

Tales of mirrored
melancholy: the
yellow wallpaper and
a jury of her peers



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“ The Yellow Wallpaper” by Charlotte Gilman and “ A Jury of Her Peers” by Susan Glaspell have plots of very different natures in one, a mentally disturbed woman is taken to a reclusive house to recuperate while in the other, a woman is accused of killing her husband. However, one common thread that the stories share is the idea of how women at this time are treated or expected to act by others. “ The Yellow Wallpaper” describes the life of a lonely woman whose lack of contact with anyone other than her husband causes her to develop a growing obsession with the wallpaper in her bedroom. On the contrary, in “ A Jury of Her Peers,” Minnie Foster, a woman accused of killing her neglectful husband is never formally introduced, as she is in jail while the story takes place. The story instead follows two housewives, Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale, who happen to stumble upon Mrs. Foster’s infatuation her beloved dead pet. It may seem that the main character in “ The Yellow Wall Paper” and Minnie Foster in “ A Jury of Her Peers” are treated in entirely different ways by those around them as one woman is coddled by her husband while Minnie Foster is ignored by hers, but in reality, both stories highlight the lonely and obsessive tendencies of women in isolation as well as the guilt they feel when they cannot live up to society’s expectations of them.

Although the husbands of Minnie Foster and the narrator in “ The Yellow Wallpaper” had different motives for the treatment of their wives, both women end up feeling dispirited and lonely. John, the husband of the narrator in “ The Yellow Wallpaper” brings his wife out to a faraway house in order to cure her of the “ temporary nervous depression” and “ slight hysterical tendency” that he, as a physician, has prescribed her with (74). As

part of his treatment, he tells her that she is “ not allowed to work” (74) until she is well again. Although John’s demand demonstrates the chauvinistic tendencies of men at the time, he truly believes that his methods will cure his wife. Unlike the narrator in the previous story, Minnie Foster, a controversial figure and suspected murderer in “ A Jury of Her Peers” spends most of her time in her house not because her husband is trying to help her, but because she doesn’t have good relationships with him or anyone else. Similarly to the narrator in “ The Yellow Wallpaper,” Minnie Foster’s house is a “ lonesome looking place” (Glaspell, 155) however, Minnie spends most of her time there doing housework or farming while her husband is out at work. The description of Minnie’s house as “ lonesome” further illustrates Mrs. Wright’s solitude. In “ The Yellow Wallpaper,” John ensures that his wife refrains from human contact, including their own child, and when the narrator asked him if her cousins could visit, she recalls that “ he says he would as soon put fireworks in my pillow case as to have those stimulating people about me now” (Gilman, 78). Comparing his wife’s cousins to “ fireworks” helps to illustrate how dangerous he feels they will be to her. Antithetically, in “ A Jury of Her Peers,” the two women at Minnie’s house discuss her husband, calling him “ a hard man” and lamenting how he was out at work all day and “ no company when he did come in” (167). Although John’s treatment is extreme, he honestly thinks that he is curing his wife. However, the narrator’s isolation still makes her feel depressed and lonely, as she admits to “ cry at nothing, and cry most of the time,” (Gilman, 79) while in “ A Jury of Her Peers” the women’s sympathy and their portrayal of Mr. Wright as “ no company” to his wife suggests Mrs. Wright’s loneliness is a result of her husbands neglectfulness.

