

## Themes in the yellow wallpaper

### **POWER IMBALANCE**

- We know her husband's name (John) but not hers. Her identity is just his wife
- John dominates her. His stereotypical masculine nature is sceptical of her seemingly weak "feminine" disorder and furthermore he, not she, diagnoses her problem and prescribes the cure.
- The effect of him telling her to employ self-control is ironic as he controls nearly everything about her.

### **MALE SUPPRESSION**

- ✚ The major function of John's control over her, as with Mitchell's over Gilman, is his inhibiting her from writing
- ✚ She feels writing would help her recover, but John believes it only saps her strength
- ✚ The act of hiding her writing when John is around is similar to the way women in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and even in the later 19<sup>th</sup> century had to hide their work from family, even Jane Austen did this.
- ✚ Not allowed to write, to be creative, to be excited, to use her imagination, to have visitors, to leave the bedroom. But it is ironic as her eventual insanity is a product of the *repression* of her imagination not the expression of it.
- ✚ The male is the expert and knows best as he's a doctor.
- ✚ John represents 'reason' while the narrator represents anxiety, nervousness, uncertainty, irrationality and other qualities ascribed to the feminine.
- ✚ John assigns his own views centrally, positioning himself as the norm from which his 'emotional' wife deviates.
- ✚ Gilman is critical of John and other like-minded male characters, but her criticism is not expressed in any direct terms within the text but rather her views are communicated not in words but through sympathy with the confined woman.
- ✚ The conventional 19<sup>th</sup> century middle-class marriage was all about a rigid distinction between the 'domestic' functions of the female and the 'active' work of the male. For Gilman this ensured that women remained second-class citizens.
- ✚ This gender division had the effect of keeping the women in a childish state of ignorance and preventing their full development.
- ✚ The main character stumbles over technical words like 'phosphates', showing that women were overlooked in education and demonstrates a normalcy of women that are non-technical—they should not have to worry about phosphates, which are in the scientific realm assigned to men
- ✚ Perhaps the strongest image is the paper's pattern, which seems to change with different lighting. Particular traits can only be seen under certain conditions, and they change over time. This could be a symbol of the subtle methods of discrimination that women face, for they can only be seen at certain times and under certain conditions; these actions of

discrimination can be so subtly framed that they go largely unnoticed by the masses. To the trained eye, like Gilman's main character, they become obvious.

- ✚ Strangled heads in the paper may symbolize women whose careers and goals have been choked, and the main character's tearing down of the paper and creeping over her husband is clearly a symbol of triumph. Indeed, bits of the paper remain on the wall; this reads strongly that there are still advances to be made in terms of true social and economic equality, and 'husbands' lie down as obstacles to be dealt with.
- ✚ The choice of the words "infuriating" and "torturing" is also descriptions of the feelings of women in the 19th century society

## GENRE

- The yellow wallpaper makes reference to the 'psychological horror tale' as used by Edgar Allan Poe. The 'tell-tale heart' is also told by the viewpoint of an insane narrator.
- The novel also makes references to the tradition of the gothic romance of the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. A typical characteristic of this would be old mansions uncovering secrets. Further like a Gothic novel, characters represent types and motives are implied rather than stated – a great deal is left to the reader's imagination.
- The yellow wallpaper is also quite forward-looking. Gilman's moment by moment reporting of the narrator's thoughts is similar to the sort of stream-of-consciousness narration used by 20<sup>th</sup> century writers like Woolf, Joyce and Faulkner.

## MADNESS IN LITERATURE

- 🌈 Madness has been an important theme in literature from Greek tragedy onwards.
- 🌈 In the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century it has been particularly associated with women and women have been seen as more biologically predisposed to madness than men. Many women writers (Gilman, Woolf, Brontë) have suffered from mental illnesses and have written about psychological breakdown from first-hand experience. Men (such as Scott and Dickens) have also produced writings about a mad woman.
- 🌈 Also see the 'critics comments' page by Elaine Showalter.
- 🌈 Though how can a woman write truthfully about madness in the language that society gives them; a patriarchal society? And, even so, when women described insanity, the fact that they were women altered the meanings and significance.
- 🌈 In Honoré Balzac's short story 'Adieu' he speaks about a mad woman. However, leading critical accounts of the story fail to mention either the woman or her madness. The critics have edited out everything that could disrupt their desire for a single, closed meaning.
- 🌈 With women's madness, the label HYSTERIA was most commonly associated with the 19<sup>th</sup> century. 'Hysteria' derives from the Greek word for 'womb'. Early medical writers believed that the uterus could give rise to mental disturbance. This makes the female body highly vulnerable to psychological derangement and gives rise to the view of femininity as naturally unstable.
- 🌈 Many doctors suggested marriage as a cure for hysteria.