

The Yellow Wallpaper



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF CHARLOTTE PERKINS GILMAN

Charlotte Perkins Gilman had a difficult childhood after her father abandoned her family while she was still an infant. Her aunts, including prominent suffragist Isabella Beecher Hooker and author Harriet Beecher Stowe, helped to support her mother through this period. In 1884 she married Charles Walter Stetson and gave birth to their only child, a daughter. After the birth of her daughter, she suffered from post-partum depression and was prescribed an unsuccessful 'rest-cure' by Dr. Silas Weir Mitchell, who suggested that she focus on domestic duties and avoid intellectual activity. She separated from her husband in 1888 and moved to Pasadena, California and became an active voice in the feminist movement, publishing extensively on the role of women in the household. She was married again in 1900, to her first cousin Houghton Gilman. In 1932 she was diagnosed with breast cancer and, in 1935, she committed suicide by taking an overdose of chloroform, which she viewed as preferable to death by cancer.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Gilman was writing at the very beginnings of the Progressive era in America, a time when many writers were using their art to contribute to a national conversation about social issues. In addition to her creative work, she wrote explicitly political books on the unhealthy dynamic of the traditional American family, arguing that everyone (men and women) was made unhappy and unproductive by the system as it existed.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Often compared to the Gothic psychological horror tales of Edgar Allan Poe, particularly *The Tell-Tale Heart*, which also features first person narration from an unreliable, insane narrator. Many feminist critics have also thought of the narrator as she relates to the madwoman in *Jane Eyre*, by Charlotte Bronte.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Yellow Wallpaper
- **When Written:** June, 1890
- **Where Written:** California
- **When Published:** May, 1892
- **Literary Period:** Gothic
- **Genre:** Short story; Gothic horror; Feminist literature

- **Setting:** Late nineteenth century, in a colonial mansion that has been rented for the summer. Most of the story's action takes place in a room at the top of the house that is referred to as the "nursery."
- **Climax:** The narrator suffers a complete mental breakdown, identifying herself with the woman she has hallucinated as being trapped in the yellow wallpaper and clawing at the walls as she creeps in endless circles about the room and over her fainted husband.
- **Antagonist:** John, the narrator's husband and doctor, could be considered an antagonist, although he is not a purely evil character.
- **Point of View:** First person narrator, in a series of diary entries.

EXTRA CREDIT

Self-funded. To finance her education at the Rhode Island School of Design, Charlotte Perkins Gilman painted advertisements (trade cards) for soap companies.

Utopian lit. In addition to critiques like *The Yellow Wallpaper*, Gilman wrote utopian fiction through which she imagined a world in which social conditions reflected equality for women.



PLOT SUMMARY

The Yellow Wallpaper is written as a series of diary entries from the perspective of a woman who is suffering from post-partum depression. The narrator begins by describing the large, ornate home that she and her husband, John, have rented for the summer. John is an extremely practical man, a physician, and their move into the country is partially motivated by his desire to expose his suffering wife to its clean air and calm life so that she can recover from what he sees as a slight hysterical tendency.

The narrator complains that her husband will not listen to her worries about her condition, and treats her like a child. She also suspects that there is something strange and mysterious about the house, which has been empty for some time, but John dismisses her concerns as a silly fantasy. As part of her cure, the narrator is forbidden from pursuing any activity other than domestic work, so as not to tax her mind. She particularly misses the intellectual act of writing and conversation, and this account is written in a [diary](#) that she hides from her husband. They move into the room at the top of the house, which the narrator supposes is a former nursery since it has barred windows and peeling yellow wallpaper.

This repellent [yellow wallpaper](#) becomes a major force in the

story, as the narrator grows obsessed with deciphering its seemingly incomprehensible, illogical patterns. She continues to hide the diary from John, and grows more and more convinced that the wallpaper contains a malevolent force that threatens the whole home. From her room, she can see a shaded lane, the bay, and an overgrown garden. When she can escape the attention of her husband and Jennie, his sister, she continues her study of the wallpaper and begins to imagine she can see a [mysterious figure](#) hiding behind the top pattern. She tries to convince her husband that they should leave the house, but he insists that she is improving and sees indulging her concerns as encouraging a dangerous, fanciful nature, when what is required is self-control.

The narrator's depression and fatigue continue to worsen. Her fascination with the wallpaper takes over her life. In a series of increasingly short diary entries, she describes her progress in uncovering the secrets of its pattern, as she grows increasingly paranoid about the intentions of Jennie and John. She believes that the figure is a creeping woman, trapped behind the bars of the top pattern, and becomes determined to free her, and to keep the secret of her existence from her husband and his sister. She surprises Jennie examining a scratched groove on the wall, and doesn't believe her excuse that she had been looking for the source of the yellow stains on the narrator's clothes. She begins to keep secrets even from her diary, and makes an initial, nighttime attempt to remove the wallpaper on the eve of their departure. Later, when all the furniture has been removed from the room except for the gnawed and heavy bedstand, she locks the door and throws the key down onto the front drive, and then proceeds to tear and tear at the parts of the wallpaper she can reach.

Here, at the story's climax, the perspective shifts as the narrator's mental breakdown becomes complete, and in her madness she is convinced that she is the woman who was trapped behind the wallpaper. She begins to creep around the room in an endless circle, smudging the wallpaper in a straight groove. John breaks into the room and discovers her, and faints at the sight. She continues to creep endlessly around the room, forced to go over his prone body.

effort and performing only domestic duties. She led an intellectual life, perhaps as a writer, before this rest cure was imposed by her husband, and profoundly misses creative and intellectual activities. She expresses worry about her own feelings of depression over the course of the tale. Her mental state gradually deteriorates, along with her relationship to her husband, until she suffers a complete breakdown into madness at the story's conclusion.

John – The narrator's husband. He is a physician of high standing, and becomes doctor to his wife. He is extremely practical, rejects superstition, and is interested only in physical facts. This leads him to dismiss his wife's concerns about her inner life, and impose his own cure – rest, food, air, phosphates, and a freedom from the distractions of life outside the domestic sphere. John treats his wife like a child in many ways, calling her his "little girl". His inability to truly recognize the inner life of his wife is made clear in her [diary](#), and leads him to faint in shock when he realizes the true extent of her illness.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Jennie – Jennie is John's sister, who acts as housekeeper in their summer home, and also seems to serve as a caretaker to the narrator. She is described as enthusiastic in her duties, and worried for the well-being of her sister-in-law.

Mary – The nanny, who takes care of the couple's baby.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



MENTAL ILLNESS AND ITS TREATMENT

Reading the series of [diary](#) entries that make up the story, the reader is in a privileged position to witness the narrator's evolving and accelerating descent into madness, foreshadowed by her mounting paranoia and obsession with [the mysterious figure](#) behind the pattern of the yellow wallpaper.

As the portrayal of a woman's gradual mental breakdown, *The Yellow Wallpaper* offers the reader a window into the perception and treatment of mental illness in the late nineteenth century. In the style of a Gothic horror story, the tale follows the gradual deterioration of its narrator's mental state, but it also explores the ways that her husband John's attempted treatment aggravates this decline. In one sense, then, the story is a propaganda piece criticizing a specific way of 'curing' mental illness. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, the author of the story,



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

The Narrator – An upper middle class woman, recently a mother, who seems to be suffering from post-partum depression. One line from the tale's conclusion suggests that her name is Jane, although there is some dispute among scholars as to its interpretation (this LitChart will simply refer to her as 'the narrator'). Her husband, John, has moved them to this colonial estate for the summer to aid in her recovery by giving her a "rest cure," which entails avoiding all intellectual

suffered from post-partum depression and, in circumstances very similar to those of the story's narrator, was prescribed a 'rest cure' by Dr. Silas Weir Mitchell, who is mentioned by name in her tale. She underwent a mental breakdown as a result of this enforced idleness, which forbade any form of writing or work outside of the domestic sphere. The forced confinement of the story's narrator, and her husband's injunctions against writing or other activity, mirror this 'rest cure' in the author's life.

