

# Analysis of symbolism in "the yellow wallpaper"



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The narrator and her doctor husband, John, rent out a colonial house for the summer. The magnificent splendor of the residence impresses her right away and she thinks herself lucky. John gives the narrator tonic and medicine help her recuperate, but primarily commands her to cease writing and keeps their baby away.

The narrator claims to have achieved the rare feat of acquiring a hereditary hall for summer together with John. She says, " it is very seldom...John and myself" (Gilman). This alludes to the empowerment of women. When they attain equality and they can do what men do. She however recognizes that it would be " asking too much of fate" for women to achieve such a status. In fact it seems as if she is a tenant in John's house as the story goes on.

Then, the anonymous protagonist in the story has resigned to her fate as a woman in her contemporary society. She says that her husband, John, laughs at her. Yet she considers that nothing out of the ordinary, saying, "... one expects that in marriage". This is submissive acquiescence to fate. She appears ready to take whatever the male dominated society of her days threw her way.

John does not believe that the narrator is actually sick but is down with a " temporary nervous depression" making her to be a slightly hysterical. He decides that the best cure for her anxiety is to abstain from any intellectual stimulation and bodily activity. Her brother in law seems to agree. Together they forbid her to read and write arguing that it would be detrimental to her condition.

The narrator does not concur with this part of her cure and abhors the regimen; in fact she suspects that exertion speed her recovery she says she personally believes "that congenial work, with excitement and change" would do her good. Still she does what the two men fearing to meet "heavy opposition". She resorts to writing in secret having to be sly about it; an exhausting process.

The house is a beautiful feminine place. The beauty of the place is comparable to the attractiveness of the womenfolk. Like her, it is a little solitary place standing far from the road and about three miles out of the village. This refers to the way society often locks in women by themselves quite apart from the society. The narrator herself says how she wishes she had "less opposition and more society and stimulus".

John dominates the narrator's feelings. He does not allow her to get angry; though she deserves to. She thus takes pains to control her feelings before him. This worsens her condition.

Additionally she stays in a room she admits not liking one bit. The beautiful room downstairs with old-fashioned chintz hangings, roses on the windows and that opens onto the piazza stays alone. She cannot have the desires of her heart; so do many women in chauvinistic societies.

She sarcastically calls her husband's incessant control "careful and loving". He does not let her stir. He controls not only her mind but her body as well. In fact, he puts her on a "schedule prescription for each hour in the day". She moves as he wills.

The narrator remains imprisoned up in the nursery room with the dreadful yellow wallpaper. It is a dull yellow from long exposure to the smoldering sun. This dullness is akin to the depression the narrator suffers from her long exposure to John's overbearing ways. In spite of it all, she has to remain up there in what she calls "atrocious". The narrator says that she had never seen worse her life and hates to stay there for long.

When the narrator sees the state of the paper, she concludes that a boy's school must have used it. The narrator remarks that she had never before seen "such ravages" as the children made. She paints a picture of boys as rough. Only boys can be that jagged. This reflects the oppressive violent nature of men boys alike them.

This and the fact that John tells her they visited the place on her on account so could have perfect rest is an irony of sorts. Why could she not get the room she wanted? Yet he restricted her movement in bed? This symbolizes the oppression of women in society.

The narrator is supposedly on a summer vacation yet she is increasingly miserable and depressed. Her husband's presence does not help much. His assurances that they are on the holiday amount to nothing. Instead, he abandons her whole days and nights; dealing with cases apparently more serious than his dear wife's is.

Women do not fare any better in family relations. They suffer inequities. The capability of women is underestimated. There is a limit to what she can do, "dress and entertain, and order things." The narrator describes her sister in law, John's sister, as a "perfect and enthusiastic housekeeper", who "

hopes for no better profession". Jennie and Mary take over her roles as wife and mother. John tells her they can invite Cousin Henry and Julia for a long visit he however determines when they can come. The narrator has no choice.

As a result, she feels lonely in the marriage. She admits that she is suffering terribly. Her husband is oblivious to her fate. To him, " there is no reason to suffer". The narrator says, " John does not know how much I really suffer". When she asks him to change the paper, he instead takes her in his arms and smothers her calling her " blessed goose". The society does not allow women to express themselves. It smothers their voices and remains oblivious to their suffering.

The story also alludes to the imprisonment of women at home. The nursery for one is a symbol of the narrator's repression it reminds her of her ' duty' to keep house and nurse the children. The barricaded windows and fixed bed also suggest a cruel use for the room before perhaps to confine someone. The narrator's perception that the wallpaper is watching her highlights the idea of the room as a prison cell under constant watch.

The narrator describes how the room has been through much violence. She says, that the " floor is scratched and gouged and splintered" with plaster dug out at places. The bed in the room also looks tortured. This alludes to the violence women go through every day. Also the narrator alludes to the popular saying that women are their own enemy. She fears lest John's sister find her writing for she might report her to her brother. She stops the

moment she Jane her on the stairs. Her sister in law probably might think she was sick from writing. This is naive.

The sunlight symbolizes men's day jobs while the women stay confined at home; doing keeping house. With the moonlight, the narrator turns around her first fears of the wallpaper and starts to learn its meaning. By the cool, feminine light of the moon, she untangles its chaotic pattern and traces the form of a woman. The narrator grasps the woman's plight as her own imprisonment struggling to break free from unyielding expectations of the marital sphere.

When she eventually tears down the wallpaper, she firmly believes that she has finally broken from her imprisonment by John. She says " I've got out at last ... you can't put me back!" This symbolizes her breakthrough.