

# Trapped in the wallpaper: the impact of first-person narrative on reader empathy



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The short stories “ The Yellow Wallpaper” by Charlotte Perkins Gilman and “ A Jury of Her Peers” by Susan Glaspell are somewhat similar. Each story is set in a different time and place, with different characters, different plots, and with considerably different narrative styles: they are very much separate, yet they are also analogous to each other. They each feature a revival of self, or the emergence of a new self awareness that had not previously existed in the main character. “ The Yellow Wallpaper” employs an empathy-garnering narrative style that makes it more effective in allowing the reader to experience the awakening along with the narrator than “ A Jury of Her Peers.” The first-person narrative connects the reader to the narrator, separates the reader from secondary characters, and uses deep, primal emotions to create a more relatable, personal experience.

The respective stories of the narrator in “ The Yellow Wallpaper” and Mrs. Peters in “ A Jury of Her Peers” have distinct similarities. Each has an revival of self in which she reclaims her stolen autonomy from the man in her life. In “ The Yellow wallpaper,” the unnamed narrator is locked away, with the eponymous yellow wallpaper, writing her story as a rebellious act and slowly separating herself from her loved ones. She slowly becomes less coherent and in the delirium she develops, she sees a woman crawling through the wallpaper. Eventually, near the end of the story she writes that she has become the woman. At the same time she breaks away from her husband and his power over her. Mrs. Peters finds evidence that could convict one of her peers of murder in a house that her husband, the sheriff, is searching. She has to make a decision: to convict the woman and remain subordinate to her husband, or to hide the evidence and break away from her husband. Her

awakening comes when she decides to hide the evidence in a last moment scramble. Both women step up for themselves and reclaim their right to make decisions.

“The Yellow Wallpaper” is written in a stream-of-consciousness, first-person style. This type of first-person narration can powerfully impact the way a reader experiences a story. In the case of “The Yellow Wallpaper,” the first-person narration allows the readers to relate directly to the main character: the story utilizes the reader-narrator connection that is inherent to the style. This happens through a combination of ‘othering’ secondary characters and exclusively displaying the narrator’s perspective.

A commonly noted disadvantage of first-person narration is that the reader is limited to just one perspective for the entirety of a story. This limitation works to the advantage of “The Yellow Wallpaper.” It imprisons the reader, by trapping them in the room with the main character and the wallpaper. While the main character experiences severe confinement at the hands of her husband, the person reading the story is paired with her. The narrative style is a parallel to the story itself, as she is trapped with the wallpaper and the reader is trapped with her. Part-way through the piece, the main character begins to put up walls against her husband and her sister in law. She paints them as outsiders, describes her husband as “queer:”

“And that cultivates deceit, for I don’t tell him I’m awake—oh no! The fact is I am getting a little afraid of John. He seems very queer sometimes and even Jennie has an inexplicable look” (Gilman 8)

The 'othering' of her loved ones pulls the audience farther into the mind of the main character. The reader is on the inside of these walls as an observer on the main character's side. Although a modern reader might typically find it difficult to access the mindset of the narrator, the 'othering' of secondary characters and the restrictive properties of first-person narrative allow them to better experience the character's awakening, not as a third party but as she feels it. These tactics cultivate a feeling of empathy. This is not necessarily a genuine empathy, but is rather artificially made by the style of writing to allow the audience to step into the experience and participate in the character's big moment of realization. The reader is guided into the main characters experience by the structure of the story. This empathy is formed by specific instances peppered throughout "The Yellow Wallpaper" that draw on fear, anger, and sadness as primary emotions that the reader feels along with the narrator. Throughout the story, the reader knows that the narrator is not supposed to be writing. She writes that her husband has forbidden it. It is revealed that she is frantically writing her story, listening for the stairs, nervous at the possibility of being caught by her husband or her sister in law, and frustrated that she is not permitted to write. The reader follows her into this frightened, irritable mindset. By appealing to those innermost emotions, the writing has a deeper effect on the reader.

