

Creeping in daylight

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



People lose their sanity through many processes. It has become an art. In her short story, "The Yellow Wallpaper," Charlotte Perkins Gilman uses the stealthy approach of insanity as a medium to advance arguments of feministic roots. Her (mostly autobiographical) protagonist, Jane, is a housewife leading a life of quiet desperation and dissatisfaction, controlled and micromanaged by her patriarchal husband John, and sent to a prison-like mansion for neurasthenia recuperation. During her stay, she gradually develops a sense of self, which Gilman shows as attainable only through overcoming masculine/societal repression in life and marriage, maintaining healthy self-expression through meaningful work, and fostering self-actualization through independence and freedom. Gilman presents a scathing report of the social structures of her day as well as a personal criticism of her own failed prescription. Dominated and run by the men in her life, Jane begins the novel in a naïve tone, assuming all is for the best and vocally accepting her situation. At one point, she lists her personal beliefs, yet within the space of one line, waves off their significance—"But what is one to do (93)?" Her prescription is one of curtailed creative expression, thus the audience finds Jane communicating in stealth each entry of her journal. It soon becomes clear that Jane's marriage is an unequal relationship, more similar to that of parenthood. Her husband, John, refers to her by patronizing and condescending names—"blessed little goose," etc.—and suppresses her freedom of expression under the guise of treatment. He does not take her anxieties seriously, and Gilman uses John and Jane's brother as typical examples of male rationality and logic—both are physicians. Meekly, Jane cultivates a sense of guilt over being a burden to her superior, healthier

males, gradually losing her sense of self-worth and identity. Her emotions are increasingly bottled up, and one gets the feeling early on that she is highly unstable and ready to snap, break, and burst. Through decoding and analyzing the yellow wallpaper in her nauseatingly oppressive room, Jane sets on a path of self-empowerment and rediscovering her identity—a vague, restricted identity which at first, mirrors that of the amorphous figure she spies behind the wallpaper. The “ great immovable bed” she speaks about is nailed down, analogous to her constrained sexuality and femininity. It quickly becomes clear that the wallpaper symbolizes the obstacles in Everywoman’s life, notably Jane’s, i. e. the patriarchal social structure, her senseless medication, depressing lack of control, etc., and she tries to clarify and understand her troubles as she does the wallpaper, although time and again she only ends up exhausted—“ It makes me tired to follow it. I will take a nap I guess (98).” The architecturally and decoratively turbulent designs of the room mirror her situation, in which so many contrived cures and solutions have been imposed upon her it only adds to the tumult. A few paragraphs down she then states, “ It is getting to be a great effort for me to think straight (99)..” —an ironic note that the suppression of one’s creativity can lead to a corresponding suppression of one’s rationality—Gilman’s argument that the two can be inextricably linked. The progressing and evolving content of the journal reflects Jane’s rising feminist awareness. “ Behind that outside pattern the dim shapes get clearer every day (99).” The initially faint figure which develops shape and solidity is a symbol of Jane and the female population in general (she sees many figures, though focuses on one)—creeping about in the shadows of their repressive society, plotting and

strategizing their cause until they are substantial enough to break through the wallpaper barrier. One night (101), Jane can suddenly see bars in the wallpaper. She finally gains a sense of purpose and clarity of mind as she increasingly empathizes with the wallpaper woman's oppression and plans a sort of jailbreak from the nauseating florid arabesque. The wallpaper is additionally compared to her society in its gentle, harmless façade yet sordid, prevalent, influential underbelly—" It is not bad—at first, and very gentle, but quite the subtlest, most enduring odor I ever met." The odor is likened to her oppression; indeed, Jane sounds as if she is being overwhelmingly attacked from all fronts—" Round and round and round...it makes me dizzy (103)..." Overwhelmed, she voices her despair—" But I forgot I could not reach far without anything to stand on (105)!"—echoing perhaps Gilman's frustration in helping spearhead the feminist movement when there was little foundation and support, and only obstacles available in reaching potential followers. It is said that Gilman's emphasized " creeping" is meant to symbolize progress. When Jane finally succeeds in breaking through the wallpaper and forging her own identity (slightly insane as it is), John's collapse is a blatant caveat from Gilman to the audience foreshadowing the range of outraged and disbelieving reactions yet to come in response to the growing feminist movement.