

# An exploration of gender roles in the nineteenth century



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## An Exploration of Gender Roles in the Nineteenth Century

To what extent does Charlotte Gilman use dialogue and motifs to explore gender roles in the nineteenth century in her novel, *The Yellow Wallpaper*?

### Introduction

During the nineteenth century, women did not have as many rights as men did and it was mainly due to the notion that men believed that they were far superior to women. This idea fueled the many literary works throughout the century and highlighted on gender roles. Gender roles are defined as expectations that both men and women have to society. However, they were very different. Men were seen to have the highest authority in each household; they were always referred to as wise and intelligent men. They were the only ones to go out and earn a proper living by having a job, while women were thought to stay at home. Society at this time believed that women has domestic, house-hold jobs to take care of, such as cleaning the house and taking care of their children. In a way, they were shown to be incapable of being independent, but rather always needed to depend on a male figure.

In *The Yellow Wallpaper*, Charlotte Gilman brings to attention the many issues surrounding that of gender roles. She demonstrates a clear division between both genders and the way they lived their life. The story mainly revolves around the relationship between an unnamed narrator and her domineering husband. She illustrates the division between the two genders through the actions of each of the characters and their environment: while the husband is seen going to work and coming home, the narrator is isolated

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in a room with nothing to do. Gilman also discusses how authoritative men, as seen through the narrator's husband John, were during this time; he was forcing and commanding the narrator while she was submissive and alone.

Gilman's use of dialogue depicts gender roles in the nineteenth century

The Yellow Wallpaper demonstrates how gender roles were depicted in the late nineteenth century through Gilman's use of dialogue of the narrator and her husband, John.

Women did not have a lot of rights in the nineteenth century. Their job was to get married and then stay at home, help out around the house, and take care of her children. Likewise, when a woman got married, she was thought to be owned by her husband, and thus, was given barely any rights, like a child (Hughes). Gilman examines the portrayal of women during the late nineteenth century through the husband's comparison of the narrator to a child. By doing so, John refers to her as a "blessed little goose" (6) and a "little girl" (13). The diction choice of "little" provides a notion that she is inferior to John, and the use of "goose" and "girl" are used as a way to illustrate childish values. This characterizes John as a man, who during this time, saw himself as far superior and dominant to his wife and all women. He demonstrates the nineteenth century belief that women had to be quiet, modest, listen to the male authoritative figure in the house, while only hoping to be a submissive wife and caring mother. Gilman continues to criticize this comparison as the narrator describes that John "gathered [her] up...carried [her] upstairs...laid [her] on the bed, sat by [her] and read to [her]" (12). By "la[y]ing her on the bed" and "read[ing] to [her]", John is

restricting the narrator from doing anything. The overall mood of the excerpt is that given off between the relationship of a father and his child, instead of a husband and wife. John continues to limit the narrator's freedom because he isolated her in a room where "the windows [were] barred for little children" (4); the denotation of the excerpt is showing how the windows were blocked off for little children, which clearly emphasizes the notion that John continued to treat his wife as a child, rather than an adult. Throughout the beginning portion of the novel, John makes all the decisions for the narrator, and though initially his actions are perceived as caring towards the narrator, such saying that they moved "solely on [his] account, that [the narrator] was to have perfect rest and all the air [she] could get" (4). However, he also gives her an ultimatum that "if [she didn't] pick up faster he shall send [her] to Weir Mitchell in the fall" (9). The diction choice of "if" at the beginning of the sentence exudes a condition; it parallels the idea that John treats his wife as a child, as most children are given a condition if they don't listen to their parents. By providing this ultimatum, he is forcing the narrator to force herself to get better. It characterizes John as not treating his wife as an equal, which was typical in the nineteenth century since men saw themselves to be far more superior to women.

