

Jane's postpartum depression in the yellow wallpaper by charlotte perkins gilman

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



Imagine being locked in a room, with no outside interaction, except for the rare conversations with a housemaid or husband. Add in a bout of postpartum depression and an overbearing husband to have the story of Jane, a woman in nineteenth-century America. She is the main character and narrator of the short story, “The Yellow Wallpaper,” written by Charlotte Perkins Stetson. Jane is also a new mother who falls into a case of baby blues, and is put into isolation by her husband to try and treat her. Unfortunately, his attempts have an adverse effect and she spirals into insanity, becoming unhealthily obsessed with the yellow wallpaper in the room she is trapped in. This obsession stems from a variety of factors, including her postpartum depression, her isolation, and her husband's misdiagnosis.

The main cause of Jane's warped perception is her postpartum depression, which is defined by the National Institute of Mental Health as: “a mood disorder that can affect women after childbirth... [those suffering] experience feelings of extreme sadness, anxiety, and exhaustion that may make it difficult for them to complete daily care activities” (NIMH). Her husband, John, is a physician and describes it as a “temporary nervous depression,” and claims that it gives her a “slight hysterical tendency” (Gilman 648). Jane's depression is most debilitating at the beginning of the story. Her mood is unstable, as she states that she would “get unreasonably angry with John...I was sure I never used to be this sensitive” (Gilman 648). Her mood swings show that her emotional health is starting to worsen. Later on, she develops an intense anxiety and it becomes apparent when she describes her interactions with her baby. During the nineteenth century, postpartum

depression was not recognized as a legitimate health condition, so Jane's confusion with her baby blues is completely understandable. She relates her experiences surrounding her infant stating, " Such a dear baby! And yet I cannot be with him, it makes me so nervous!" (Gilman 648). Jane's anxiety with her child obviously distresses her which adds to the mental weight on her.

Jane's ability to think logically begins to deteriorate once she discovers the yellow wallpaper. She seems to get irrationally bothered by the inconsistency of the pattern to the point where she says: " I positively angry with the impertinence of it and the everlastingness" (649). Her behaviors in the first two examples can be considered as those of an anxious person and do not fall too far outside the realm of neurotypicality. However, in the last example, it is clear that her grasp on her emotions is starting to slip. Her irrational irritation with an inanimate object proves the idea that Jane's moodiness may be linked to something deeper.

Eventually, Jane's depression gives way into psychosis, a more sinister path. She develops an unhealthy obsession with the yellow wallpaper in the room that she is living in. From the beginning, Jane does show an unusually strong distaste towards it, describing its color as, " repellant, almost revolting; a smouldering unclean yellow, strangely faded by the slow-turning sunlight. It is a dull yet lurid orange in some places, a sickly sulphur tint in others" (Gilman 649). After a long description of the room she lives in, she shares that she can see a being in the wall. She states: " But in the places where it isn't faded and where the sun is just so – I can see a strange, provoking,

formless sort of figure, that seems to skulk about behind that silly and conspicuous front design" (Gilman 650). At this point, it is obvious to the reader that Jane is falling into a bout of psychosis. Her fall into this dark hole is not caused by her depression. As her time in the room progresses, so does her obsession. Jane's time in the room is lonely, and with no stimuli except for the occasional conversation with John or his sister. Besides that, she has no interaction with anyone for twenty-four hours a day. Jane's depression may have begun her mental illness, but it is not what caused her hallucinations. She loses her grip on reality because of under stimulation.

Because Jane is not interacting with anything or anyone, her imagination becomes hyperactive and she starts to hallucinate, and the strange figure from before is identified as a mysterious woman. Jane continues to see the imaginary woman more frequently, describing her as, " always creeping, and most women do not creep by daylight" (Gilman 654). Eventually, the weeks of isolation push Jane past her breaking point and she falls into complete psychosis. She rejects the outside world because " for outside you have to creep on the ground, and everything is green instead of yellow" (Gilman 656). She continues on, narrating her erratic behavior by saying: " But here I can creep smoothly on the floor, and my shoulder just fits in that long smooch around the wall, so I cannot lose my way" (Gilman 656). These two sentences destroy any doubt that Jane still has a sliver of sanity left. The relationship between the amount of isolation Jane suffered through and her insanity is not a coincidence. Rather, their relation is cause and effect; Jane's time alone in the room is the cause, and her mental break is the effect.

Despite the above reasons, the true problem that causes the narrator, Jane, to fall into her mental degeneracy is her husband, John. In the beginning of the story, Jane is diagnosed with hysterical depression by John. She describes his idea of treatment by sharing all the medicine she has to take, such as: “ phosphates or phosphites whichever it is, and tonics, and journeys, and air, and exercise, and I am absolutely forbidden to “ work” until I am well again” (Gilman 648). In the nineteenth century, women's mental health was disregarded and most legitimate conditions were brushed off as a short episode of hysteria. This caused many women to be treated incorrectly, oftentimes under one blanket treatment of isolation which tended to be extremely detrimental to their health. Two psychologists from the University of Wisconsin confirms this in their paper, describing the treatment the women in the nineteenth century endured. They state, “ Between the years of 1850-1900, women were placed in mental institutions for behaving in ways that male society did not agree with. Women during this time period had minimal rights, even concerning their own mental health” (Pouba and Tianen 95). Some could say that John is a symbol of the patriarchy in this story. It is not a far stretch to believe this, as his actions towards Jane indicate that he may be overbearing in their relationship. John does not seem to value Jane's opinion about her own health, as she states that, “ John laughs at me, of course, but one expects that in marriage” (Gilman 647). She seems to have experienced a lot of ridicule from her husband as she normalizes it as a regular part of marriage. He does show a lot of affection towards Jane; she shares an interaction she had, stating, “ He said I was his darling and his comfort and all he had, and that I must take

care of myself for his sake" (Gilman 652). Although he is sweet to Jane, he still shows selfish reasoning behind his desire for her to be well. It is showing of his character, as it reveals him to be self-centered and misleading. John may have thought he was helping the situation, but like the patriarchy, he ended up becoming an overbearing presence to Jane and ignored her well-being, all of which only pushed Jane into a poor mental state.

Overall, Jane's fall into insanity is not her fault. Her postpartum depression, her isolation, and her husband's poor understanding of her condition all contribute to her psychosis. Her baby blues are what cause her to be in a unwell mental state, and it is only perpetuated by the under stimulation she experiences through being locked in her room. All of this could have been avoided if her husband had taken her opinion into consideration in the first place. As a whole, this story, although fictitious, demonstrates the mistreatment of women and the negative effects it can have.