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Despite both women feeling unhappy and alone, they are still expected to maintain the attitudes and responsibilities of “the cult of domesticity” and feel guilty when they cannot live up to those expectations. Women at this time were expected to be submissive, pious, pure, and handle all of the domestic aspects of family life. These expectations can be seen when the narrator in “The Yellow Wallpaper” writes in her journal that “John says the worst thing I can do is to think about my condition, and I confess it always makes me feel bad” (75). The narrator’s admission of guilt for disobeying her husband’s orders illustrates that she feels the need to remain submissive and unopinionated, even regarding matters about her own health. Minnie Foster, on the other hand, feels the need to follow a different branch of the cult of domesticity as she strives to complete her domestic responsibilities such as farm work, cleaning the house, and knitting, despite being unhappy and lonely. During the investigation of Minnie’s kitchen, Mrs. Peters opens the cupboard to find ruined fruit and tells Mrs. Hale that Minnie had been “worried” that it would spoil “when it got so cold last night” (Glaspell, 159). Right after this discovery, the group was walking around Minnie’s disheveled kitchen and found some dirty washcloths, which causes the sheriff, Mrs. Peter’s husband, to conclude that Minnie was “not much of a housekeeper” (160). Minnie’s “worry” about her fruit while she is spending the night in jail shows she feels guilty that she could not complete her domestic responsibilities and illustrates that women at this time were socialized to always be cognizant of these duties so as not to be perceived as unladylike by people such as Mr. Peters. The narrator in “The Yellow Wallpaper” is also focused on her domestic responsibilities, as seen later on in the story. When she is really starting to become haunted by the wallpaper in her room, she

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tries to tell John how she feels, but he silences her with a “ stern, reproachful look” (Gilman, 82). He then continues on to tell her that she needs to get better, “ for my sake, and for our child’s sake, as well as your own” so his wife then “ said no more” on the subject (82). The narrator’s immediate silence is caused by not only John’s mention of their child, but also the “ reproachful look” that he gives her, illustrating both her understanding of the importance of her role as a housewife and mother and the guilt she feels for not being able to fulfill those duties even though she is sick. Despite being lonely and unhappy, both Minnie Foster and the narrator in “ The Yellow Wallpaper” are expected to be typical, submissive housewives.

Although Minnie Foster is in more of a social isolation while the narrator in “ The Yellow Wallpaper” is in a physical isolation, both women develop unhealthy obsessions during this time due to lack of contact with the outside world. Because the narrator in “ The Yellow Wallpaper” is not allowed to see anyone except her husband, she develops a strange relationship with the wallpaper in her bedroom. She admits to “ watch it always” (83) and although she was at first afraid of it, she soon grows to like the room not despite, but “ because of the wallpaper” (79). The narrator’s change of feelings towards the wallpaper represent the beginning of a relationship that goes beyond the normal bond between humans and objects. Minnie Foster, on the other hand, is not physically isolated from other people as she has neighbors and a husband, but she does feel socially removed from them. Due to her lack of friends, Minnie develops a friendship with her bird that quite resembles the narrator’s relationship to her wallpaper, as it serves as a replacement for relationships with other human beings. Similarly to this, in “

The Yellow Wallpaper,” the narrator’s desperate need for companionship drives her to convince herself that she can see a woman “ creeping about behind that pattern” (81) and suddenly she starts to see her “ out of every one of my windows” (85). Therefore, the night before her and John are scheduled to leave the house, she becomes so desperate to find this elusive woman that she is willing to tear apart the entire room. In her journal, she recalls that “ I pulled and she shook” (86) the wallpaper in an attempt to free her. This imagery describes the two working together, which shows that the narrator sees this woman as someone who can keep her company, clearly a result of her lack of contact with real people. Minnie Foster has an equally crazy reaction when her husband kills her bird, as she becomes so enraged that she “ choked the life out of him,” (Glaspell, 170) killing him in the same manner he killed her bird. Minnie’s obsessive relationship with her bird as well as the unlikely friendship the narrator in “ The Yellow Wallpaper” discovers illustrate how women cope with different types of isolation and how far they are willing to go when the relationships they develop are threatened.

By comparing the narrator in “ The Yellow Wallpaper” and Minnie in “ A Jury of Her Peers” it is easier to understand their motives for the desperate acts they are both driven to at the end of the stories. Although the two women had different backgrounds as one was a loved wife and mother while the other had been ignored and lonely, both women lost their sanity at the ends of their stories. Their acts of desperation suggest that perhaps it was not merely their loneliness that propelled them to seek out friends in odd places

and commit acts of murder or madness, but also the guilt of not living up to the expectations that society had of them.