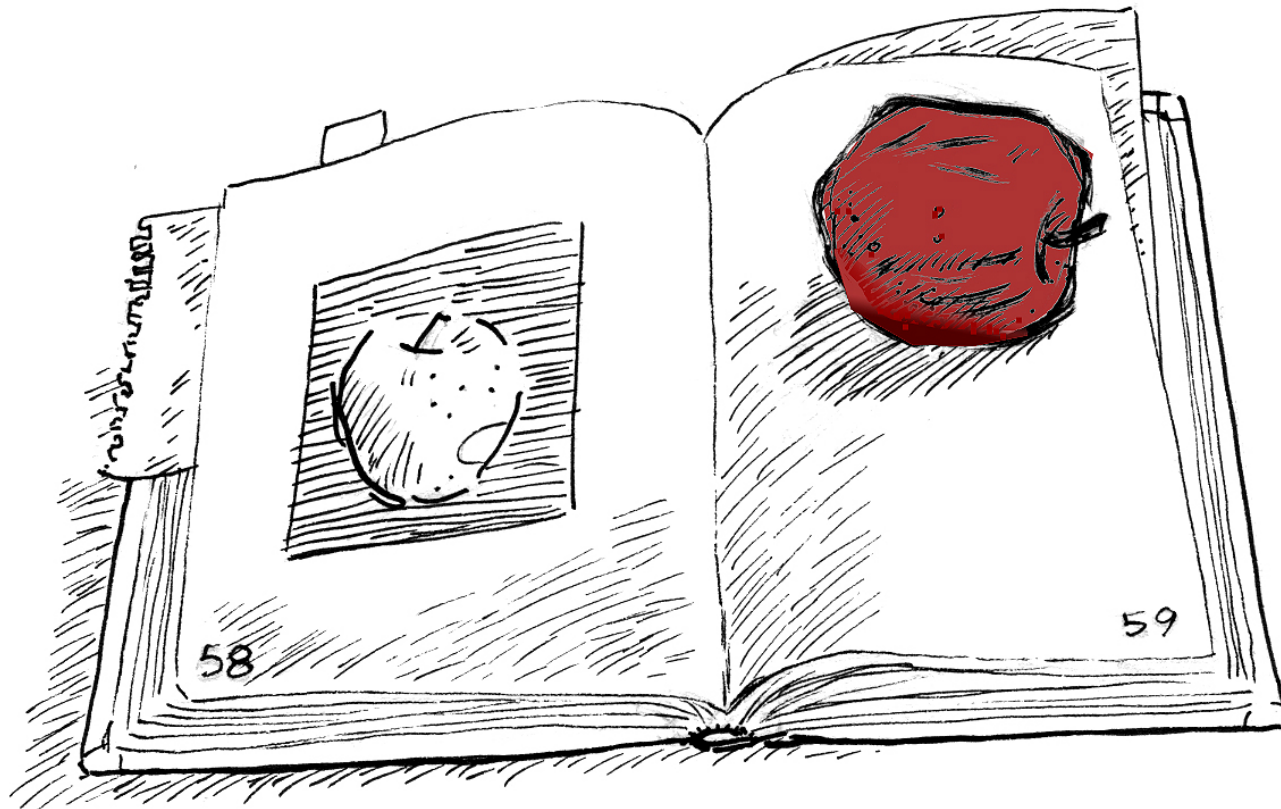


Charlotte Perkins Gilman



The Yellow Wallpaper

Quick Facts

- This work was “rediscovered” after being hidden away for almost fifty years.
- First published in May 1892.
- The story is semi-autobiographical; Gilman wrote this after a severe bout of postpartum depression she experienced herself.

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What strategies does Gilman utilize in this story which echo Poe's techniques in "The Cask of the Amontillado" and "The Tell-Tale Heart"?

