



# Actual understanding of Yellow Wallpaper by Charlotte Perkins

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**Abstract:** Charlotte Perkins Gilman's classic short story, "The Yellow Wallpaper" tells the story of a young woman's gradual descent into psychosis. "The Yellow Wallpaper" is often cited as an early feminist work that predates a woman's right to vote in the United States. The author was involved in first-wave feminism, and her other works questioned the origins of the subjugation of women, particularly in marriage. "The Yellow Wallpaper" is a widely read work that asks difficult questions about the role of women, particularly regarding their mental health and right to autonomy and self-identity. We'll go over The Yellow Wallpaper summary, themes and symbols, The Yellow Wallpaper analysis, and some important information about the author.

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The narrator begins her journal by marveling at the grandeur of the house and grounds her husband has taken for their summer vacation. She describes it in romantic terms as an aristocratic estate or even a haunted house and wonders how they were able to afford it, and why the house had been empty for so long. Her feeling that there is "something queer" about the situation leads her into a discussion of her illness—she is suffering from "nervous depression"—and of her marriage. She complains that her husband John, who is also her doctor, belittles both her illness and her thoughts and concerns in general. She contrasts his practical, rationalistic manner with her own imaginative, sensitive ways. Her treatment requires that she do almost nothing active, and she is especially forbidden from working and writing. She feels that activity, freedom, and interesting work would help her condition and reveals that she has begun her secret journal in order to "relieve her mind." In an attempt to do so, the narrator begins describing the house. Her description is mostly positive, but disturbing elements such as the "rings and things" in the bedroom walls, and the bars on the windows, keep showing up. She is particularly disturbed by the yellow wallpaper in the bedroom, with its strange, formless pattern, and describes it as "revolting." Soon, however, her thoughts are interrupted by John's approach, and she is forced to stop writing.

As the first few weeks of the summer pass, the narrator becomes good at hiding her journal, and thus hiding her true thoughts from John. She continues to long for more stimulating company and activity, and she complains again about John's patronizing, controlling ways—although she immediately returns to the wallpaper, which begins to seem not only ugly, but oddly menacing. She mentions that John is worried about her becoming fixated on it, and that he has even refused to repaper the room so as not to give in to her neurotic worries. The narrator's imagination, however, has been aroused. She mentions that she enjoys picturing people on the walkways around the house and that John always discourages such fantasies. She also thinks back to her childhood, when she was able to work herself into a terror by imagining things in the dark. As she describes the bedroom, which she says must have been a nursery for young children, she points out that the paper is torn off the wall in spots, there are scratches and gouges in the floor, and the furniture is heavy and fixed in place. Just as she begins to see a strange sub-pattern behind the main design of the wallpaper, her writing is interrupted again, this time by John's sister, Jennie, who is acting as housekeeper and nurse for the narrator.

As the Fourth of July passes, the narrator reports that her family has just visited, leaving her more tired than ever. John threatens to send her to Weir Mitchell, the real-life physician under whose care Gilman had a nervous breakdown. The narrator is alone most of the time and says that she has become almost fond of the wallpaper and that attempting to figure out its pattern has become her primary entertainment. As her obsession grows, the sub-pattern of the wallpaper becomes clearer. It begins to resemble a woman “stooping down and creeping” behind the main pattern, which looks like the bars of a cage. Whenever the narrator tries to discuss leaving the house, John makes light of her concerns, effectively silencing her. Each time he does so, her disgusted fascination with the paper grows.

Soon the wallpaper dominates the narrator’s imagination. She becomes possessive and secretive, hiding her interest in the paper and making sure no one else examines it so that she can “find it out” on her own. At one point, she startles Jennie, who had been touching the wallpaper and who mentions that she had found yellow stains on their clothes. Mistaking the narrator’s fixation for tranquility, John thinks she is improving. But she sleeps less and less and is convinced that she can smell the paper all over the house, even outside. She discovers a strange smudge mark on the paper, running all around the room, as if it had been rubbed by someone crawling against the wall.

The sub-pattern now clearly resembles a woman who is trying to get out from behind the main pattern. The narrator sees her shaking the bars at night and creeping around during the day, when the woman is able to escape briefly. The narrator mentions that she, too, creeps around at times. She suspects that John and Jennie are aware of her obsession, and she resolves to destroy the paper once and for all, peeling much of it off during the night. The next day she manages to be alone and goes into something of a frenzy, biting and tearing at the paper in order to free the trapped woman, whom she sees struggling from inside the pattern. By the end, the narrator is hopelessly insane, convinced that there are many creeping women around and that she herself has come out of the wallpaper—that she herself is the trapped woman. She creeps endlessly around the room, smudging the wallpaper as she goes. When John breaks into the locked room and sees the full horror of the situation, he faints in the doorway, so that the narrator has “to creep over him every time!”

