

Essential Short Stories

Teaching Unit

The Yellow Wallpaper

by Charlotte Perkins Gillman

written by Rebecca Challman

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The Yellow Wallpaper

Biography

Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860 – 1935) is the great-niece of Harriet Beecher Stowe, author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. She is most famous for writing *Herland* (1915), a utopian, feminist novel, and “The Yellow Wallpaper,” which she published in 1892.

She grew up in a poor New England family and attended school for only four years. Her father abandoned the family, causing Gilman to swear she would never marry. However, in 1884, a suitor, Charles Walter Stetson, persuaded her to marry him. After the birth of their only child, a daughter, Gilman began suffering from depression, which lasted for many years.

Following a brief stay in a sanitarium, Gilman's doctor prescribed that she rest and pursue domestic duties at home. He and her husband restricted her physical activity and forbade social interaction and mental stimulation. The doctor claimed Gilman should “[h]ave but two hours' intellectual life a day. And never touch pen, brush or pencil as long as [she] live.” During this time, she did not write and devoted herself entirely to the necessities of running a household; unfortunately, Gilman had a nervous breakdown, most likely because of the doctor's recommendations. After just four years of marriage, she left her husband—a very unusual act in the nineteenth century—and took her daughter to California. There, she began writing and lecturing, recovering swiftly from what would now be termed “postpartum depression.”

Gilman eventually allowed her husband and his new wife to take custody of her daughter, thus, freeing her to pursue her own interests rather than the ones society demanded of her. She earned international acclaim for her 1898 book, *Women and Economics*. Later, she married her first cousin, Houghton Gilman. She wrote more than a dozen books before her death in 1935, when she committed suicide after battling breast cancer for three years.

“The Yellow Wallpaper” is Gilman's response to her treatment at the hands of the doctor and her husband. Critics at the time, however, panned the shocking tale as capable of driving someone mad. Gilman responds in “Why I Wrote *The Yellow Wallpaper*” (1913), that her story “was not intended to drive people crazy, but to save people from being driven crazy, and it worked.”

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Plot Summary

Jane*, a young mother, and John, her physician husband, lease a colonial country mansion for three months. She feels unwell, but John insists that nothing is wrong with her. He implies that she simply suffers from hysteria and could control it if she wished. Despite the dismissiveness of his diagnosis, he severely restricts her activities and social life. He leaves her and the baby in the care of servants and his sister Jennie while he goes to work every day. The reader learns all of this from Jane as she indulges in her only outlet: covert journal writing.

As her first-person narrative progresses, Jane reveals that the house they occupy has stood empty for many years, and she jokes that it may be haunted. She describes the lovely gardens surrounding the house, which she views from a room on the top floor. She believes that the room she shares with her husband was an old nursery because the windows are all barred and the solid furniture is affixed to the floor. Moreover, one of the legs of the bed has teeth marks in it, and the wallpaper has been worn and ripped. She dislikes the room, especially the yellow wallpaper.

All attempts to persuade John that they should move to a different room in the house fail, and Jane becomes more fixated on the wallpaper. She sees “subpatterns in it,” describes it in great detail, and cannot focus on anything else in the room, “only the paper.” Jane begins to cry “most of the time” and “at nothing.” She spends a great deal of time in bed, but starts to like her room, possibly “because of the wallpaper.”

As the story continues, the ugliness of the wallpaper begins to disturb her until it becomes her sole focus. She becomes obsessed with the pattern and tries to make logical sense of it. She, however, continues to trust in John’s diagnosis and treatment; John feels she is getting better. Jane’s obsession grows rapidly, and she begins to be “a little afraid of John.” She convinces herself that a woman is trying to escape the wallpaper. At first, she does not want the woman to get out, but, eventually, she tries to help the woman by stripping the paper from the walls. Her behavior concerns her husband, which makes her more duplicitous in seeking the privacy she needs to continue her efforts.

Jane’s insanity increases, and she imagines that she sees the woman “way off in the open country.” As Jane becomes more and more distrustful and paranoid, she contemplates suicide, but does not kill herself. Suicide would be “improper” and “misconstrued.”

Finally, on the last day of the lease, Jane locks herself in the room to complete the task of removing the yellow wallpaper and, in so doing, loses her fragile grip on sanity. John finally enters the room and sees Jane “creeping.” She turns to talk to him, declaring that she—as the woman in the wallpaper—has escaped and cannot be trapped again. John faints, and Jane continues her creeping.

