



# ***"The Yellow Wallpaper"***

by Charlotte Perkins Gilman

## **Notes**



Queen Victoria  
1819 - 1901

This is information about the SOCIAL context of the short story.

# SETTING: VICTORIAN ERA

Late 1880s

- A woman's role = wife and mother
- Women could not vote or own property
- Women were to be “pure, pious, domestic and submissive.”



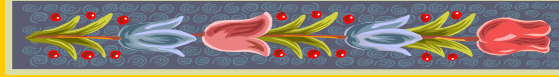
# VICTORIAN ERA

This is information about the SOCIAL context of the short story.

- The **Feminist movement** had just begun as a radical, fringe ideology, largely dismissed by the mainstream

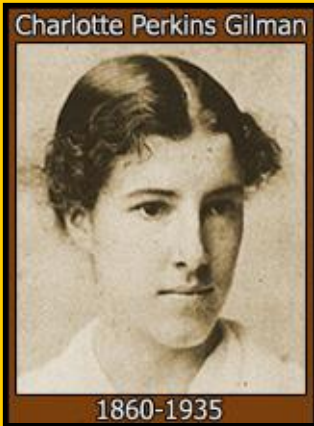
- Women could not live on their own; their husbands or fathers served as their guardians

# VICTORIAN WOMEN:



- **QUEEN VICTORIA HERSELF SAID**  
"I am most anxious to enlist everyone who can speak or write to join in checking this **mad, wicked folly of 'Women's Rights'**, with all its attendant horrors, on which her poor feeble sex is bent, forgetting every sense of womanly feelings and propriety **Feminists ought to get a good whipping.** Were woman to 'unsex' themselves by claiming equality with men, they would become the **most hateful, heathen and disgusting of beings** and would surely perish without male protection."

# Charlotte Perkins Gilman: Not a 'typical' Victorian lady



This is information about the PERSONAL context of the WRITER of this short story and the SOCIETY in which she lived.

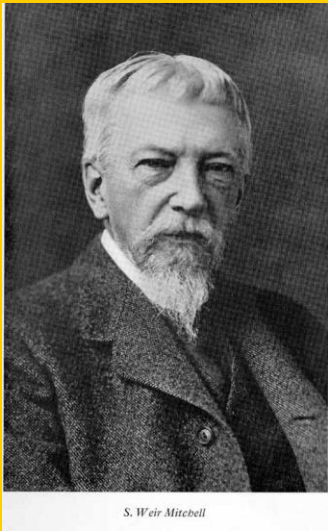
- **Gilman believed in women's rights**
- **Her own experiences were similar to those of the "The Yellow Wallpaper", narrator**
- **Gilman believed that women must exercise their intellect or go mad**
- **The story, "The Yellow Wallpaper", was set in the Victorian era, and the story's theme was contrary to the established beliefs of the period.**

# Is the narrator of “The Yellow Wallpaper”, physically or mentally ill?

- **The narrator has recently given birth; she may be suffering from **post-partum depression****
- **The narrator mentions that she has been diagnosed with “*A slight hysterical tendency,*” and was being treated as most women of her time would be: with the Rest Cure.**



This is information about the PERSONAL context of the CHARACTER in this short story.



S. Weir Mitchell

# The Rest Cure

- **This cure was advocated strongly by a nationally (in the USA) recognized neurologist of the time, Dr. Silas Weir Mitchell.**
- His **Rest Cure** called for complete rest, coerced feeding and isolation.

This is information about the SOCIAL context of the short story.

# The Rest Cure – for Hysteria

- **The treatment prescribed by Dr. Weir Mitchell for the cure of Hysteria involved four steps:**
  - **1) extended and total bed rest;**
  - **2) isolation** from family and familiar surroundings;
  - **3) overfeeding**, especially with cream, on the assumption that increased body volume created new energy;
  - **4) massage** and often the use of electricity for "hysterical paroxysm."



# What is Hysteria?

This is information about the CULTURAL context of the short story.

