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Freud and “The Yellow Wallpaper”: Doctors with Attitudes

Hysteria was a very misunderstood subject at the time when Freud was giving his lectures at Clark University in 1909. This insufficiency of knowledge about hysteria among many doctors has led Freud to form his opinion on them. Freud believes that doctors neglect patients with hysteria with the excuse of it not really being an actual illness or problem. This is due to their lack of knowledge on the subject and they try to hide it by making that excuse. Doctor Breuer is a doctor used in many of Freud’s lectures and examples and he has a different attitude towards how Breuer treats his patients. Breuer treats his patients with a lot of intrigue and sympathy to try to fully understand their symptoms and what they’re going through, even if he doesn’t really know what’s going on. An example to back Freud’s attitude towards doctors can be found in the short story “The Yellow Wallpaper”, where the narrator is constantly told by her husband who is also a doctor that she is fine and healthy when in reality she isn’t and she knows she isn’t. Freud’s opinion of doctors was very prominent among many doctors at the time, especially with cases concerning hysteria.

Freud goes into much detail about doctors in the first lecture and gives examples of this to show why doctors treat patients with neglect and false hope when they have hysteria. Many doctors at the time couldn’t find any organic diseases at the time, so they couldn’t find exactly what the patient was complaining about. This led to them telling the patients lies or not giving the patient the attention, they needed. Freud explains that this is due to their absence of knowledge on hysteria. He also describes hysteria as an “enigmatic condition” (6) which means that hysteria is not the average illness and requires much more understanding of what it is and how to treat from the doctor’s side. This causes the doctor to not care for the patient as much because he doesn’t want to show that he doesn’t know much about what the patient is experiencing. Freud also says that the doctor becomes the “layman” in this situation considering the fact that he doesn’t show any effort to try to understand what is going on or how he can help the patient. Instead, the doctor will tell the patient that he or she is doing fine and that they have nothing to worry about like what happened to the author of “The Yellow Wallpaper” and the narrator in the story. Freud didn’t have a good view of doctors and it mainly came down to how misunderstood hysteria was at the time.

Breuer’s attitude towards the patients is the complete opposite because Breuer actually tried to understand what the patient was complaining about and this led him to be able to make slight progress in trying to treat patients with hysteria. Freud says, “He gave her both sympathy and interest, even though, to begin with, he did not know how to help her” (8). This shows that Breuer was actually intrigued by the patient’s situation and tries to advance research in hysteria by trying to help the patient and potentially come up with cures to help a lot more patients. This in turn comforted the patient by Breuer’s ability to show intellect and interest in their symptoms, as well as actually admitting that they have a problem that needs to be fixed. This is most likely a big relief to the patient, where they were probably receiving the other type of treatment that Freud was describing before. These optimistic and curious traits from Breuer led to a lot more information being discovered on hysteria and helped Freud himself to conduct further researches himself, building off of what Breuer came up with. The attitude of Breuer towards hysterical patients differed dramatically from many other doctors.

“The Yellow Wallpaper” proves Freud’s opinion on doctors to be true because the narrator goes through the same thing that most of the patients in real life are going through. “If a physician of high standing, and one’s own husband, assures friends and relatives that there is really nothing the matter with one but temporary nervous depression – a slight hysterical tendency – what is one to do?” (Gilman 2). Her husband, who is also a physician, is telling her that its nothing serious and just some depression. This mirrors the attitudes of the doctors that Freud was criticizing in his first lecture. The reader starts to realize in the story that the narrator is experiencing symptoms of hysteria, but her husband continues to deny this because of his lack of knowledge on hysteria. This is exactly the type of doctor that Freud was talking about. Another example of this is with the author of “The Yellow Wallpaper” who wrote an article called “Why I Wrote ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’” and she says “Being naturally moved to rejoicing by this narrow escape, I wrote The Yellow Wallpaper, with its embellishments and additions, to carry out the ideal, and sent a copy to the physician who so nearly drove me mad. He never acknowledged it” (Gilman 1) This came as a result of the physician telling her to rest and to stop writing, which it clearly turned out that he had no expertise in the subject of hysteria. This is because she continued to write and do what made her feel comfortable which worked better than what he told her to do. She sent the story to him, but he never paid attention to it, which again proves what Freud was saying about doctors. They let their ego get the better of them and don’t open themselves to new knowledge that they can use to help other patients. Funnily enough, it is revealed that the doctor employs Gilman’s techniques in the future to help other patients. These two stories prove Freud’s take on doctors and cements his argument that doctors didn’t really understand hysteria and that would get in the way of them actually giving the patient the treatment they deserve.

In conclusion, Freud’s attitude towards doctors was very critical because he explains that not many of them really understand hysterical patients and what they’re going through and this is proven to be true in “The Yellow Wallpaper” and “Why I Wrote ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’”. This attitude that the doctors have restricts them from trying to find out what’s really going on with the patient and the narrator in the story and the author as well have had similar scenarios where this has happened. Breuer was one of the few, if not the only one who was intrigued and curious enough to really discover what was going on and help so many other psychologists and patients in the field of hysteria. Freud owes much of his findings to the help of Breuer who did what not many other doctors had the strength to do.

Works Cited

*Gilman, Why I Wrote The Yellow Wallpaper*, https://csivc.csi.cuny.edu/history/files/lavender/whyyw.html.

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Reflection

The genre of the essay is an argumentative essay which picks a side from the argument and backs it up by using evidence and cites sources to prove that point. It also has a thesis that answers the question that is asked and then backed by points in the body paragraphs. I wanted to show the connection between Freuds opinion of doctors and how they treat patients with hysteria to how that is shown in “The Yellow Wallpaper” and “Why I Wrote ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’”. This motivated me to pick a side on the argument and then look into the texts for evidence to back up my position on the question. This is what I was going for when writing the essay and what I wanted the reader to see when they read my essay. The purpose of the essay is to show the reader my opinion on the question that is asked and give them new insight into what Freud was saying in the first lecture. I wanted the reader to also see the examples that I use and hopefully convince them of my point that’s in the essay. The potential audience of the essay are people who are interested in Freud and his lectures and his opinions on different matters. It’s also for people who want to see the connection between the things that Freud said and different psychoanalytical stories. The essay would interest the people who are looking for those things. The relationship between me and the audience is an informational one, but also a persuasive one because I am trying to inform the audience on this specific topic, but also convince them of my point and why I think it’s true by using evidence from multiple sources. I can achieve these things by using the medium which is the argumentative essay that the audience is reading and that way, they can find out what I’m thinking and how it is backed from multiple works. These are the relationships that I’m hoping to maintain through writing this essay.