woman are tired of having to stay in the same place all the time and not being able to get out and lead a normal life. Sylvia Plath the author of *The Bell Jar* uses symbols of confinement in the title of the novel. *The Bell Jar* is effective at portraying the feeling of being trapped as it is like the character Esther is trapped in a jar.

In *The Yellow Wallpaper* John's wife tries to talk to him about her feelings,

"I tried to have a real earnest reasonable talk with him the other day, and tell him how I wish he would let me go and make a visit to cousin Henry and Julia. But he said I wasn't able to go, nor able to stand it after I got there; and I did not make out a very good case for myself, for I was crying before I had finished."<sup>9</sup>

Again John does not let his wife do what she wants and this upsets her we see she does not think by showing her feelings this helped. This shows that John is trying to take control of his wife's life and thinks he can help her in his way when infact he is not helping and should let her handle things her own way. Again there is another similarity between John and Esther's mother as she thinks by putting her daughter in hospital it will help. This is not what she wanted,

"I've got to get out of here, I told her meaningly. Then I'd be all right. You got me in here, I said. you get me out."<sup>10</sup>

Esther does not think the hospital is helping and is desperate to get out, she asks her mother to get her out since it was her decision to put her into hospital in the first place. This suggests,

<sup>6</sup> Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar*, Farber and Farber limited, 2005,pg140

<sup>7</sup> Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper*, The Feminist Press, New York, 2007, pg 19

<sup>8</sup> Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar*, Farber and Farber limited, 2005,pg 169

<sup>9</sup> Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper*, The Feminist Press, New York, 2007, pg 21

<sup>10</sup> Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar*, Farber and Farber limited, 2005,pg 173

just like John, Esther's mother did not discuss things with her daughter and took control of her life.

Another similarity in *The Yellow Wallpaper* and *The Bell Jar* is that the person suffering from the mental condition is made to feel guilty as they are made to think everything has had to change due to their illness,

"He said we came here solely on my account, that I was to have perfect rest and all the air I could get."<sup>11</sup>

John makes it clear that everything has had to change because of her illness which makes her feel guilty and distressed for not appreciating him as much as she should which I do not think is fair as it is not her fault she is not well.

Esther's mother does the same,

"My mother told me I should be grateful. She said I had used up almost all her money,"<sup>12</sup>

Her mother reminds her how much she has cost her and she should be thankful, which could make Esther feel guilty about using her mother's money. Again shows that Esther's mother does not seem to be the kind of mother who lets their child know that they are there for them no matter what as she just makes her daughter feel bad.

John also says to his wife in *The Yellow Wallpaper*,

"He said I was his darling and his comfort and all he had, and that I must take care of myself for his sake, and keep well."<sup>13</sup>

John puts a burden on his wife making it seem she has not to get better for herself but for her husband.

Esther's mother's lack of support for her daughter and the way she makes her feel guilty has an affect on her daughter,

"A daughter in an asylum! I had done that to her. Still, she had obviously decided to forgive me."<sup>14</sup>

When Esther is getting out of hospital her mother lets her know that she forgives her, I think this is terrible as again her mother is making it all about herself as if she has had to go through more than her daughter who has had to cope being in an mental hospital and cope with her illness.

Therefore the authors of these novels portray the strain that is put on the relationships and how it can ruin relationships and cause a break in the relationship.

"He asked me all sorts of questions, too, and pretended to be very loving and kind. As if I couldn't see through him!"<sup>15</sup>

This shows a breakdown in the relationship between John and his wife as she begins to get cautious of him and is losing trust for him.

Also in *Girl Interrupted* a breakdown of a relationship happens due to the girl having mental health problems.

"First of all, he wasn't my boyfriend anymore. How could a person who was locked up have a boyfriend? Anyhow, he couldn't bear coming here."<sup>16</sup>

When Susanna is hospitalised for her illness it has an effect on her relationships and she loses her boyfriend as he couldn't bring himself to visit her in the hospital. This showing that the women's mental health does have a horrible impact on their relationships.

This is also shown in *The Bell Jar*,

"She looked loving and reproachful, and I wanted her to go away."<sup>17</sup>

This suggests that Esther cannot stand to be with her mother right now and perhaps suggests a break in their relationship.

