

# Development and decline in the yellow wallpaper

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



The Yellow Wallpaper is a story of the emotional and intellectual deterioration of a woman confined to a “rest cure”, following the narrator from a state of depression, to a state of isolation, and finally to a state of insanity, provoked by the misguided and oppressive restrictions imposed by her husband. In her struggle with physical confinement, the narrator descends to a state of madness as the only way to free herself from her current condition, a condition marked by marital imprisonment and the paralyzing restraints of a patriarchal society. In this way, we are presented with a dual narrative of the simultaneous decline and development of the protagonist’s selfhood; the development of her autonomy is a direct side-effect of the decline in her mental state: a break-down of social and moral inhibitions..

It is in this state that we see the emergence of her independent identity, through the liberation of her own will and desires. This dichotomy is the dominant theme of the narrative, as the protagonist’s attempts to cope with isolation become the engine to drive her liberation forward.

At the start of the story, it is revealed that the narrator is suffering from a condition of depression, however, notably it is not her mental instability that strikes the reader, but rather the oppressive marital dynamic between the narrator and her husband John.

This is immediately evident in the narrative voice of the story. Although the story is told in the first person, the female protagonist’s narration appears to be governed by her husband’s narration, who largely makes decisions on her behalf. The critic Horowitz notes that this bears a significant resemblance to Gilman’s own experience with the oppressive dealings of male doctors in

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prescribing the “rest cure” for women afflicted with nervous disorders. Thus, Gilman’s personal narrative finds itself into the fictional voice of the protagonist, “infected by doubts and uncertainties of powerlessness” (120).

This is evident in the first two pages, where we see the protagonist’s narration of her own thoughts repeatedly interrupted by the narration of her husband’s thoughts: “I don’t like our room a bit...But John would not hear of it”; “I think it is due to this nervous condition...But John says” (845). While there may be the appearance of narrative autonomy, it is clear that her husband is the driving force behind the key occurrences of the plot. In her critique of female discourse in *The Yellow Wall-paper*, Treichler argues that the narrative style reflects a wider feminist discourse that “seeks to escape the sentence” that the structure of patriarchal language imposes, and to move beyond the boundaries of male-determined syntax (70).

This dynamic struggle sets the the narrative tone for most of the story, with the repeated structure of the first person narrative voice of “I” being immediately proceeded by “John”: “I am sitting by the window now... John is away all day... I am glad my case is not serious! ... John does not know how much I really suffer” (846). In this way, John seems to shadow her thoughts with his interjecting presence in the narration. Gilman sets us this imposing and dominating marital condition to pave the way for her protagonist’s suppression, and thus her eventual liberation.

Gilman continues to set the wills of the protagonist and her husband in conflict with one another, in the phrases “control myself - before him” and “I must put this away - he hates” (845), where we see their individual

pronouns juxtaposed. However, while conflicting the two, she also closely aligns them to illustrate the extent of the protagonist's reliance upon her husband. Despite her initial distaste for the room, we see her quickly persuaded to it by John: " He is right enough about the beds and windows and things. It is as airy and comfortable a room as any...I'm really quite fond of the big room" (846). Here we see the protagonist's thought process unfold, marked by a rapid change in attitude in conformance with her husband. In this way, she appears to be highly susceptible to John's shaping of her own feelings and opinions.

The extent of this dynamic of dependence and dominance in their marriage is further illustrated by the child-like imagery depicting the narrator. She describes her initial stages of confinement to the room in the phrase " he took me in his arms and called me a blessed little goose" (846), revealing the patronizing tone and parental role that her husband has assumed. Her husband's later references to her as " little girl," accompanied by his order " Don't go walking about like that – you'll get a cold" (850) bears the similar tone of a concerned and caring father. However, while the narrator initially expresses gratitude to her husband for his supposedly well-intentioned affection, with her repeated reference to him as " Dear John!" (849), it becomes clear to the reader that her husband is not so much caring as controlling.

Whilst directly addressing his wife, John uses the third person in the phrase " Bless her little heart!...she shall be as sick as she pleases!" (850). By talking about his wife as if she was not present, the reader gets the sense that John

not only removes the narrator's agency but also reduces her existence to that of a child incapable of self-care.

This endearing "withering sweet talk" works to belittle the protagonist under the veil of affection (Horowitz 124), and thus becomes a subtle tool by which passivity and control are imposed by her husband.

Just as we come to see the narrator as a child at the hands of her husband, we similarly come to see the confined room itself akin to a nursery: "It was nursery first and then playroom...the windows are barred for little children, and there are rings and things in the walls" (845). The description of the room as "barred" bears the imagery of a cage, while the reference to "rings and things in the walls" calls to mind children's toys, thus depicting a place where she is stripped of autonomous activity and is instead confined to an infantile state void of emotional and intellectual stimulation.

The confines of the room are further highlighted in contrast with the external world. The natural descriptions of the "lovely country, too, full of great elms and velvet meadows," which she glimpses outside of the room, is juxtaposed with the man-made interior scenery of the "wall-paper" (847), thus aggravating the bleak isolation of her position. We can see how the protagonist resorts to conjuring some form of life and beauty in the blank setting of the room, in her description of the wall-paper as possessing animated qualities: "where the sun is just so - I can see a strange, provoking, formless sort of figure that seems to skulk about behind that silly and conspicuous front design" (847). The setting of the room as a nursery is further illustrated through references to the narrator's own child, who has

been taken out of her care, and whose position she has now occupied: “ the baby is well and happy and does not have to occupy this room with the horrid wall-paper” (849).