- Hysteria was a broad diagnosis, assigned to **women who displayed too much emotion or demanded too much attention.**
- The word itself derives from “**hystera,**” Greek for **uterus**, and ancient doctors attributed a number of female maladies to **a starved or misplaced womb.**
- Hippocrates built on the theory; **marriage was among his recommended treatments.**

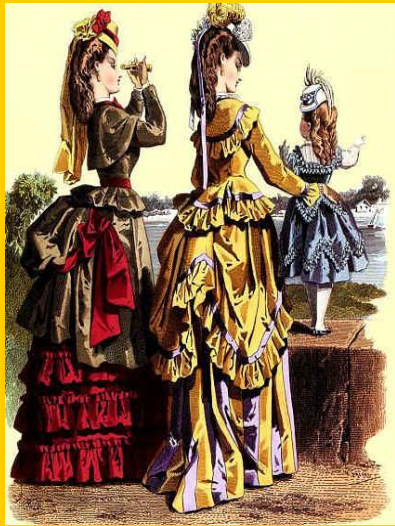


What context does this information fulfill?

# Hysteria



- In the Victorian era, women were **discouraged from work** and over-stimulation.

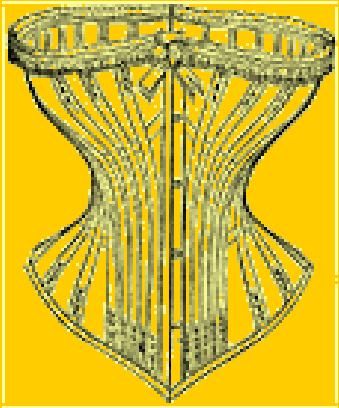


- Hysteria's nature was questionable, and many believed **women faked illness** to gain attention.

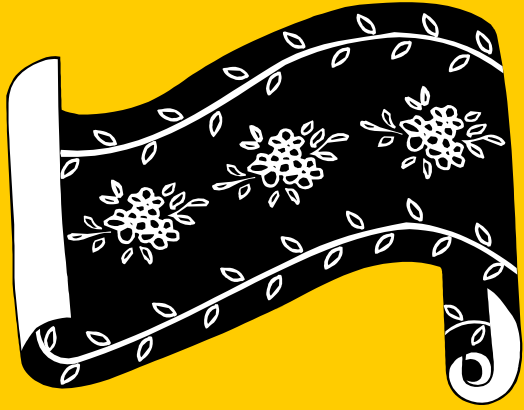
# Hysteria in pre- 20<sup>th</sup> Century society



- The Rest Cure was both a treatment and a punishment. Why?



- A: Most women disliked being placed on rest, and were unlikely to become “hysterical” again.



# Analysis & Quotes



# **Narrative Style**

**Unreliable narrator**

**Style of prose → narration becomes  
breathless, manic**

**Does the narrator go insane or does  
she maintain her sanity by  
interacting with the only stimulus  
she has—the wallpaper?**

# What could these quotes about the house be suggesting?

- *haunted house...that would be asking too much of fate!*
- *And why has it stood so long untenanted?*
- *It is quite alone*
- *there is something strange about the house—I can feel it.*

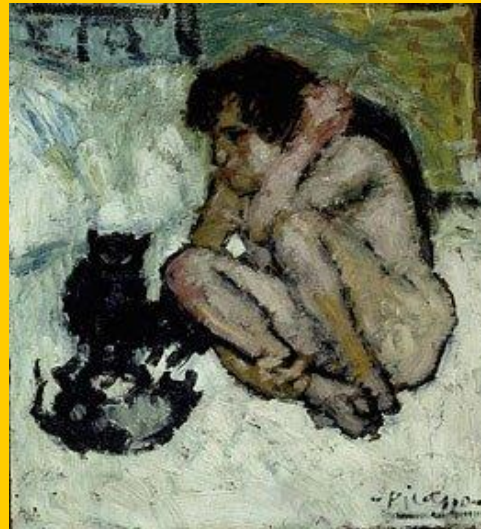
The narrator is 'alone ... isolated ... haunted ... ' so these quotes show the house is symbolic of her.

These words are typical of Gothic literature – they help to foreshadow the terror which will follow.