* This teaching unit will identify the narrator as Jane. Toward the end of the story, after John enters the room in which the narrator has locked herself, she turns around and says, “I’ve got out at last...in spite of you and Jane. And I’ve pulled off most of the paper, so you can’t put me back.” Since Gilman has never mentioned a character named Jane before this moment and does not offer an explanation, the reader can assume that the narrator thinks she is the woman in the wallpaper. She, as the newly-freed woman, tells John that he and Jane—his wife and the narrator as viewed as a third-party—cannot put her back. It is also interesting to note, that the woman escapes from the wallpaper at the same time that the narrator “escapes” her oppressive husband when she locks herself in the room and disobeys him. This connection between her and the woman may have helped her dissociate from herself and take on the identity of the woman in the wallpaper.

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Objectives

By the end of this unit, the student will be able to

1. analyze the effectiveness of Gilman's use of the first-person point of view.
2. explain how the setting plays a crucial role in the story.
3. identify and discuss the central theme of "The Yellow Wallpaper."
4. examine the story for underlying ideas, such as the suppression of the creative instinct and the abuse of authority.
5. identify Gilman's use of imagery and explain how it lends meaning to the story.
6. cite examples of irony within the story and categorize them as situational, verbal, or dramatic.
7. identify and explain the symbols of the yellow wallpaper and the narrator's journal.
8. cite at least one example of foreshadowing within the story.
9. discuss the time, place, and circumstance in which Gilman wrote "The Yellow Wallpaper" and explain how it affects the story.
10. analyze the story's tone and identify the elements Gilman employs to convey it.
11. explain the nature of the major conflict within "The Yellow Wallpaper."

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Terms and Definitions

Allusion – a reference to a person, place, poem, book, event, etc., which is not part of the story, that the author expects the reader will recognize. **Example:** In *Romeo and Juliet*, Mercutio alludes to several historical figures and Greek & Roman myths when he says that Juliet, in Romeo’s mind, is prettier than Dido, Cleopatra, Helen, Hero, and Thisbe.

Antagonist – the person or force that is in conflict with, or opposes, the protagonist. **Example:** Nurse Ratched opposes McMurphy throughout *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*.

Conflict – the struggle that moves the action forward in a work of literature. There are three types of conflict, and most books include all three: *man versus man* (**Example:** a typical Western, in which the sheriff confronts the outlaw); *man versus nature* (**Example:** a story about someone surviving in a small boat on the ocean); *man versus himself* (**Example:** a character in a story fighting his or her own drug abuse). Some authorities consider *man versus society* a fourth category of conflict (**Example:** a character in a book fighting against the Nazis).

Foreshadowing – the use of hints or clues in a story to suggest what action is to come. Foreshadowing is frequently used to create interest and build suspense. **Example:** The prophet, Tiresias, in *Oedipus Rex* says that Oedipus is blind for not seeing the truth about his parentage and the murder of Laius. When Oedipus learns that he is the murderer and Jocasta is his mother, he blinds himself with his mother’s brooches.

Irony – a perception of inconsistency, sometimes humorous, in which the significance and understanding of a statement or event is changed by its context. **Example:** The firehouse burned down.

- *Dramatic Irony* – the audience or reader knows more about a character’s situation than the character does and knows that the character’s understanding is incorrect. **Example:** In *Medea*, Creon asks, “What atrocities could she commit in one day?” The reader, however, knows Medea will destroy her family and Creon’s by day’s end.
- *Situational Irony* – an event in a story that does not happen the way the audience or reader predicts. **Example:** In *Great Expectations*, Magwitch, not Miss Havisham, is Pip’s benefactor.
- *Verbal Irony* – a discrepancy between what is said and what is really meant; sarcasm. **Example:** A large man whose nickname is “Tiny.”

Personification – a figure of speech in which an object, abstract idea, or animal is given human characteristics. **Examples:** The wall did its best to keep out the invaders.

“Because I could not stop for Death,
He kindly stopped for me.”

– Emily Dickinson

Symbol – an object, person, or place that has a meaning in itself and that also stands for something larger than itself, usually an idea or concept; some concrete thing which represents an abstraction. **Example:** The sea could be symbolic for “the unknown.” Since the sea is something that is physical and can be seen by the reader, and also has elements that cannot be understood, it can be used symbolically to stand for the abstraction of “mystery,” “obscurity,” or “the unknown.”

Theme – the central or dominant idea behind the story; the most important aspect that emerges from how the book treats its subject. Sometimes theme is easy to see, but, at other times, it may be more difficult. Theme is usually expressed indirectly, as an element the reader must figure out. It is a universal statement about humanity, rather than a simple statement dealing with plot or characters in the story. Themes are generally hinted at through different methods: a phrase or quotation that introduces the novel, a recurring element in the book, or an observation made that is reinforced through plot, dialogue, or characters. It must be emphasized that not all works of literature have themes in them. **Example:** In a story about a man who is diagnosed with cancer and, through medicine and will-power, returns to his former occupation, the theme might be: “Real courage is demonstrated through internal bravery and perseverance.” In a poem about a flower that grows, blooms, and dies, the theme might be: “Youth fades, and death comes to all.”

