

## GENERAL NOTES ON THE YELLOW WALLPAPER.

- Gilman wrote the Yellow Wallpaper as a symbol of the obsession of women in a paternalistic society
- Much of what the narrator thinks is not expressed directly but rather is implied.
- Gilman does not sentimentalise madness, it is just simply implicitly critical
- What drives the narrator mad is the confining or 'caging' of her creative imagination. She is an intelligent woman who is forbidden from venting her creative energies and ideas through writing.
- The nameless narrator is taken to live in a rented house in which she does not feel comfortable. She is persuaded to spend most of her time in a room she does not like.
- She is forbidden to write and, due to these mental constrictions (even more so than the physical constrictions), she eventually loses her grip on the world outside of the room.
- The wallpaper is symbolic of her madness and its décor slowly begins to mirror her mental state.
- She is left without any company, shut up in an unfamiliar house and asked to conform to a norm of 'feminine' behaviour in her various social and domestic roles as a woman, wife and mother.
- As the story progresses she loses strength and spirit in her efforts to conform to her husband's view (which represents that of society).
- The chopped sentences and brevity of the paragraphs convey to taut, distraught mental state.
- Images of the women with "bulbous eyes" behind the wallpaper permeate the story – if they are the images men had of women and hence that women had of themselves it is not surprising that madness and suicide bulk large in the work of late 19<sup>th</sup> century women writers.
- A lot of it is drawn of Gilman's own experiences as Gilman freely admits. Even in a 1992 BBC television production, the woman is named 'Charlotte'; an obvious interpretation.
- Her writing was a process of catharsis (emotional release), of healing and coming to terms with herself.
- The book makes use of both verbal irony (such as when the narrator says "I am glad my case is not that serious" at a point when it is clear that she is concerned that her case is serious) and dramatic irony (which is when there is a contrast between the reader's knowledge and the knowledge of the characters in the book). An example of dramatic irony in the book is when the narrator describes the room – the 'rings and things' in the walls, the nailed-down furniture, the bars on the windows and the torn wallpaper – and attributes it to the fact that it must have been a nursery. However the dramatic irony is that the reader sees an equally plausible explanation for these details; the room had been used to house an insane person. A further example is when the narrator assumes that Jennie shares her interest in the wallpaper while it is clear to the reader that she is only now noticing the source of the yellow stains on their clothing. There is also situational irony such as when a characters actions have the opposite of the intended effect like John's 'treatment' actually worsening the depression.
- It can be seen as having doubly subversive literary criticism as it is subversive because she is mad and also because she is a woman.

- The reference to *old* things and the past is a reference to out-dated practices and treatment of women
- The narrator is left in an ambiguous position at the end of the story. She sees herself as having escaped from behind the wallpaper and imagines she has self her 'other self' free. However she is still trapped physically and emotionally in a world ruled by one man. She both wins and loses; she sees the complexity of her situation but is in no position to do anything about it. 'Madness' is just an escape from one kind of cage into another.
- Written as a quasi-autobiographical style
- Gilman doesn't sentimentalise madness – she does not want us to feel sorry for her but to admire her.
- Gilman did not fail, having written the story she transcended the narrator's fate.
- yellow is often considered the colour of sickness or weakness
- The wallpaper really represents the society. Those bars, which she sees in front of the wallpaper, represent freedom. It is the boundary that woman wants to break open of.
- The women image is behind the bars is twisted up, as what happens to women who try to escape from the control of men
- Women are expected to bear children, keep house and do only as they are told. Since men are privileged enough to have education, they hold jobs and make all the decisions. Thus, women are cast into the prison of acquiescence because they live in a world dominated by men.
- Since men suppress women, John, the narrator's husband, is presumed to have control over the protagonist. Gilman, however, suggests otherwise. She implies that it is a combination of society's control as well as the woman's personal weakness that contribute to the suppression of women. These two factors result in the woman's inability to make her own decisions and voice opposition to men.
- John represents society at large. Like society, John controls and determines much of what his wife should or should not do, leaving his wife incapable of making her own decisions.
- John's domineering nature can be accredited to the fact that John is male and also a "physician of high standing". He is "practical in the extreme. He is scientific, factual, logical and rational, everything that characterizes a sane person in society.
- The narrator thinks that a life void of any work or excitement will not be helpful or aid her on the road to recovery. However she says "but what is one to do?" which exemplifies her oppressed stature in society. It demonstrates that the narrator cannot do anything to change her life because her husband - society - controls what she can and cannot do
- Because of society's oppressive nature, the narrator is unable to write in the presence of other people, especially John and Jennie, his sister, who are great products of society (a "high standing physician" and an "enthusiastic housekeeper"), since she believes that people see her writing as contributing to her illness. Writing is an improper occupation for women in societal standards, the narrator must not write publicly, but in secret.
- John also tries to control how and what his wife should think, exemplifying society's suppression of women. He uses the fact that he is a doctor to insinuate his "rightness" and hint that the narrator must be wrong because she is not a doctor.
- He is always making decisions for her based on his assumptions on what is best for her, and not what she really wants. To others, this may seem like John is showing care and affection, but even care and affection has its limitations. John frequently laughs at the narrator ("John laughs at me") and uses demeaning names that belittle women and make women seem childlike to men. Although John's protectiveness is of good intentions, he oppresses her by trying to control what his wife thinks and ignoring what she says.

