

Mental illness as a theme of the yellow wallpaper essay

[Literature](#), [American Literature](#)



One of the reasons why the short story *The Yellow Wallpaper* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman has traditionally been referred to as such that constitutes a high literary and philosophical value is that it contributed towards advocating the legitimacy of psychiatry as a newly emerged medical science. At the same time, Gilman's story represented a powerful critique of the discourse of male chauvinism - hence, the sheer progressiveness of this story's themes and motifs. In my paper, I will aim to explore the validity of this suggestion at length.

As it appears from the novel, the reason why the narrator and her husband John decided to spend their summer vacation in a secluded mansion is that this proved beneficial to the narrator's mental condition. For the vacation's duration, she would be unlikely to experience any socialization-related distress.

As Treichler noted: " Her (narrator's) physical isolation was in part designed to remove her from the possibility of over-stimulating intellectual discussion" (61). This suggests that, prior to the couple's relocation, John was already aware of his wife's mental condition.

Nevertheless, he continued to deny that her mental anxieties had to be taken seriously: " You see, he (John) does not believe I am sick!" (Gilman 1). Partially, the narrator herself provides an explanation as to why, despite having been an accomplished physician, John nevertheless could not help referring to his wife's pleas for help in the thoroughly arrogant manner: " John does not know how much I really suffer.

He knows there is no reason to suffer, and that satisfies him" (Gilman 2).

This narrator's remark helps us to understand the essence of John's failure to prescribe his wife with the appropriate therapy, which, in turn, created the objective preconditions for her to keep descending into madness.

Apparently, just as it used to be the case with many physicians in the 19th century, John believed that the reason why some people exhibit mental angst is that they do not apply enough of a conscious effort while trying to suppress their unconscious anxieties. The explanation for this is quite apparent - during the historical period in question, physicians remained utterly unaware that it is precisely one's unconscious, which defines the workings of this person's rational psyche, and not the other way around.

Partially, this had to do with the fact that by the end of the 19th century, the discursive influence of Christianity remained comparatively strong. In its turn, this religion has always been concerned with promoting the assumption that there is a structural unity to one's soul (psyche), which is why it cannot consist of any mutually incompatible elements.

Therefore, there is nothing particularly odd about the fact in the late 19th century, the majority of physicians continued to regard the emanations of one's mental volatility, as having been physiologically (externally) triggered.

Even though while staying at the mansion, the narrator continued to show her mental state's continual deterioration, John could not come up with anything better but to prescribe his wife to lead a socially withdrawn lifestyle. John could never bring himself to consider the possibility that the

worsening of his wife's mental condition had nothing to do with the purely environmental circumstances.

This is the reason why he continued insisting that the key to her rehabilitation was a plenty of food and sleep: " John says I mustn't lose my strength, and has me take cod liver oil and lots of tonics and things, to say nothing of ale and wine and rare meat" (Gilman 4). Being an ego-centered male, John never thought of the possibility for his wife's mental troubles to have been the direct consequence of her socially imposed inability to lead a normal life.

The reading of Gilman's story also suggests that there was another reason, as to why John proved himself unable to properly diagnose his wife and to prescribe her with the proper therapy. Apparently, while acting as a physician (who by definition should have been trying to expand his intellectual horizons), John never made even a single attempt to reconsider the legitimacy of his male-chauvinistic prejudices towards women. In its turn, this explains why although John continued to observe many signs that there was something wrong with his wife, he nevertheless refused to give much thought to what should have been considered these signs' actual significance.

In John's mind, the narrator's mental anxieties were seen confirming the validity of his male-chauvinistic presumption that, just as it is the case with all women, his wife was naturally predisposed to grow hysterical from time to time: " If... one's own husband, assures friends and relatives that there is

really nothing the matter with one but temporary nervous depression - a slight hysterical tendency - what is one to do?" (Gilman 1).

This, of course, implies that, despite having been in love with his wife, John nevertheless could not help patronizing her as someone who did not have what it takes to be able to keep its irrational feelings under control.

Hence, the 'therapy' that her husband prescribed the narrator: " He (John) says no one but myself can help me out of it (depression), that I must use my will and self-control and not let any silly fancies run away with me" (Gilman 5).

It is needless to be mentioned, of course, that the application of this kind of 'therapy' could hardly bring about any positive results, because it was based upon the idea that the unconscious workings of one's psyche can be subjected to conscious control, on this individual's part. Yet, contemporary psychoanalysts know that this is far from being the case. Quite on the contrary - one's conscious attempts to suppress its unconscious anxieties only result in the worsening of the concerned individual's overall mental condition.

This is exactly the reason why, as time went on, the narrator was becoming ever more delirious - the mere fact that, in full accordance with John's advice, she tried to disregard the symptoms of depression, caused her mental despair to continue becoming even worse.

Moreover, apart from experiencing depression, on account of her inability to lead a socially productive lifestyle, she started to grow progressively worried about her self-presumed inability to live up to John's expectations.

Predictably enough, it created yet additional prerequisite for the narrator to continue losing her grip on things, because without being able to articulate her own unconscious fears, she allowed them to be accumulated deep within - hence, making it only the matter of time before they would break out of their psychic confinement into the realm of the main character's consciousness.

As a result, the narrator's ability to indulge in the rationale-based reasoning sustained irreparable damage. The validity of this statement can be illustrated, in regards to the fact that at the end of Gilman's story, the narrator started to behave as if having been nothing short of a schizophrenic, endowed with the fictitious sense of self-identity.

Thus, it will not be much of an exaggeration, on our part, to suggest that The Yellow Wallpaper can be referred to as a particularly powerful indictment of what used to account for the 19th century's approaches to treating mental illnesses. Apparently, besides having been scientifically illegitimate, these approaches were also perceptually arrogant. The fact that John did allow his wife's mild depression to be transformed into schizophrenia validates the appropriateness of this statement.

I believe that the earlier deployed line of argumentation, in defense of the suggestion that the story's main character can be best defined as a victim of

the 19th century's healthcare conventions, correlates well with the paper's initial thesis. This once again emphasizes the fact that, just as it was implied in the Introduction, the literary significance of *The Yellow Wallpaper* cannot be discussed outside of the story's ability to stimulate readers intellectually.

This simply could not be otherwise, because, in *The Yellow Wallpaper*, the author succeeded in both: outlining the discursive principles of what will later become known as the methodology of psychoanalysis, and helping to promote the cause of women's emancipation.

Gilman, Charlotte Perkins. *The Yellow Wallpaper*. 1892. 647 - 656. PDF file.

Treichler, Paula. "Escaping the Sentence: Diagnosis and Discourse in 'The Yellow Wallpaper'." *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 3. 1/2 (1984): 61-77. Print.