

The Yellow Wallpaper by C.P. Gilman Lesson Plan

The Narrator and Female Voice: Historical Context of "The Yellow Wallpaper"

"The Yellow Wallpaper" is probably Gilman's best known short story. The story clearly dramatizes Gilman's own struggle with depression, writing, and living in a male-dominated society.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman actually had difficulty publishing the story. Submitted first to William Dean Howells and later passed on to Horace Scudder, editor of *The Atlantic Monthly*, the story was rejected because of its melancholy nature. One point for student discussion might be whether Mr. Scudder would have also rejected one of Edgar Allan Poe's stories for the same reason. Gilman's story was finally published in 1892 in *The New England Magazine*.

During the nineteenth century in America, the nation was moving toward a more consumer-oriented society. With the Industrial Revolution and the end of the Civil War, society changed, and money became increasingly important. While what is known as the Gilded Age brought more women into the workforce, few women actually supported themselves. Young women who were working were often expected to turn their wages over to their parents, and wives were expected to turn wages over to their husbands. Women who were not in the workforce were burdened with domestic duties. Neither marriage nor work really loosened the boundaries placed on women; each situation simply offered a different set of rules.

Nineteenth century doctors accepted the idea that a woman's energy was centered around her reproductive organs. When a woman suffered a medical problem, doctors often diagnosed the problem as a problem with channeling energy. Since reproductivity was central to a nineteenth century wife's life, doctors often concluded that a "sick" woman was out of sync with her reproductive organs.

In addition, upper class women made ideal patients. Their husband's bank accounts " . . . seemed almost inexhaustible," and the patients were usually " . . . submissive and obedient to the doctor's orders."⁵ Charlotte Perkins Gilman herself was treated for a similar "nervous condition" as that of the narrator in "The Yellow Wallpaper." Her physician, Silas Weir Mitchell, was well known in the United States for his "rest cure," also called the "Weir Mitchell Treatment." Mitchell believed, as a rule, that no harm was done by rest. He often required patients to stay in bed for six to eight weeks. Most female patients were forbidden to sit up, sew, write, or read.⁶

It appears that no effort to probe the symptoms of mental illness was made. In the case of Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and in the case of the narrator of "The Yellow Wallpaper," the rest cure failed. One analysis of such failure is that the rest cure simply locked Gilman, her narrator, and all "sick" women into a extremely submissive, helpless role. As a reader of "The Yellow Wallpaper" can conclude, the rest cure only " . . . deepened a person's psychic unrest".⁷

Terms: ancestral; hereditary; felicity; hysterical; congenial

Pre Reading Activity

Have students read the following article by the author. Then, answer the prompt with a journal exercise.

Why I Wrote "The Yellow Wallpaper"

by Charlotte Perkins Gilman

As it appeared in *The Forerunner*, October, 1913

Many and many a reader has asked that. When the story first came out, in the *New England Magazine* about 1891, a Boston physician made protest in *The Transcript*. Such a story ought not to be written, he said; it was enough to drive anyone mad to read it.

Another physician, in Kansas I think, wrote to say that it was the best description of incipient insanity he had ever seen, and, begging my pardon, had I been there?

Now the story of the story is this:

For many years I suffered from a severe and continuous nervous breakdown tending to melancholia and beyond. During about the third year of this trouble I went, in devout faith and some faint stir of hope, to a noted specialist in nervous diseases, the best known in the country. This wise man put me to bed and applied the rest cure, to which a still-good physique responded so promptly that he concluded there was nothing much the matter with me, and sent me home with solemn advice to "live as domestic life as far as possible," to "have but two hours' intellectual life a day," and "never to touch pen, or pencil again" as long as I lived. This was in 1887.

I went home and obeyed those directions for some three months, and came so near the borderline of utter mental ruin that I could see over.

Then, using the remnants of intelligence that remained, and helped by a wise friend, I cast the noted specialist's advice to the winds and went to work again; work, the normal life of every human being; work, in which is joy and growth and service, without which one is a pauper and a parasite, ultimately recovering some measure of power.

Being naturally moved to rejoicing by this narrow escape, I wrote, "The Yellow Wallpaper," with its embellishments and additions, to carry out the ideal (I never had hallucinations or objections to my mural decorations) and sent a copy to the physician who so nearly drove me mad. He never acknowledged it.

The little book is valued by alienists and as a good specimen of one kind of literature. It has, to my knowledge, saved one woman from a similar fate, so terrifying her family that they let her out into normal activity and she recovered.

But the best result is this. Many years later I was told that the great specialist had admitted to friends of his that he had altered his treatment of neurasthenia since reading "The Yellow Wallpaper."

It was not intended to drive people crazy, but to save people from being driven crazy, and it worked.

Pre Reading Journal Prompt:

Some acts are considered "normal" by one society but considered "insane" by others. Is insanity entirely or always a matter of society's definition? How do you think Gilman would define "insanity" based on her testimony?

Reading Activity:

Read story aloud to students without note taking. Then, pose this question and have a five to ten minute discussion:

Is self image influenced by other people? How do we know the difference between true self image and influenced self image?

After the discussion, have students read the story again but this time silently and to themselves. During reading, students should annotate the text with the following markings:

T: Narrator's *true* self-image: underline words and phrases that support text marking.

I: Narrator's *influenced* self-image: underline words and phrases that support text marking.

Post Reading Journal Prompt:

What role does gender play in our understanding of insanity? How does the husband's understanding of his wife compare to today's understanding or misunderstanding between genders?