

Yellow wallpaper context

- Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860-1935) born in Hartford, Connecticut to Mary and Frederick who both separated shortly after her birth. She had one other sibling and after that the father abandoned the family. Gilman suggests in her autobiography that the father may have left because the mother had been told that if she were to have another child she might die.
- She was concerned with political inequality and social justice in general, but the primary focus of her writing was the unequal status of women within the institution of marriage.
- She was largely self-educated, spirited and intellectually lively.
- In 1882 she married Charles Walter Stetson and, after the birth of her daughter in 1885 she suffered severe depression.
- In 1887 Gilman, suffering for several years from (post-natal) depression and fatigue went to see physician Silas Weir Mitchell (then the country's leading specialist in nervous disorders) who diagnosed her with 'neurasthenia' (a term formally used to describe a vague disorder marked by chronic abnormal fatigability, moderate depression, inability to concentrate, loss of appetite, insomnia and other symptoms) and prescribed her with the '**rest cure**' as evident in the story with the reasoning that she had 'inappropriate' ambition. In her 1935 autobiography, *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman*, Gilman describes her "utter prostration" by "unbearable inner misery" and "ceaseless tears," a condition only made worse by the presence of her husband and her baby.
- Weir Mitchell believed nervous depression was a result of too much mental activity and over reactive nerves and ordered her to stop all forms of creative activity, including writing, for the rest of her life.
- The goal of treatment was to promote domesticity and calm her agitated nerves.

- Charlotte felt herself going insane and was reduced to crawling under her bed holding a rag doll.
- Unlike the protagonist, Gilman did not reach the point of total madness but knew her deteriorating mental state was due to the oppressive medical regime.
- Unable to write or see company, Gilman's rest drove her to the brink of insanity over the next 3 months.
- She finally disregarded the doctor's advice and moved to California in 1898 and resumed her work of writing whilst supporting Nationalist views and feminism.
- After divorcing her husband (a courageous and scandalous decision) in 1894 she now married her cousin George Houghton Gilman in 1900.

- She soon felt better and wrote 'the yellow wallpaper' (between the years of 1890 and 1892), an exaggerated version of her own treatment.
- She actually had difficulty publishing the story. Submitted first to William Dean Howells and later passed on to Horace Scudder, the story was rejected because of its melancholy nature. Question is, would it still have been rejected if, for example, it was written by Edgar Allen Poe? According to Gilman's autobiography, Scudder rejected the story with a note saying "I could not forgive myself if I made others as miserable as I have made myself"

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- Though Mitchell didn't respond when she sent him a copy, she later learned that he altered his treatment of neurasthenia after reading.
- George then died in 1934 and, after contracting cancer and it prohibiting her from working, she committed suicide in 1935. She left a note to her family saying 'it is the simplest of human rights to choose a quick and easy death in place of a slow and horrible one'.