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“Women have sat indoors all these millions of years, so that by this time the very walls are permeated by their creative force.”

In relation to Woolf’s statement, explore the symbolism of ‘home’ in literature. Make reference to at least one example of prose and/or poetry written before 1928.

The ‘home’ is consistently used as a symbol for the temperament of its inhabitants and the mood of a narrative throughout English literature. Typically, a writer tends towards one of two tones when exploring the personality of a home: it is either characterised by a comforting familiarity and warm sentiment or by an oppressive emptiness - physical or emotional - and gloomy circumstance. In Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*, Longbourn is hub of jovial domesticity befitting a novel of manners but Gilman’s *The Yellow Wallpaper* depicts a woman driven to insanity by the interior decor of her summer house. Emily Brontë uses the home as a thematic device in her early nineteenth century novel when contrasting the eponymous and wild *Wuthering Heights* with the civilised and ‘splendid place’ that is Thrushcross Grange (p. 57). However each novel has a common constituent: the betrothed or married woman. She is in a position unique to her sex wherein, unlike her male counterparts, she experiences the dynamics and intricacies of two homes rather than one: her childhood and nuptial.

This essay aims to compare and contrast three texts which use symbolism to reference a woman’s relationship with her domestic surroundings: *A Room of One’s Own* is Virginia Woolf’s treatise on a woman’s need for her own creative space. *The Yellow Wallpaper* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman depicts the mental unraveling of a woman confined by an oppressive patriarchal figure in a rented mansion. Thirdly, *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Brontë, compares and assesses the merits and drawbacks of civilised culture versus wild passion through its two domestic environments.

In *A Room of One’s Own*, Woolf cites that a woman has very few creative outlets and limited creative freedom in the home. She challenges the guise that it is a comfortable, safe, familiar environment and refuses to celebrate the domestic sphere that women have been trapped in due to their perceived inabilities in other areas of work. Instead, Woolf sees that domestic life has inhibited women and the mundanity of its relentless cycle of cleaning, cooking, mending,

cleaning, cooking and mending has encouraged attitudes like that of Pope Pius XI that 'Most women have no character at all' (p.48). Her concluding idea in *A Room of One's Own* is that women need a place of creativity that is not aligned to the general domestic sphere of the house. In addition women need to have lives outside of the home so they can appreciate the parts of nature and human existence that have inspired male contemporaries for centuries. Being 'sat indoors' is what had been preventing women from making, in the same abundance that men do, notable pieces of art, scientific discoveries or steps into careers outside the home.

Woolf's statement that 'women have sat indoors all these millions of years' portrays how women throughout history have suffered from physical under-stimulation and, although not alluded to here, intellectual under-stimulation. This perhaps explains why, when mental asylums became popular in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, an unnecessarily high number of women were locked up as these are both causes of depression, which was seen to be a sign of insanity. The effects of intellectual under-stimulation combined with a desire to create are explored in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's semi-autobiographical short story *The Yellow Wallpaper*, published in 1892. Her bold portrayal of the middle-class American woman has led to it being regarded as 'a classic in feminist literature' as well as a cunning exposé of Gilman's doctor, Silas Weir Mitchell, and his infamous 'rest cure'.

Gilman's protagonist is the unnamed wife (telling in itself) of John the physician and a new mother. A modern reader may recognise her symptoms as those of post-natal depression but she has been diagnosed with 'temporary nervous depression' and 'a slight hysterical tendency' by her husband and her brother - both 'physicians of high standing'. In an attempt to cure his wife, John rents a mansion for the summer and creates a strict daily schedule which is largely based on ample amounts of fresh air and rest. The mansion becomes symbolic of John's - and by further extension nineteenth century - attitudes towards mental health: the protagonist is confined to the nursery at the top of the house so can easily be ignored but also controlled as she can only exit the house by going past John due to the room's windows being barred.

The fact that the protagonist is confined to the nursery could be symbolic of the parent-child relationship that was often common between husbands and wives in the nineteenth century.

Wives, due to their restricted economic and social independence and perceived lesser mental ability, were sometimes treated like children by their husbands, who were in complete financial control. Gilman explores a father-daughter relationship in *The Yellow Wallpaper* through John's patronising dismissal of the protagonist's concerns: he asks, 'what is it, little girl?' (p. 652) when she gets up to inspect the wallpaper in the middle of the night and when she raises concerns about the effectiveness of the rest cure he retaliates by saying, 'Bless her little heart!...she shall be as sick as she please!' (p. 652). This alienation of the protagonist leads to her distancing herself from John and relying on her imagination to provide company.

It can be argued that the couple's temporary home in *The Yellow Wallpaper* could also be symbolic of the protagonist's paranoia. She describes 'hedges and walls and gates that lock' when she compares the colonial mansion to 'English places that you read about' (p. 248). The three structures mentioned all connote separation and protection which also link to the protagonist's relationship with her husband. In addition they are relevant to her deterioration in mental stability later on in the story when she has trouble distinguishing the boundary between herself and the 'creeping woman' in the wallpaper: she wants to help this woman and feels as though she must physically reach for her by pulling the wallpaper off the walls. She also speculates about the supernatural in relation to her home: 'I would say a haunted house...there is something strange about the house - I can feel it' (pp. 647-648). The protagonist could be projecting her discomfort due to her depression onto an inanimate object - in this case the house - as a subconscious coping mechanism. This mention of the supernatural also allows the protagonist to think of the 'creeping woman' as a separate being from her. In addition she repeatedly sees the patterns on the wallpaper as eyes, 'bulbous eyes', 'unblinking eyes' (pp. 649, 650). A reader could interpret this as a manifestation of the protagonist's guilt for allowing herself to become stimulated by the wallpaper as John does not like her to become fixated and succumb to her 'fancies'.

