

Personal Response to "The Yellow Wallpaper" - Women's Roles

Examining "The Yellow Wallpaper" after reading these background texts, I realize Charlotte Perkins Gilman's defiance of the conventional social norms in the 19th century. As these readings denote, the exclusive roles of women at the time were to raise the children and fulfill their husbands' desires. Ideally, the women "dropt The Playtings of Her Life To take the honourable work of Woman, and of Wife-" wrote Emily Dickinson. These standards are parallel with the texts on "Gender and the Nineteenth Century Home" as well as "A Nineteenth-Century Husband's Letter to His Wife (1844)". The husband criticizes his wife's "selfish motives" in which she "believes herself to be entitled to act on her own". Even in his effort to convince his wife to return, he blames her for their sins and threatens her with contempt if she chooses not to return. As seen with "The Angel in the House", the idolized Victorian woman would take all sins upon herself, an element which the narrator fails to exemplify.

These texts may be used to understand the social barriers Charlotte Perkins Gilman faced when writing. She uses "The Yellow Wallpaper" as a platform to convey the internal struggles inflicted on her by her contradictory physician and essentially by society. As mentioned by "Domesticity in Turn of the Century Literature", women looked to literature to find their role in society. As women were being flooded with media portraying traditional restricted gender role ideals of how to be a proper woman, Charlotte Perkins Gilman provided juxtaposing ideas. She wrote novels which defied traditional women's roles and enlightened society with the profound idea of women fantasizing about escape and freedom. This literature provided a powerful subversive text to the typical advice literature that previously dominated. Within "The Yellow Wallpaper", the narrator defies the conventional social norms by continuing to write, not only because she craved intellectual stimulation but also because she was not obeying her husband's orders. As Charlotte Perkins Gilman explains, the purpose of her writing was to "save people from being driven crazy". Her story is a satire of the absurd rest cure philosophies for women in the Victorian Era. In "Why I Wrote *The Yellow Wallpaper*", Charlotte Perkins Gelman describes how she "went home and obeyed those directions for some three months, and came so near the borderline of utter mental ruin." She exposes the counteractive results it produces and the dangers of belittling women.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman elucidates that without joy, growth, service, and power "one is a pauper and a parasite", as she explains in "Why I Wrote *The Yellow Wallpaper*". Essentially, this lifestyle without joy, growth, service, and power was the type designed for women during the Victorian era. In this case, her husband, John, serves as the persecutor of each of these structures. John embodies the prevailing cultural power structures that Gilman seeks to criticize which are the dispassionate and stolid medical community and the dominant male hierarchy of husband over wife. John undermines his wife's self-worth by speaking to her in a condescending manner and discounting her need for an alternative, more rational treatment. For instance, when

the narrator gets up to examine the wallpaper, John intervenes with, "what is it, little girl?" which is then followed by his orders, "don't go walking about like that - you'll get cold". John is completely oblivious and disbelieving of his wife's hallucinations. He is not open to accepting the severity of her case at any level. He simply believes she is over-exaggerating and fabricating her illness. Charlotte Perkins Gilman's final revolt was against the perception that women were expected to have self-control and discouraged to showcase their emotions. "Whatever have been the cares of the day, greet your husband with a smile when he returns" were the instructions in *Hill's Manual of Social and Business Forms, 1888*. However, the narrator reveals "I get unreasonably angry with John sometimes" and "John says if I feel so, I shall neglect proper self-control". In my opinion, the narrator's ultimate defiance of these societal stipulations was in her actions during her descent into madness. She's described as biting the bed, peeling the wallpaper, and creating a smooch in the wall from her creeping. These actions represent her complete absence of self-control. I believe this symbolizes her ultimate rebellion against the social norms for women in the Victorian era.

I am still interested in discovering the author's intention for the ending - whether it was designed to be portrayed as a victory or a defeat for the protagonist. I observe both sides of this. It is a defeat as referred to by the narrator's demoted mental health and the magnitude of suffering she endures to reach this point. It is a victory in so far as the rest cure was proven ineffective. If the rest cure had been proven effective, this would have supported the continuation of the unjust societal structure in which women are given very little power, social communication, and intellectual responsibility so that they may be cured. In my opinion, since the narrator was not cured, the unjust societal hierarchy is not to be accepted. Finally, the narrator's deranged mental state eventually causes her physician/husband to faint as she continues to "creep over him every time!" How ironic it is that the epitome of her oppressors is defeated with such a weak and traditionally feminine act of fainting. Then, the narrator is free to climb over his inert body as she makes her psychotic circles around the room and her tyrant simply becomes a small physical barrier to step over. Furthermore, the narrator has finally "freed the woman from the wallpaper" which, in my interpretation, symbolizes herself being freed from the societal pressures of women. She has concluded her conflict with John, representing Charlotte Perkins Gilman's divorce, and eventually she has accepted herself and asserted the power she wishes to possess.