<sup>11</sup> Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper*, The Feminist Press, New York, 2007, pg 12

<sup>12</sup> Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar*, Farber and Farber limited, 2005,pg 178

<sup>13</sup> Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper*, The Feminist Press, New York, 2007, pg 22

<sup>14</sup> Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar*, Farber and Farber limited, 2005,pg 227

<sup>15</sup> Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper*, The Feminist Press, New York, 2007, pg 32

<sup>16</sup> Susanna Kaysen, *Girl, Interrupted*, Viagro Press 2000, pg 25

<sup>17</sup> Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar*, Farber and Farber limited, 2005,pg 166

All three novels show that the women's illnesses have a terrible effect on their relationships and cause a strain on their relationships.

Another theme which is portrayed similarly in all three novels is the lack of freedom the women have.

In *The Yellow Wallpaper* John takes all control from his wife leaving her with no say in anything and therefore she is not free to do as she pleases.

"He is very careful and loving, and hardly lets me stir without special direction. I have a schedule prescription for each hour in the day; he takes all care from me, and so I feel basely ungrateful not to value it more."<sup>18</sup>

John takes charge of everything and does everything therefore his wife has no control or freedom over her own life and feels she should appreciate him more for everything he does. Also John does not like his wife doing things that he does not want her to do,

"There comes John, and I must put this away, - he hates to have me write a word."<sup>19</sup>

She does not have the freedom to do something she enjoys doing like writing as her husband does not like it. This showing a lack of freedom as she has to hide writing from her husband.

Also in *Girl Interrupted* we see the lack of freedom Susanna has when she is hospitalised,

"Our privacy, our liberty, our dignity: All of this was gone and we were stripped down to the bare bones of our selves."<sup>20</sup>

This shows that while in hospital suffering from a mental illness all freedom is taken from Susanna and everything is taken from her.

This is also shown in *The Yellow Wallpaper* the woman is confined to a room in the attic by her husband and she does not like this and wants to be in one of the rooms downstairs,

"Then do let us go downstairs, I said, there are such pretty rooms there."<sup>21</sup>

This shows the lack of freedom the woman has as she is confined to the one room in the attic. This literary motif of the mad woman in the attic is symbolic of how woman felt constrained by the conventions of the time and by patriarchy, and has been used earlier in literature, for example *Jane Eyre*, Bronte. Gilman uses the "mad woman in the attic" motif in *The Yellow Wallpaper*. When she makes a small request to her husband to change rooms he refuses as he does not think it will help but what he does not realise is by confining his wife to this room it is making her worse and making her feel trapped.

"I thought it was a good time to talk, so I told him that I really was not gaining here, and that I wished he would take me away."<sup>22</sup>

This shows that the woman being confined to the one room is not helping and the lack of freedom is not helping either and when she tries to tell her husband this he does not do not let her change rooms and thinks she is fine.

"Of course if you were in any danger, I could and would, but you really you are better, dear, whether you can see it or not. I am a doctor dear, and I know."<sup>23</sup>

John again does not let her move rooms and takes control and thinks he knows better.

Again in *Girl Interrupted* the author makes it clear to see the lack of freedom people with mental health problems have when in hospital,

"Our double-locked doors, our steel-mesh window screens, our kitchen stocked with plastic knives and locked unless a nurse was with us, our bathroom does that didn't lock. All this was medium security. Maximum security was another world."<sup>24</sup>

This shows how little freedom Susanna has in hospital and shows that people feel that those with mental illnesses need to be locked up and their freedom taken off them. I think that this

<sup>18</sup> Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *"The Yellow Wallpaper"* The Feminist Press, New York, 2007, pg 12

<sup>19</sup> Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *"The Yellow Wallpaper"* The Feminist Press, New York, 2007, pg 13

<sup>20</sup> Susanna Kaysen, *"Girl, Interrupted"*, Viagro Press 2000, pg 94

<sup>21</sup> Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *"The Yellow Wallpaper"* The Feminist Press, New York, 2007, pg 15

<sup>22</sup> Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *"The Yellow Wallpaper"* The Feminist Press, New York, 2007, pg 23

<sup>23</sup> Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *"The Yellow Wallpaper"* The Feminist Press, New York, 2007, pg 23-24

<sup>24</sup> Susanna Kaysen, *"Girl, Interrupted"*, Viagro Press 2000, pg 47



could have an effect on the women and could make them feel like they cannot be trusted and that they have no privacy or the freedom like the people outside the hospital do, and so this could make them feel different and isolated.

Also in *The Bell Jar* the lack of freedom is portrayed in the same way,

"I saw that the windows in that part were indeed barred, and that the room door and closet door and the drawers of the bureau and everything that opened and shut was fitted with a keyhole so it could be locked up."<sup>25</sup>

This again shows the lack of freedom, that people who are in hospital with mental problems have.

