

# Free essay about the yellow wallpaper

[Sociology](#), [Women](#)



## **A Look at Antiquated Gender Roles**

### **INTRODUCTION**

What is crazy? Mentally disturbed? What makes someone's behavior unstable and makes them a threat? Today we have a much clearer understanding of the nature of people's psychology, mental illness, and diseases. However, throughout the past people have been branded as insane, unstable, a threat, and locked away for issues that are not motivated by insanity. The mentally and physically disabled have often been mistaken for the mentally ill and placed in confinement. It was, also, not uncommon to see women committed to sanitariums for the "emotional outbursts" and disagreeable dispositions. None of these were signs of true mental illness, but the label of mental illness was hard to escape then, as surely as it is today. There is a stigma associated with mental illness or the possibility of it. That person becomes unreliable, dishonest, and others may find everything they say is questionable and everything they do is suspected to be a manifestation of this mental or emotional problem that they have. It steals away credibility. That is part of the problem in the story "The Yellow Wallpaper," written by Charlotte Perkins Gilman in 1892. The story is riddled with gender inequality, antiquated psychological perspectives, and stands as a testament to the negative and imbalanced gender relations common in that era.

### **HISTORY**

The Yellow Wallpaper tells the tale of an unnamed narrator. The narrator, a woman who has been diagnosed as mentally ill by her husband, is confined

into a room in a house that they share. The title evolved from the yellow wallpaper that covered the walls in her room. Her husband has assigned himself the job, of both her caretaker and her psychiatric counsel. Her husband, a well-respected physician of his time, diagnosed his own wife with a mental illness and then arbitrates her confinement. This is a fascinating convenience that would never be tolerated today. However, throughout history and prevalent during the story's era, the patriarchal outlook on society set very strict gender roles and perspectives. These stereotypes were ingrained in societies through both day-to-day social orders and religious ideologies. The male superiority has been supported by the Christianity for generations. Adam is superior to Eve in the Garden of Eden, and therefore all women are inferior to men. Societies were structured around male advantage. Gender roles would define men and women for generations to come. Women had few rights and a lot of social responsibility within the household. Women seldom worked or earned a monetary wage. Domestic life, the maintenance of the house, cooking meals, cleaning, and raising children was the place of women. Since that is a woman's purpose, according to a patriarchal society, then it should make her happy and fulfill her to do it. When this did not happen then there must be something wrong with the woman. Of course that is not true, the problem laid in the system, but society would not figure that out for several generations to come. This is, however, the world that the narrator of "The Yellow Wallpaper" had to survive. There is also a level of stigma and shame associated with such mental illness; this would only be a greater concern for people of the upper-class as they are in this story.

## DISCUSSION

While her husband made the initial diagnosis that the narrator is suffering from a minor issue, an emotional problem that can be treated with confinement and disallowance to do anything but sit and contemplate herself and her surroundings. “ My brother is also a physician, and also of high standing, and he says the same thing! So I take phosphates or phosphites.” (Perkins Gilman 1). This was typical means by which men of the past has worked to sedate and limit the women around them. Many women were told that any dissatisfaction that they feel in their lives could be treated with tonics, elixirs, and the like. These bottled remedies were often fraudulent in nature, containing nothing that would benefit anyone on a medical level. In fact, many contained mostly alcohol and, often, drugs, like Laudanum. Many women became addicted to these substances. So she has been diagnosed by two men in her family to be unstable and that is a sufficient to restrain and confine her.

Sadly, the narrator may not have been truly insane, however, after her long confinement and loss of self and autonomy was driven mad. That said, many may question if readers can truly rely on the narrator. However, because women were perceived as secondary member of society there was very little energy expended in understanding the psychology of women. Male physicians seldom listened to their female patients and their solution was often hap-hazard and led to much misdiagnoses and maltreatment. In fact, there is a line in the short story that speaks volumes as to what the narrator many have been suffering from. “ Such a dear baby! And yet I cannot be with him, it makes me so nervous” (Perkins Gilman 2). This implies that the

narrator may have recently had a new baby. Today women suffer from nervousness, anxiety, and unstable emotions as a result of post-partum depression, which is a form of depression that many new mothers suffer from. That said, women with post-partum depression are not insane, they may need some treatment, but confinement is hardly necessary.

“ The narrator says that her husband “ hates to have [her] write a word” (Perkins Gilman 2). The narrator husband discourages her from writing or using her imagination. He did not want her to give in to whims and fancies. When men are creative and write they would be seen as talented, inspiring, and insightful. However, for a woman to possess creativity is thought to be silly, overemotional, and irrelevant nonsense that deter women from fulfilling the proper goals in their lives. It was this emotional and intellectual disregard and neglect of herself and by her husband that only increased her depression and enraged her madness. The banning of her writing is simply another example of the disregard what women feel and more importantly think. Men do not listen to women and do not want them wasting so much time expressing themselves.