In "The Yellow Wallpaper," the use of personal pronouns and present tense creates a story that seems to be happening as it is being read. If "The Yellow Wallpaper" is a story that is happening, "A Jury of Her Peers" is a story that happened. This is the first level of separation between the character and the reader. "A Jury of Her Peers" is written in third-person

omniscient, limited to the mind of Mrs. Hale. However, Mrs. Hale is not the character who experiences the awakening during the course of the story, as she sympathizes with Winnie Foster from the beginning. Instead it is Mrs. Peters who has a moment of drastic change. Despite this being a story of Mrs. Peters' awakening, it is Mrs. Hale's mind the reader is given access to. In contrast to "The Yellow Wallpaper," in "A Jury of Her Peers," the reader is given a limited view of Mrs. Peter's emotions and thoughts. It is difficult to relate to Mrs. Peters and share in the experience of her awakening if the reader cannot easily relate to her. During the most critical moments in her decision-making process Mrs. Peters erects barriers between herself and Mrs. Hale, and by extension, the reader: "' Why, I don't know whether she did or not.' [Mrs. Hale] turned to look at the cage Mrs. Peters was holding up. ' I've not been here in so long.' She sighed. "' There was a man round last year selling canaries cheap— but I don't know as she took one. Maybe she did. She used to be real pretty herself' Mrs. Peters looked around the kitchen. ' Seems kind of funny to think of a bird in here.' She half laughed—an attempt to put up a barrier" (Glaspell).

This is an example of a form of 'othering' found in "A Jury of Her Peers" that is not present in "The Yellow Wallpaper." As stated previously, in the first person narrative, the reader is closed in with the character who has an awakening. However, in the third person narrative, the reader is shut out, away from the awakening character and the use of past tense distances the reader from the main character as well. This awakening woman is the most important character to relate to in order to experience the revival of self and the rebirth of autonomy. In the case of Mrs. Peters, the reader is actively

denied entrance to the inner workings of the mind. In each story the reader is grouped differently with the characters. In "The Yellow Wallpaper," the reader is grouped with the narrator and the secondary characters become outsiders. In "A Jury of Her Peers," the reader is grouped with Mrs. Hale, making Mrs. Peters an outsider, creating an environment in which the reader feels the same level of empathy or intense emotion towards her as a person. The only place in the story where the reader can empathize with Mrs. Peters and feel the same panic she feels in her moment of decision, is contained within a few sentences at the climax of the story: "And then [Mrs. Peters] did it. With a rush forward, she threw back the quilt pieces, got the box, tried to put it in her handbag. It was too big. Desperately she opened, started to take the bird out. But there she broke—she could not touch the bird. She stood there helpless, foolish." (Glaspell)

Much like "The Yellow Wallpaper," Glaspell's story uses primary emotions to draw the reader in. Mrs. Peter's moment of awakening is intense and emotional. There is fear and panic in her split second decision to hide incriminating evidence from her husband to protect another woman. This highly stressful climax in the story is powerful but it does not offer the same experience as "The Yellow Wallpaper." Due to the third person style and lack of personal pronouns, the reader may have difficulty empathizing with Mrs. Peters as the story primarily asks them not to understand Mrs. Peters, but to understand that she is feeling these emotions.

By the end of the story, Mrs. Peters has to make a firm decision about who she sides with. She reclaims her autonomy and decides to hide the bird. This is the moment she changes. Mr. Hale jokes at the end of the story that " a <https://assignbuster.com/trapped-in-the-wallpaper-the-impact-of-first-person-narrative-on-reader-empathy/>

sheriff's wife is married to the law" (Glaspell). Though she is married to her husband, by the end of the story, she is not "married to the law" in the same way she had been when they first arrived at the Wright house.

Both "The Yellow Wallpaper" by Charlotte Perkins Gilman and "A Jury of Her Peers" involve the awakening of a woman as she reclaims her ability to make her own decisions. The texts utilize similar intense emotions to help the reader feel connected to the characters and allow them to take part in the awakenings. The third-person narration of "A Jury of Her Peers" is less effective than "The Yellow Wallpaper" because a first person narrative is naturally more personal and creates a sense of unity with the main character through separation from the secondary characters. Although each story is an emotional experience of its own, when compared, Gilman's story is a stronger experience for the reader.