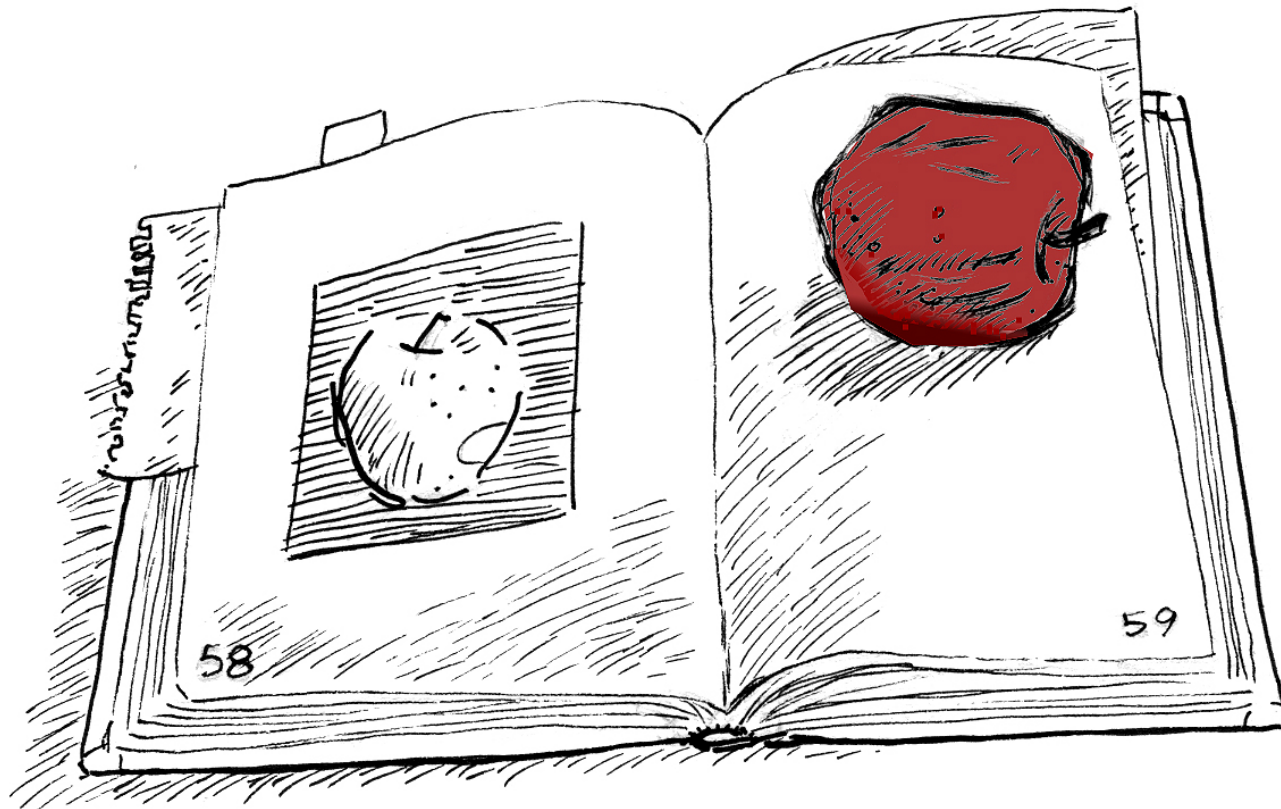


# Charlotte Perkins Gilman

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# *The Yellow Wallpaper*

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## **Quick Facts**

- This work is a “rediscovered” piece of story hidden away for almost fifty years.
- First published in May 1892, three years before Kate Chopin published her controversial story *The Awakening*.
- Gilman’s story is semi-autobiographical; she wrote this after experiencing a severe bout of postpartum depression.

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*What strategies does Gilman utilize in this story which echo Poe's techniques in "The Tell-Tale Heart"?*

# *The Yellow Wallpaper*

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*What strategies does Gilman utilize in this story which echo Poe's techniques in "The Tell-Tale Heart"?*

- like Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart" the Narrator is the protagonist; the story is told in first person accounts
- 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 unnamed Narrator:
  - > Gilman's character has no control nor sense of identity
  - > in a sense, due to her lack of self-will, she causes her own tragic ending
  - > story closes without a firm sense of resolution
  - > character is neither 100% evil, nor 100% good; she is an average woman

# *The Yellow Wallpaper*

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## **Setting**

Paragraph 19, on page 376, 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 by paragraph 32, and then the wallpaper by paragraph 34.
- Ironically the reader sees the danger of the situation *before* the Narrator understands the significance of the room itself; this builds up suspense.
- Just as the house is disconnected from the village, and is withdrawn from any sense of community, the Narrator has no connection with the outside world, and as well as from her self.

# *The Yellow Wallpaper*

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*What was your first reaction to paragraph 31, page 377, when the protagonist describes her room?*

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*How does Gilman increase a sense of suspense with the description of the room?*

*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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*How does Gilman increase a sense of suspense with the description of the room?*

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.

