

# En 655 critical thinking examples

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



## **Reviewing " The Yellow Wallpaper" through Plato and Christine de Pisan**

Charlotte Gilman's short story " The Yellow Wallpaper" tells the tale of a young married woman who suffers from what is presumed to be post-partum depression. Her physician husband decides to sequester her for a ' rest cure' in their summer home, which turns out to backfire when she starts to slowly go insane. The story takes the form of journal entries denoting her gradual slide into madness, as she hallucinates and forms paranoid thoughts about her husband and the outside world. The audience sees all of this through a first-person perspective that allows us to see inside the mind of the protagonist, sharing her slow mental collapse and allowing them to feel everything that she is going through. This creates a sympathy for the protagonist that would not otherwise have been as present if the story were told from any other perspective. Viewing this short story through the modes of both Plato and Christine de Pisan, we see a work that is concerned chiefly with both the nature of reality and the state of feminism in its time period. The philosopher Plato was chiefly concerned with the nature of reality and of being, as well as his Theory of Forms - the idealism that there are permanent concepts that shape our material world (Plato, Republic). Plato's distrust of fallible memory and man's ability to delude itself and others is evident in his works: " If men learn this, it will implant forgetfulness in their souls; they will cease to exercise memory because they rely on that which is written, calling things to remembrance no longer from within themselves, but by means of external marks" (Phaedrus 79). Plato warns of the dangers of relying on the opinion of others instead of cultivating one's own wisdom; this is

demonstrated in the narrator's noted lack of agency, and her misplaced trust in the fallible and unchallenged doctor-cum-husband.

In essence, this struggle between reality and fantasy is at the heart of “The Yellow Wallpaper” as the narrator begins to lose her grasp of what truly constitutes the Real. At the beginning of the story, the protagonist is excited, even chipper, about the prospect of going to this summer home with John, her husband – however, she is suspicious from the start about why they are going there. “Still I will proudly declare that there is something queer about it. Else, why should it be let so cheaply? And why have stood so long untenanted?” (Gilman 508). The first person perspective lends to foreshadowing, as the protagonist senses that something is wrong, letting the audience know, but she cannot quite articulate it.

The protagonist of “The Yellow Wallpaper” experiences both tremendous psychotic episodes and incredible feministic tendencies and desires, exploring them both for the sake of finding her own identity apart from her husband and normal society and demonstrating the importance of activity and feminism in the female mind. Christine de Pisan was an incredibly learned woman who was perpetually concerned with growing misogyny in French society; she would see the narrator as a victim of such a patriarchal world, where the husband traps her and makes her insane by exerting his control. As men “can tell endless tales and keep the best parts for themselves” (Christine de Pisan 125), Pisan would see this story as an expression of that persecution, and how it can drive victims of patriarchal society insane.

The sense of isolation that the protagonist feels (due to the gender-specific

discrimination she experiences) is not unlike the lack of enlightenment one feels in Plato's "Allegory of the Cave". In it, he describes the philosopher as someone who is able to free themselves from seeing just the 'shadows' of reality, and can now see the true shapes of it. This ties back to his ideal of an aristocracy in society, wherein those same philosophers would go back to the cave in order to share the true Forms of reality and knowledge with those still in the cave (who do not understand that they only see shadows) (Republic). The narrator was placed in a prison or cave-like environment, where she was being observed and noticed, rather than simply hidden away. Over time, much of this surveillance took place merely in the protagonist's head, through the "two bulbous eyes" (Gilman 511) that she regularly sees in the yellow wallpaper. This merely leads to her madness and paranoia, and does not help her already agitated situation. The primary antagonist of the main character in "The Yellow Wallpaper" is the husband himself, John. He is a doctor, and a 19th century one, at that; at the time, mental illness was not very well known of or talked about, and therefore many of the remedies that were prescribed to those suffering from these maladies were anything but helpful. The concept of a 'rest cure' is particularly bizarre, as it implies that the outside world itself is what needs to be stopped, not the protagonist's potential sadness (which may or may not be postpartum depression). He is Plato's idea of the foolish poet who attempts to act as a doctor though he is actually harming her: "The poet is like a painter who, as we have already observed, will make a likeness of a cobbler though he understands nothing of cobbling" (Plato, Republic 33).

As the narrator continues on this path, the madness and despair get worse.