John, the narrator's husband, serves also as her de facto doctor. As such, he is a model of traditional attitudes toward mental illness. He is driven purely by practicalities, prescribing self-control above all else, and warning against anything that he sees as indulging his wife's dangerous imagination or hysteria. His refusal to acknowledge his wife's concerns about her own mental state as legitimate, or to listen to her various requests – about their choice of room, receiving visitors, leaving the house, her writing or, of course, [the wallpaper](#) – ultimately contributes to her breakdown, as she finds herself trapped, alone, and unable to make her inner struggles understood. This feeling of powerlessness, of an inability to communicate, is portrayed with special horror to inspire empathy in a progressive reader, who may have been moved to reconsider methods such as the rest cure of Weir Mitchell.



GENDER ROLES AND DOMESTIC LIFE

Alongside its exploration of mental illness, *The Yellow Wallpaper* offers a critique of traditional gender roles as they were defined during the late nineteenth century, the time in which the story is set and was written. Charlotte Perkins Gilman was a prominent feminist, who rejected the trappings of traditional domestic life and published extensively about the role of women in society, and saw the gender roles of the time as horribly stifling.

The story's family unit falls along traditional lines. John, the husband, is rational, practically minded, protective, and the ultimate decision maker in the couple. He infantilizes his wife, referring to her as his 'little girl' and brushing off her complaints. However, John is not purely the irredeemable villain of the story. Rather, we see how his ability to communicate effectively with his wife is constrained by the structure of their gender roles. This is an important point: John's happiness is also ruined by the strictures of traditional domestic life.

The narrator, his wife, is confined to the home, not allowed to work (or to write), and considered by her husband to be fragile, emotional, and self-indulgent. Differing readings of the text's sarcasm lead to different interpretations of her voluntary submission to this role, but it is clear that her forced inactivity was abhorrent to her. [The diary](#) becomes a symbol of her rebellion against John's commands. The willingness of John's sister, Jennie, to submit to her domestic role in the home only

increases the narrator's guilt at her own dissatisfaction.

[The mysterious figure](#) of a woman trapped behind [the yellow wallpaper](#) becomes a symbol for the ways in which the narrator herself feels trapped by her role in the family. The narrator's urgent desire to free this woman, and to hide her existence from John and Jennie, leads to her raving final breakdown as she tears the paper, 'creeping' around the room and over her husband – who, in a reversal of their traditional roles as strong protector and fragile child, has fainted in shock at the sight of his wife.



OUTWARD APPEARANCE VS. INNER LIFE

Another major theme in the story lies in the contradiction between outward appearance and inner life.

The story's form, in a series of [diary](#) entries, gives the reader a glimpse into its writer's inner life. This, in turn, allows us to watch as the narrator's husband misinterprets her condition, and as she begins to consciously deceive both him and Jennie. Our privileged view into the narrator's mind leads to an appreciation of the *sarcasm* and *irony* that lace her descriptions of her husband John and her life in the home. Even as her husband is convinced that she is improving, the reader witnesses her obsession with [the wallpaper](#) take a dangerous turn as her despair intensifies. The practically minded John is unable to grasp the realities of his wife's inner life, which exists outside of his direct observation. He assumes she is improving since she eats more at dinner, ignoring her more emotional complaints. His blindness to her inner life means that, when she ultimately breaks down completely at the story's climax, John is shocked to the point of fainting.

The narrator's descriptions of her home, and in particular of the wallpaper, further highlight this contradiction between outward appearance and inner life. Many of the rooms and objects in the home and in the narrator's memory of her childhood, although outwardly inanimate, take on a sort of life. Even before the narrator becomes convinced that the wallpaper contains [a mysterious figure](#), she describes it as having an all-pervasive, changeable, menacing life of its own, invading the whole house and hiding some evil intention. It is partly the narrator's intense need to interpret this inner life of the wallpaper that drives her to madness, a process that mirrors her attempt to interpret her own psychological condition as well as the reader's attempts to interpret her story.



SELF-EXPRESSION, MISCOMMUNICATION, AND MISUNDERSTANDING

Alongside questions of gender and mental illness in "The Yellow Wallpaper" is the simple story of a woman who is

unable fully to express herself, or to find someone who will listen.

The narrator's sense that the act of writing, which she has been forbidden to do, is exactly what she needs to feel better suggests this stifled self-expression. Since she is unable to communicate with her husband, this [diary](#) becomes a secret outlet for those thoughts that would cause him to worry or become upset. The conversations recorded in the diary reveal the extent to which her husband John misunderstands her inner life, and the reader's ability to see this miscommunication creates *dramatic irony*, which arises when the reader knows more about what's going on than the characters. The reader can see both how the narrator's relationship to her husband changes dramatically over the course of her stay in the room with [the yellow wallpaper](#), and how John is blind to this growing distance. Able to see this but, being a reader, able to do nothing about it, the reader comes to inhabit a similar position as the narrator in her isolation – of being able to perceive things but completely unable to then share them in a meaningful or impactful way.

There are also moments of misunderstanding within the diary itself, small clues that signal the house's darker past. These markers create another kind of dramatic irony, since here it is the narrator herself whose knowledge is incomplete. The reader is kept in suspense as these small details, such as the gnawed bedposts or the barred windows, reveal new information about the rented house, which we know has stood empty for a long period, and was acquired inexpensively for the summer. There is an implication that the upper room has served before as a sanatorium (rather than as a nursery), and perhaps that the house is indeed haunted, as the narrator jokingly suggests in the opening diary entry. These details create an awareness of the author behind the character of the narrator, who has crafted this story to maximize its horror, and in so doing has linked the horror of a traditional gothic tale with what the author sees as the horror of the way her society treats women faced with mental illness.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in [blue text](#) throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



THE WALLPAPER

The yellow wallpaper of the 'nursery' gives this story its title, and becomes an obsession of the narrator, who begins to view it as a living entity. Its significance shifts as the story progresses, but it is most importantly a symbol of the narrator's worsening mental state. It is partly a puzzle that confounds interpretation, a challenge to be overcome, and partly a malevolent, all-pervasive force that

keeps her from resting soundly. Since the narrator is unable to convince her husband, John, to change the wallpaper, it also represents her impotence in the household and his dismissal of her concerns.



THE DIARY

The story is told through a series of secret entries in the diary of the narrator, who has been forbidden from writing. As a form of written expression, the diary represents the life of the mind that the narrator has been forced to give up during her "rest cure," and gives the reader a privileged view of her inner life. The diary is also a symbol of the narrator's rebellion against John.



THE MYSTERIOUS FIGURE

As the story progresses, the narrator begins to imagine that, in a certain light, a mysterious figure appears within [the wallpaper](#). Eventually this figure takes on the form of a woman, and she seems to be trapped within the wallpaper. The narrator keeps this mysterious figure's existence a secret from her husband, John, and in the story's climax seeks to free her by destroying the wallpaper. The woman behind the wallpaper seems to represent the narrator's own sense of confinement and being oppressed, and she eventually identifies herself entirely with this mysterious figure.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin edition of *The Yellow Wall-Paper, Herland, and Selected Writings* published in 2009.

