

The yellow wallpaper

Literature



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A contemporary reader's interpretations of "The Yellow Wall-Paper" will be founded in the reader's set of current beliefs, knowledge and understanding of the era of the story, and a fundamental knowledge of the author. Any history or prior-knowledge a reader has of the author's personal life will help them clearly identify any biases or overtly stressed generalizations of that author's characters.

When reading the work of a "social reformer" and "mentally disorganized" author, such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman, an unknowing or uneducated reader will, most always, miss the intended plots, symbols, and under-currents of the work being read ("Charlotte" n. p.). In "The Yellow Wall-Paper" a contemporary reader will immediately identify that Gilman portrays her male characters with an element of unmistakable bias, however, fairly so.

By being able to see what her reality was then, versus current day reality, a patron of this work should acknowledge that the biased nature of her depiction of males was not only justified, but invaluable to the worthiness of the literary work today. Armed with the acceptance of Gilman's biased male characters in "The Yellow Wall-Paper", it is vitally important for contemporary readers to understand why she is biased against men, what influence her feminist attitude had on this story, and how the biased depiction of her male characters helped earn this short story its reputation and accolades.

To understand the feminist and biased nature of Gilman toward the male characters in "The Yellow Wall-Paper", one must know her history and experiences. Born in the nineteenth century, Gilman, then Perkins, was <https://assignbuster.com/the-yellow-wallpaper-essay-samples/>

abandoned by her father as a very young child. With few options, her mother was thrust into an atmosphere of poverty, where fear, worry, and emotional scarcity dictated how she was able to raise her family (Gilman 664).

Any child exposed to abandonment by their father, the presumed first and most important man a child will know, at such an early age would adopt the idea that women are self-sufficient and men are unnecessary. This is where Gilman's prejudice against men got its roots, but not where it ended. Years later, tainted with what many called "mental nervousness", Gilman suffered through a failed marriage and much insensitivity to her brilliant published works by male publishers and male readers of "higher-thinking".

They discredited Gilman's talents and her intelligent and realistic writings, further growing her prejudices towards men (Haney-Peritz 113). In search of stability, identity, and self-worth, Gilman's natural inclinations and talents for art and writing became her outlet and her desire. They even earned her the label, according to Carolina Nunez-Puente, of "one of the earliest sociologists in the United States" (139). This rarely offered the male reader of her era any reason to give merit or appropriate credit to her writings.

Though not truly or formally educated, Gilman had always been successful with words and art and she used these tools to write "with purpose" and with little regard to how the male world viewed her (Nunez-Puente 139). She rebelled against the common nineteenth century "rest-cure" for her mental illness and raced bountifully toward the "self-expression and intellectual growth" that freed her. In her new found freedom, she rallied for women's rights and begged for social justice. In 1900, she married again, this time to

a man who shared her beliefs and did not stifle her vigor for feminist propensities.

Her works were being published more, and finally, she had a platform from which to lecture her feminist ideas. In *Anthology of American Literature*, one reads For five years in the 1890's, Charlotte Perkins Gilman toured America as a lecturer, arguing that women were dominated by their fathers and husbands, that women were entrapped by their innocence and their upbringing. She insisted that home was more often a prison than a shelter, and she encouraged women to assert their rights and free themselves from unthinking devotion to cooking, cleaning, church, and children (665).

No other collection of words or sentences could possibly sum up why Gilman felt biases against men and why her realistic works reeked of feminism and an unashamed recognition of her own bias in her characters in "The Yellow Wall-Paper." The influence of Gilman's negatively depicted male characters steered the very story, plot, and tone of "The Yellow Wall-Paper". In stark contrast to what was expected of a woman of the nineteenth century, Gilman chose the rockier path of realism in her writing, which exposed the manipulative and possessive ways of men of that era.

Without her truths surrounding nineteenth century men, "The Yellow Wall-Paper" would have had no shape or girth at all. Almost instantly, Gilman throws open the doors of her bias against men in this story. On the very first page she makes three very definitive statements that support this: "John laughs at me, of course, but one expects that in marriage...My brother is also a physician, and also of high standing, and he says the same thing... Personally, I disagree with their ideas" (Gilman 666).

So, from the beginning, a reader knows the main character, the narrator, is held back by the men in her life. Also, in a brilliant ploy of genius, Gilman neglects to give her main character a name, reinforcing the idea to her reader that men don't truly "recognize" women, so why would she. The negligent and dismissive treatment that John and the narrator's own brother show her, unfortunately leads her down a progressively dark road of depression and insanity.

As Amy Hudock states in *Masterplots II: Women's Literature Series*, "Gilman attempts to warn her readership that denying women full humanity is dangerous to women, family, and society as a whole" (3). For Gilman's era, "The Yellow Wall-Paper" was not only poorly received by men, but it was so viewed because of how effectively it portrayed men's behaviors at the time. Gilman's biased nature against man flows on all pages of this work and clearly guides the messages and plots she fluidly expresses.

Knowing that Gilman's "The Yellow Wall-Paper" was not well received in her era, one must wonder if it would have ever gained its much deserved literary accolades in more recent times if it was not so rich with biases and feminist views. When first published, the story's feminist plunge had gone completely unremarked and hugely ignored (Haney-Peritz 113). It was not until the 1970's, with the dawn of feminist subsidy, that literary critics began to realize the importance of the social, cultural, and political implications Gilman drenched "The Yellow Wall-Paper" in.

Since that time, feminist scholars have noted that the story is a picture-perfect depiction of a society where women's intelligence, psychological importance, and creative genius was dissuaded and stunted, likely in hopes

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to keep women submissive to men, in general (Hudock 3). With such strides in women's rights and feminism and the acceptance and normality of women as equals since the writing of this work, one cannot argue that the bold and unwavering stance Gilman took with "The Yellow Wall-Paper" is the core of why it has been recognized, awarded, and prized as a much respected and loved literary masterpiece.

Gilman was a true touchstone for women activists and female radical authors of her time. With little more than a label of "mental illness" and a heart full of hope and foresight, Charlotte Perkins Gilman wrote "The Yellow Wall-Paper" with such realism and truth that it stuck her with a rebellious tag until decades after her death. As contemporary readers, all who partake in the journey that is "The Yellow Wall-Paper" will have a real sense of understanding and sympathy for the reality that shaped this fine woman's words.

By appreciating the author's personal history and background, understanding how her portrayal of male characters enhanced her work, and seeing how Gilman's feministic views and biased portrayal of men in "The Yellow Wall-Paper" eventually led to its recognition and high acclaim, contemporary readers will have a richer appreciation for this fine author as a woman, a victim of mental illness, and an extraordinary realist writer and feminist activist of her time.