Tone – the atmosphere in a literary work or the attitude the author puts in a literary work. **Examples:** The gloom and representation of decay is the main tone of Poe’s *The Fall of the House of Usher*; the tone of *Catch-22* is one of sarcasm and absurdity.

Verisimilitude – the use of realistic elements to make literature appear truthful or accurate. **Example:** *Frankenstein* mentions exact dates in the novel to make the story seem more realistic.

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Test

1. From where does the story's title originate?
 - A. It comes from the name of the country house.
 - B. It refers to the bedroom wallpaper on which the protagonist becomes fixated.
 - C. It comes from the protagonist's ideas of redecorating the country house.
 - D. It alludes to a novel by the same name.
 - E. It originates from the yellow flowers in the garden.

2. What is the narrator's name?
 - A. Jane
 - B. Jennie
 - C. Julia
 - D. Mary
 - E. Nellie

3. What is most significant about the room the couple occupies?
 - A. It has one window and is not large enough for two beds.
 - B. It has bars on the windows and immovable furniture.
 - C. It is on the top floor of the house.
 - D. It overlooks the garden and a little private wharf.
 - E. It is airy and comfortable.

4. Why does the couple lease the home in the first place?
 - A. so the doctor can work
 - B. to save their marriage
 - C. for the baby's health
 - D. for the wife's health
 - E. for a family vacation

5. In literary terms, the yellow wallpaper in the story is an example of
 - A. a theme.
 - B. personification.
 - C. a symbol.
 - D. irony.
 - E. foreshadowing.

6. What theme is most predominate in the story?
 - A. the subordination of women
 - B. the futility of marriage
 - C. the necessity of self-expression
 - D. the dangers of ugly wallpaper
 - E. the abuse of power

7. The tone of the story is best described as
 - A. angry.
 - B. sad.
 - C. anxious.
 - D. ambiguous.
 - E. happy.

8. What is most ironic about the ending of the story?
 - A. John listens to his wife only after she goes insane.
 - B. The narrator finally finishes stripping the wallpaper.
 - C. The narrator is supposed to be resting.
 - D. John no longer has any control over his wife.
 - E. The narrator's mental breakdown gives her the freedom she craves.

9. Which of the following genre combinations best describes the story?
 - A. fantasy and science fiction
 - B. socio-political allegory and horror
 - C. nonfiction and autobiography
 - D. romantic fiction and travelogue
 - E. character study and memoir

10. What is the story's major conflict?
 - A. the conflict between John and Jane regarding her health
 - B. the conflict between the narrator and Jennie regarding the wallpaper
 - C. the conflict within Jane's mind regarding her child
 - D. the protagonist's inner conflict when she refuses to accept her powerlessness
 - E. John's inner conflict as he realizes his wife's treatment is harming her

11. In what time and place does the story occur?
 - A. Edwardian England
 - B. Victorian England
 - C. Late nineteenth-century America
 - D. Late twentieth-century America
 - E. Colonial America

12. What object shows the narrator's need for creative expression?
 - A. her journal
 - B. the wallpaper
 - C. the garden
 - D. the locked door
 - E. the immovable bed

13. John's character is best described as
 - A. wholly evil.
 - B. unconcerned.
 - C. irrational.
 - D. benevolent.
 - E. foolish.

14. What is the shape the narrator sees behind the wallpaper?
 - A. endless vines
 - B. a hangman's noose
 - C. children playing
 - D. a woman creeping
 - E. a florid arabesque

15. When the narrator writes that the wallpaper has "two bulbous eyes [that] stare at you" and it "slaps you in the face, knocks you down, and tramples upon you," Gilman is employing what type of figurative language?
 - A. metaphor
 - B. simile
 - C. imagery
 - D. personification
 - E. alliteration

16. Who is Jennie?
 - A. John's nurse
 - B. John's sister
 - C. the baby's nanny
 - D. Jane's friend
 - E. the creeping woman

17. John is reluctant to leave the house when Jane asks to move because he
 - A. thinks Jane is safer in a room with barred windows.
 - B. is secretly having her admitted to the asylum.
 - C. does not think that Jane is really unwell.
 - D. thinks the fresh country air will help her recover.
 - E. has patients in town he must take care of.

18. The outer pattern on the wallpaper, which often appears cage-like to the narrator, most likely represents
 - A. the traditions that trap women in certain roles.
 - B. the beginning of Jane's new life as a wife.
 - C. the continuation of an established way of life.
 - D. the limitations of parenthood.
 - E. the limitations of creative self-expression.