## Themes

### The Subordination of Women in Marriage

In “The Yellow Wallpaper,” Gilman uses the conventions of the psychological horror tale to critique the position of women within the institution of marriage, especially as practiced by the “respectable” classes of her time. When the story was first published, most readers took it as a scary tale about a woman in an extreme state of consciousness—a gripping, disturbing entertainment, but little more. After its rediscovery in the twentieth century, however, readings of the story have become more complex. For Gilman, the conventional nineteenth-century middle-class marriage, with its rigid distinction between the “domestic” functions of the female and the “active” work of the male, ensured that women remained second-class citizens. The story reveals that this gender division had the effect of keeping women in a childish state of ignorance and preventing their full development. John’s assumption of his own superior wisdom and maturity leads him to misjudge, patronize, and dominate his wife, all in the name of “helping” her. The narrator is reduced to acting like a cross, petulant child, unable to stand up for herself without seeming unreasonable or disloyal. The narrator has no say in even the smallest details of her life, and she retreats into her obsessive fantasy, the only place she can retain some control and exercise the power of her mind.

### The Importance of Self-Expression

The mental constraints placed upon the narrator, even more so than the physical ones, are what ultimately drive her insane. She is forced to hide her anxieties and fears in order to preserve the façade of a happy marriage and to make it seem as though she is winning the fight against her depression. From the beginning, the most intolerable aspect of her treatment is the compulsory silence and idleness of the “resting cure.” She is forced to become completely passive, forbidden from exercising her mind in any way. Writing is especially off limits, and John warns her several times that she must use her self-control to rein in her imagination, which he fears will run away with her. Of course, the narrator’s eventual insanity is a product of the repression of her imaginative power, not the expression of it. She is constantly longing for an emotional and intellectual outlet, even going so far as to keep a secret journal, which she describes more than once as a “relief” to her mind. For Gilman, a mind that is kept in a state of forced inactivity is doomed to self-destruction.

## The Evils of the “Resting Cure”

As someone who almost was destroyed by S. Weir Mitchell’s “resting cure” for depression, it is not surprising that Gilman structured her story as an attack on this ineffective and cruel course of treatment. “The Yellow Wallpaper” is an illustration of the way a mind that is already plagued with anxiety can deteriorate and begin to prey on itself when it is forced into inactivity and kept from healthy work. To his credit, Mitchell, who is mentioned by name in the story, took Gilman’s criticism to heart and abandoned the “resting cure.” Beyond the specific technique described in the story, Gilman means to criticize any form of medical care that ignores the concerns of the patient, considering her only as a passive object of treatment. The connection between a woman’s subordination in the home and her subordination in a doctor/patient relationship is clear—John is, after all, the narrator’s husband and doctor. Gilman implies that both forms of authority can be easily abused, even when the husband or doctor means to help. All too often, the women who are the silent subjects of this authority are infantilized, or worse.

### Symbols

#### The Wallpaper

“The Yellow Wallpaper” is driven by the narrator’s sense that the wallpaper is a text she must interpret, that it symbolizes something that affects her directly. Accordingly, the wallpaper develops its symbolism throughout the story. At first it seems merely unpleasant: it is ripped, soiled, and an “unclean yellow.” The worst part is the ostensibly formless pattern, which fascinates the narrator as she attempts to figure out how it is organized. After staring at the paper for hours, she sees a ghostly sub-pattern behind the main pattern, visible only in certain light. Eventually, the sub-pattern comes into focus as a desperate woman, constantly crawling and stooping, looking for an escape from behind the main pattern, which has come to resemble the bars of a cage. The narrator sees this cage as festooned with the heads of many women, all of whom were strangled as they tried to escape. Clearly, the wallpaper represents the structure of family, medicine, and tradition in which the narrator finds herself trapped. Wallpaper is domestic and humble, and Gilman skillfully uses this nightmarish, hideous paper as a symbol of the domestic life that traps so many women.

#### Character of John

Though John seems like the obvious villain of “The Yellow Wallpaper,” the story does not allow us to see him as wholly evil. John’s treatment of the narrator’s depression goes terribly wrong, but in all likelihood he was trying to help her, not make her worse. The real problem with John is the all-encompassing authority he has in his combined role as the narrator’s husband and doctor. John is so sure that he knows what’s best for his wife that he disregards her own opinion of the matter, forcing her to hide her true feelings. He consistently patronizes her. He calls her “a blessed little goose” and vetoes her smallest wishes, such as when he refuses to switch bedrooms so as not to overindulge her “fancies.” Further, his dry, clinical rationality renders him uniquely unsuited to understand his imaginative wife. He does not intend to harm her, but his ignorance about what she really needs ultimately proves dangerous.