“ I'm feeling ever so much better! I don't sleep much at night, for it is so interesting to watch developments; but I sleep a good deal in the daytime” (Perkins Gilman 7). This admission by the narrator reflects her dissent into madness, she is no longer clinging to societal norms; she sleep during the day and is awake all night. This places her behavior in opposition of what is normal. The yellow wallpaper, that spawned the works title, becomes more and more offensive to her as the story continues. She begins to see other women in the patterns or rather trapped behind it. The narrator is becoming

more and more compromised by her situation. She says, “ The woman behind shakes it!! Sometimes I think there are a great many women behind, and sometimes only one, and she crawls around fast, and her crawling shakes it all over! Then in the very bright spots she keeps still, and in the very shady spots she just takes hold other bars and shakes them hard! And she is all the time trying to climb through. But nobody could climb through that pattern” (Perkins Gilman 8). As mad as this rant may sound, it is actually a very clear metaphor for her imprisonment and the imprisonment of gender inequality as a whole. They are her and she is them, simple as that.

The disregard of her husband and doctor, her denial of freedom, and discouragement to express herself through writing or any physical activity is hardly an effective treatment of a mental illness by today’s standard. This environment is, however, conducive with “ breaking someone’s spirit.” That is what this “ treatment” and much of the treatment that women received was based on the premise. Sedatives, confinement, and strict control factors slowly but surely led to properly conform. While many of readers will probably feel that by the end of the story the main character is completely insane. However, that is not necessarily true. Again, her initial issue may have been post-partum depression but her resulting condition may very well be Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Confinement, loss of control, solitude, and forced inaction can be traumatizing to people. Today mental science knows that after traumatic and frightening events can have a profound and lasting effect on the victim. If that is true then gender inequality is what drove this women mad, not mental illness.

One of the only pieces of furniture of note in this short story is the bed. The bed is described as large, heavy, and bolted to the floor (Perkin Gilman 9). The presence of the bed, symbolically, may relate to another metaphor used to symbolize the strict gender roles. One of women's relevant duties is to provide for their husbands needs in the bedroom and produce healthy children from those couplings. While she is forbidden from leaving, engaging in activities, and prevented from expressing herself, she is allowed the bed as a reminder, no doubt, reinforcing the antiquated and unequal gender and sexual roles that women of her time were forced to endure.

One of the most significant moments in the story that speaks greatly to gender roles and societal norms, is the last scene. When her husband walks into her room and sees her standing there, having ripped the wallpaper from the walls. She “creeps” around the room believing herself free and liberated. Her husband's response is to faint. This weakness is hardly personifying the strong, dominate male favored in this society. In fact, it was a rather feminine response. It is like the writer was balancing the “freedom” that the narrator achieves by tearing down the wallpaper, which empowers her and weakness, her spouse. She says that she can, “creep over him every time!” (Perkins-Gilman 10). The switch of gender roles on briefly seen as she freely steps over him as he had metaphorically done to her. Sadly her confinement has caused her to become truly mentally ill and in need of real psychological treatment. While tearing the wallpaper freed her from the confines of this room, one may assume that she would ultimately find herself confined in someplace far less pleasant.

Again, the narrator in “The Yellow Wallpaper” represents generations of

women who have been underestimated, disregarded, and mistreated by male dominant societies. She is a true victim of her era, like many women who came before and after her. The conclusion of the story is not a traditional conclusion because none of the literary “ loose ends” were tied up, leaving many questions unanswered. We do not know what happens after the husband faints and the narrator proceeds with her “ creeping.” Was she able to recover after some time? What does her husband do when he woke up? One might want question if in her madness she “ crept” into the kitchen snatched a butcher knife and cut her husband up into a dozen individual pieces? Is her freedom an illusion? Has her long confinement caused her to mentally deteriorate is that not a whole new prison in and of itself. Sadly that was likely the fate of many real women of that era.

## **CONCLUSION**

Gender inequality still exists in the world. Gender roles are perpetually enforced on children each and every day; however, those roles have evolved and changed over time. “ The Yellow Wallpaper” personifies the plight that that inequality can create. It is fair to say that her gender arbitrarily caused her confinement. Had she been a male the story would be very different. The narrator is a representation of every woman who has suffered the consequences of gender inequality in a patriarchal society, just as the women trapped in the wallpaper represented herself. Today, in most intellectual circles, we have a more firm understanding of the nature of mental illness and madness; a woman today would never be diagnosed as a hysterical woman, disregarding her feeling and circumstances. Fortunately,



we are far removed from the era that the narrator lives and the author penned the tale.

## **WORK CITED**

Perkins Gilman, C. The Yellow Wallpaper. 1892. 1-10. Print.