19. John's treatment of his wife can best be described as
- A. dismissive and patronizing.
 - B. kind and gentle.
 - C. respectful and supportive.
 - D. mean and cruel.
 - E. attentive and worshipful.
20. "The Yellow Wallpaper" draws some of its material from
- A. events in the life of Harriet Beecher Stowe.
 - B. an autobiography of Dr. S. Weir Mitchell.
 - C. the records of Dr. John Mitchell.
 - D. events in the life of Charlotte Perkins Gilman.
 - E. events in the life of Susan B. Anthony.

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Test Answer Key

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|----|---|-----|---|-----|---|-----|---|
| 1. | B | 6. | A | 11. | C | 16. | B |
| 2. | A | 7. | C | 12. | A | 17. | C |
| 3. | B | 8. | E | 13. | B | 18. | A |
| 4. | D | 9. | B | 14. | D | 19. | A |
| 5. | C | 10. | D | 15. | D | 20. | D |

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Study Guide

Vocabulary

alternation – movement back and forth
arabesque – a floral design
bulbous – bulging
chintz – patterned cotton cloth
debased – reduced in value
delirium tremens – shaking and hallucinating
fatuity – foolishness
felicity – happiness
flamboyant – colorful and elaborate
florid – flowery
frieze – a sculptured, decorative band
interminable – never ending
lurid – shockingly bright
patent – typical, obvious
phosphates – salt made from phosphoric acid
piazza – a porch or open entryway
querulous – irritable; argumentative
radiation – an even distribution from the center
Romanesque – an architectural style employing curves and arches
skulking – prowling or creeping
smooch – a smudge
symmetry – evenness, balance
undulating – wavy
untenanted – empty, uninhabited
wallowing – billowing or rolling in waves

1. What point of view does Gilman employ in “The Yellow Wallpaper”? What impact does it have on the story?

Gilman employs first-person point of view to narrate the story. Since the story is a character study of a woman descending into madness, the first-person narration allows the reader to enter the character's deteriorating mind. The reader knows the protagonist's motivation, sympathizes with her, and becomes afraid both for her and with her. As she begins to envision things in the wallpaper, the line between reality and fantasy becomes blurred for her and the reader. The first-person narration heightens the anxiety of the story until the climax, where the reader realizes that the protagonist is indeed mad.

2. Compare the protagonist with her sister-in-law Jennie. Use textual references to show how the two differ.

Answers will vary. Sample response:

The protagonist is a creative individual. She writes and has a vivid imagination. She wants work, company, and excitement. She explains, "Personally, I believe that congenial work, with excitement and change, would do me good." It is also evident that she feels discontented with her role as a submissive wife and mother.

Jennie enjoys the domestic duties assigned to her, and she is content with her role in the family. Jane says, "She is a perfect and enthusiastic housekeeper, and hopes for no better profession." Moreover, Jennie seems to feel no need for creative self-expression outside of these duties.

However, the information the reader learns about the women is filtered through the first-person point of view of the narrator. Not only is her point of view limited, but her ideas and opinions are tainted by her deteriorating mental health.

3. What is the central theme of "The Yellow Wallpaper"?

Answers may vary. Sample response:

The central theme is that women who are oppressed and treated as second-class citizens will go insane if they are not allowed to express themselves.

4. What is the primary conflict of the story? What type of conflict is it?

The primary conflict of "The Yellow Wallpaper" is the one taking place in the mind of the protagonist. She gradually understands that she lacks power over her own life, and she cannot accept her helplessness. It is a conflict between a woman and herself.

Another conflict in this story is the one between Jane, who represents all women, and society. At the time when this story takes place, which is around 1892, women were believed to be weaker and more fragile than men. As a result, women were expected to reside in the "private sphere," the home, instead of the "public sphere," the outside world where business transactions take place. John thinks that Jane's illness is the result of her exposure to the evils of public life. The cure John prescribes is bad for her mental health, but it is the cure society would recommend for a woman in her condition.

5. What makes John faint?

John faints out of shock; he sees his wife creeping around the room, and later, hears her talk about herself in the third-person, as if she were possessed by the woman trapped in the wallpaper.

6. What does “The Yellow Wallpaper” say about each of the following topics:

- The Gender Hierarchy of Marriage
 - The Dangers of the Private Sphere
 - The Need for Creative Self-Expression
 - Desire to Control One’s Own Life
-
- *The Gender Hierarchy of Marriage*

At the time when this story takes place, the husband had the dominant role in marriage. He was deemed more important than his wife because he had a public identity and earned the household income. The wife, on the other hand, worked in the home and was not paid for her labor. As a result of the roles of husband and wife, the husband became the authority figure.

