

The impenetrable fortress of wallpaper: tone, symbolism, and context "the yellow ...

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



“ Live as domestic a life as possible... And never touch pen, brush, or pencil as long as you live” (“ The Literature of Prescription”). Such was the suggestion bestowed upon Charlotte Perkins Gilman, author of “ The Yellow Wallpaper,” by her physician, the famed Silas Weir Mitchell, when she began to exhibit symptoms now known to characterize post-partum depression. The “ rest cure,” as it came to be known, was a common prescription in the 19th century for all manners of mental disorders, ranging from depression to hysteria (polar opposites, it should be noted). It involved forgoing nearly all physical and mental activity, opting out of social contact, spending heavy amounts of time in bed, being fed a steady diet of high-calorie foods, and occasionally, even being subjected to electrotherapy (“ Bed Rest”). From this brief description, it could be inferred that, in “ The Yellow Wallpaper,” Charlotte Gilman was attempting to take on the inadequacies of the rest cure, exposing them to the public eye. However, that alone is not entirely true. According to a recent review of the rest cure in *The American Journal of Psychiatry*, said cure “ was prescribed almost exclusively for women,” the unstated presumption of the day being that men had far too important matters to which to attend to be bedridden (Martin). By the grace of that quote, we are presented with the root theme of “ The Yellow Wallpaper.” While Gilman indeed intended to sully the image of the rest cure, in a larger context she was attending to a much more pertinent issue, the subjugation of women during the Late Victorian era. The manner in which she does so, however, is quite unique. Indeed, Gilman is declaring that there is a largely unintentional, though no less suffocating, subjugation of women occurring during the Late Victorian era, and it is through the wondrous combination of

tone, symbolism, social context, and psychological context, four elements of fiction swirling together like the paisley of the titular wallpaper, that “The Yellow Wallpaper” is made memorable and its above-mentioned message is made coherent. It is through the use of tone that the true feelings of both Gilman and the story’s characters can begin to be understood, and furthermore, tone, in a way, installs the framework for understanding the other literary devices and the larger theme of “The Yellow Wallpaper.”

Consider the initial description of the wallpaper upon its introduction: “The color is repellent, almost revolting: a smouldering unclean yellow, strangely faded by the slow-turning sunlight” (Gilman 674). In reading through this excerpt, one can almost hear the foreboding tinge of hatred with which the narrator describes the wallpaper. Until this point in the story, our protagonist’s words are marked with an occasional air of sadness or some slight lament, such as when she notes, “You see he does not believe I am sick! And what can one do?” (673). However, it is only with the introduction of the wallpaper that a new, intensely powerful emotion is stirred within the narrator’s words: disgust. Like a blaring siren, even a tired reader will be awakened at this point, alerted by tone to the fact that the wallpaper will be of significance. Tone, though, is capable of doing far more than preparing one for upcoming symbolism; it can also reveal an admirable amount about a story’s characters. Throughout the story, the reader is presented with multiple variations upon the following passage: “There comes John, and I must put this away—he hates to have me write a word” (674). The tone contained herein speaks miles; the passage does not sport a resentful tone nor does it sport a sorrowful one. Instead, a calm, dutiful tone

is presented; the woman, with nary a second thought, complies with her husband's desires. Just the same as tone provides insights about the narrator, it also sheds light on John's personality. "What is it, little girl? Don't go walking about like that," John warns, "you'll get cold" (678). One can almost hear John speaking to the main character as if she was a seven-year-old girl with little sense of her own. Through this passage, we begin to understand the restrictions placed on the main character and the dutiful manner with which she accepts them. The most striking bit of the preceding excerpt though, is that John is no tyrant. He truly cares for his wife, as the tone confirms, albeit in a perhaps misguided, overly-paternalistic manner. This, again, sets off an alarm in the reader's mind, building up suspense as tone prepares us for a different bit of the juicy core that is story's underlying argument. In this way, tone provides a sturdy, well-calibrated framework for its fellow literary devices. A story cannot, however, be built on framework alone; it needs some wood and bricks to morph it into something substantial. If the tone of "The Yellow Wallpaper" answers the "how," its symbolism answers the "why," providing reasoning behind the tone and allowing the reader to begin to understand how the wallpaper, and nearly everything relating to it, represents female subjugation. The most prominent motif of the story is, of course, the titular yellow wallpaper. As such, it should come as no surprise that the most meaningful, prominent symbols of the story relate to said yellow wallpaper. As tone alerted us, the wallpaper is not simply the ugly, decaying wallpaper that could be found in so many aging homes, and this becomes overtly apparent when the main character states, "At night in any kind of light... [the wallpaper] becomes bars! ... The woman

behind it is as plain as can be” (679). The woman within the wallpaper is being held in captivity by the wallpaper, itself. At this point, it could certainly be conjectured that the wallpaper represents some sort of prison, a prison holding a woman back, making her a captive. However, with only one passage under its belt, this claim is not fully developed, and it cannot be definitely said what the prison, itself, represents. Soon after, though, the main character writes, “ By daylight she is subdued, quiet. I fancy it is the pattern that keeps her so still” (679). Immense weight and form has now been added to our conjecture; the wallpaper, it seems, is by the light of day a swirling combination of many elegant, multifarious designs; by night, however, it is obviously merely bars. Just the same, for real-life Victorian women, restrictive social roles would have, in the daylight of public, appeared “ dainty” or “ refined,” but upon nightfall, when the women were alone with their husbands, such roles would truly have been no better than prison, resigning the women to their husbands’ wills, whatever they may be. Thus, taking all aspects of the story into consideration, including the character behind the wallpaper being a woman, our female main character’s lamentable situation, and Gilman’s experiences before writing the story, it seems beyond doubt that the wallpaper represents the oppressive social roles of Victorian society. Like the wallpaper, the various devices of Victorian society by which women must abide (obedience, a forced lack of education, a certain manner of acting and speaking, etc.) appear elegant on the exterior, but by night, when the people have gone and the dust has faded, they are merely devices of repression. While the preceding symbolism relating directly to the wallpaper is the guiding light of the story, there