She starts to hallucinate that figures in the wallpaper are watching her: " I always fancy I see people walking in these numerous paths and arbors, but John has cautioned me not to give way to fancy in the least" (Gilman 511). All this is evidence of the hallucinations she is experiencing, as well as her further disconnect from reality as a result of the rest cure and her inattentive husband. Feeling separated from this cruel world by terrible circumstances, the protagonist begins to form her very own narrative about what she is seeing. Part of this narrative involves increasable creative leaps, including seeing a woman in the wallpaper – one who is trapped and in need of help. This reflects the protagonist's own desire to be saved from her own boredom and restrictions. She even laments this potential problem, only to shoot it down with her husband's own faulty logic: " I sometimes fancy that in my condition if I had less opposition and more society and stimulus – but John says the very worst thing I can do is to think about my condition, and I confess it always makes me feel bad" (Gilman 508). Here, she is falling into the trap that de Pisan avoids sarcastically when she criticizes patriarchy, which is that she does not dare to find fault in what her husband is doing to her. " yet may my daring to repudiate and find fault with an author so worthy and so subtle not seem presumption in me" (Christine de Pisan, 127). Despite the protagonist's protests as to the effectiveness of (or desire for) the resting cure, John persists, stating that he knows what is best for her. " Your exercise depends on your strength, my dear, ' said he' and your food somewhat on your appetite; but air you can absorb all the time" (Gilman 509). This is one of his many relatively crackpot and holistic theories as to how the protagonist can get better again. However, all this serves to do is

bring her further away from everything that still keeps her sane, like her art and painting. Plato warns against those who are too quick to advance their causes (in this case, modern medicine) at the expense of what is right: "what will anyone be profited if under the influence of honor or money or power, aye, or under the excitement of poetry, he neglect justice and virtue?" (Plato 38). In this case, John neglects the desire to do the right thing with his wife in favor of comforting her with flawed 19th century medicine, as well as possibly to keep her out of the way, so as not to disturb him with her hysteria.

The protagonist's relationship with the color yellow is a big part of the story, especially as more and more time passes and she becomes increasingly paranoid. When she first enters the room, she has a violently negative reaction to the titular wallpaper – "The color is repellent, almost revolting: a smoldering unclean yellow, strangely faded by the slow-turning sunlight" (Gilman, 509). Time goes on, and John's promise to change the wallpaper has not been fulfilled, leaving the otherwise nice room with a nagging flaw that exacerbates her growing insanity – "I'm really getting quite fond of the big room, all but that horrid paper" (Gilman 510). This quote indicates that everything about the room is acceptable to her, except for the wallpaper itself, which she describes as "horrid." The narrator starts to form her own reality through hallucination; Plato rails against this as well, both narrator and husband living in a world of delusion: "if he does not make a real object he cannot make what is, but only some semblance of existence; and if anyone were to say that the work of the maker of the bed, or of any other workman, has real existence, he could hardly be supposed to be speaking

the truth" (Plato 31).

The first person perspective allows the audience to go on the complete emotional journey with the protagonist – nothing is left out, no matter how gruesome or uncomfortable. Suspicion turns to anger and hatred, as the protagonist starts to wonder about the woman she sees behind the yellow wallpaper, even relating to it in her own isolation. “ I don’t blame her a bit. It must be very humiliating to be caught creeping by daylight!” (Gilman 517). She also has her lucid moments – the punctuation of her continuing insanity with moments of clarity makes the journey even more dangerous, as she recognizes what is happening to her, but seemingly cannot stop it. “ I wish I could get well faster,” (Gilman 511) says the protagonist at one point in a fit of pique. However, due to her own depression and madness, we see her slowly believe that there are women in the wallpaper. Plato, reading this, might see this as an expression of art and creativity -something that is irrational and has no place in the perfect state of man: " The poet is like a painter who, as we have already observed, will make a likeness of a cobbler though he understands nothing of cobbling; and his picture is good enough for those who know no more than he does, and judge only by colors and figures"(Plato 33).

In the end, she is extremely excited by her situation regarding the wallpaper – the first-person perspective allows us to see inside her mind and learn her opinions on the situation. “ Life is very much more exciting now than it used to be. You see I have something more to expect, to look forward to, to watch. I really do eat better, and am more quiet than I was” (Gilman 515). If this story were told from a third-person perspective, we would simply see a