First Entry Quotes

☹☹ It is very seldom that mere ordinary people like John and myself secure ancestral halls for the summer. A colonial mansion, a hereditary estate, I would say a haunted house, and reach the height of romantic felicity—but that would be asking too much of fate! Still I will proudly declare that there is something queer about it.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), John

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 166

Explanation and Analysis



These words that the narrator writes in her diary begin the

story, and set the tone for the rest of the tale. On the one hand, there is already a sense of suspicion in the narrator's description of the house as haunted, a suggestion that there may be a malevolent force at work in this outwardly grand summer home. This sense foreshadows the psychological horror of the story to come. At the same time, the narrator's dismissal of her own suspicion as "the height of romantic felicity" is a moment of self-deprecation that hints at the way that she has been repressed and taught not to trust herself or take her own feelings seriously. And finally, her "proud" declaration that there is something odd about the house and the way that her statement "would be asking too much of fate" seems to imply that she might *want* the house to be haunted—that the narrator herself might be hiding some inner demons or desires.

So, in just this brief opening statement the story establishes both that the house might not be what it appears, and that the narrator might hide more within her than first is visible. That both might hide a secret—and perhaps sinister—inner life.

☞ John laughs at me, of course, but one expects that in marriage.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), John

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 166

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote the narrator explains how John, her husband and de facto doctor, mocks her worry about the house they have rented for the summer. In laughing at his wife's concerns, John reveals how lightly he values her judgment, a disregard that will extend to his condescending belief that he understands her anxiety and mental illness better than she does. Because he is unable to take the inner life of his wife seriously, John seriously misunderstands the extent and cause of her illness, belittling the narrator in a way that only further isolates her.

The quote also connects John's belief about his wife's "silliness" to society's perception of women in the nineteenth century, as the narrator makes clear with her admission that "of course" any woman should expect such treatment in a marriage. While one might read the narrator's quote here as resigned or accepting—that's just the way life and marriage is for women—it is also possible to

read the line as sarcastic, in which case her sarcasm would signal that the narrator is more resistant to the unfair restrictions put on her because she is a woman than it may at first appear from her seemingly polite treatment of John. This potential sarcasm, along with the diary itself, which she is hiding it from the husband who has expressly forbidden her from keeping any sort of journal, can therefore be seen as rebellions against those sexist restrictions and the unfair treatment of women.

☞ John is a physician, and PERHAPS—(I would not say it to a living soul, of course, but this is dead paper and a great relief to my mind)—PERHAPS that is one reason I do not get well faster.
You see he does not believe I am sick!
And what can one do?

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), John

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 166

Explanation and Analysis

These lines are the first clue that the narrator is sick in some way, and signal that what we are reading is a secret diary. There is a dark humor in the suggestion that the reason the narrator remains sick is that her husband is a doctor. This is a bitter joke criticizing doctors, and particularly male doctors who misunderstand (or condescendingly refuse to trust or believe) their female patients. Here, again, John is shown as being incapable of taking his wife's mental illness seriously, believing her sickness to be the result of her "fancy" and fragility as a woman and not an actual illness. The narrator's helplessness in the face of her doctor-husband's judgment reveals how little agency women had over their own lives at the time, and suggests that this lack of control is in fact what is *causing* her sickness (in part, at least). This jab at doctors also begins Gilman's attack on her own, real-life doctor, Dr. Weir Mitchell, who prescribed to Gilman a "rest cure" similar to the forced idleness enforced upon the narrator in this short story.

The fact that the story in our hands is a secret diary also creates a close relationship between reader and narrator, since we are privileged to see critical parts of her thinking that other characters in the story cannot. In one sense, then, the distinction between "living souls" and "dead paper" is a

false one, since we, as readers, are essentially a living audience for the narrator—we are "living souls" who are hearing what she has to say through the "dead paper" upon which she writes. The use of the phrase "dead paper," which in fact might be described as a kind of living connection between the narrator and the reader, also foreshadows the yellow wallpaper of her room—more "dead paper" that seems to become inhabited with a mysterious "living soul."

☞ He is very careful and loving, and hardly lets me stir without special direction.

I have a schedule prescription for each hour in the day; he takes all care from me, and so I feel basely ungrateful not to value it more.

He said we came here solely on my account, that I was to have perfect rest and all the air I could get.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), John

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 167

Explanation and Analysis


In this quote, the narrator describes her husband John's "careful" treatment of her. From her summary of this treatment, it is clear that every moment of her life is strictly controlled by John in his capacity as doctor and head of the household. This control seems stifling, and yet John sees it as a loving exercise, driven by concern for his fragile wife, whose judgment does not figure into his decisions about her treatment. This controlled idleness is what would have been called a "rest cure" in the author's time, and is something that Gilman herself was prescribed by Dr. Weir Mitchell. It seems to be worsening the narrator's condition—and, insidiously, her depression is only increased by the guilt she feels at not appreciating the assigned cure.

The narrator's tone may again be read as at least partly sarcastic here, since she is clearly suffering as a result of her husband's "special direction." In any case, the narrator's own feelings about her treatment are hidden from her husband, or he is fundamentally unable to understand them—possibly because his society and profession do not value the opinions of women very highly.

☞ The paint and paper look as if a boys' school had used it. It is stripped off—the paper—in great patches all around the head of my bed, about as far as I can reach, and in a great place on the other side of the room low down. I never saw a worse paper in my life.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 168

Explanation and Analysis

This quote describes the narrator's room at the top of the house, and introduces the titular yellow wallpaper to the reader for the first time. Here, again, in the stripped, torn paper, is a clue that the house hides a dark and mysterious past behind its grand exterior—this would also help explain why the vacationing couple were able to acquire it so cheaply. The narrator's explanation that a "boy's school" may have used it in the past is thrown into question by what happens later in the story, as she begins to tear the wallpaper herself; there is thus the implication that this room may have once housed a mentally ill woman like the narrator. This suggests that the plight of the narrator is not just her own, but that of many women in her time. The narrator's misinterpretation of the stripped paper creates suspense in the reader, for whom the torn paper foreshadows the violence of the breakdown to come. Even if the room is, in fact, a former schoolhouse, the fact that it has now become the narrator's isolation chamber continues to drive home the idea that women are treated as infants by society, fanciful and fragile creatures with no control over their own lives.

Second Entry Quotes

☞ John is away all day, and even some nights when his cases are serious.

I am glad my case is not serious!

But these nervous troubles are dreadfully depressing.

John does not know how much I really suffer. He knows there is no REASON to suffer, and that satisfies him.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), John

Related Themes:   



Page Number: 169

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, the narrator writes in her diary about her worsening loneliness and boredom. Her husband is neglecting her in favor of his more "serious" patients, and here the potential sarcasm in the narrator's exclamation that she is glad that her own case is not "serious" comes through more clearly. Whether or not the narrator is aware that her condition is in fact becoming more "serious," the reader, at least, is warned that her state is deteriorating. John, meanwhile, has entirely failed to understand the severity of his wife's condition. Driven by sterile reason, a stereotypically male quality, he refuses to give credit to his wife's feelings of depression, assuming that they are merely a product of her own fancy or "hysteria." Unfortunately this dismissal of the narrator's suffering does nothing to reduce its harmful effects.

☞ There comes John's sister. Such a dear girl as she is, and so careful of me! I must not let her find me writing. She is a perfect and enthusiastic housekeeper, and hopes for no better profession. I verily believe she thinks it is the writing which made me sick!