certainly are many other pieces of symbolism, in particular during the final few pages, which build upon the main piece and add to its intrigue. Most interestingly, note the main character's observations when she first notices a woman creeping outside of the house. "Most women," she begins, "do not creep by daylight" (681). In creeping outside of the wallpaper and outside of the house, the woman is expressing her freedom from the societal oppressions of the wallpaper, something most women do not strive to make obvious. "When a carriage comes," the main character continues, "she hides under the blackberry vines. I don't blame her a bit. It must be very humiliating to be caught creeping by daylight" (681). Here, the narrator scorns the woman for creeping in broad daylight; that is, she scorns her for exercising her freedom in broad daylight. In its symbolic meaning, this passage exposes a contradiction underlying Victorian society. Women who have achieved freedom, Gilman laments, are scorned for this by their fellow women, becoming ironically complicit in their own subjugation. As if this flurry of symbolism was not enough to drive home Gilman's argument, the story reaches its crowning moment in the final few lines. "'I've got out [of the wallpaper] at last,' said I, '... And I've pulled off most of the paper, so you can't put me back!' Now why should that man have fainted? But he did, and right across my path by the wall, so that I had to creep over him every time!" (683). Having been liberated, the main character refuses to relegate herself back into the confines of the unnecessarily-complex wallpaper, and as John faints, she victoriously creeps over him, symbolically (and beyond doubt) expressing her newfound freedom from societal limitations. Delivering a fatal blow to both the rest cure and Victorian social roles simultaneously, it would

seem that we have now fully understood Gilman's argument, but this is a false vacuum, for let us not forget the man who only just fainted. Having taken into account the lavish tone and symbolism in "The Yellow Wallpaper," we now understand that Gilman is representing the subjugation of women in Victorian times, but to understand that she means to represent unintentional subjugation, we must first begin examine the social and psychological context of the character John. Superficially, John seems to be the villain of the story. However, John is no tyrant. John is not an evil reactionary bent on enslaving all women. Far from it, John is actually a kind, caring man. "Dear John!" she says on one occasion, "He loves me very dearly, and hates to have me sick" (677). In fact, every time that the narrator speaks of John, at least before she has descended into complete insanity, one can detect a change of tone toward a slight slant of happiness, no matter the context. That John is a good person is not simply made up in the main character's mind, either, for it is supported by his actions: "Dear John gathered me up in his arms, and just carried me upstairs and laid me on the bed, and sat by me and read to me till it tired my head. He said I was his darling and his comfort and all he had" (677). While John does undoubtedly relegate the narrator to the home and, as previously acknowledged, treat her a bit like a child, should his intended benevolence in doing so be detrimental to Gilman's argument that women of the story's era were being subjugated? Not necessarily, but what it does do is require the reader to look elsewhere for a main antagonist, and this leads us directly into social context of the man that is John. A man of the Victorian era, especially one of John's status, would have been expected to provide everything for his wife while

relegating her to the home; it was an all-encompassing philosophy and would have been seen, at the time, as the only option. Writing about women of the late Victorian era, Dustin Harp notes, “ The expansion of the middle class... influenced the ideological constructions of women... The result was a strengthening of the idea that men were naturally meant to occupy the public arena while women tended to the private/domestic sphere” (21). This social context, the promotion of keeping women in the home, brings the reader face-to-face with the core ethos of the rest cure and ties in directly to John’s psychological context; that is to say, it clarifies his motivation for the prescription he bestowed upon his wife. You see, John fails to properly diagnose the narrator’s illness. This is because her illness is, as evidenced by a few references to the fact that she recently gave birth, Postpartum Psychosis. There were no female doctors during the 19th century because of the above-mentioned social roles, and the male physicians were simply unable to understand what a woman has to go through (or potentially has to go through) after childbirth. Basically, both John and the main character, male and female, have fallen victim to society’s subjugation of women. It is unclear whether she can ever be properly treated at this stage, and John, being a good person, will surely make himself suffer for his misdiagnosis. In the end, what makes Gilman’s commentary so devastating is that John isn’t a tyrant. If he was, this would simply be the story of a woman who had the wrong husband. John tries to be a fundamentally good person, and as such, what happened to the main character of “ The Yellow Wallpaper,” Gilman is saying, happened because of vicious social roles, not the people involved therein, and thus, it could happen to anyone. With the help of tone,

symbolism, social context, and psychological context, Gilman crafts a powerful argument that women of her era are oppressed unintentionally by both men and women who feel they have to comply with the strict, confining social roles of their time. Gilman begins by providing an introduction to the elements of the story that will be highlighted through brilliant utilization of tone. If tone is the marker that highlights, symbolism is the pencil with which notes are written in the margins, and through poignant use of symbolism, the reader marvels as Gilman reveals, with progressively greater force, that the wallpaper represents oppressive societal conventions imprisoning women. Gilman could have walked away at that point, already having penned a magnificent story, but she chooses to insert another element, craftily painting John as man with a good heart who, sadly, abides by the oppressive conventions. In the end, you see, it was not John who was the villain, it was the social context of late Victorian era. Finally, as Gilman seemingly comes to terms with the fact that the rest cure was an effect, not a cause of said social context, our two main characters, male and female, are left in that room, surrounded by what remains of that horrendous wallpaper prison, both completely obliterated at the hand of the female subjugation which ended up subjugating all. Works Cited“ Bed Rest.”

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