

THE YELLOW WALLPAPER

Charlotte Perkins Gilman

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1860-1935



- ▣ Genre: Novels, short stories, poetry
"The Yellow Wallpaper: Written and published in 1892
- ▣ Utopian feminist
- ▣ Suffered severe post-partum depression after birth of daughter
- ▣ Famous quotation
"There is no female brain. The brain is not an organ of sex. Might as well speak of a female liver."

The Yellow Wallpaper

Historical context

- ▣ Last three decades of 19th century: Time of development, growth, and expansion,
- ▣ Time of *femme covert*: Common law holding that meant wives were property of husbands and had no direct legal control over own earnings, children, or belongs

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Style

- ▣ Psychological realism (attempts to accurately portray the mental deterioration of narrator and depicts the way it was for women during the 19th century)
- ▣ Gothicism (horror, dread, dreams, suspense, and the supernatural)

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Characters

▣ Unnamed protagonist

The unnamed narrator of "The Yellow Wallpaper" is married to John, a doctor, and has just recently had a baby. She suffers from depression, or "nervous prostration," and is confined to a room that used to be a nursery, as a "bed-rest" cure, in a country house that she and her husband are renting for a holiday. While John does not allow her to read, write, or engage in any other type of mental stimulation, she does secretly write in a journal. The story itself is a transcription of these journal entries. Bored and restless, the narrator is driven to distraction by the yellow wallpaper that decorates the room, eventually suffering a complete mental breakdown after imagining that she sees in the wallpaper's pattern women who are trying to escape. Because the narrator is completely dependent on her husband and is allowed no other role than to be a wife and mother, she represents the secondary status of women during the nineteenth century.

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Characters

▣ John

The husband of the unnamed narrator, John is a doctor who believes in the "rest-cure," a treatment developed by real-life neurologist S. Weir Mitchell, for women suffering from hysteria. Therefore, he prescribes complete bed rest, not allowing his wife to do anything. John in many ways treats his wife like a child, calling her his "blessed little goose" and "little girl." The character displays the nineteenth-century attitude that women were to behave demurely and remain within the domestic sphere, aspiring only to be competent mothers and charming wives.

▣ Jennie

The narrator's sister-in-law. She helps to take care of the narrator and, more importantly, the narrator's newborn baby. She is described as "a perfect and enthusiastic housekeeper." She represents the nineteenth-century view of the role of women as housekeepers and child rearers.

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Setting

- ▣ Location – Country house
- ▣ House – Large, in disrepair
- ▣ Nursery – Yellow wallpaper, bars on windows, bed secured to floor

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Narration

- ▣ Point of view – 1st person
- ▣ Journal – Writing style changes as story progresses

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Symbolism

- ▣ Wallpaper – State of mind of protagonist
- ▣ Nursery – 19th century society's view of women as children (feminism)/society's or world's view of different genders, classes, nations, etc. as incapable of determining own future (classic)
- ▣ Barred windows – Emotional, psychological, and social isolation
- ▣ Nailed-down bed – Repressed sexuality

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Themes

▣ Mental illness

"The Yellow Wallpaper," because of its first-person description of mental illness, is also considered a work of psychological fiction. In the story Gilman addresses such themes as madness, depression, despair, and self-worth by presenting a realistic and shocking account of the stages of mental breakdown. Because the narrator has nothing to do to occupy herself and because she has no say in her treatment, she comes to project all of her pent-up feelings onto the yellow wallpaper in her room. She eventually believes that there is a woman trapped in the wallpaper's pattern. This trapped figure symbolizes the narrator's emotional and intellectual confinement. Left with no real means of expression or escape, the narrator represses her anger and frustration and succumbs to insanity.

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Themes

Role of women

"The Yellow Wallpaper" examines the role of women in nineteenth-century American society, including the relationship between husbands and wives, the economic and social dependence of women on men, and the repression of female individuality and sexuality. The Victorian Age had a profound impact on the social values in the United States. Victorian values stressed that women were to behave demurely and remain within the domestic sphere. Suffering from post-partum depression after the birth of her son, the protagonist is advised to get complete bed rest by her husband and brother, despite her suggestions that she would like to write and read. While she does secretly write in a journal, it is made clear that her husband is to be the final decision-maker and that she has no role other than to be a charming wife and a competent mother. In fact, John often treats her like a child, calling her his "little girl" and his "blessed little goose." When the narrator has a "real earnest reasonable talk" with John during which she asks him if she can visit some relatives, he does not allow her to go.