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), John, Jennie

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 171

Explanation and Analysis


This quote is the reader's first introduction to John's sister, Jennie, who is helping to run the house while the narrator is sick in bed. The narrator hides the diary at the sound of her approach, underlining the conspiratorial, secretive nature of this writing, and reinforcing the idea that her writing is an act of rebellion against her husband's expectation that she rest in complete idleness, giving up on any idea of more ambitious work. Writing, the narrator's secret ambition, is not fit work for a woman—according to societal expectations of the time. Meanwhile, Jennie's willing and even enthusiastic acceptance of the traditionally female domestic role in the home gives the narrator still more reason to feel guilty at her own rebellious instincts and depression. She is isolated even from another woman in her ambition and her mental illness, and has begun to hide her true self from the rest of the house.

Third Entry Quotes

☞ But, on the other hand, they connect diagonally, and the sprawling outlines run off in great slanting waves of optic horror, like a lot of wallowing seaweeds in full chase.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 172


Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, the narrator begins to fixate on the yellow wallpaper, seeing her own illness reflected in its horrid patterns (not unlike a Rorschach psychological test, or "inkblot test"). The organic, overwhelming, chaotic images that the narrator selects hint at her own confused inner life. She feels deeply disturbed by the wallpaper's pattern, whose horror chases her every waking moment as she lies idle and alone in this isolated room. The wave imagery, in combination with the reference to wallowing seaweed, gives the impression that the narrator is underwater in this room, drowning in her illness and frustration. She attempts to interpret the seemingly patternless paper, reading meaning into the random, "sprawling outlines." This desperate act of interpretation echoes the reader's quest to take meaning from the patterns of the narrator's diary entries, perceiving hints of secret horror underneath the surface of the narrator's polite tone.

☞ Of course I never mention it to them any more—I am too wise,—but I keep watch of it all the same. There are things in that paper that nobody knows but me, or ever will ...

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 174

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, the narrator's obsession with the wallpaper takes a more sinister turn. Here, she confides in her diary that there are secrets within the wallpaper that she is keeping from John and Jennie. Her decision to deceive them

is definite now—she is "too wise" to let on about her watchful vigil over the wallpaper, since she knows that neither of them will credit her feeling. John has already proven that he will disregard any complaint she has, and so the narrator begins to construct an isolating barrier between herself and the people around her, retreating deeper into her illness and this diary.

Given the Gothic features of this story, and the ominous clues that the house has a sinister past life, the reader might be led to believe that there is, in fact, a haunted life within this room and this wallpaper. At the very least, the illness and oppression that the narrator feel are deeply real, and the wallpaper comes to symbolize these horrifying features of her life.

Fourth Entry Quotes

☹☹ Dear John! He loves me very dearly, and hates to have me sick. I tried to have a real earnest reasonable talk with him the other day, and tell him how I wish he would let me go and make a visit to Cousin Henry and Julia. But he said I wasn't able to go, nor able to stand it after I got there; and I did not make out a very good case for myself, for I was crying before I had finished.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), John

Related Themes:   



Page Number: 173

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, the narrator describes another desperate attempt on her part to communicate to her husband how unendurable this "rest cure" really is—but John promptly refuses her request to leave the house and visit their family elsewhere. As the male head of the household, and the physician in charge of the narrator's treatment, John's word is final, and the narrator is powerless to resist. This powerlessness no doubt contributes to her tearful sense of despair, but the tears that she cries as she attempts to convince her husband to listen to her only further discredit her in his eyes, since they signal her status as a fragile, fanciful, emotional woman. The misunderstanding between the narrator and John deepens further, even as she recognizes that he loves her dearly (or thinks he does, at least). He is still fundamentally unable to see that this stifling rest cure is what is causing, or at least worsening, her mental illness.

☹☹ If we had not used it, that blessed child would have! What a fortunate escape! Why, I wouldn't have a child of mine, an impressionable little thing, live in such a room for worlds. I never thought of it before, but it is lucky that John kept me here after all, I can stand it so much easier than a baby, you see.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 173

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, the narrator references her baby, who is rarely mentioned in the story. Speaking about the baby gives the narrator a chance to reaffirm the terror that the room has caused her in terms of what has been spared their child.

This is another hint that the room was never a nursery, or a schoolroom, as the torn walls suggested earlier in the tale.

Although the narrator is separated from her child, and has expressed that thinking about the child is part of what has driven her nerves to begin with—suggesting that she may be suffering at least in part from postpartum depression—she still feels an urge to protect the baby. This also suggests that she feels very honestly threatened and oppressed by her prison-like room, and increasingly so. It is as if she is engaged in a battle of wills with the wallpaper, which represents her own illness, and the only comfort she can find in this struggle is that at least her child is spared from it.

Fifth Entry Quotes

☹☹ Of course if you were in any danger, I could and would, but you really are better, dear, whether you can see it or not. I am a doctor, dear, and I know. You are gaining flesh and color, your appetite is better, I feel really much easier about you.

Related Characters: John (speaker), The Narrator

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 174

Explanation and Analysis


In this quote, John speaks to his wife directly to reject her plea that they leave the house early, and he reassures her that she is, in fact, recovering under his care in this summer home. The reader has a privileged view of the narrator's inner life, since she has been confiding her despair and


paranoia in the diary, and hiding this rebellious act from John. Meanwhile, John is totally blind to the harmful effects of this illness, both because of his inability to communicate with his wife, and because he, as a purely rational male doctor who routinely rejects his wife's complaints as fanciful or emotional, is completely self-assured, certain that his wife is well on her way to recovery. This is an ultimate example of the arrogance of the medical field as Charlotte Perkins Gilman herself experienced it; John presumes to know the narrator's feeling and condition much better than she herself ever could. In the face of this blind—and condescending—assurance, the reader sympathizes with the narrator's inability to make herself understood. John's position is in some ways equally pitiful—it is society's common perception of women as fragile, infantile beings that has led him to this absolute misunderstanding of his wife's condition.

Sixth Entry Quotes

☞ On a pattern like this, by daylight, there is a lack of sequence, a defiance of law, that is a constant irritant to a normal mind... You think you have mastered it, but just as you get well underway in following, it turns a back-somersault and there you are. It slaps you in the face, knocks you down, and tramples upon you. It is like a bad dream.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 175

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, the narrator's fixation with the wallpaper's mystifying pattern takes on new power. She personifies the pattern, assigning to it a string of violent actions that express the ways in which her struggle to interpret this wallpaper—really a struggle to understand her own illness and oppression—have left her broken and haunted. Although she still thinks of herself as a "normal mind," it is clear by this point that her environment has taken a serious toll on her mental health. This growing obsession with the wallpaper, which is "like a bad dream," signals a troubled mind, and her choice of imagery to describe the paper cast it as an assaulting force, something which she must confront in complete isolation, misunderstood by everyone around her and confined to this menacing chamber.

☞ At night in any kind of light, in twilight, candle light, lamplight, and worst of all by moonlight, it becomes bars! The outside pattern I mean, and the woman behind it is as plain as can be.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 175

Explanation and Analysis


In this quote, as the narrator's mental conditions continues to worsen and she descends into her paranoid obsession with the wallpaper, there is a definite clue to the wallpaper's symbolic importance in the text—and to the reasons behind the narrator's mental illness. There is a mysterious figure trapped within the wallpaper—and a woman, nonetheless! The identity of this mysterious figure will not be resolved until the end of the tale, and even then it remains open to question. It may be a past inhabitant of this room, another mentally unstable and institutionally oppressed woman, or a reflection of the narrator herself, who is, after all, a woman imprisoned by the walls of her society and room. The explicit reference to bars is the clearest allusion to prison yet, and it's clear that the narrator does, in fact, feel as though she were stuck in prison, trapped in this room without an ally in the world aside from the diary in which she confides her secret depression and thoughts of rebellion against her husband and society.