- like most of Poe's works the protagonist is the narrator;
the story is told in a first person account
- strong Gothic atmosphere and irony
- identifiable characters which fill roles of dominant aggressor and passive victim
- despite the fact the protagonist is a passive victim's perspective she can be identified as as an anti-hero like Poe's protagonists:
 - > the female narrator has no control nor sense of identity
 - > due to her lack of self-will, she causes her own tragic ending
 - > story closes without a firm sense of resolution

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- despite the fact in “The Tell-Tale Heart” Poe shows his narrator as an active, dominant force, Gilman’s narrator has no control in her story
 - > she is locked away by her husband — a doctor — who brings her to a large estate which she describes in terms of imprisonment
 - > the character is shown in a barren labyrinth without an exit
 - > she often hesitates and rethinks her actions; as a result, she often does not take any action— she is seen as a character stuck in a mundane, redundant cycle of consideration, always second guessing her desires against her husband’s logic

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Setting

Paragraph 19, page 545, establishes the developing image of the scene.

- Notice as the story progresses the reader slowly learns more about the surroundings; just as a film develops, the reader moves from the main exterior of the grounds and the construction of the house, slowly moving towards the main setting: the bedroom upstairs

The “beautiful [house...] is quite alone, standing well back from the road, quite three miles from the village [...] There are hedges and gates that lock and lots of separate little houses” (paragraph 18, 545).

- Ironically the reader sees the danger of the situation *before* the narrator understands the significance of the house or the room itself; this builds up suspense

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- Just as the house is disconnected from the village, is outside of any community or has no connection with the world, the narrator herself is disconnected from the outside world, as well as from her self.

What was your first reaction to paragraph 31, page 546, when the protagonist describes her room?

Gilman writes:

It is a big, airy room, the whole floor nearly, with windows that look all ways, and air and sunshine galore. It was nursery first and then playroom and gymnasium, I should judge; for the windows are barred for little children, and there are rings and things in the walls (546).

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The reader should pick up on the fact this was not a nursery.

It is a strong description of a prison, not a resort or rest home.

If it is not a nursery what could its former function serve?

What is relevant regarding the bars on the window and rings embedded in the walls?

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What is relevant regarding the bars on the window and rings embedded in the walls?

More than likely it was once used for mentally ill patients.

The most severe cases would have to be chained to the wall.

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Because the narrator's perspective is not a hundred percent accurate and filled with speculation and false impressions, the reader has multiple assumptions.

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The room serves more than one role.

The atmosphere it generates is controlled by the ambiguity of John's real actions, which in turn adds more suspense.

- Some readers want to trust him, give him a benefit of a doubt.

(Consider page 546, ¶ 30.)

- Some see him as an out-right villain.

(Consider page 546, ¶ 39 and 42; likewise page 547, ¶ 58.)

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Because the narrator's perspective is vague at times, ultimately the reader has two immediate choices.

1. If what the narrator relates is incorrect and the room was *not* a nursery but rather was an asylum, she is clearly being overtly manipulated by her husband, who wants to brainwash his wife through ill-intentions. He seems to want her to be the epitome of a proper nineteenth century woman suited as a doctor's wife.

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2. If what she relates is true, that the room *was* once a nursery and *not* an asylum, John can be seen as well-intended, but misguided.
- With this in mind, it is ironic for John to place his wife in this particular room; she is locked in what *should* be a maternal environment; John is restraining her to a stereotype definition of womankind— more than likely he is trying to make her realize her true station in life as a domestic spouse rather than an intellectual, free thinking individual equal in thought and creativity to a man. Yet at the same time, restraining her from her baby.
- Either way he is seen forcing a transformation of her womanhood; Jane is limited to the role of a simple child or a symbolic insane individual locked away in the sparse garret attic. Notice how he calls her “a blessed little goose”(547) or “little girl”(550).

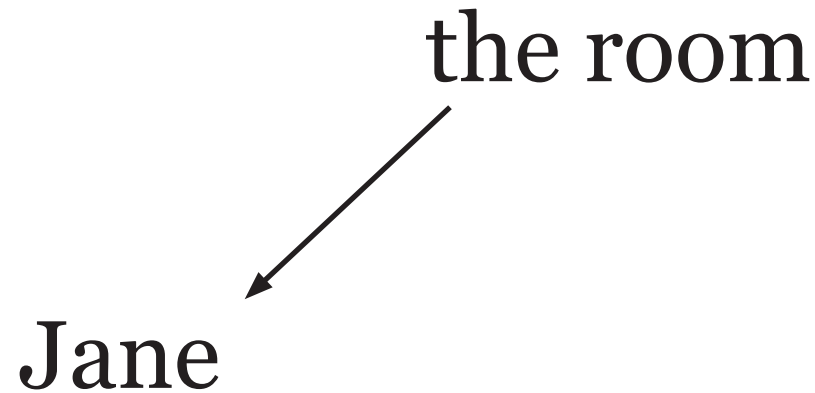
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The room itself can represent many different elements.

