

How setting plays a significant role in the yellow wallpaper by charlotte perkins...

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The Crucialness of Setting in The Yellow Wallpaper

Setting can be more than just the location in which a story takes place; setting can be essential to the plot or theme of a work. In Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*, the narrator is temporarily residing in a secluded mansion, isolated in an upper room alone where she is on a rest cure, for mental health issues, due to her husband's orders. In *The Yellow Wallpaper*, the setting is vital to the story because the themes of gender and isolation/entrapment would not be able to be fully developed without taking place in its specific environment in the late 19th century.

One of the major themes in *The Yellow Wallpaper* is gender and the control men had over women in the 19th century. The setting is important in this aspect because the way women acted and were viewed in the 19th century is vastly different from how women behave today. In many instances, the narrator expresses that she thinks the rest cure her husband prescribed is not helping her, for example " I sometimes fancy that in my condition if I had less opposition and more society and stimulus — but John says the very worst thing I can do is to think about my condition, and I confess it always makes me feel bad" (Gilman 2), however, she follows her husband's orders and feels bad for questioning him. This portrays the social reality of the late 19th century, and how she must do as she is told and remain under the control of her husband, who views her as weak. The husband also treats the narrator as if she were a child, calling her things like " blessed little goose" (Gilman 4), and keeping her locked away in the upstairs room and not allowing her to leave and visit others as seen when she states " I tried to

have a real earnest reasonable talk with him the other day, and tell him how I wish he would let me go and make a visit to Cousin Henry and Julia. But he said I wasn't able to go, nor able to stand it after I got there..." (Gilman 7). She tries to express her desires to her husband and ask his permission, but he treats her as a child and tells her she is too weak and unstable to go and makes the decision for her. If this story had taken place at a different point in time, it would seem less realistic for the narrator to be completely under the control of her husband and to have him treat her as a child unable to decide what is good for her own mental health and lifestyle.

Entrapment/isolation is another major theme of Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*. The story starts with the narrator describing the mansion they are moving into while their home is renovated and describes it as being "quite alone, standing well back from the road, quite three miles from the village. It makes me think of English places that you read about, for there are hedges and walls and gates that lock..." (Gilman 3). The mansion being so far away from everything introduces the theme of isolation. The hedges, walls, and locks induce the feeling of being trapped and unable to see others. The narrator goes on to describe the room, with "windows that look all ways" but are barred (Gilman 3), presumably to keep her from being able to escape. She is able to see the world outside her room, but she is trapped and isolated from it, seeking solace only in her journal and in trying to decipher the pattern in the yellow wallpaper. She is both physically confined to the room and she is also confined mentally from stimulus and socialization. The barred windows can also add to the theme as a symbol that she is a prisoner

entrapped inside the room, unable to do as she desires out in the world under the control of her husband.

The most important aspect of the setting in *The Yellow Wallpaper* is just that: the yellow wallpaper in the room the narrator is staying in. The majority of the text is the narrator describing the wallpaper and what she sees within it, the “hideous,” “unreliable,” and “infuriating” pattern (Gilman 9), the “repellent, almost revolting” yellow color (Gilman 3), and the “woman stooping down and creeping about behind that pattern” (Gilman 8).

Throughout the story, the narrator’s feelings towards the wallpaper change from simply disliking it to believing there is an actual woman trapped beneath it. This happens as she loses her mind as she is isolated from the world around her; the wallpaper is her only stimulus. The ugly, meaningless pattern and color of the wallpaper represent her life and her unhappiness with it. She tries to decipher the pattern and make sense of it, and can focus on nothing else. As she loses her sanity she starts to see the woman stuck behind it, the woman being herself, confined to the room and under the control of her husband, unable to live the life she wants to. When she finally completely derails into madness, she rips the wallpaper off, freeing and becoming the woman who, though completely insane, is free. Her husband faints, unable to control the situation and no longer having power over her (Gilman 16).

In conclusion, the setting in Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *The Yellow Wallpaper* is crucial for the themes of the story to be fully disclosed and developed. The setting does more than just provide an environment for the events in the

story to take place, it adds a second layer to the story beyond what is just stated. Without taking place in the 19th century in a secluded mansion with ugly wallpaper, the narrator's reliance on her husband, her build up to insanity due to isolation, and the rest cure she is put on would not have made for the disturbing and insightful piece of literature it is.