Unlike Catherine Earnshaw in *Wuthering Heights*, whose character is defined by her movement between two homes, we only know Gilman's unnamed protagonist as a married woman

who offers no hint of her independent identity. For the reader, her identity is fundamentally linked to the décor of the house and more specifically just one room. As the narrative unfolds we see that the protagonist has become highly disturbed by the wallpaper covering the nursery walls. She mentions 'sprawling flamboyant patterns committing every artistic sin' and goes on to analyse it in detail using morbid imagery throughout: 'when you follow the lame uncertain curves for a little distance they suddenly commit suicide...the pattern lolls like a broken neck' (p. 648). However it can be argued that she finds some comfort in the 'atrocious nursery' as by the end of the story she refuses to go into any other room in the house and finds it highly irritating that her husband should sleep in the room with her at night. The comfort that the wallpaper offers is probably that it permits a form of creative license. This is because John cannot know what she is thinking and cannot forbid her from speculating about the world beyond the wall. This freedom becomes intoxicating to the protagonist and she slowly starts to distance herself from the people in her life as she obsesses over the 'creeping woman'. Gilman's protagonist allows the house to satisfy a craving to create.

Freedom is also a key theme in *Wuthering Heights* and Brontë uses three environments in which Catherine is comfortable and, arguably, considers to be 'home'. The two principal domestic settings are the civilised and cultural Thrushcross Grange and the wild and natural Wuthering Heights. Through the inherent contrast of these grand houses, separated by only a four mile expanse of the third setting, the Yorkshire moors, Brontë addresses the constraints of society and what it is to be an outsider. Her complex plot and characters allow the reader to understand that this is a novel about emancipation unattained and identity in, or out of, society.

Wuthering Heights is first described through the eyes of Lockwood as a 'perfect misanthropist's Heaven' (p.1) and is dark, forbidding and without heart. He immediately detects a silence behind the lack of domestic warmth: 'I observed no signs of roasting, boiling or baking about the huge fireplace' (p. 3). This depicts the absence of nurturing and hospitality that would be present if a family were to live there, rather just Heathcliff, Hareton and a few servants. When Catherine was in residence she brought vitality to the home: 'her spirits were always at high-water

mark, her tongue was always going - singing, laughing and plaguing everybody who would not do the same' (p. 49). Whereas this showed the atmosphere at the Heights to be anarchic, her first visit to Thrushcross Grange instils in her the gentility that was expected of young women in the eighteenth century. The Lintons begin a five week 'curing' treatment for Catherine by washing her feet, combing her hair and giving her slippers which are designed exclusively for internal use thus immediately denying the part of her that yearns to be outdoors.

The moors between the two estates are a central symbol in the novel. Catherine sees them as a place of freedom and opportunity and is strongly attached to them. So much so that she wishes to be buried in them rather than in a conventional chapel: 'My resting place where I'm bound before Spring is over! There it is, not among the Lintons, mind, under the chapel-roof; but in the open air with a head-stone' (p. 157). For Catherine and Heathcliff the moors are a place of youthful innocence, free from the demands of society. The fact that Catherine seems to yearn for them more than Heathcliff as the two grow up could communicate Brontë's view that these demands were much greater for women than men. This was certainly true with regards to a person's freedom and independence as women were not allowed by law to own property.

Despite Catherine's new status as a 'lady' due to her marriage and move to Thrushcross Grange, her true identity and nature is intrinsically linked to the more chaotic Wuthering Heights. This is evident on her death bed, when she confesses her real desire is to be back "home", which she identifies as the place of her childhood, rather than that of her married self. "Oh, dear! I thought I was at home," she sighed. 'I thought I was lying in my chamber at Wuthering Heights...Oh if I were but in my own bed in the old house!' (p. 152).

In both *Wuthering Heights* and *The Yellow Wallpaper* the novel ends with the female protagonist confined to a bedroom where her life has become dull and uninspiring. Catherine expresses her creativity through the poetic yearning for the freedom represented by the wildness of the moors, while Gilman's unnamed protagonist creates a rich but ultimately destructive inner life focusing on her wallpaper fantasies. Both were in property owned or paid for by their husbands.

This is why Woolf argues so vociferously for women to have a room of their own to allow creative freedom apart from their role in the house. Woolf quite rightly identified lack of financial independence as a key obstacle for women to have their own space: 'I thought how unpleasant it is to be locked out; and I thought how it is worse perhaps to be locked in; and, thinking of the safety and prosperity of the one sex and the poverty and insecurity of the other...' (p. 44).

For Woolf, her home is a place of sanctuary and creativity where she is able to think clearly and formulate the subject of her paper: *Women and Fiction*. She draws the curtains, shuts out distractions and lights the lamps before getting down to work. The women in the works discussed can afford no such luxuries as it is true that they have rooms to be alone in, however these rooms are bedrooms and not offices. The symbolism of the room of one's own is focused around not having to look after one's children or one's husband and feeling able to put one's means of creative expression above the traditional demands of domestic family life. According to Woolf, it is only when women's role in society is redefined that this is able to change: 'anything may happen when womanhood has ceased to be a protected occupation' (p. 56). Creativity needs two things to flourish for women: a room of one's own and the time to develop as an artist inside or outside the home.

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