John is displayed to be the dominant male character throughout the novel and is shown to be wiser and smarter than the other female characters, while also having more power than they do; he symbolizes the typical working man in the nineteenth century. John is physician and he believes that the best way for women suffering from hysteria to get better is by using the "rest-cure" regimen; however, this "cure" allows for women to do

nothing, rather than being prescribed bed-rest and being forced to be inactive. His belief came from Weir Mitchell, the leading specialist in nervous disorders during this time. Mitchell believed that, for his female patients, they would become depressed if they had a lot of mental activity and not enough attention to domestic affairs (Thraillkill).

Jane Thraikill points out that the nineteenth-century hospitals did not understand how to properly treat women with mental health issues, but rather often misdiagnosing them as having hysteria (545). Thraikill clarifies that doctors used the “rest cure” regimen as a way to hold power over an illness that they did not understand. The narrator is described to have a “nervous condition”, however it is not hysteria; it is postpartum depression. Physicians in the nineteenth century were not aware of postpartum depression, so they diagnosed many women with hysteria. However, Gilman argues that the symptoms of suffering from postpartum depression were prominent, such as when the narrator claims that “It is fortunate Mary is so good with the baby. Such a dear baby! And yet I cannot be with him, it makes me so nervous”. Throughout the entire story, the narrator’s baby is only mentioned twice. The narrator also never called the baby by its name, but rather referred to it as “the baby.” This links the narrator with a more feminine role and as she describes her child as “such a dear baby” (6), it can be seen as loving. However, the tone shows that she is distanced from her child, given that she seems jealous that Mary is capable of taking care of her baby as she cannot. In a way, the narrator is struggling to express herself in a feminine light, because she is not able to take care of her own baby, which is one of the main things that women had to do during the nineteenth

century. All of the narrator's actions and behavior in this scene focuses on the notion that she does suffer from postpartum depression. Thraikill believes that Gilman is bringing awareness to the misdiagnosis of mental health issues, specifically for women, due to her own experiences when she was treated by Weir Mitchell (540).

Gilman's personal experience from this procedure was very bad. She was not able to work and, because of that, had many nervous breakdowns. However, once she stopped following Mitchell's rest-cure regimen, she improved significantly. She realized that the rest-cure was causing more harm on women as their health was getting worse because they were prescribed to stay at home and not participate in any physical activity. Similarly, the narrator was able to understand how to improve her health, but it contrasted the methods that John had enforced: John was restricting her from having any interaction with anything outside of the room she was forced to be isolated in. Because of this, she decided to write in a journal which she kept secret from her husband; there, she was able to express herself freely. She kept the journal secret because John did not agree to this and disagreed to this practice; however, writing and expressing one's thoughts is shown to be more beneficial, rather than coping with the emotions and feelings inside oneself. In this sense, John is displayed as a domineering male force within society, disregarding other practices and alternatives that would, in turn, help alleviate situations.

As the story nears the end, the narrator resembles a woman who is able to stray far from societal norms and overcome them. The narrator's

improvement is noticed when she says " I MUST say what I feel and think in <https://assignbuster.com/an-exploration-of-gender-roles-in-the-nineteenth-century/>

some way" (11). This sentence is a turnpoint for the narrator; the capitalization of " must" shows how she strongly believes that this is something she has to do and that it is her duty to do so, while also presenting a sense of firmness and assurance; the sentence itself also shows the confidence that the narrator has. From the beginning of the story to the end, the narrator has been able to grow and evolve from a shy submissive character, to one that is able to voice her opinions. It is significant of the nineteenth century because as women were treated similar to how the narrator was, they slowly started gaining their confidence to voice their opinions; this in turn led to the Women's Rights Movement where women fought for their rights, and to have the same rights as men. Furthermore, there is a significant shift in how the narrator portrays her husband: Initially, she talks about how John " loves [her] dearly" (12), but later came to the conclusion that John was " pretend[ing] to be very loving and kind" (20); however, she was able to " see through him" (20). This distinct shift from her assuming that he truly loved her, to her realizing it was all fake, also shows a shift from being submissive to being more empowering. On the contrary, Janice Haney-Peritz argues that " in a patriarchal society...no one can survive the rigid gender expectations placed upon them" (104). This brings into question that if John was not as authoritative or dominating as he actually was, he might have been able to help her through her illness. Similarly, if the narrator did not conform to the rules set by John in the beginning of the story, she might have been able to advocate for herself earlier, in a better manner. However, given the time it takes place, the narrator does not think it is her place to go against her husband's judgement, but rather just conform to it. She said that it is " so hard to talk with John about my case, <https://assignbuster.com/an-exploration-of-gender-roles-in-the-nineteenth-century/>