Eighth Entry Quotes

☞ It used to disturb me at first. I thought seriously of burning the house—to reach the smell. But now I am used to it. The only thing I can think of that it is like is the COLOR of the paper! A yellow smell.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 178



Explanation and Analysis


In this quote, the narrator continues her obsessive

description of the insidious wallpaper. The blending of senses here—sight and smell—seems to signal a further shift in the narrator's mental condition. The intensity of her inner turmoil is such that she has considered burning down the house, an offhand admission that gives the reader a frightening glimpse of just how far the narrator has slipped into her illness since the early entries, when her writing was measured and polite. The fact that the wallpaper has taken on a smell for the narrator now also suggests that its influence is completely inescapable—she cannot even close her eyes to evade its effects. The shift in her reaction to his invasion, from disturbance and distaste to acceptance, also suggests that she has ceased fighting against her dangerous fantasies, and has moved further still into her illness, continuing to distance herself from the reach of John or Jennie, entirely isolated in her struggle with the wallpaper.

☛ There is a very funny mark on this wall, low down, near the mopboard. A streak that runs round the room. It goes behind every piece of furniture, except the bed, a long, straight, even SMOOCH, as if it had been rubbed over and over. I wonder how it was done and who did it, and what they did it for. Round and round and round—round and round and round—it makes me dizzy!

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 178

Explanation and Analysis

This quote reveals another facet of the narrator's room, which suggests a sinister past while foreshadowing a dangerous future for the sick woman. The mysterious mark along the wall suggests an obsessive scratching at the wallpaper—something that the narrator herself might have done without being conscious of her action, or which the room's previous inhabitant, driven to a madness similar to the narrator's, may have created. In either case, the narrator is now misunderstanding something which the reader has reason to second guess, undermining her own reliability as a narrator. She does not, in fact, have perfect knowledge of the room's past—or even of her own present mental condition.

The motion suggested by the streak is an endless, circular pacing, the action of a caged animal, an idea that fits the

mental state of the narrator in this moment. The repetition of "round and round and round" illustrates this mental state, as the narrator is sinking further into her obsession with the wallpaper, and has no means to escape the prison of forced idleness. Instead, she is forced to look at the same wallpaper, day after day, a boring task which has driven her to build out fantastical explanations for its odd patterns.

Ninth Entry Quotes

☛ And she is all the time trying to climb through. But nobody could climb through that pattern—it strangles so; I think that is why it has so many heads.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 178

Explanation and Analysis



In this quote, the mysterious figure returns to haunt the narrator. Instead of fear, however, there is now sympathy in the way that the narrator discusses the figure—like her, the mysterious figure is trapped by the strangling pattern of the wallpaper. In fact, the similarities between the mysterious figure trapped within the wallpaper and the narrator herself foreshadow the story's climax, when the narrator seemingly morphs into the mysterious figure herself.

The wallpaper has by now been transfigured into a malevolent, hydra-like creature in the narrator's mind (the hydra was a many-headed monster from Greek myth). Its strangling pattern, which entraps the mysterious figure and the narrator all at the same time, is a symbol of the many-headed monster of mental illness and societal oppression that has restricted the narrator's choices for so long, and led her down the path toward this dark, unhealthy obsession. The many heads, though, carry a sad as well as a scary connotation, since they also represent the many victims that have been strangled by this pattern. The narrator's situation is specific to her, but the illness from which she suffers, and the injustice that she faces as a woman, have affected countless others as well, who are now similarly frozen in the "wallpaper."

Tenth Entry Quotes

☛ I always lock the door when I creep by daylight. I can't do it at night, for I know John would suspect something at once.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), John

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 178

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, as her sickness and paranoia accelerate, the narrator reveals that she has been "creeping" in a motion similar to the mysterious figure in the wallpaper. She does this behind locked doors, further isolating herself from John and Jennie, whom she now completely mistrusts. This motion is further evidence that the long streak running along the wall, which she mentions in the eighth diary entry, may have been scratched out by the narrator herself in an unconscious state. She is taking on the characteristics of a caged animal, as that earlier quote suggests, and carefully hiding her activity from her husband John. This secrecy is a clear sign of something unhealthy, but it also makes sense, since John has already proven that he will be unsympathetic to the narrator's plight. Now, instead of reaching out to him, she has retreated entirely into herself and this dangerous delusion of the living wallpaper. John continues to be oblivious to this creeping illness and his wife's growing derangement, and we as the readers of this secret diary have a privileged view of her mental decay, but no power to affect it in any way.

come to some harm without any means of escaping the downward spiral she has entered into.

This secret half-confession underlines how completely the narrator has transformed over the course of her isolation in the room. She has learned to trust no one, and partly with good cause—since the person she ought to be able to trust most, her husband John, is a major cause of her current harmful state of imprisonment, essentially acting as her jailer. While in the beginning of the story the narrator seemed to make every effort to interpret John's actions kindly and to think the best of the people around her, she has now become so paranoid that everyone in her life is a potential enemy.

☝ John knows I don't sleep very well at night, for all I'm so quiet!

He asked me all sorts of questions, too, and pretended to be very loving and kind. As if I couldn't see through him!

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), John

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 180

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote the narrator reveals a shift in her attitude toward John, while also cluing the reader in to her insomnia—no doubt a contributing factor in her continuing mental deterioration. Instead of attributing love and kindness to John's questioning, as she did at the beginning of the story, the narrator is now convinced that John is only *pretending* to care about her. In her paranoia, she sees their relationship as a sort of subtle battlefield, full of espionage and deception.

The image of the narrator's sleepless, silent nights is a disturbing one, as she lays still in an attempt to convince John that she is actually sleeping. She is in a constant state of alert, watching out for John's surveilling eye, as he checks in with her as both his patient and his wife. It is this sense of surveillance, this oppressive male gaze, that truly imprisons the narrator, and not merely the walls of her room upstairs. At the same time, the fact that John is finally asking her more questions suggests that he may at long last be noticing her accelerating illness, and so the reader's privileged knowledge of this illness is intensely frustrating; we are unable to intervene in this relationship, and John has already ruined any chance of earning enough trust from his wife for her to reveal her increasingly alarming delusions to

Eleventh Entry Quotes

☝ I have found out another funny thing, but I shan't tell it this time! It does not do to trust people too much.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 179

Explanation and Analysis



In this quote, the narrator turns completely inward, rejecting even the previously comforting audience of her diary as untrustworthy. Her paranoia has mounted to the point that she is even suspicious of her own writing, which had been the only outlet for her inner turmoil. This "funny thing" that the narrator has found out creates a mystery for the reader, and a frightening one, given the narrator's deteriorating mental state—it seems likely that she will


him.

Twelfth Entry Quotes

☞ Then I peeled off all the paper I could reach standing on the floor. It sticks horribly and the pattern just enjoys it! All those strangled heads and bulbous eyes and waddling fungus growths just shriek with derision!

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 181

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote the narrator describes the beginning of her assault on the yellow wallpaper, demonstrating a further slide into madness. In her mind the inanimate wallpaper laughs mockingly at her desperate attempts to tear it down. The narrator tries to evade her illness's corrupting influence, but is only met with derision from the "strangled heads" of the wallpaper's previous victims. Fungus appears here as a symbol of madness and sickness, an unclean, infecting organism.

This tearing of the wallpaper is further evidence that earlier clues in the narrator's diary entry (specifically, her observations that someone has been tearing the wallpaper) have a secret significance. At first, the narrator had interpreted these tears as a remnant of the schoolroom that may have occupied this chamber before her, but now it seems increasingly obvious that the room has imprisoned another woman (or several women) like her. The streaking scratch that circles the room is potentially another sign of these past inhabitants, but the possibility that the narrator herself created the tear without being aware of her actions remains possible as well.

