

Historical analysis of charlotte perkins gilman's "the yellow wallpaper"

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



Although the feminist movement began to make a solid appearance in the United States in the mid 19th century, successful results did not show until the early 20th century. In the 1800s, women held little importance in society and had little to no voice. They had almost no power since they were not allowed to vote and were expected to be subordinate in marriage by always obliging to their husbands orders without any objection. The oppression of women in both marriage and society throughout the late 19th century is reflected in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper." In this story, the narrator was diagnosed with temporary nervous depression with a slight hysterical tendency by her physician husband and as a result they lived in a secluded colonial mansion for the summer as treatment. During their three months stay, the wife had very little interaction with the outside world, was forbidden from doing strenuous activities, and was not supposed to write. Due to her constant isolation and slim activity, she progressively hallucinated a woman who was trapped in the wallpaper of her room, and was trying to break free. The woman in the wallpaper was a reflection of the progressive woman in the United States during the late 19th century. Many readers would argue that the narrator was actually mentally ill from the beginning, however the "sickness" she experienced was a result of both her husband and society restricting her and every other woman's actions and freedom.

For treatment to the narrator's "illness" that was diagnosed by her husband, she underwent a less severe regimen of the rest cure for twelve weeks. The rest cure treatment was developed by Silas Weir Mitchell in the 1870s, the most prominent physician in the treatment of neurasthenia in the United

States at the time, and was practiced widely throughout the U. S. and western Europe until the mid-1930s (Stiles). His therapy consisted of five elements: extreme bed rest, seclusion, dietary changes, massages, and electricity. The patients are removed from their home and family and are cared for by nurses. They also aren't allowed to read or write or create a lot of neural stimulation. For at least five weeks, the patient is bedridden and can only leave to use the bathroom. Because of this, massages and electricity were used to prevent muscular atrophy. As for their diet, they mostly drank milk because of its high fat content. The treatment was used mostly on women that had severe nervous system issues which included hypochondria, hysteria, and temporary nervous depression (Poirier). Supposedly, many women actually benefitted from the treatment, however numerous patients developed negative psychological responses just like the ones the narrator experienced.

The effects the narrator experienced from the rest cure were anxiety, hallucinations, depression, and paranoia. Although Dr. Mitchell and other medical experts weren't fully aware of the physiological effects during the 19th century, recent researchers were able to uncover the negative outcomes of bed rest and isolation. Multiple studies have shown that long periods of bedrest can cause a patient to show symptoms of depression, anxiety, forgetfulness, and confusion. The lack of personal control and freedom one feels during bedrest is a factor in the cause of these symptoms (Breslow). Since the narrator's husband made almost all of her decisions and wanted her to stay in her bed most of the time with little brain stimulation, it

comes as no surprise that the wife is experiencing the negative psychological effects. Studies investigating the psychological effects of long-term solitary confinement reveal that “ hallucinations, insomnia, paranoia, uncontrollable feelings of rage and fear, and distortions of time and perception” can occur (Weir). Even though the narrator in “ The Yellow Wallpaper” did not experience the same severity of isolation as prisoners in solitary confinement, it is expected that her symptoms are similar considering she spent the three months powerless in a secluded mansion under her husband’s overpowering actions and patriarchal tendencies.

Although the rest cure technique was one factor into the narrator’s anxiety, paranoia, and hallucinations that led her to “ free” the trapped woman in the wallpaper at the end of the story, another cause of her actions were from the restraints put on her emotional and physical freedom by her husband and the patriarchal society in the 19th century. Just like almost every other woman during that time period, the narrator didn’t have a voice in her marriage or society— unable to make her own choices such as writing in her journal, picking the room she will stay in for three months, and deciding who visits her. When she was fixated on the details of the wallpaper, the narrator perceived part of the design as a woman who was stuck in the wall and unable to break free. She described the woman in the wallpaper as “” (). When she ripped the wallpaper at the end of the story and “ freed” the woman, it represented the narrator’s escape from the patriarchal and sexist gender roles that prevented equality in the American 19th century.

By the mid-1800s, the fight for women's suffrage became prevalent. In July 1848 Seneca Falls, New York, the first meeting dedicated to women's rights took place and around 100 women attended with two-thirds of them being female. Smaller women's rights conventions were also being convened across the United States which were prominently in the North. These groups were able to have the Married Women's Property Act adopted in numerous states in 1882, which allowed married women control over their own property and income. Other regulations were also being enacted across America, such as the a New York Law created in 1860 that " gives women joint custody over their children and the right to sue and be sued" (Eisenberg et. al). The first state to grant women full voting was was Wyoming in 1869, and the other states that passed suffrage laws in the 19th century were Colorado (1893), Utah (1896), and Idaho (1896) (Crumrin et. al). These activists were not just fighting for the right to vote, but were striving for social, economic, and educational equality. Just like the rest of the women in the late 1800s, the narrator in " The Yellow Wallpaper" is struggling with the lack of freedom and civil rights apparent in society. The frustration and stress from the inferiority she feels while stranded alone in the house with her misogynistic and obstinate husband ultimately leads to her psychotic breakdown in hopes to break free from the oppression.