because he is so wise, and because he loves me so" (11). From the beginning, she had purely assumed that whatever John did was to her benefit, rather than questioning his methods. In the nineteenth century, this was very prominent because of societal views on gender norms, and that women were inferior to men and had to accommodate to them. Because of her preconceived notion to not question her husband, her health got worse.

The narrator's repetition of the word "one" is used to refer to women as a whole. She starts by saying that "John laughs at [her]...but one expects that in a marriage...and what can one do?" (2). Rather than just talking about herself, the use of "one" refers to all women. During this time period, every woman was expected to fill certain roles that when they were discussed, referred to the roles that all of them had to do. Nevertheless, the repetition of "one" also implies that the narrator is portraying herself oppressed because she is unable to confront John and his methods. Similarly, it also confirms the roles that are taken on by each gender after marriage; it expresses how her husband is the one making a living by being a physician, while she stays at home, cleans up the house, and takes care of her children.

Gilman's use of motifs depicts gender roles in the nineteenth century

The Yellow Wallpaper demonstrates how gender roles were depicted in the late nineteenth century through Gilman's use of motifs.

In the beginning of the story, the mansion is used as a motif to illustrate the narrator's isolation and confinement. The mansion is described as being "ancestral" (2). The denotation of "ancestral" refers to being very old and

being inherited from an ancestor; the connotation refers to the portrayal and  
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expectations of women being passed down. The term “ ancestral” is furthered as the narrator continues describing the setting of the hall as “ a hereditary estate, I would say a haunted house” (2). The diction choice of “ hereditary” refers to inherited and genetic, and the connotation of the beginning portion of the phrase shows that was passed down. However, being described as a “ haunted house” usually refers to something that is scary and unwanted. In this sense, it foreshadows the John’s treatment towards the narrator because the narrator did not like how he oppressed and isolated her. The narrator continues to describe the mansion as “ standing well back from the road, quite three miles from the village” (3). This statement refers to how far the mansion is from society, but also how far the narrator is as well. It foreshadows the feeling of isolation and loneliness that she endures. However, it mirrors the role women had in the nineteenth century because during that time, women had to stay at home and care for their children while only their husbands left the house. It expresses the idea that women were isolated at home because of societal norms producing these preconceived notions, just as the narrator was isolated within the mansion, away from society.

Gilman uses the journal as a motif for narrator to express herself freely. She initially describes the journal as “ dead paper and a great relief to my mind” (2). The denotation of “ great relief to my mind” related to how it brings peace of mind and makes her feel relieved and able to express herself, rather than coping with it. In a sense, the energy the narrator uses to avoid John from seeing it, because he forbids that type of practice, it adds on her illness of postpartum depression. The journal also signifies the narrator’s

rebellion against her husband, which wasn't very prominent until the mid to late nineteenth century when the Women's Rights Movement started.

The room that the narrator is isolated in is decorated in a patterned wallpaper. The wallpaper signifies what women are expected to do within society. Initially, the narrator is confused about the wallpaper, and just as confused as she is about the wallpaper in the beginning of the story, she is not able to comprehend what society expects of her. The narrator continues by saying that she "should hate it [herself] if [she] had to live in it long" (5). The denotation of this statement reveals that she would not be able to live inside the wallpaper for a long period of time, while the connotation refers to her not being able to confine to the societal norms of what is expected of women. The narrator discusses the expectations of women are shown in a more positive light from certain perspectives, by saying that "you can only see it in certain lights, and not clearly then" (9). This is because the denotation of "certain lights" refers to the specific perspectives, which foreshadows the pattern of the woman the narrator sees later.