☞ I am getting angry enough to do something desperate. To jump out of the window would be admirable exercise, but the bars are too strong even to try. Besides I wouldn't do it. Of course not. I know well enough that a step like that is improper and might be misconstrued.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 181

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote the narrator reveals an instinct toward self-harm or suicide that is wrapped in delusion. Her desperate need to escape this prison of a room is increasing, but escape seems impossible. By describing the act of jumping out the window as "admirable exercise," the narrator demonstrates just how restless and unhappy she has become. The bars on the windows are further evidence that the room has a dark past, and that the narrator's initial rosy description of her chamber might have left out some important details. As she has been throughout the story, the narrator is again utterly powerless to escape the restrictions placed upon her by her gender and illness, and as her frustration mounts her paranoia increases.

The understatement of the second half of the quote, which admits that jumping out the window is a step that is "improper and might be misconstrued," emphasizes the extent to which the narrator's biggest struggle in this entire process has been an inability to make herself understood. Restrained by her gender and notions of propriety, the narrator has been pushed to the brink of suicide in her desperation to escape the literal and figurative confines of her situation.

☞ I suppose I shall have to get back behind the pattern when it comes night, and that is hard!

It is so pleasant to be out in this great room and creep around as I please! I don't want to go outside. I won't, even if Jennie asks me to.

For outside you have to creep on the ground, and everything is green instead of yellow.

But here I can creep smoothly on the floor, and my shoulder just fits in that long smooch around the wall, so I cannot lose my way.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Jennie

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 181

Explanation and Analysis



In this quote, the narrator begins to identify herself as the mysterious figure behind the wallpaper, as the story reaches its climax and spills into horror. There are still remnants of the narrator's identity intact—she seems to know who Jennie is, for example, which suggests that this new personality is more than just the ghost of a past resident of the room—but she has been taken over by a second personality, that of the woman behind the wallpaper. This woman seems to be a figment of the narrator's madness, a creature whose only instinct is to "creep" around and around.

The narrator used the word "creep" to describe her own action earlier in the tale, again suggesting that this second personality has been present behind the scenes (or in the narrator's subconscious) for some time now—perhaps since the first time that the narrator saw the mysterious figure within the wallpaper's confusing patterns. Furthermore, the "smooch" along the wall that the narrator was puzzling over in an earlier diary entry is perhaps explained by this description of the groove in which her shoulder fits as she circles the room. It seems likely that the narrator has been unconsciously giving herself over to this "second personality" for some time now without being aware of its influence (or else she is just succumbing to a similar kind of madness as the room's previous inhabitant). The narrator's attitude and diction have also been transformed, suggesting a complete mental breakdown. Rather than any hope of escape or recovery, this new narrator's only ambition is to creep endlessly around the "pleasant" room, enjoying its yellow color and repeating her every action in an obsessive cycle.

💬 "I've got out at last," said I, "in spite of you and Jane. And I've pulled off most of the paper, so you can't put me back!"
Now why should that man have fainted? But he did, and right across my path by the wall, so that I had to creep over him every time!

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), John, Jennie

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 182

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, the narrator speaks to John directly, in the voice of the mysterious figure from the wallpaper. This is the first mention in the story of anyone named "Jane"—some readers have suggested that this is a typo (or the narrator misspeaking), and the narrator is referring to Jennie, while others believe that Jane could be the name of the narrator herself, who is not otherwise named in the story. From her triumphant speech, it is clear that the narrator has slipped into madness primarily as a last resort attempt to escape the clutches of her husband and sister-in-law, who, along with society more generally, restricted her self-expression and identity.

John faints here, in an interesting reversal of gender roles that has him taking on the more feminine, fragile action while the narrator triumphs over him. This suggests that the trauma of his wife's breakdown might have shaken his strict adherence to these traditional roles, which blinded him to the true severity of her condition. It also suggests that he, too, is a victim, in a sense, of society's gender expectations, and of the medical practice of the time. He is completely shocked by his wife's breakdown, since his principles as a doctor and a man led him to ignore her complaints early in the story, and to reject any attempt at communication that she made. And yet his actions were ultimately motivated by love for his wife, and it was misunderstanding on a structural as much as a personal level that brought about her descent into madness.

The story ends with the frightening image of the narrator's persistent, creeping, circling motion, as she steps over the prone body of her husband again and again.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

FIRST ENTRY

The narrator begins with a description of the impressive summer home she has just moved into with her husband John. She is amazed that two 'mere ordinary people' could have secured such a place. She jokingly wonders whether the home might be haunted, since it was so cheap to rent. Her husband laughs at her suspicion, but, as she writes, 'one expects that in marriage.'

The narrator goes on to describe her eminently practical husband John, who is a physician, and his dismissal of her worries about depression—she believes she is sick, while he thinks she has 'a slight hysterical tendency' and nothing more. She explains the cure he has prescribed her, which forbids any writing or intellectual work until she feels better. Although she disagrees with this lack of activity, she feels powerless to object.

The narrator describes the house in more detail, which is grand but seems semi-abandoned and a bit 'strange.' She doesn't like the room they have chosen to live in, but John insisted they take the nursery at the top of the house so that she could absorb the restorative air. Her whole life is scheduled by John, who is very 'careful and loving' so that she feels 'basely ungrateful not to value it more.'

The narrator thinks the large, airy room at the top of the house must have been a nursery, since its paper is stripped off in great patches and there are bars on the window to prevent children from falling. She objects only to the room's [yellow wallpaper](#), which she finds irritating, repellent, and full of contradictions and outrageous angles.

Hints that there is something strange about the house create the first sense of disconnect between its outward appearance, as a beautiful home, and its inner (perhaps sinister) life. John's laughter, and the narrator's sarcastic response, reveal the strained dynamic of their marriage and the fact that these dynamics are built into marriage—that marriage as it exists in the society of the time of the story involved such strains and power disparities.



John embodies a typically male view of the world—pragmatic, stoic, dismissive of anxiety—in contrast to his wife, and does not take her emotional concerns very seriously. The cure he has prescribed resembles that which the author experienced in real life, and restricts her self-expression outside of traditional gender roles.



If we read the narrator's tone in describing her husband's special care as sarcastic, it betrays her frustrated sense of powerlessness. She is unable to communicate, since John has removed her means of self-expression and dismisses any suggestion she makes about her own life.



Already, small, sinister details of the room foreshadow a difference between its appearance as a 'nursery' and its true past. Seeing the narrator misinterpreting these details—the stripped off paper, the bars on the windows, which might be the result of children or a previous insane occupant—creates suspense and a sense of powerlessness in the reader. It also suggests that the narrator's experience that eventually drives her crazy is one shared by other women; that the narrator is just one of many women affected by society's treatment of them.



As John approaches, the narrator hides [the diary](#) where she is writing this note.

By hiding her only form of self-expression, the narrator rebels against John's orders both as her husband and her doctor. This contributes to the growing gap between how she appears to him, and how she feels inside.



SECOND ENTRY

Two weeks have passed, and the narrator feels significantly worse. John is away most days, and she is alone in the 'atrocious nursery.' She is frustrated by her husband, who cannot understand how much she is suffering. We learn that she has a baby, who is being cared for by their nanny, Mary, since the narrator feels too nervous to be with her child.

The narrator's child is a sign that this is a case of post-partum depression, which the author also experienced. It also represents the domestic role that she feels trapped within. John's profession as a doctor heightens the irony of his inability to understand his wife's suffering, and of the time period's dismissal of mental illness in general.