woman going mad in a room, not knowing her innermost thoughts. In this way, however, Gilman allows the woman's mind to become the journey itself; the arc of the plot is her own descent into madness, rather than merely becoming cooped up in a summer home. What the narrator hallucinates about and what ends up plaguing her most is the violation of her own rights and privileges as a person and woman. John is domineering and unkind, believing erroneously that he knows exactly what is wrong with her and how to fix it. " John is a physician and PERHAPS. that is one reason I do not get well faster" (Gilman 508). Her subordinate status as the woman in the marriage forces her to follow her husband's lead, especially when he has such a prestigious education and standing in life at the time as a doctor. Things like the rest cure were meant to also demoralize her and make her more docile – her condition merely made it easier to be manipulated. This flies in the face of many feminist ideals, and the story often provides feminism as a solution to the problems the protagonist is experiencing. De Pisan herself notes man's willingness to think terrible, insulting things about women, as she mentioned in her criticism of Roman de la Rose: " In God's name, what can one find there but sophistical exhortations filled with ugliness and things horrible to recall?" (Christine de Pisan 128). Feminism was not entirely present in the 19th century – the domestic picture painted by families in the United States was of women dutifully caring for their home while the men went forth and worked on their own. Women were not allowed to vote, and they were often left powerless by an increasingly patriarchal society. " The Yellow Wallpaper" is meant to be an answer to that, wherein the woman is driven mad by the same thing the man wants her to do,



proving that he does not have the ultimate answer for everything. It becomes an expression of the world of the woman, and how it can drive women to desperation and psychological torment. “The Yellow Wallpaper” is an extremely feminist text. By showing just how wrong John is in his assessment of the protagonist, and seeing how much his diagnosis hurts her psychologically, we begin to see that it is not a good idea for the woman’s own desires and intentions to be ignored. John would rather be certain of his own superiority, both gender-wise and intellectually, than consider the idea that his wife may know more about her own condition than she does. This is akin to “the wickedness which is there recorded of women” (Christine de Pisan 128). De Pisan talks about in her critiques - John and his ilk think poorly of women, and so take the initiative to control them in these ways; by downplaying her need for real medical and psychological help as “a nervous weakness” which “is sure to lead to all manner of excited fancies” is akin to this kind of wickedness de Pisan describes (Gilman 508). The biggest thing getting in the way of this being a feminist text is the relative passivity of the protagonist. For as many people (John included) who make fun of her, there are many more instances where she does not stand up for herself. This is for many reasons – one, it would not have been effective to whine in front of the man who is both one’s husband and one’s health care provider; also, in the 19th century it was important to mask her anxieties and fears in order to keep the illusion of a happy marriage, and to make it seem like she is fighting her own depression and living to tell the tale. De Pisan would have admired her, as she fought against these patriarchal beliefs in her own struggles, saying that it “may it not be imputed to me as folly, arrogance, or

presumption, that I, a woman, should dare to reproach and call into question"(Christine de Pisan 131) the actions of arrogant men who seek to marginalize women due to their low opinion of them.

In the end, it seems as though the protagonist is forced into this situation against her will, entering into it through a misplaced trust of her husband/doctor's assessment of her health. The very tenets of the resting cure prevent her from thinking or spending time on intellectualism for very long, almost as if to discourage her from really thinking about what she is doing. This leads her to the type of creative and cognitive starvation that makes her mind start to invent hallucinations such as the woman in the wallpaper. De Pisan would see this as the eventual outcome of a patriarchal hostage situation like we see in Gilman's story, as men like John do not know what is like to be a woman and cannot address these 'problems' - " it is precisely because I am a woman that I can speak better in this matter than one who has not had the experience, since he speaks only by conjecture and by chance" (Christine de Pisan 130).

Perhaps the most gratifying (yet disturbing) moment for the protagonist in the short story is when she finally succumbs to her madness, falling victim to the patriarchal and homeopathic solution that her husband laid out for her. She writes, " I've got out at last in spite of you and Jane. And I've pulled off most of the paper, so you can't put me back!" (Gilman 519). At this point, she fully believes she is the woman in the wallpaper who has freed herself from her own insecurities and manages to survive. However, she can never then regain that humanity, as the prison experience has left her feeling higher than consciousness; she has gone off the deep end, and does not

have the appropriate skills or support system (being an isolated woman in the 19th century) to thrive, much less survive.

An unsatisfying, patriarchal marriage, combined with misplaced ideas of what constituted medicine in the 19th century, makes the protagonist of “The Yellow Wallpaper” descend into madness and hysteria. Plato's modes would see the story as an example of the poet's need to create a world that is inferior to the real one; both John with his mistaken ideas of what women need, and the narrator's increasing hallucinations to recreate her own reality, are false. Christine de Pisan would see the story as an example of the increasing distrust of men toward women; John uses his apparent greater knowledge of medicine to keep the narrator disenfranchised and without agency. The woman, on the other hand, does not get a say in how she is treated, because she is presumed to not know any better - the same claims de Pisan refuted when criticizing Roman de la Rose.

## **Works Cited**

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