In the story, John is in full control of Jane. Even though she believes she is sick, John argues that she is only stressed. Instead of believing that her judgment is correct and acknowledging that she knows her body better than her husband does, she believes his opinion to be correct instead of her own.

In addition, John prescribes rest for Jane, and he practically imprisons her. Jane’s freedom is taken away from her. The image of the bars on the windows also suggests her imprisonment.

- *The Dangers of the Private Sphere*

Jane starts to lose her mind after she undergoes the “resting cure.” She is isolated from the rest of society, and, feeling companionless and purposeless, she starts to go insane. While this effect of isolation may be unique to Jane, the text suggests that if women are entirely cut off from the public sphere, they could potentially lose their sanity.

- *The Need for Creative Self-Expression*

In the story, Jane remarks, “I think sometimes that if I were well enough to write a little it would relieve the press of ideas and rest me.” This comment suggests that sanity can only be maintained through expression and communication, whether it is through dialogue with another person or through writing.

- *Desire to Control One’s Own Life*

Even though Jane thinks she is seriously ill, John convinces her that she is only stressed. Her ability to get help is also repressed by John’s prescribed rest cure. John’s domineering words and actions control both Jane’s thoughts and her freedom.

7. Use textual references to illustrate how John behaves toward his wife.

Answers may vary. Sample response:

John loves his wife, but he does not respect her as an equal. He treats his wife like a child. For instance, when she wakes him in the night he asks, "What is it, little girl?" Later, he dismisses her health concerns saying, "Bless her little heart, she will be as sick as she pleases."

Furthermore, he reproaches her for hinting that she may be mentally unstable. He says, "I beg of you, for my sake and for our child's sake...that you will never for one instant let that idea enter your mind...It is a false and foolish fancy." Thus, he proves he does not think her adult enough to know her own mind.

8. Why does the narrator think her room was once a nursery? What else could it have been?

She thinks her room was a nursery because it has bars on the windows, an immovable bed with bite marks on the legs, torn wallpaper, and metal rings in the walls. It might also have been a room that housed an insane person.

9. List textual references that highlight Gilman's use of irony. (i.e., dramatic, verbal, and situational)

Answers will vary. Sample response:

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

"John is away all day, and even some nights when his cases are serious. I am glad my case is not serious!"

10. How do you think a doctor might diagnose and treat the narrator of "The Yellow Wallpaper" today?

Answers will vary. Sample response:

Today, a doctor might diagnose the narrator with postpartum depression and treat her accordingly. He could suggest antidepressants, the company of friends and family, a support group, or a creative outlet, such as writing or painting, to keep her mind occupied.

11. In “The Yellow Wallpaper,” the young mother is forbidden to write, socialize, or work. She is isolated when she needs company, and she is forced to be idle when she needs work. She is told that she is not sick, but she is probably suffering from postpartum depression. In your opinion, what sort of thing could drive a person insane?

Answers will vary. Sample response:

A person who must work all the time to buy the bare necessities, and who cannot spare time or money to improve the chances of earning more, might go insane. That person might feel that his or her efforts at advancement are futile.

Activities

Note to the Teacher: These activities are intended to increase understanding of “The Yellow Wallpaper.” A few may gauge students’ comprehension of the story or their writing abilities, while others may simply serve to encourage independent thinking and creativity.

1. In “The Yellow Wallpaper,” the protagonist has recently had a baby and now feels anxious and depressed. Her husband dismisses her concerns and prescribes rest. Isolated and lonely, with nothing to occupy her mind, she fixates on the wallpaper, and her descent into madness begins.

Assume that you are an author, and you are going to write a story about a person going insane. Think about what ideas may be troubling this person. Is the character going crazy due to constant rejection? Is grief over a loved one’s death causing the descent into madness? First, decide on a catalyst that might cause a person to lose touch with reality. Then, select a real-life object for your character to fixate on as they descend into madness. Write a paragraph explaining your choices.

2. “The Yellow Wallpaper” is often compared to Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Tell-Tale Heart.” Read Poe’s short story, then, write a couple of paragraphs comparing and contrasting the two. Which do you find more compelling? Explain.
3. Compose a “found poem” from the text of “The Yellow Wallpaper.” A “found” poem is a poem constructed entirely of words and phrases gleaned from the text. Reread the story, and create a “found” poem of your own. Your poem may reflect the actual events of the story, focus on a character, or be totally unrelated to the story.

Your poem should be at least ten lines long. It does not need to rhyme, but it certainly may. You can rearrange the phrases and words and change the punctuation, but you must use Gilman’s actual words. Title the poem any way you would like. Below is an example. Note that it incorporates imagery from the text to convey a different idea.