The narrator continues to describe the yellow wallpaper as a motif to depict gender roles in the nineteenth century. She describes the color of the wallpaper as being "repellant, almost revolting: a smoldering unclean yellow, strangely faded by the slow turning sunlight". The diction choice of "smoldering" refers to a slow burn, and the allusion of burning suggests that a women's role in society can gradually burn them out over time. Moreover, the connection between the "smoldering unclean yellow" and the color of the wallpaper being referred to as "repellant" and "strongly faded by the slow turning sunlight" indicates that wallpaper is most likely gross and very  
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unclean. This is due to the visual imagery of “ smouldering unclean yellow” being unhealthy like a sickness. This presents the wallpaper as being very yellow that it looks so old that it is deteriorating. It furthers that the wallpaper hasn’t been properly cleaned yet, but rather has been treated badly. This signifies both the sense of gender roles and representation of mental illnesses in the nineteenth century (5).

Gilman finishes describing how the yellow wallpaper depicts gender roles in the late nineteenth century, through the woman in the wallpaper. She explains that “ the front pattern does move and...the women behind shakes it” (19)! The narrator sees the woman trying to shake the wallpaper in order to get out because she wants to be free; she doesn’t want to be caged and isolated. Similar to the woman in the wallpaper, the narrator is physically trapped and isolated in her room, but also mentally trapped due to society’s expectations that are placed on women. This is seen through the expectation that women are to take care of their children; due to the narrator’s illness, Jennie takes care of the narrator’s baby because she is unable to. Overall, the narrator rebels against the preconceived norms set by society in order to strengthen herself.

In the last scene of the story, the narrator locks herself in her bedroom and throws the key outside. At first, John had demanded that the narrator break down the door, where his demand shows his having more authoritative power, given that he is a man. Then, John simply asks for the door to be opened, symbolizing that though he still holds more power over the narrator, he wants her to get the key and open the door. The juxtaposition between demands and asks shows how as time progressed, he realized that the

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narrator's absence of responses was rebelling against him because he was not getting what he wanted. At this point, the roles of the narrator and the husband are switched as the narrator announces "Why there's John at the door! It is no use young man, you can't open it" (23)! Only at the end of the story is when the narrator refers to John as a young man, just as he referred to her as a "little goose" (6), which no longer puts him as the person obtaining all the power. It furthers that the narrator has overcome the societal expectations of how a woman should act as she is no longer bound by those rules. The narrator ends the story by asking, "Now why should that man have fainted" (24)? "Fainted" has a more feminine connotation as being able to express a more emotional mood. Connecting John to a feminine word signifies that the narrator is neither bound by nor dependent on the husband, but rather that she was able to overcome societal norms and being submissive.

## Conclusion

Throughout the psychological short story, Gilman use of dialogue and motifs demonstrates how gender roles in the nineteenth century circulated the idea of women being very inferior and submissive to men, while they held more power overall. The dialogue was able to characterize each individual character, such as by relating their tone and mood to the overall tone of the scene. Furthermore, the motifs justified how limited women were within the story, which, in turn, added to the overall effect it had on gender roles.

Initially, the unnamed character was very submissive and cooperative with her husband. Though she had opposing views, she was never able to voice them directly towards him. However, through the motif of the yellow

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wallpaper, which resembled her limitations, it helped her stand up to her husband at the end of the story. The yellow wallpaper represented both the oppression the narrator had gone through, but also how she was able to overcome it.

Gilman clearly demonstrates the limitations women had in society during this time in comparison to men, and with this, was able to properly express their strength coming through, by exploring both the characters actions and behaviors through the use of dialogue and motifs.

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