The narrator has tried unsuccessfully to convince John to change [the wallpaper](#), but he laughed at her silliness and refused to renovate the house for their short rental, calling her a 'blessed little goose.'

The language used by John in responding to his wife's request is condescending; he treats her like a silly child and she feels powerless.



From the barred windows of the nursery, the narrator can see the overgrown garden, the bay, and a shaded lane where she sometimes imagines she can see people walking. John warns her not to give into this 'habit of story-making', since a 'nervous weakness' like hers will create too much excitement from such things. The narrator wishes she could have visitors, or write a little, but John strongly advises against it.

The narrator's tendency to endow inanimate things with a sort of inner life begins to emerge in her descriptions of the house and gardens. It is just this sort of imaginative habit that John warns his wife against as impractical, exerting his authority as her husband and doctor to stamp it out.



The narrator's focus shifts to [the wallpaper](#). She says it looks as though it 'KNEW what a vicious influence it had.' She sees a multitude of expressions and crawling eyes in the 'impertinent' wallpaper, and remembers how she used to lie awake as a child imagining the expressions of her furniture.

The narrator's evolving relationship to the wallpaper mirrors her worsening mental condition. She expresses a belief in the inner life of outwardly inanimate things, like furniture.



The narrator describes the room again, but less kindly this time; it is ravaged, with gouged and splintered floors, large tears in [the wallpaper](#), and a great heavy bed that was the only piece of furniture present when they moved in.

These new details continue to suggest to the reader that the room served a more mysterious and dark purpose in the past, and is not as it appears to the narrator.



From the window, the narrator sees John's sister, Jennie, approaching the house. She describes her as a 'perfect and enthusiastic housekeeper.' The narrator's attention then returns to [the wallpaper](#), in which, when the light is just right, she can see a [mysterious figure](#) that 'seems to skulk' in a sub-pattern. Jennie's approach on the stairs interrupts her musing, and she hides [the diary](#).

Jennie's easy acceptance of her domestic role only increases the guilt that the narrator feels with her own dissatisfaction with the domestic role into which she has been forced. The wallpaper's 'inner life' begins to take a more definite form in the troubled brain of the narrator. She hides all of this from her sister-in-law.



THIRD ENTRY

A few family members visited for the Fourth of July, but they are gone now and the festivities, for which Jennie made all the arrangements, are over. The narrator is tired and depressed, she cries 'most of the time' when she is alone, although she stops when John is home. He has suggested that he may have to send her to Weir Mitchell, another doctor, in the fall.

Jennie continues to perform the domestic duties of the narrator, increasing the narrator's sense of guilt. She now hides her emotions from John, masking her inner life and making communication impossible. Weir Mitchell is the real life champion of the 'rest cure' that is being enforced on the narrator, and was the actual doctor who treated Charlotte Perkins Gilman, the author of this story.



While John is away, the narrator walks in the garden or lies in her room, staring at [the wallpaper](#). She feels determined to find some sort of rhyme or reason behind its 'pointless pattern.' She goes on at length about its incomprehensible shapes, 'great slanting waves of optic horror.' The pattern also changes with the light of the day as she lies in bed watching it. Following its 'interminable grotesques' tires her, so she ends her [diary](#) entry to take a nap.

The narrator's obsession grows in her enforced idle isolation, and her need to make sense of the wallpaper is a symbol both for her inability to interpret or express her own inner life and her need for her mind to be creative and active in at least some way. The narrator's attempts to interpret the wallpaper also mirror the reader's attempts to interpret the narrator's diary entries.



FOURTH ENTRY

The narrator feels almost too weak to write, but she needs to express herself in some way to find relief. She has lost strength, and John administers a whole range of treatments. She tries to convince him to let her leave the house and visit her cousins, but cries and cannot finish.

The diary is the narrator's only remaining outlet for self-expression. John's treatments ignore her true sickness. Her failure to convince him to leave shows their inability to communicate, as she is trapped by her husband's authority.



John carries her gently upstairs in his arms and reads to her until she is too tired. He tells her she must use her self control and not allow her silly fancies to take over, since he loves her too dearly to see her unwell.

Here, John is a sympathetic, loving husband. He too, though, is trapped by traditional gender roles, which leave him completely unable to understand his wife's inner life.



The narrator finds one positive side to living in the nursery: it means that her baby is not exposed to the horrible [wallpaper](#), and can be happy and well. She has stopped mentioning the wallpaper to her husband and Jennie, but she watches it more and more closely. She can make out the dim [figure](#) behind the pattern more clearly now: it is the repeated shape of a woman, stooping down and creeping around. She wishes John would take her away from the house.

The baby is a reminder of the role that the narrator is neglecting. Her relationship to the wallpaper becomes more secretive, as her isolation grows and her self-expression is restricted to this diary. The woman trapped within the wallpaper is almost a new companion. She senses a danger in this realization.



FIFTH ENTRY

The narrator describes an attempt she made to discuss her case with John the night before, as the moonlight crept in the windows. She lay awake watching the light on the pattern, seeing [the figure](#) seem to move behind it, and then got up to feel if it had in fact moved, waking up her husband.

The wallpaper has become a place where the stifled inner life of the narrator is expressed. She is experiencing insomnia and hallucinations.



In her memory, the narrator tells John that she wishes to leave the house. He objects to this notion, which he views as silly since there are only three weeks left on their lease and she seems to be recovering. She tries to insist, arguing that while she may be better in body, her mind is suffering. His tone shifts, from the indulgent scolding of a child, to a stern command not to entertain such a 'false and foolish fancy.'

Here, John asserts his traditional authority as doctor and husband, and embracing the traditional view that emotion or anxiety (seen as feminine) are 'foolish fancies' that should not even be considered. And so this desperate attempt by the narrator to make herself understood fails, as John cannot understand the difference between her outward appearance and inner suffering.



After the argument is over, the narrator lay awake for hours staring at the pattern in [the wallpaper](#).

The narrator is increasingly isolated from John, and in her isolation becomes increasingly obsessed with the wallpaper.



SIXTH ENTRY

The narrator dwells on the irritating lack of regularity in [the wallpaper](#), which defies her 'like a bad dream,' resembling a fungus. She explains the wallpaper's secret: it changes as the light changes. At night, the pattern becomes bars, and she sees [the mysterious figure](#) of a woman behind them. The figure puzzles and intrigues her, as she lies in bed.

The wallpaper's puzzling patterns continue to symbolize the changeable nature of the narrator's sickening mind. The fungus image is unclean, ill, ugly. The woman, trapped behind the bars of the pattern, seems like a double of the narrator herself. In fact, one could argue that the woman in the wallpaper is trapped in a way that is similar to the narrator within the story.



The narrator has been staying in bed even more, and John encourages her rest by making her lie down for an hour after each meal. She only pretends to sleep though, and hides this from her husband, of whom she is 'getting a little afraid.'

The narrator's paranoia further isolates her, so that she consciously deceives those around her, hiding her true, inner life. She is weakened by the continual rest cure that is supposed to help her. And the distance between the narrator and her husband is actually making her distrust and fear him.



The narrator is beginning to distrust both John and Jennie, and suspects that it is [the wallpaper's](#) fault. The narrator once caught Jennie with her hand on the wall, and she believes that Jennie is her rival in studying the pattern. Jennie says that she had noticed yellow stains on the narrator's clothing and was only investigating their source.

Her paranoia grows, and she blames the wallpaper, which is a symbol of her sickness. She is jealous of Jennie's interaction with it, anxious that only she should have access to the wallpaper's secrets. The yellow stains are a clue that some part of the story is being withheld in the diary.