Elusive Gardener

There is a delicious garden,
Large and shady,
Lined with long grape-covered arbors.

I walk a little in the garden,
Down that lovely lane.
I see her in those dark grape arbors.

She hides under the blackberry vines,
Though I always see her,
In the very bright spots.
She keeps still.

4. Since “The Yellow Wallpaper” is told from the first-person point of view, the reader benefits from knowing what the protagonist thinks at any given moment. She often behaves in a manner contrary to her thoughts. Thinking one thing and doing another makes her character realistic.

Document at least five instances when the narrator thinks one thing, but does something else. Use textual references to list the thought she has and the action she takes in each instance. Give an example of a thought and an action for each of the following five categories:

Her Condition and Treatment

Thought: *“Personally, I disagree with their ideas. Personally, I believe that congenial work, with excitement and change, would do me good.”*

Action: *“So I take phosphates or phosphates—whichever it is, and tonics, and journeys, and air, and exercise, and am absolutely forbidden to work until I am well again.”*

Writing

Thought: *“I think sometimes that if I were only well enough to write a little it would relieve the press of ideas and rest me.”*

Action: *“I did write for a while in spite of them; but it does exhaust me a good deal—having to be so sly about it, or else meet with heavy opposition.”*

Her Environment

Thought: *“I wish John would take me away from here.”*

Action: *“Of course I said no more on that score.”*

Naps or The Rest Cure

Thought: *“Indeed he started the habit by making me lie down for an hour after each meal. It is a very bad habit I am convinced.”*

Action: *“I lie down ever so much now.”*

Anger

Thought: *“I am getting angry enough to do something desperate. To jump out of the window would be admirable exercise...”*

Action: *“Besides I wouldn't do it. Of course not. I know well enough that a step like that is improper and might be misconstrued.”*

Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. Explain how the setting is crucial to the story.

Gilman sets the story in her present-day, the late nineteenth century, in a Colonial country house. The action takes place primarily in a bedroom on the top floor of the house. The room has barred windows, massive, immovable furniture, and ugly, torn wallpaper. The narrator assumes it was once the nursery.

All of these elements serve the story in critical ways. For example, the time is relevant because it was a time when the institution of marriage was highly valued by society and women were expected to submit to domesticity and curtail their pursuits outside the home.

The location of an old house in the country allows for the sense of isolation. The room on the top floor further isolates the protagonist, the bars on the windows contribute to her feelings of imprisonment, and the immovable furniture emphasizes her powerlessness.

2. Cite three instances of irony within the story, and label each one as verbal, dramatic, or situational.

“John laughs at me, of course, but one expects that in a marriage.” – Verbal Irony

The narrator refers to events that must have happened in the nursery; the children must have torn the wallpaper, chewed the bed legs, etc. Meanwhile, the reader can deduce that perhaps the room was not a nursery, but rather a room where a mentally-ill person was kept. – Dramatic Irony

“I sometimes fancy that in my condition if I had less opposition and more society and stimulus—but John says the very worst thing I can do is think about my condition, and I confess it always makes me feel bad. So I will let it alone and talk about the house.” The husband’s treatment of his wife, including encouraging her attention to the house, actually contributes to her breakdown. – Situational Irony

3. What is the significance of the first-person point of view? How would the story change if Gilman had used a different point of view?

The first-person point of view in the narrator’s journal allows the reader to witness her descent into madness. Readers know what she is thinking, and therefore, understand her motivation.

If Gilman had used any other point of view, her story would lose the impact she achieves by portraying the protagonist’s mind. Moreover, the narrator often acts in ways that are incomprehensible to John and her sister-in-law, Jennie, and the narrator’s thoughts make the actions more understandable. The reader knows the source of Jane’s distress firsthand and is able to feel the irony and the suspense.

4. Why is John's character, though an antagonist, not a villain?

John's actions define his character as unconcerned, not malicious. He intends to provide the best care for his wife. Unfortunately, he lacks the understanding of her creative personality and her intelligent mind. In his ignorance, he forbids the very things that she needs to maintain her sanity. For example, she needs a creative outlet and mental stimulation. She needs the society of other intelligent people. She needs to broaden her experience and existence, not narrow it to domestic concerns.

If John truly knew his wife, he would know the appropriate measures to take to help her get well. Instead, he patronizes and dismisses her. He treats her supposed hysteria using the popular rest cure of the time. In the face of his restrictions and her powerlessness, she succumbs to insanity. Ironically, it is at this point that she achieves freedom. John may be naïve and insensitive, but he is not villainous.