In *Girl Interrupted* the lack of freedom and privacy Susanna has in hospital is portrayed well as you can imagine how terrible it must be to get watched all the time,

"Five-minute checks. Fifteen-minute checks. Half-hour checks. Some nurses said, Checks, when they opened the door. Click, turn the knob, swish, open the door, Checks, swish, pull the door, shut, click, turn the knob. Five-minute checks. Not enough time to drink a cup of coffee, read three pages of a book, take a shower."<sup>26</sup>

The use of repetition shows how repetitive it gets to the patients the same checks over and over again and shows the lack of privacy and freedom they get in hospital. This also suggests that people with mental illnesses are seen as people who cannot be trusted and have to be checked on.

Even when Susanna is wanting to do a personal thing like shave she has to be watched again emphasising the lack of freedom,

"Click, swish, my shaving supervisor. Did you bring my razor? She hands it over. She sits on the chair next to the bath-tub. I am eighteen years old. She's twenty-two. She's watching me shave my legs."<sup>27</sup>

This again shows the lack of freedom and privacy Susanna has while in hospital as she has to be watched while doing anything, even personal things.

"The grounds were large and beautifully planted. They were pristine as well, since we were almost never allowed to walk around."<sup>28</sup>

Again this shows the lack of freedom Susanna has as she is not even allowed to walk around the garden.

All three novels make it clear that the women have a lack of freedom as everyone thinks they cannot be trusted alone or trusted to make decisions by themselves because they are not well enough. A lack of freedom has a large impact on these women. They cannot do anything without being watched which annoys them especially if it is something personal. Also these women are not free to lead a normal life like those in the outside world.

Another similarity in all three novels is the women feel trapped.

In *Girl Interrupted* she compares herself to meat showing the reader how Susanna feels trapped,

"The meat was bruised, bleeding and imprisoned in a tight wrapping. And, though I had a six-month respite from thinking about it, so was I."<sup>29</sup>

This shows how Susanna feels hurt and trapped and this perhaps is due to the fact she is in a hospital with no freedom and she cannot do what regular teenagers are out doing.

This is also the same in *The Bell Jar* as Esther also feels trapped,

"I would be sitting under the same glass bell jar, stewing in my own sour air... The air of the bell jar wadded round me and I couldn't stir."<sup>30</sup>

This suggests that the bell jar symbolises how Esther is feeling trapped inside it and does not think there is a way out.

<sup>25</sup> Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar*, Farber and Farber limited, 2005, pg 137

<sup>26</sup> Susanna Kaysen, *Girl, Interrupted*, Viagro Press 2000, pg 54

<sup>27</sup> Susanna Kaysen, *Girl, Interrupted*, Viagro Press 2000, pg 57

<sup>28</sup> Susanna Kaysen, *Girl, Interrupted*, Viagro Press 2000, pg 48

<sup>29</sup> Susanna Kaysen, *Girl, Interrupted*, Viagro Press 2000, pg 38

<sup>30</sup> Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar*, Farber and Farber limited, 2005, pg 178

Also effective imagery is used in *Girl Interrupted* to show the feeling of Susanna being trapped again,

"A nurse would look through the chicken wire and decide if you were ready to come out. Somewhat like looking at a cake through the glass of the oven door."<sup>31</sup>

This again shows a feeling of being trapped because if you are put in seclusion the nurse decides when you can come out and if she does not think you are ready then you have to stay locked up.

In *The Yellow Wallpaper* the woman wants to free the woman in the wallpaper and is not going to give up until she has got her out,

"I pulled and she shook, I shook and she pulled, and before morning we had peeled off yards of that paper"<sup>32</sup>

This shows how determined the woman is to free the trapped woman but in fact she is really trying to free herself. The woman finally begins to realise that she is the trapped woman,

"I wonder if they all come out of the wall-paper as I did?"<sup>33</sup>

This is the point where the woman realises she herself is trapped just like the woman she has seen in the paper and in herself she is trying to free. She manages to free the woman and so she has freed herself,

"And I've pulled off most of the paper, so you can't put me back!"<sup>34</sup>

This shows she feels free now and does not want to feel trapped as she is now happy to be free.

This is the same in *Girl Interrupted*,

"All of us had learned by default to treasure freedom and would do anything we could to get it and keep it."<sup>35</sup>

This shows that Susanna is the same and when she feels no longer trapped but free she does not want to lose the feeling just like the woman in *The Yellow Wallpaper*. This is also similar in *The Bell Jar* as Esther wants to gain privileges so she can do things herself,

"and I would probably be allowed shopping privileges and movie privileges downtown, and my escape would be assured."<sup>36</sup>

This shows that Esther is also frustrated at being trapped and having no freedom that she wants to gain privileges so she can run away as she no longer wants to stay trapped and wants to lead a normal life.