SEVENTH ENTRY

The narrator is feeling an improvement in her mood. She says the change is due to [the wallpaper](#), although John doesn't know that and she 'has no intention of telling him.' She is fascinated by its secrets and certain that, with the week remaining, she will be able to uncover them.

The narrator's sense of purpose has returned with this 'activity' of sorts, but the reader can see that it is a dangerous obsession. She is no longer attempting to express her inner life to John.



EIGHTH ENTRY

The narrator claims to be feeling better. She sleeps during the day, and stays up at night watching for 'developments' in [the wallpaper](#). Its foulness continues to disturb her, its color and also now its smell. It seems to be creeping all over the house, 'hovering in the dining-room, skulking in the parlor, etc.' She smells it even while out riding, if she turns her head suddenly to 'surprise it.'

The narrator's illness is invading the home, embodied by the inescapable odor of the wallpaper. The verbs used to describe the wallpaper's actions—"hovering," "skulking," etc.—are a prime example of the theme of outward appearance vs. inner life as it relates to inanimate objects.



The narrator admits to considering burning the house down to escape the smell, but she has grown used to it; it is 'a yellow smell.' She has also noticed a long, straight even streak in [the wallpaper](#) that runs all the way around the room, 'as if it had been rubbed over and over,' and wonders who did it.

The narrator's casually expressed plan to burn the house shows the extent of her illness, and the reader feels powerless to intervene (much as the narrator feels powerless to make herself understood). The streak in the wallpaper foreshadows the narrator's breakdown, and again suggests that others have suffered similar breakdowns in this room, which both adds to the general gothic horror of the story and suggests that the narrator's situation as a confined woman forced into the "rest cure" is not unique in her society.



NINTH ENTRY

The narrator has made a discovery: the front pattern does move, because [the mysterious figure](#) of the woman shakes it by crawling around fast and shaking the bars formed by the shadows, trying to climb through. But the mysterious woman cannot escape the strangling pattern.

Here, the link between the mysterious figure and the narrator becomes clearer still. The narrator is similarly trapped, desperate to escape the grasp of her sickness but also the grasp of the society (and her husband who represents that traditional society) that has forced her into this room because of its views of women and mental illness.



TENTH ENTRY

The narrator confides in the reader that she has seen [the mysterious woman](#) escape [the wallpaper](#) during the day, creeping along on the shaded lane. The narrator knows it is the creeping woman from the wall, since most women would be embarrassed to be found creeping by daylight—she, for example, locks her door whenever she creeps during the day, so that John suspects nothing. She wishes he would leave their room so that she could be alone with the woman at night.

The narrator identifies further with the woman in the wall, and reveals casually that she herself has begun to 'creep' around the room during the day while John is away. This may be the source of the yellow stains on her clothing, and the mysterious groove in the wall that she had spoken of earlier – though still the question remains of whether the narrator herself has created that groove or whether she is now following a groove that was created by one or more others before her. The reliability of the diary begins to be called into question, whether because the narrator is purposely keepings things to herself or because, in her mental illness, there are things she is doing that she doesn't recognize.



ELEVENTH ENTRY

The narrator is determined to remove the top pattern of [the wallpaper](#) from the one she sees underneath. She has discovered something that she won't tell the reader, since 'it does not do to trust people too much.' John seems worried or suspicious, and asks Jennie about the narrator's welfare, but the narrator claims to have seen through his loving disguise. She now believes that the wallpaper is secretly affecting John and Jennie.

Now the narrator has turned completely inward, away even from the diary, hiding her discovery as her last desperate means of self-expression becomes this mission to free the figure behind the wallpaper. We see John's worry, but the narrator is beyond making any attempt at communication with him.



TWELFTH ENTRY

This is the last day of their time in the house, and the narrator arranges to be alone in the room overnight. As soon as the moon appears, she begins her attempt to free [the mysterious figure](#), peeling yards of [the wallpaper](#) away in a strip around the room. When Jennie sees it the next morning, the narrator tells her 'merrily' that she did it out of pure spite, and Jennie laughs and warns her not to get tired.

The suspense mounts as the narrator's imminent breakdown approaches inescapably. John and Jennie still have not grasped the seriousness of her fixation on the wallpaper, and even when she discovers the narrator halfway through her mission, Jennie laughingly assumes it is a simple hatred of the pattern.



The narrator is obsessed, driven to finish the task of removing the wallpaper. She refuses to leave the room, even as everything but the gnawed bedstead is being moved out of it, and when she is alone again she locks the door, throws the key onto the front path, and gets to work removing the paper.

The bedstead, which we now learn has been gnawed, contributes to a growing sense of this room's sinister past. As she isolates herself from those people that might help her, the danger of self-harm grows, and so does the suspense.



The narrator cannot reach the tops of the walls, and after trying in vain to move the heavy bedstead so that she can reach, she bites at one corner in frustration. She tears off whatever she can reach, and [the wallpaper](#) seems to shriek with laughter at her attempts. She writes that she is angry enough to jump out the window, but the bars are too strong—and besides, ‘a step like that is improper and would be misconstrued.’

Here, the perspective shifts. The narrator begins to speak as though she were [the mysterious woman](#) behind [the wallpaper](#), just escaped. She can creep around in the room as much as she pleases, and doesn’t want to go back inside the wallpaper or outside in the garden. She can creep along the wall on the floor, so that her shoulder fits smoothly into the long ‘smooch’ on the wall.

John arrives at the door, calling for an axe to break it down. The narrator tells him that the key is outside under a plantain leaf, repeating it over and over until he opens the door. When he enters, she says that she has ‘got out at last’ in spite of him ‘and Jane,’ and will not be put back. He faints at the sight of her creeping along the wall, and she continues to creep in a circle around the room, forced to go over his prone body with each turn.

Trust in the narrator’s reliability erodes further, since a new possibility— that the narrator has been rubbing against the wall and gnawing the bedstead before this point— emerges. The other possibility, that this room has been inhabited by a woman who went mad in nearly the same way, strengthens the sense that this ‘illness’ is an affliction common to all women, who are trapped by the constraints of society. Her idea of suicide is scarily casual, and the understatement she uses to dismiss it - that it might be ‘improper or misconstrued’- is an indictment of the way that society’s notion of ‘propriety’ has brought her to this point.



As the narrator descends completely into a mental breakdown, she now identifies completely with the mysterious woman, seeing herself as that woman. The rest cure—enforced on her by her society and husband—has in fact driven her to this breakdown, which appeared in the author’s real life experience as well.



Until now, John was blind to the inner life of his wife, both because it was hidden in her diary but also because his society and education as a doctor has taught him to dismiss such things. Now, though, as his wife’s mental breakdown is complete, and her inner life has taken over her outer appearance, he is forced to confront it directly. That he faints marks a departure from his traditional “male role” of strength and self-control—it is an overwhelming emotional reaction, and suggests perhaps that he too has been constrained by his social role in a way that actually weakens him. Some critics think that the mention of ‘Jane’ is just a misprint of ‘Jennie’, but others argue that it suggests that the narrator is herself is named Jane and that she has become so dissociated from her sane self to the point that she here refers to herself in the third person, having “become” the ‘woman in the wall.’



HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Lorenz, Ben. "The Yellow Wallpaper." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 4 Sep 2015. Web. 18 Oct 2019.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Lorenz, Ben. "The Yellow Wallpaper." LitCharts LLC, September 4, 2015. Retrieved October 18, 2019. <https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-yellow-wallpaper>.

To cite any of the quotes from *The Yellow Wallpaper* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Gilman, Charlotte Perkins. *The Yellow Wallpaper*. Penguin. 2009.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Gilman, Charlotte Perkins. *The Yellow Wallpaper*. New York: Penguin. 2009.