- It is not until the last scene that the narrator finally gains control of her life and becomes her own decision maker by standing up to her husband and society. The narrator and John switch roles; the narrator has power now. The narrator now becomes the more dominant figure in the relationship because while he is "crying," she is speaking out in the "gentlest voice." Her use of the description "young man" makes John seem very youthful and childlike, as if she was calling him a "blessed little goose" now.
- At last, she thinks for herself and has the mental strength to "creep" around as she pleases, without having to do what others expect her to do. She successfully communicates to John and voices opposition to be put back into the wallpaper. Finally, she gathers the strength to be strong and keep from breaking down and crying.
- John faints in the end, after seeing his wife "creeping" along the floor. It is very "unmanly" that he does such a womanly thing. It shows that he still does not understand her, if ever he had. Otherwise, he would not have been so shocked and alarmed to see her behaving that way
- The narrator cannot truly identify with her socially ascribed gender role. Moreover, she probably retains a significant amount of guilt about this due to her love for her family and because she cannot comply with how society and her husband want her to be.
- She cannot fulfil her creative ambition to write because she is trapped in the patriarchal power structure of which, albeit unwittingly, her husband is a microcosmic representative. She has had to deny her creativity and intelligence in order to comply with the social norms prevalent at the time.
- The yellow wallpaper is symbolic of the narrator's increasing dissipation and the language follows that disintegration. The wallpaper has an unpleasant smell suggesting stagnation. The narrator's mind is stagnant due to lack of stimulation.
- The 'uncertain curves' that 'plunge off at certain angles' and 'destroy themselves in unheard of contradictions' symbolise her own feelings of being unheard and incomprehensible to others, and indeed, incomprehensible to herself. All she can feel is her 'self' dissolving as many like-minded women have also dissolved, into ghostly replicas who 'creep' in a void
- Like the indistinct pattern on the wallpaper, the narrator is losing her weak sense of psychological boundaries. She is lonely, virtually isolated. Importantly, she receives no intelligent, alternative viewpoints regarding what she is perceiving. Since the 'self' also needs to be curtailed by the perceptions of others, and because what the narrator is experiencing is not named or conceptualised, she loses her sense of identity and dies in spirit. The narrator being nameless parallels this idea.
- We follow the stream of consciousness of the narrator's dissent into psychosis and we know that the reason for it is because she has been locked alone in a barred room by her husband. She has been forced into idleness. She is desolate - perhaps suffering post-natal depression. She has no company, no writing materials, no stimulation. She is separated from her baby. Her imagination starts to run riot until all power over reason is lost and she is reduced to crawling around on the floor just like the women she imagined to be doing in the yellow wallpaper.
- The deeper theme is that Gilman's Yellow Wallpaper is symbolic of the struggle to throw off the constraints of patriarchal society in order to write and break free of absolute confinement in the domestic domain.
- In America, in that particular era, middle class men perpetrated for women an ideological prison that served to subjugate and silence them. 'The Cult of True Womanhood' or 'Cult of domesticity' (this was a prevailing value system among the upper and middle classes during the nineteenth century in the United States and Great Britain. This value system emphasized

new ideas of femininity, the woman's role within the home and the dynamics of work and family. "True women" were supposed to possess four cardinal virtues: piety, purity, domesticity, and submissiveness) bound them to home and family in the perseverance of social stability and women were conditioned to accept it. These were the means that men used to ensure the passivity and docility of women

- The narrator's husband is a physician. The medical profession fully condoned the teaching of The Cult of True Womanhood. They believed that 'civilised' females were on the delicate side and that their 'nervous complaints' required complete bed rest and isolation from the rest of the world and that this would aid a speedy recovery.
- The wallpaper is symbolic of The Cult of True Womanhood. By getting beyond the yellow wallpaper, the narrator, representing women generally, defied the power which the ideology of the cult wielded over them and escaped its oppression.
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