All three novels portray the same idea about the women feeling trapped due to their illness, lack of freedom and not being able to live their life normally.

The last thing that all three novels also show is how those in society act towards those who have mental health problems.

In *The Yellow Wallpaper* the woman is hidden away from society and not able to go out and see friends and relatives which suggests her husband was ashamed of what they would think.

"I wish he would let me go and make a visit to cousin Henry and Julia. But he said I wasn't able to go,"<sup>37</sup>

This suggests he does not want people to see his wife in the state she is in and suggests he might think she would be treated differently.

In *Girl Interrupted* the opening sentence is a powerful one and shows straight away how differently society can treat you,

"People ask, how did you get in there? What they really want to know is if they are likely to end up in there as well."<sup>38</sup>

This shows the reader straight away that Susanna Kaysen knows that people think of her as

<sup>31</sup> Susanna Kaysen, *Girl, Interrupted*, Viagro Press 2000, pg 46

<sup>32</sup> Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper*, The Feminist Press, New York, 2007, pg32

<sup>33</sup> Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper*, The Feminist Press, New York, 2007, pg35

<sup>34</sup> Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper*, The Feminist Press, New York, 2007, pg 36

<sup>35</sup> Susanna Kaysen, *Girl, Interrupted*, Viagro Press 2000, pg 124

<sup>36</sup> Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar*, Farber and Farber limited, 2005, pg 186

<sup>37</sup> Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper*, The Feminist Press, New York, 2007, pg21

<sup>38</sup> Susanna Kaysen, *Girl, Interrupted*, Viagro Press 2000, pg 5

different due to the fact that she had a mental health problem. They do not want the same happening to them and are scared it happens to them and want to know how to stop it from happening to them.

Also in *The Bell Jar* it becomes apparent that society is going to treat those with a mental health history differently and Esther is warned about this before she leaves the hospital,

"Doctor Nolan had said, quite bluntly, that a lot of people would treat me gingerly, or even avoid me, like a leper with a warning bell."<sup>39</sup>

Before she leaves the hospital her doctor lets Esther know what to expect of people and how they will treat her differently because she was ill.

Again in *Girl Interrupted* we see how society treat those who have had mental health problems differently,

"You're living at One fifteen Mill Street? Asked a small, basement-coloured person who ran a sewing-notions shop in Harvard Square, where I was trying to get a job."

"Uh-hunh"

"And how long have you been living there?"

"Oh, a while. I gestured at the past with one hand"

"And I guess you haven't been working for a while? He leaned back, enjoying himself."

"No, I said, I've been thinking things over. I didn't get the job. As I left the shop my glance met his, and he gave me a look of such terrible intimacy that I cringed. I know what you are, said his look. What were we, that they could know us so well? We were probably better than we used to be, before we went into the hospital."<sup>40</sup>

This shows that when Susanna is trying to put her life back on track and get a job her past does not help her and people cannot see past that she has been in hospital and do not give her the chance to prove herself.

All three novels show clearly and similarly that people in society do not treat the woman the same after finding out they have had mental health problems. Esther in *The Bell Jar* knows not to tell people that she has been staying in a mental hospital as it will change their opinion of her and they will treat her differently which she does not want. When Susanna Kaysen in *Girl Interrupted* enters the hospital she gives up her freedom. When she gets better and leaves the hospital to try and get her life back on track and get a job it is difficult. In the eyes of the employers her stay at the hospital is not good and affects her chances at the job. Although she is free from the confinement of the hospital it still affects her and limits her opportunities. This therefore showing that mental health problems do affect the way society treats people.

In conclusion the three novels *The Yellow Wallpaper* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *Girl Interrupted* by Susanna Kaysen and *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath explore the theme of mental health. These three novels all portray the effects mental health has on relationships and show how mental health issues can be the cause of breakdowns in relationships. Also the three novels similarly show the lack of freedom and privacy those with mental health problems are left with and suggests that people do not think these people can be trusted on their own and therefore need to be watched all the time. Lastly the three novels also show how if you have had a mental health problem the way society treats you changes and you are seen as different because of your past. These three novels portrayed effectively the effects and problems that arose between these three women who were all suffering from mental health problems.

<sup>39</sup> Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar*, Farber and Farber limited, 2005, pg 226

<sup>40</sup> Susanna Kaysen, *Girl, Interrupted*, Viagro Press 2000, pg 124



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