

CHARACTERS

1. **NARRATOR**

- She is a young, middleclass woman who is newly married and a mother
- She's undergoing care for depression
- Jane, as she's known in the tale, is highly imaginative and a natural story teller. Though her doctors believe she has a slight hysterical tendency.
- The story is told in the form of her secret diary as she records her thoughts as her obsession with the wallpaper grows.
- She desperately wants to please her husband and assume her role as an ideal mother and wife.
- However she is unable to balance her husband's needs with her desire to express her creativity.
- She gradually begins to see a female figure trapped behind the bar-like pattern of the wallpaper and realised that both she and the figure are suffering from oppression and imprisonment.
- As she becomes more and more preoccupied with the pattern, she forgets her desire to become the perfect wife and mother and thinks only of a way to release the imprisoned woman from the wallpaper.
- While she discards her duty as a wife and mother, as well as her sanity, the narrator ultimately triumphs in her personal quest to release the woman in the wallpaper and this liberates herself.
- The narrator is a paradox; as she loses touch with the outer world she comes to a greater understanding of the inner reality of her life.
- The inner-outer split is crucial to understanding the nature of the narrators suffering.
- At every point she is faced with relationships, objects and situations that seem innocent and natural but that sore actually quite bizarre and even oppressive.
- In essence, the plot of the yellow wallpaper is the narrators attempt to avoid acknowledging the extent to which her external situation stifles her inner impulses.
- She is an imaginative and highly expressive woman (she enjoys the notion that the house they have taken is haunted). When she is forbidden to exercise her imagination in any way, both her reason and her emotions rebel at this treatment and she turns her imagination onto seemingly neutral objects (the house and the wallpaper) in an attempt to ignore her growing frustration.
- Her negative feelings colour her description of her surroundings, making them seem uncanny and sinister and she becomes fixated on the wallpaper.
- There is a process of disassociation from the real world and this begins when the story does at the very moment she decides to keep a secret diary as 'a relief to her mind'. From that point her true thoughts are hidden from the outer world and the narrator begins to slip into a fantasy world in which the nature of 'her situation' is made clear in symbolic terms.
- The horror of this story is that the narrator must loose herself to understand herself. She has untangled the pattern of her life but she has torn herself apart in getting free of it.
- During her final split from reality the narrator says 'I've got out at last in spite of you and jane.' Who is this Jane? So far it has been an unnamed narrator – but some critics claim that

Jane is a misprint for Jenny (her sister in law). It is more likely however that Jane is the name of the unnamed narrator who has been a stranger to herself and her jailors.

- Now she is horribly free from the constraints of her marriage, her society, and her own efforts to repress her mind.

JOHN

- He is the narrator's husband.
- He is a practical physician who believes that his wife is suffering from nothing more than a 'slight hysterical tendency'. He prescribes the rest cure, confining the narrator to the nursery and forbidding her to exercise her creative imagination in any way.
- His antagonism towards her imagination stems from his own rationality and personal anxiety about creativity.
- He is incapable of understanding her true nature.
- Throughout the story he reduces her to and treats her as an infant, referring to her as his 'blessed little goose' and 'little girl'.
- At the same time, when the narrator attempts to discuss her unhappiness with the situation in a mature manner he refuses to accept her as an equal and simply carries her back up to the nursery for bed rest.
- He is fixed in his authoritative position as husband and doctor and cannot adapt his strategy to account for her opinion on the matter.
- He believes in a strict paternalistic divide between men and women. Men work outside the home as he does whilst women like Jenny (his sister) and Mary (the nanny) tend to the house.
- Although John is set up as the villain, he can also be seen as a more sympathetic character. He clearly loves his wife and relies on her for his own happiness, yet his is unable to reconcile her creative desires with his own rationality or the chauvinistic expectations of the time period.
- John's treatment of the narrator depression goes terribly wrong, but in all likelihood he was trying to help her and not make her worse.
- The real problem with John is the all-encompassing authority he has in his combined roll as the narrator's husband and doctor. He is so sure that he knows what's best for his wife that he disregards her own opinion of the matter, forcing her to hide her true feelings.
- His dry, clinical rationality renders him uniquely unsuited to understand his imaginative wife.
- He does not intend to harm her, but his ignorance about what she really needs ultimately proves dangerous.
- John knows his wife only superficially, if we think of the wallpaper analogy he only sees the outer patten but misses the trapped struggling woman inside.
- By treating her as a case or a wife and not as a person with a will of her own he helps destroy her, which is the last thing he wants.
- The fact that John has been destroyed by this imprisoning relationship is made clear by the story's chilling finale - after breaking in on his insane wife, John faints in shock (ironic as fainting was only done by women) and he goes unrecognised by his wife who calls him 'that man' and complains about having to creep over him as she makes her way along the wall.

THE WALLPAPER

- 👤 It is described as a sulphurous yellow paper torn off in spots and un-patterned with “lame uncertain curves that plunge off in outrageous angles” and “destroy themselves in unheard of contradictions”.
- 👤 Ancient, smouldering and “unclean” as the oppressive structures of the society in which she finds herself.
- 👤 The paper surrounds the narrator like an inexplicable text, censorious and overwhelming as her physician husband and haunting as the estate in which she is trying to survive.
- 👤 By moonlight the pattern of the wallpaper is “behind bars”, eventually as the narrator sinks more deeply into what the world calls madness, the terrifying implications of both the paper and the figure imprisoned behind begin to permeate or to haunt the mansion.
- 👤 Inevitably it becomes obvious to both the reader and the narrator that the figure creeping through and behind the wallpaper is both the narrator and the narrator’s double.
- 👤 By the end of the story the narrator has enabled this double to escape from her textual/architectural confinement.