Different interpretation exist regarding the use of this plot device.

- Primarily, due to its claustrophobic, controlling presence of the narrator's life it is generally seen as an example of the patriarchal system in place, a system upheld by the culture of the times, and indirectly, by Jane herself.
- Jane slowly succumbs to the room's control:
 - > At first it disturbs her; she feels something is wrong with the setting.
Furthermore she cannot understand the design in the wallpaper.
 - > Slowly, as the story progresses she comes to believe she rather likes the room (¶ 91, 548), until eventually she does not want to ever leave it.
- She is shown as a woman living without concern of the patriarchal control over her femininity, her creative thought and intellect.

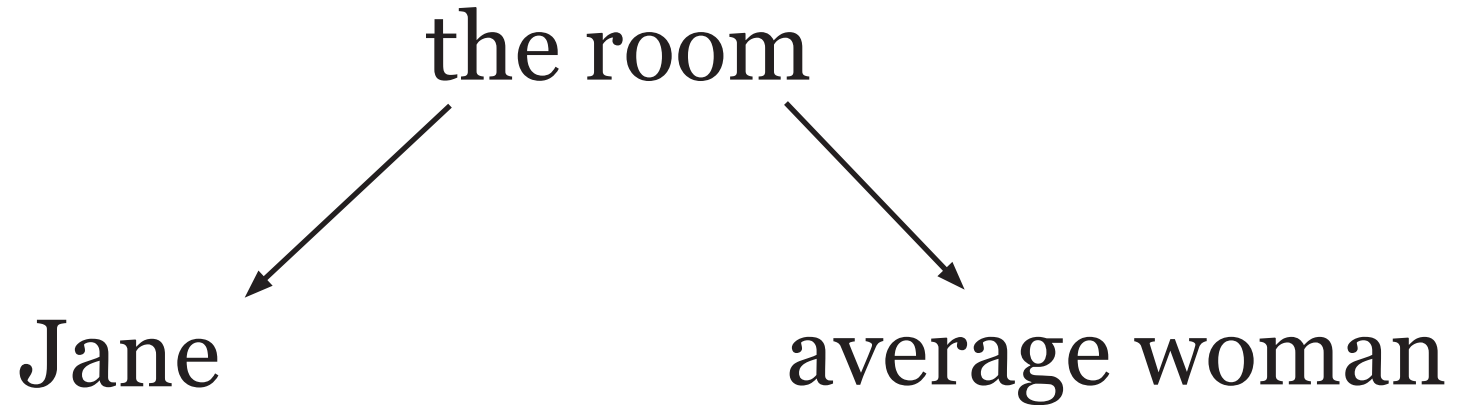
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However, the room can also be a symbol for the narrator herself.

- The more she tries to deconstruct the room, she is unintentionally, violently destroying herself. Progressively as she descends into her insanity, she begins to forget the effects she makes on the walls, the floors, the paper itself.
- She believes someone else is changing the environment around her as each new journal entry indicates. She changes as the room changes.
- Some critics believe the wallpaper represents the narrator's own discourse.

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Readers likewise should place themselves in her situation.

- What is a *private* story of an individual transforms itself to a *public* level.
the room's symbolism indirectly shifts to include the average woman.

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Needless to say she had a hard time getting it published.

The ending does not have a moral-uplifting ending which was expected from women writers of her day.

- The protagonist is reduced to an animalistic state, crawling on the floor, groveling insane, circling the room like a caged tiger, acting less than human.
(Just as the Princess in “The Goose Girl” is forced to drink water as an animal.)
- The protagonist loses all sense of her former self, but ironically has gained a sense of independence at the collapse of her sanity.

