

El Awad

Sophia

Rest Cure

Weir Mitchell is well-known for the establishment of the rest cure, a method of treatment, designed for artistic women who suffered from serious anxiety and hysteria. It consisted of isolating patients while recommending them to stay confined to bed, and over-feeding them to restore the appropriate functionality of their damaged brain cells. As a result, by gaining weight weak patients were able to surmount their anxiousness with composure and self-assurance. As stated by Jones Ernest in his book entitled “Treatment of The Neuroses”

“The classical example of the physiological type of therapeutic measures is the well-known Weir Mitchell treatment. This has had a rather curious history. Of the four elements comprising the treatment, namely over-feeding, massage (with or without electricity), isolation, and rest in bed..., but for Mitchell the nutritional element was the cardinal one, as he indicated by the title of his book (Fat and Blood, and How to Make them). (Jones24)

The cure became the standard treatment for many decades for those creative women who were judged to be lunatic. We notice through women writing in the subjects discussed in class that madness was a recurrent theme similar to an icon.

Thus, a mad woman represented relief from the traditional restrictions imposed by patriarchy, such as found in “The yellow Wallpaper” story by Charlotte Perkinson. The female protagonist suffered from severe depression and was submitted to the rest cure therapy. The mad woman in the story is locked tragically in a room. The “central hall” refers to the father’s house where she inherited the rest cure. She was not taken seriously. By tearing the wallpaper, she overcomes her nervousness and uncontrolled agitation through repetitive and irrational behaviour. Moreover, she is confined to the private sphere under her husband’s control whose social status, being a doctor, was superior to hers. She aspires to get rid of patriarchy. The way her husband treats her as his “little goose” is disrespectful. By using patronizing words, he diminishes her, which reveals his superiority and his contempt towards her. Deborah Kathleen Brandy said “her physician husband, therefore, placed her on a rest cure modeled after S. Weir Mitchell’s famous rest cure and he forbade her to read, write, or socialize.” However, the rest cure in Charlotte Perkinson case proved useless. Her depression was not treated adequately with the rest cure, which led to her suicide.

Virginia Woolf was as well subject to rest cure as were many women of that period, who suffered from mental dysfunction and who could not be institutionalized, worst of all, they kept on working until their case worsened. The stress of creativity alienated them from their body; therefore, they were confined in their room and were over- nourished to increase their strength. However, Woolf was a victim of suicide even after following the treatment.

Emily Dickinson's poem "Much Madness is Divinest Sense" reveals her rebelliousness. She says that if women are submissive and accept patriarchy and marriage they are sane, but if they "demure" they are considered a threat to men and society in general.

Dorothy Livesay evokes in her poem entitled "The Three Emilies" her struggle between maternal labour and art, and her admiration towards them. She refers to Emily Carr, a famous painter who also had mental breakdowns and to whom rest cure was applied.

Charles Brontee, as well as Jean Rhys, was also subject to the rest cure therapy.

In both novels madness is seen as a hereditary case passed on genetically. In most cases, men were responsible for what happened; however, some women were truly depressed. Charlotte Brontë's novel is a good example of revealing the intensity of Bertha's state of mind. She was isolated from the rest of the family and locked up in the attic. When Rochester evoked her lunacy, he said that there is madness in Bertha's family and that he was not aware of it. In Jane Rhys' novel, Antoinette's mother was depressed because of her colonial situation. Besides that, Antoinette is also entrapped in a room under patriarchy and colonization.

Often isolation and confinement in the private sphere proved unbeneficial.

Certainly, to make such treatments helpful is to discover the motives behind such a mental disorder by providing accurate treatment to prevent them from relapsing again. Isn't their withdrawal from social contacts and interests a prominent factor in the decrease of their mental condition?

Cited Works

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