

First and Last Name

Professor

Class

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### Gender Norms and *The Yellow Wallpaper*

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* is an exploration of the role and place of women in America in the 1800s. Society at the time was fiercely patriarchal and oppressive of women (Rothenberg 539). Women had no life outside of their homes, and this is what the wallpaper in Perkins' story symbolizes. It is a representation of the structure of family at the time, as well as how tradition trapped women in their homes. The narrator sees the wallpaper as something she needs to understand, as she feels the wallpaper affects her in a direct way. At face value, the narrator found the wallpaper unpleasant and its color unclean (Gilman 8). It also had a formless pattern she could not figure out (Gilman 18). With time, however, she is capable of identifying the sub-pattern under the main pattern on the wallpaper. The sub-pattern is a depiction of desperate women looking for a way out of the cages of life that trap them. The domestic lives they are subjected to suffocate them and drive them mad, and they can only hope to escape the imprisonment.

The narrator saw the heads of many women in the cage on the wallpaper. They had been strangled while trying to escape from the cage they were held in. This is symbolic of the cost of trying to defy tradition and grow out of the domestic roles defined by the patriarchal society in which they lived. The mental and physical constraints placed on women greatly affected them and limited their right to self-expression, while demanding the preservation of the façade of happiness in their marriages and lives in general.

The narrator believes her husband belittles her and treats her like a child. Though well-meaning, her husband, does what he thinks is right considering his wife's condition. He does not believe she is sick and does not allow her to work (Gilman 2). The narrator says her husband, John, laughs her at her ideas about the house and what she could do to get better (Gilman 1). Even though that disappoints her, she tries to be the good wife and takes pains in controlling herself before her husband. Though she obeys her husband, there is a strain between them. The tension makes her angry at times, but she points out that her husband is not only loving, but also careful (Gilman 6). However, he likes being in control of the situation she is in, and on occasion, can be manipulative. As such, they may appear to be a happy couple on the outside, but inwardly, their relationship is strained. The stress makes her condition worse.

According to the *Declaration of Sentiments*, women are civilly dead in marriages (Rothenberg 540). Women are compelled to be obedient to their husbands in the institution of marriage, a requirement that basically elevates men to the level of masters over their wives (Rothenberg 540). The laws at the time gave men the power not only to administer chastisement, but also to deprive their wives of their liberty. This is the subordination of women seen in *The Yellow Wallpaper*, as the man has done all he can to undermine the confidence of his wife in herself and her own ideas. She has no self-respect and is virtually dependent on him not just as her doctor and husband, but as the caregiver and the provider, just as the *Declaration of Sentiments* states (Rothenberg 541). She, therefore, leads an abject life because of what society prescribes for her in the name of tradition and gender roles.

The narrator spends a lot of time describing the wallpaper. According to her, it has a yellow smell, misses some patches, has a breakneck pattern, and leaves yellow smears when touched (Gilman 18). She feels that the wallpaper changes in appearance if a person stays in the

room with it for long, more so with changes in light (Gilman 34). She becomes intrigued by the designs and the pattern on the wallpaper. Her mind is so fixated on it that she starts to see a woman on all fours creeping behind the pattern (Gilman 44). She thought the woman was stuck in the wallpaper and had to strip the paper off the wall to free the woman. In essence, she believed she was freeing herself from the bondage of her husband's ideas about her illness, and the traditions that forbid women from expressing themselves. Her description of the painting is reminiscent of what she feels about her marriage and the situation she finds herself in, and the millions of women around the world at the time.

The narrator does not like how her husband treats her and dismisses her thoughts and ideas (Gilman 2). John's actions toward her, while driven by the best intentions, make her feel fragile and weak, and it angers her. It makes her depression escalate into mental illness. The narrator expresses her thoughts privately in her journals and hides them from John. She also hides what she feels about the wallpaper from John and Jennie, as they do not allow her to do anything (Gilman 33). She felt that she needed to work as opposed to being submitted to bed-rest. She wanted to engage with society as opposed to being isolated, and she wanted to be more than a patient and a wife, but John dismissed those ideas as irrational, being her doctor and husband.

The narrator slips into insanity in the end, a personal cost she had to pay for 'standing up' against male domination. She did not want to be controlled by anyone, and made it clear when John found her ripping the paper from the wall. He fainted and she crawled over him, an act depicting her rise over her husband and doctor. However, the victory she achieves is at the expense of sanity.

Works Cited

Gilman, Charlotte P. *The Yellow Wall Paper*. Small, Maynard, 1899.

Rothenberg, Paula S. *Race, Class, and Gender in the United States: An Integrated Study*. Worth Publishers, 2007.