5. Initially, what type of person is the narrator? How does Gilman reveal her personality?

Initially, Jane is a bright, energetic, and imaginative woman. Gilman reveals these characteristics through her character's speculations and through her husband's comments to her. For instance, the narrator speculates that the house is haunted. This fanciful thought pleases her, and she refers to it as "the height of romantic felicity." Later, she speculates how the children, who must have occupied the room, might have entertained themselves. She remembers that in her own childhood imagination, she brought the furniture to life, either to threaten or to comfort her. These thoughts show she has a vivid imagination.

Her husband warns her of her tendency toward fanciful storytelling. Moreover, she fights, initially, for time and privacy to write in her journal. Her writing is her last outlet, her final vestige of creative expression. When she is denied the freedom to express herself, she turns her imagination to the wallpaper, in which she imagines she sees a woman trapped, much in the same way she is.

6. What is the significance of the line, "I've got out at last, in spite of you and Jane."

At this point in the story, Jane has assumed the identity of the creeping woman who has escaped from the wallpaper. Jane had been projecting her worries and concerns onto the woman she imagined she saw in the wallpaper. Just as Jane struggled with the limitations John placed on her physical, mental, and creative freedom, the woman in the paper struggled to get out of the wall. When Jane finally does get her freedom, albeit through her insanity and defiance of John, she assumes the role of the woman in the paper and dissociates from her previous, oppressed self.

7. Explain how the time, place, and circumstances in which Gilman wrote “The Yellow Wallpaper” affect the story.

Gilman wrote the story in 1892 in California. She had suffered and recovered from a nervous breakdown, which she attributed, at least in part, to being stifled. She was a true feminist in a time before women were accorded equal rights. Hence, like her, her character longs for freedom from duty and oppression. When her longing is denied, she suffers a mental breakdown. Gilman brings her own experience to bear in bringing her character to life and lending verisimilitude to the story.

When Gilman first began suffering from depression after her daughter was born, a renowned doctor prescribed the resting cure. She was not allowed to write or do any other meaningful work. At that time, the male medical establishment held that women were prone to hysteria. Thus, many hormonal problems, such as the imbalance brought on by childbirth, were diagnosed as hysteria as a matter of course.

Moreover, a woman was supposed to be grateful for a life of domestic servitude to her family. In the face of such a future as a young mother, to feel oneself depressed was seen as ungrateful and abnormal. After her treatment for “hysteria” caused her to suffer a mental breakdown, Gilman knew what she needed to do. She left her husband and daughter in favor of a life she created for herself: the life of a writer, author, respected feminist, and an effective activist.

In “The Yellow Wallpaper,” Gilman explores the path she did not take. What if she stayed with her first husband, stopped writing, and suppressed her intelligence and her true self? Her story clearly illustrates that, like men, women require freedom of expression and intellectual stimulation to retain good mental health.

8. Explain how the narrator's tone helps establish character and contribute to a theme in the play.

The narrator's tone is anxious and distressed, evident by Gilman's use of short paragraphs and sentences consisting of multiple, short phrases, separated by commas. The syntax increases the pace at which the text is read, giving the reader the impression that something about which the narrator is anxious will happen. However, the narrator continually mentions that she cannot escape, for her husband John has prohibited her from getting away by prescribing the rest cure and refusing to acknowledge that she is ill. Jane is, therefore, characterized as a woman who is oppressed by her husband and cannot acquire the help she needs.

Jane's problem, however, while unique on the surface, represents a greater social issue: women at Gilman's time were isolated and alone, bound to their duties as wives and mothers, unable to express themselves and communicate with other women. Furthermore, they were convinced by society that they were intellectually inferior to men, over-emotional, prone to fits of hysteria. Jane's situation, which is amplified by her tone, shows the potential dangers of women being trapped in the “private sphere.”

The Yellow Wallpaper

Study Guide

Vocabulary

alternation – movement back and forth
arabesque – a floral design
bulbous – bulging
chintz – patterned cotton cloth
debased – reduced in value
delirium tremens – shaking and hallucinating
fatuity – foolishness
felicity – happiness
flamboyant – colorful and elaborate
florid – flowery
frieze – a sculptured, decorative band
interminable – never ending
lurid – shockingly bright
patent – typical, obvious
phosphates – salt made from phosphoric acid
piazza – a porch or open entryway
querulous – irritable; argumentative
radiation – an even distribution from the center
Romanesque – an architectural style employing curves and arches
skulking – prowling or creeping
smooch – a smudge
symmetry – evenness, balance
undulating – wavy
untenanted – empty, uninhabited
wallowing – billowing or rolling in waves