Through these brief mentions of her child, we are reminded how the protagonist’s maternal capacity has been stripped from her. Critic St. Jean points out the significance of Gilman placing the source of the protagonist’s insanity in “ the sacrosanct sphere for dutiful women – the home” (88). From this interpretation, the nursery signifies the traditionally-defining feature of a woman in society: a mother. In this way, not only has she been “ barred” from the physical world, but she has also been separated from her identity as a mother, a traditionally defining feature of a woman in society.

Therefore, the room becomes a place where she is stripped of a fully-fleshed sense of self. Just as a child develops from a blank slate without preconceived societal notions, the nursery causes the protagonist to revert to such a state in which she can govern herself, by casting out all prior order that governed her life.

It is from this rudimentary condition that she develops freedom of thought in a state akin to insanity, nurturing her individual desires and impulses. The protagonist experiences a whirlwind of paradoxical feelings which tracks her descent into a state of emotional chaos, but also her development from this previous child-like state of complete submission, as we now see her grappling with conflicting loyalties to her husband’s authority and the drive of her independent will. The beginnings of this mental unrest is revealed in the inconsistency of her train of thought: “ It is not bad...In this damp

weather it is awful...It used to disturb me at first. I thought seriously of burning the house to reach the smell. But now I am used to it" (852).

Her volatile attitudes towards the room seem to reflect a struggle between her previous compliance and growing defiance. This is also evident in her changing feelings towards her husband, from the earlier innocent assertion that " he is so wise, and because he loves me so" (849) to the more incredulous, accusatory tone of "[he] pretended to very loving and kind. As if I couldn't see through him!" (853). Therefore, throughout the narrative we see her in a state of emotional toil akin to madness, swinging from passive delusions about her husband's good intentions, to moments of reasoned clarity, to outbursts of backlash.

Clearly her experience of mental distress has made her more temperamentally vulnerable, yet ironically, this is countered by moments of more acute awareness (Horowitz 120). Up to and including this point, it is clear her life has been governed by her husband and societal pressures on women, and she now appears to experience a rollercoaster of contradictory emotional states and changing attitudes, in a solitary effort to come to terms with her individual drives.

With the protagonist's internal dialogue swinging between extremes, a climax is reached in the final few pages; the release of her mental stability is accompanied by the release of a foundation of inhibiting false premises, built to enable her husband's control over her. Thus, this climax of the narrator's mental detachment is accompanied by her severing of external controls; the reader is struck by the sense of unprecedented happiness and freedom that

the narrator experiences in achieving this state of ultimate liberation. This climax is built with the narrator's metaphorical hallucination of a woman trying to escape out of the pattern of the wall-paper: " her crawling shakes it all over...she just takes hold of the bars and shakes them hard. And she is all the time trying to climb through" (852-853). The imagery of this figure " crawling" out of the wallpaper recalls the earlier child-like imagery of the narrator within the " barred" nursery, and thus we come to see this figure as a symbolic parallel for the narrator's own imprisonment.

In these moments, Gilman draws out the uncanny horror genre of romantic fiction by grounding its gothic template in a domesticated tale, and setting these nightmarish visions against the story's realism (Horowitz 119). The wallpaper becomes a harrowing and sinister taunt for the narrator, not only marking the physical boundaries of her confinement but also serving as a symbol of the oppressive domestic sphere that haunts so many women.

The narrator's attempts to break out of her own confines manifests itself in her attempts to free this trapped female figure: " that poor thing began to crawl and shake the pattern, I got up and ran to help her" (854). This evolves into her own freedom from domestic and marital expectations, through the tearing down of the physical enclosure of the wall-paper: " I've pulled off most of the paper, so you can't put me back!" (855).

The narrator's own description causes the reader to see her growing identification with the wall-paper woman (Horowitz 125), and thus her individual condition becomes symptomatic of a wider feminist discourse. Through the breakdown of the wall-paper, and the social restrictions on



women that it represents, we get a sense of the birth of a liberated, self-oriented existence for the narrator, with the phrase “ I wonder if they all came out of that wall-paper as I did?” (855). The suggestion of her existence as emerging out of the wall-paper, combined with the reference to the “ creeping women” (855) she envisions outside of the room, depicts an image of the narrator’s re-birth out of domestic confinement, and into the freedom of the external world.

According to Treicher, the wallpaper can be interpreted as female writing, and the woman in the wallpaper as a representation of the possibilities for women once they obtain their voice (64). However, the extent to which the narrator actually achieves a state of free possibility is somewhat ambiguous at the end of the story, as we are left with the image of her still creeping within the confines of the room, at the same time as she reveals “ I don’t like to look out of the windows even” (855). In some interpretations, the narrator has triumphed over the patriarchy, or has at least achieved some victory over her own husband (St. Jean 94); while John is left in a defeated position on the ground, the narrator is pictured crawling over him and asserting a more forceful presence in her exclamation “ I’ve got out at last!” (855). Thus, we see how this dichotomy between her mental decline and her drive for self-liberation prevails in the finale of the story, leaving the fate of the protagonist undetermined.

The Yellow Wallpaper is a story that sheds light on the confinements of a patriarchal social system. It is such a system that the narrator falls victim to, however, ironically it is within the walls of her confinement that her

independent and unrestrained sense of self is developed. The room becomes a microcosm of her private life, and of a wider patriarchal society; it is a space that confines her physically and artistically, and one which paves way for the narrative of her escape. In this way, the room becomes a place in which the birth of her liberated self takes place, through the shedding of previous inhibitions and orders in a state characteristic of insanity. Therefore, the narrator develops a somewhat unhinged internal state as a way to free her from her confined external state.