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What is important to realize, is *how* the wallpaper acts as the central image of the story. This is a crucial setting element. Gilman shows the paper in an active role: it surrounds, disturbs, and invokes feelings of a strong claustrophobic nature.

Interestingly it remains undefined—just a Jane herself is not defined clearly to the reader, or to herself. The pattern is made up of “lame, uncertain curves” which without warning “commit suicide, [...] destroy themselves in unheard of contradictions” (546). The pattern disturbs and bewilders the narrator as she tries to make out various shapes and images in the amorphous designs.

- The wallpaper with its lack of definition symbolizes Jane seeking definition in the male-controlled environment. The longer she stays in the bedroom, the more the wallpaper appears to mutate and change, especially in the moonlight, feminine energy stereotyped with lunacy and witchcraft.

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- The symbolic message is clear: women must stay in their place and bend to the exact will of the male. A woman should be silent and “stay in their place.”
The narrator seeks her identity, for her own sense of place, for an independent self.
- By having the narrator obsess over the paper rather than the room itself puts the reader off-balance. Utilizing a room as an element of claustrophobia and discomfort is an *expected* solution.
- Having the narrator primarily focus on the *paper* shows how obsessive her repressed nature and intellect have become.

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Timing:

Notice the central timing of the story: the three months of Summer.

- As Summer draws to an end, so does the plot.
- Fall is approaching; this is the time of death, of harvest, the old year drawing in to a close. Just as Chopin uses Spring as an ironic cue for the unfolding events, Gilman uses close of Summer (July-August) as a foreshadowing effect.
- *On the last day of summer*, Jane undergoes the most dramatic changes:
 - > she locks herself in her room in order to strip the remains of the wallpaper
 - > she becomes regulated to the floor, a lowly state of being, subservient status, beneath the male dominated system
 - > she assumes the role of the woman behind the paper, screaming at her husband that she has managed to get out, losing her sanity, losing her individuality

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- Most importantly, notice it is the male figure who faints at the condition of the room, how she ripped apart the paper, her degraded self.
- In her delusions, her broken down form, the narrator crawls over him, circling the room like an animal, never wanting to leave. In a sense, this allows a form of triumph for the protagonist, who regresses to continually crawling around the room and *over* the prone figure of her husband. A sense of partial victory lies in the catastrophic closure of the story. The female protagonist knew she was going insane despite her husband's objections.
- This catastrophic ending does give the narrator a sense of sad "I told you so"—allowing her to have the last word, however, it is up to the reader to project the future of the characters beyond this point. There is no firm resolution.

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Important items to consider:

- *Notice the other woman featured in the story: the servant Mary (546) and John's sister Jennie (548, 551). How do they operate in the plot? What type of characters are they? How do they respond to their traditional roles?*
- Very few colors are mentioned other than the yellow of the wallpaper.
 - > The color shifts as an obsessive point for the narrator.
 - > The sick yellow color begins staining everything, her husband's clothes, the stairways.
- The narrator at one point desires to strangle the other woman behind the paper, wanting to tie her up, restrict her as much as her own husband's authority symbolically ties her up.
- The woman trapped in the wallpaper is her other self, a double.
E. A. Poe uses this same element in most of his stories and poems.

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- Critic Juliann Fleenor points out that in the character's "cure" the doctor-husband takes the child away as well as her expressions of creativity. Both of these elements are interrelated: childbirth and writing are forms of creation — and in this case, feminine qualities under his misguided masculine suppression
- The wallpaper itself acts as a character, transforming and changing with Jane's moods and swerving descent into madness. Compare the following pages to see Jane's shift in descriptions: ¶ 33-34, p. 546; ¶ 65-66 p. 547; ¶ 140-151 551; ¶ 214-218, 553.

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Criticism:

Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar constructed a strong discussion of this type of literature in their book *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*.

- One point they raise, regarding “imprisonment literature” of the time period, namely the woman of the 19th century often used the domestic setting of a house to show the imprisonment of womankind.
- The traditional domestic (and in this case maternal) landscape becomes a symbol of repression in itself, similar to what Poe does in “The Tell-Tale Heart” where the unnamed narrator causes the death of the Old Man and dismembers his corpse in the victim’s bedroom.