1. What point of view does Gilman employ in “The Yellow Wallpaper”? What impact does it have on the story?

2. Compare the protagonist with her sister-in-law Jennie. Use textual references to show how the two differ.

3. What is the central theme of “The Yellow Wallpaper”?

4. What is the primary conflict of the story? What type of conflict is it?

5. What makes John faint?

6. What does “The Yellow Wallpaper” say about each of the following topics:

- The Gender Hierarchy of Marriage
- The Dangers of the Private Sphere
- The Need for Creative Self-Expression
- Desire to Control One’s Own Life

7. Use textual references to illustrate how John behaves toward his wife.

8. Why does the narrator think her room was once a nursery? What else could it have been?

9. List textual references that highlight Gilman's use of irony. (i.e., dramatic, verbal, situational)

10. How do you think a doctor might diagnose and treat the narrator of "The Yellow Wallpaper" today?

11. In "The Yellow Wallpaper," the young mother is forbidden to write, socialize, or work. She is isolated when she needs company, and she is forced to be idle when she needs work. She is told that she is not sick, but she is probably suffering from postpartum depression. In your opinion, what sort of thing could drive a person insane?

Activities

1. In “The Yellow Wallpaper,” the protagonist has recently had a baby and now feels anxious and depressed. Her husband dismisses her concerns and prescribes rest. Isolated and lonely, with nothing to occupy her mind, she fixates on the wallpaper, and her descent into madness begins.

Assume that you are an author, and you are going to write a story about a person going insane. Think about what ideas may be troubling this person. Is the character going crazy due to constant rejection? Is grief over a loved one’s death causing the descent into madness? First, decide on a catalyst that might cause a person to lose touch with reality. Then, select a real-life object for your character to fixate on as they descend into madness. Write a paragraph explaining your choices.

2. “The Yellow Wallpaper” is often compared to Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Tell-Tale Heart.” Read Poe’s short story, then, write a couple of paragraphs comparing and contrasting the two. Which do you find more compelling? Explain.
3. Compose a “found poem” from the text of “The Yellow Wallpaper.” A “found” poem is a poem constructed entirely of words and phrases gleaned from the text. Reread the story, and create a “found” poem of your own. Your poem may reflect the actual events of the story, focus on a character, or be totally unrelated to the story.

Your poem should be at least ten lines long. It does not need to rhyme, but it certainly may. You can rearrange the phrases and words and change the punctuation, but you must use Gilman’s actual words. Title the poem any way you would like. Below is an example. Note that it incorporates imagery from the text to convey a different idea.

Elusive Gardener

There is a delicious garden,
Large and shady,
Lined with long grape-covered arbors.

I walk a little in the garden,
Down that lovely lane.
I see her in those dark grape arbors.

She hides under the blackberry vines,
Though I always see her,
In the very bright spots.
She keeps still.

4. Since “The Yellow Wallpaper” is told from the first-person point of view, the reader benefits from knowing what the protagonist thinks at any given moment. She often behaves in a manner contrary to her thoughts. Thinking one thing and doing another makes her character realistic.

Document at least five instances when the narrator thinks one thing, but does something else. Use textual references to list the thought she has and the action she takes in each instance. Give an example of a thought and an action for each of the following five categories:

Her Condition and Treatment

Thought: _____

Action: _____

Writing

Thought: _____

Action: _____

Her Environment

Thought: _____

Action: _____

Naps or The Rest Cure

Thought: _____

Action: _____

Anger

Thought: _____

Action: _____

Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. Explain how the setting is crucial to the story.

2. Cite three instances of irony within the story, and label each one as verbal, dramatic, or situational.

3. What is the significance of the first-person point of view? How would the story change if Gilman had used a different point of view?

4. Why is John's character, though an antagonist, not a villain?

5. Initially, what type of person is the narrator? How does Gilman reveal her personality?

6. What is the significance of the line, "I've got out at last, in spite of you and Jane."

7. Explain how the time, place, and circumstances in which Gilman wrote "The Yellow Wallpaper" affect the story.

8. Explain how the narrators tone helps establish character and contribute to a theme in the play.

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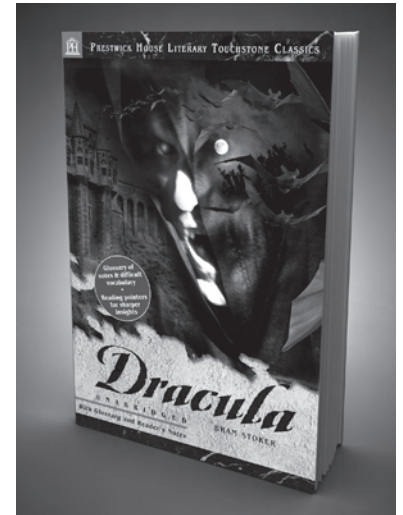
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