John knows his wife only superficially. He sees the “outer pattern” but misses the trapped, struggling woman inside. This ignorance is why John is no mere cardboard villain. He cares for his wife, but the unequal relationship in which they find themselves prevents him from truly understanding her and her problems. By treating her as a “case” or a “wife” and not as a person with a will of her own, he helps destroy her, which is the last thing he wants. That John has been destroyed by this imprisoning relationship is made clear by the story’s chilling finale. After breaking in on his insane wife, John faints in shock and goes unrecognized by his wife, who calls him “that man” and complains about having to “creep over him” as she makes her way along the wall.

#### Character of narrator

The narrator of “The Yellow Wallpaper” is a paradox: as she loses touch with the outer world, she comes to a greater understanding of the inner reality of her life. This inner/outer split is crucial to understanding the nature of the narrator’s suffering. At every point, she is faced with relationships, objects, and situations that seem innocent and natural but that are actually quite bizarre and even oppressive. In a sense, the plot of “The Yellow Wallpaper” is the narrator’s attempt to avoid acknowledging the extent to which her external situation stifles her inner impulses. From the beginning, we see that the narrator is an imaginative, highly expressive woman. She remembers terrifying herself with imaginary nighttime monsters as a child, and she enjoys the notion that the house they have taken is haunted. Yet as part of her “cure,” her husband forbids her to exercise her imagination in any way. Both her reason and her emotions rebel at this treatment,

and she turns her imagination onto seemingly neutral objects—the house and the wallpaper—in an attempt to ignore her growing frustration. Her negative feelings color her description of her surroundings, making them seem uncanny and sinister, and she becomes fixated on the wallpaper.

As the narrator sinks further into her inner fascination with the wallpaper, she becomes progressively more dissociated from her day-to-day life. This process of dissociation begins when the story does, at the very moment she decides to keep a secret diary as “a relief to her mind.” From that point, her true thoughts are hidden from the outer world, and the narrator begins to slip into a fantasy world in which the nature of “her situation” is made clear in symbolic terms. Gilman shows us this division in the narrator’s consciousness by having the narrator puzzle over effects in the world that she herself has caused. For example, the narrator doesn’t immediately understand that the yellow stains on her clothing and the long “smooch” on the wallpaper are connected. Similarly, the narrator fights the realization that the predicament of the woman in the wallpaper is a symbolic version of her own situation. At first she even disapproves of the woman’s efforts to escape and intends to “tie her up.”

When the narrator finally identifies herself with the woman trapped in the wallpaper, she is able to see that other women are forced to creep and hide behind the domestic “patterns” of their lives, and that she herself is the one in need of rescue. The horror of this story is that the narrator must lose herself to understand herself. She has untangled the pattern of her life, but she has torn herself apart in getting free of it. An odd detail at the end of the story reveals how much the narrator has sacrificed. During her final split from reality, the narrator says, “I’ve got out at last, in spite of you and Jane.” Who is this Jane? Some critics claim “Jane” is a misprint for “Jennie,” the sister-in-law. It is more likely, however, that “Jane” is the name of the unnamed narrator, who has been a stranger to herself and her jailers. Now she is horribly “free” of the constraints of her marriage, her society, and her own efforts to repress her mind.

### **Irony in the story**

Almost every aspect of “The Yellow Wallpaper” is ironic in some way. Irony is a way of using words to convey multiple levels of meaning that contrast with or complicate one another. In verbal irony, words are frequently used to convey the exact opposite of their literal meaning, such as when one person responds to another’s mistake by saying “nice work.” (Sarcasm—which this example embodies—is a form of verbal irony.) In her journal, the narrator uses verbal irony often, especially in reference to her husband: “John laughs at me, of course, but one expects that in marriage.” Obviously, one expects no such thing, at least not in a healthy marriage. Later, she says, “I am glad my case is not serious,” at a point when it is clear that she is concerned that her case is very serious indeed.

Dramatic irony occurs when there is a contrast between the reader’s knowledge and the knowledge of the characters in the work. Dramatic irony is used extensively in “The Yellow Wallpaper.” For example, when the narrator first describes the bedroom John has chosen for them, she attributes the room’s bizarre features—the “rings and things” in the walls, the nailed-down furniture, the bars on the windows, and the torn wallpaper—to the fact that it must have once been used as a nursery. Even this early in the story, the reader sees that there is an equally plausible explanation for these details: the room had been used to house an insane person. Another example is when the narrator assumes that Jennie shares her interest in the wallpaper, while it is clear that Jennie is only now noticing the source of the yellow stains on their clothing. The effect intensifies toward the end of the story, as the narrator sinks further into her fantasy and the reader remains able to see her actions from the “outside.” By the time the narrator fully identifies with the trapped woman she sees in the wallpaper, the reader can appreciate the narrator’s experience from her point of view as well as John’s shock at what he sees when he breaks down the door to the bedroom.

Situational irony refers to moments when a character’s actions have the opposite of their intended effect. For example, John’s course of treatment backfires, worsening the depression he was trying to cure and actually driving his wife insane. Similarly, there is a deep irony in the way the narrator’s fate develops. She gains a kind of power and insight only by losing what we would call her self-control and reason.

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