# The House...

- In Victorian times, insane relatives would have been **kept hidden away in an attic.**
- Note how she mentions fate, as if something is going to happen to her: ***“but that would be asking too much of fate!”***



Pablo Picasso,  
*Mad Woman with Black Cat*

# Important Themes & Ideas

- ☞ Patriarchy & the subjugation of women in marriage (note how John patronizes her)
- ☞ Childlike dependency of women
- ☞ Superiority of physicians
- ☞ Need for work, intellectual stimulation and opportunities to express creativity.



# The Wallpaper

👁️ ***Read the following quotes about the wallpaper:***

👁️ *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.*

👁️ **What is the Wallpaper doing to her?**

# The Wallpaper

- ① sprawling flamboyant patterns committing every artistic sin.
- ① The color is repellent, almost revolting; a smouldering unclean yellow, strangely faded by the slow-turning sunlight.
- ① It is a dull yet lurid orange in some places, a sickly sulphur tint in others.
- ① **What is the Wallpaper doing to her?**

# The Wallpaper

- *This paper looks to me as if it knew what a vicious influence it had!*
- *There is a recurrent spot where the pattern lolls like a broken neck and two bulbous eyes stare at you upside down.*
- *I never saw so much expression in an inanimate thing before, and we all know how much expression they have!*
- **What is the Wallpaper doing to her?**



# **The Wallpaper**

**What is the wallpaper doing to her?**

- **The wallpaper is stimulating her senses, as she has nothing else to do**
- **All the emotional and intellectual stimulation she has comes from the wallpaper**

# The Wallpaper

- *It is dull enough to confuse the eye in following, pronounced enough to constantly **irritate** and provoke study, and when you follow the lame uncertain curves for a little distance they suddenly **commit suicide**—**plunge off at outrageous angles, destroy themselves** in unheard of contradictions.*
- **Note the violent images and reference to suicide**
- **What inference can you make about her?**

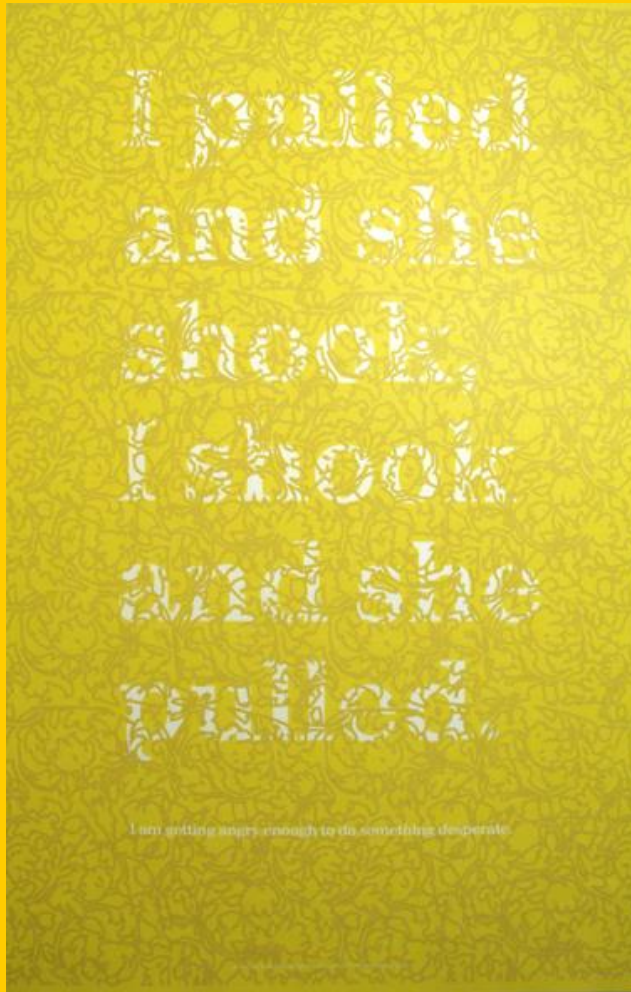
# What do these observations about the Wallpaper tell us?