*What could its former function serve?*

*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.

*How does the room function within the plot?*



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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.

Some see him as an out-right villain.

# *The Yellow Wallpaper*

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Because the Narrator's perspective is not a hundred percent accurate and is filled with speculation and false impressions, ultimately the reader has two choices.

1. *If what she 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.
2. *If what she relates is true*, that the room was once nursery (and not an asylum), John can be seen as being supportive of his wife, but horribly misguided.

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- Either way, it is ironic for John to place his wife in this particular room; she is locked in what *should* be a maternal environment. Some see John as restraining her to a stereotype definition of womankind— 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, and at the same time, restraining her from her baby— *OR* he wants her to “snap out of it” and return to a state of normalcy.
- Either way he is seen forcing a transformation of her womanhood; the Narrator 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”(par. 56, p. 378) or “little girl”(par. 133, p. 381).

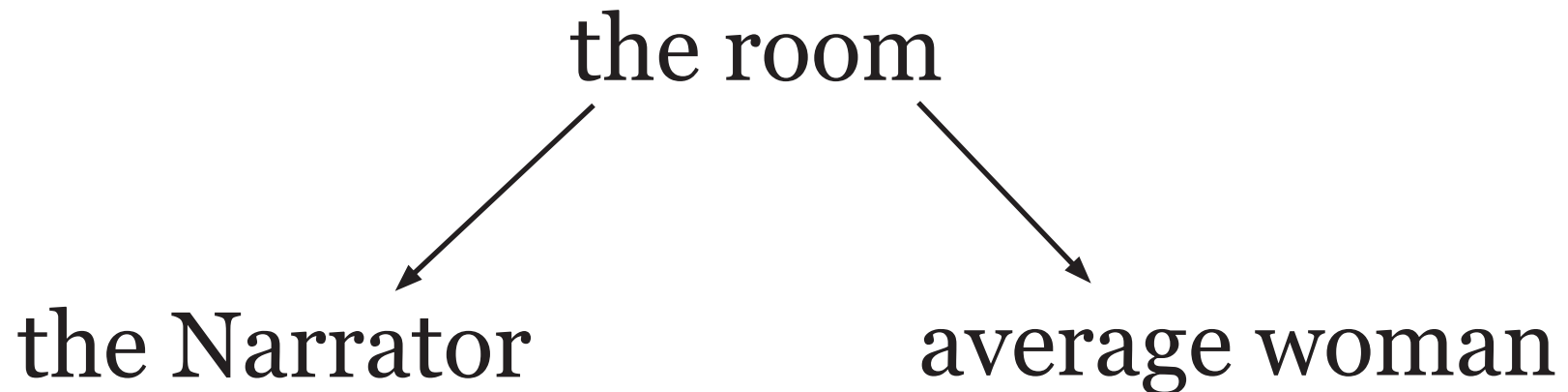
# *The Yellow Wallpaper*

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**Finally, it is important to realize that the room is a symbol for the Narrator herself (and for any intellectual woman).**

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.

She believes someone else is changing the environment around her as each new journal entry indicates. She changes as the room changes.



# *The Yellow Wallpaper*

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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, forced to act less than human.

*(Just as the Princess in Goose Girl is forced to drink water as an animal.)*

# *The Yellow Wallpaper*

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*Why does Gilman center the Narrator's focus on the wallpaper itself?  
—why not concentrate more on the imprisoning aspects of the room?*

# *The Yellow Wallpaper*

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*Why does Gilman center the Narrator's focus on the wallpaper itself?  
—why not concentrate more on the imprisoning aspects of the room?*

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, suffocates, smothers, disturbs, and invokes feelings of a strong claustrophobic nature.

Interestingly it remains undefined—just as the Narrator 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” (377). The pattern disturbs and bewilders the Narrator as she tries to make out various shapes and images in the amorphous designs.

# *The Yellow Wallpaper*

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- The wallpaper with its lack of definition symbolizes the Narrator seeking definition in a 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.
- 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.



# *The Yellow Wallpaper*

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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.
- The long dead winter waits.

# *The Yellow Wallpaper*

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## **Important items to consider:**

- *Notice the other woman featured in the story: the servant Mary (14) and John's sister Jennie (18). 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.

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- 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.
- *On the last day of summer*, she 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
- 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.

# *The Yellow Wallpaper*

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- 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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- Unlike Mrs. Mallard who emerges from her religious cell as a “goddess of Victory” the protagonist’s transformation is not an escalation of character as is the Princess in the Grim story, or as Chopin’s Mrs. Mallard, but it is a deterioration.
- 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 surpression.

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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, maternal, landscape becomes a symbol of repression in itself. I point this out because unlike Poe’s “Cask of Amontillado” where Montresor imprisons Fortunato in a Gothic surreal nightmare setting of a catacomb, Gilman specifically twists a stereotypical domestic scene of a supposed bedroom, possible nursery, into a jail.