

The yellow wallpaper: breaking free

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



During the 19th century, women were severely discriminated and influenced by society's strict patriarchal ideals. Charlotte Perkins Gilman emphasizes in her short story "The Yellow Wallpaper" men's imprisonment of women into patterned domestic lives through the narrator's complicated relationship with the nursery she is forced to stay at and its intricate wallpaper. Gilman discloses the necessity for women's equal opportunity and freedom as men through the constant conflict between the narrator's desire to express creativity and society's patriarchal expectations of her.

The narrator's connection to the nursery and its wallpaper corresponds to her relationship with her husband John. Although she expresses irritation and frustration with the disturbing patterns of the nursery's wallpaper and the barred windows that together resemble a room for the insane upon her first encounter, she passively tries to suppress these feelings because John declares that the nursery room is helping her repress her "harmful" fancies.

Consistently throughout the story, the narrator's creativity conflicts with John's rationality.

While the narrator struggles to suppress her expressive nature and thus, relates to the wallpaper, John "scoffs openly at any talk of things not to be felt and seen and put down in figures" (Gilman 166). The contrasting female and male characteristics supports Simon Baren-Cohen's theory that females are stronger empathizers and males are stronger systemizers at a population level.

While the narrator desires to freely express her individuality, John believes that women should be restrained to domestic roles. Although men and

women have different characteristics as Cohen states, Gilman ultimately stresses the need for society to transform social norms of degrading women and to instead strive for more women's rights because men and women are inherently equal. Gilman further advocates for women's liberalization from a patriarchal society by reflecting on John's significant control over the narrator.

Despite the narrator's desire to live in a different room, John abuses his power as her husband and physician by choosing to restrain her to the brutal prison surveillance-like nursery and its wallpaper. John's dominant authority reflects Anthropologist Peggy McIntosh's conclusion that men unconsciously enjoy male privilege just as whites obliviously enjoy certain privileges. McIntosh states that belonging to a dominant sex or race gives one "considerable power to [...] choose" (15).

Evidently, John practices his male privileges upon his wife by choosing to have full power over the narrator's mental and physical state. Through the clash of the narrator's desire to express her creativity and man's submissive expectation of women, Gilman portrays society's unjust patriarchal system and challenges society to liberate women to the freedom of expression. Her ambiguous relations to the wallpaper become clear as she finally awakens from the unjust patriarchal restrictions her husband imposes on her.

Although the narrator expresses irritation with the disturbing patterns of the nursery's wallpaper in the beginning of the story, she develops an obsession to the wallpaper when she has more freedom and control of herself at night when John is sleeping. Gilman illustrates the narrator's successful identification to the woman struggling to break free from the wallpaper that

essentially symbolizes men's imprisonment of women. The strong imagery of the narrator tearing down the wallpaper and asserting her own identity represents the strip of woman's passivity and the beginning of a fight for equal rights.

By illustrating the narrator's liberation from patriarchy, Gilman essentially gives hope to other women to breaking free. Gilman ultimately portrays the complicated patterns of the wallpaper as a symbol of female confinement within a patriarchy. He strongly stresses through his "The Yellow Wallpaper," that we need to globally strive to educate and aid women, who are afraid of escaping from their own walls, of their inherent equality to men and their right to break free.