- *“The wall-paper, as I said before, is torn off in spots”*
- *“Then the floor is scratched and gouged and splintered, the plaster itself is dug out here and there, and this great heavy bed which is all we found in the room, looks as if it had been through the wars.”*



**She's not the first to hate it!**

# The Wallpaper



- Clearly, some other unhappy person (or people) have been held in this room, tearing at the paper, gouging the walls, gnawing on the bed...

# Indication of the narrator's mental state:

- *“I got so angry I bit off a little piece at one corner—but it hurt my teeth.”*
- What does this reveal:
- How does it reveal it?





# The wallpaper occupies her mind

- *I'm getting really fond of the room in spite of the wallpaper. Perhaps because of the wallpaper.*
- *It dwells in my mind so!*
- *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.*

## **The wallpaper occupies her mind**

- *It sticks horribly and the pattern just enjoys it! All those strangled heads and bulbous eyes and waddling fungus growths just shriek with derision!*
  - **The wallpaper has come alive and interacts with her! In fact, it is like another character.**

# Work vs Rest

- *“Personally, I believe that congenial work, with excitement and change, would do me good.”*
- *“sometimes fancy that in my condition if I had less opposition and more society and stimulus”*
  - **What do these quotes reveal about the narrator’s state of mind?**
  - **A: Clearly, the narrator understands that she needs activity, rather than isolation and “rest”**



"I am sitting by the Window in this Abbeys Nursery."

# Work vs Rest



- *“It is so discouraging not to have any advice and companionship about my work. When I get really well, John says we will ask Cousin Henry and Julia down for a long visit; but he says he would as soon put fireworks in my pillow-case as to let me have those stimulating people about now.”*
- **What would have happened if the narrator had had ‘stimulating people’ and ‘advice and companionship’ made available to her?**

# Lunacy...

- She **stays up at night** and sleeps during the day.
- The word "**lunatic**" is built on the Latin word for moon, *luna*.
- **Lunacy** = a form of insanity characterized by alternating lucid and insane periods, believed to be influenced by phases of the moon.
- Cycles of the **moon**... menstrual cycles...more hysterical woman stuff?

*“I didn't realize for a long time what the thing was that showed behind, that dim sub-pattern, but now I am quite sure it is a woman.”*

# Sensory Stimulation

- *“By daylight she is subdued, quiet. I fancy it is the pattern that keeps her so still. It is so puzzling. It keeps me quiet by the hour.”*

◇ Which sense?



# Sensory Stimulation

- *“There are always new shoots on the fungus, and new shades of yellow all over it.”*
- ◇ *“I cannot keep count of them, though I have tried conscientiously.”*
- ◇ *Which sense?*



# Sensory Stimulation



- *It is the strangest yellow, that wall-paper! It makes me think of all the yellow things I ever saw—not beautiful ones like buttercups, but old foul, bad yellow things.*
- *But there is something else about that paper—the smell!*
- ◇ Which sense?



# **Sensory Stimulation**

- **The narrator hears, sees, touches, tastes and smells the paper as it comes more alive to her.**
- **Make a table of 5 columns, draw a symbol for each sense in each column and write in a quote appropriate to each one.**

# Who is the woman in the wallpaper?



- Could the woman be the narrator's shadow?
- Could it represent the narrator herself, trapped inside the wallpaper? (Just as the wallpaper has trapped the narrator's mind.)

# Who is the woman in the wallpaper?



- Like the narrator herself, the woman is trapped within a suffocating domestic “pattern” from which no escape is possible...however, she tears off the paper to free the woman (and herself.)

# Resolution: Victim or Victor?

- *“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!”*
- **Fainting is a “feminine” response; continuing one’s work without emotion is more “male” (especially in Victorian times) → At the end of this story there is a role reversal? Why?**

A “fainting couch” →



# Resolution: Victim or Victor?

- *“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!”*
  - The meaning of the last paragraph has been the subject of a great deal of critical debate.
  - Some critics see this as a point where the narrator triumphs over her husband and the wallpaper.
  - Others see this as a point where the narrator fails since she has finally been driven insane by the paper and not escaped the room.

**What do you think?**