

## **The Yellow Wallpaper: Craving a New Role in Society**

**By James Branam**

“The Yellow Wallpaper,” by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, follows one woman as she struggles with her role in society. Perkins Gilman provides the reader with a firsthand account of a woman suffering from what appears to be a nervous breakdown. However, a closer reading reveals that the nervous breakdown is only a vehicle to the woman’s subconscious desire to move outside the traditional role of women in society at that time in history.

According to many who have read the story, “The Yellow Wallpaper” depicts a woman suffering from a typical case of post-partum depression. Mention of the baby in the story confirms the narrator has recently become a mother, which lends credibility to this argument. However, I believe that the narrator’s depression existed long before the baby was born. Of course, the birth of the baby could have contributed to the narrator’s condition, but it probably did not cause it. I believe it was caused by her being forced to assume the expected role of a woman in society. She was thus forced to suppress her own identity.

In order for the reader to fully understand just what the narrator was forced to go through, it is necessary to look at the traditional role of women in 19<sup>th</sup> century society. A woman’s role in the 19<sup>th</sup> century can be compared to the description of the colonial estate in the story, “...quite alone standing well back from the road” (391). Women were to be seen and not heard. They were basically *baby machines*, to be switched on or off at the

will of their husbands. Perkins Gilman's character is even more unfortunate to have married a paternalistic man who, in essence, treats her like a small child, "...he is very careful and loving, and hardly lets me stir without special direction" (392). The fact that her husband is also a physician complicates the matter even further, "John is a physician, and *perhaps* that is one reason I do not get well faster. You see he does not believe I am sick" (391). As one can see, the narrator of the story did not have an easy life.

At the beginning of the story, the narrator travels with her husband and sister-in-law to a colonial estate to undergo a rest cure. This cure consists of doing almost nothing except eating and sleeping. However, we see very early in the story that the narrator sees her new residence as a type of prison. There are even several references to confinement in the text, "...there are hedges and walls and gates that lock..." (391). She is not permitted to take the room of her choice, but is ordered to a room in which she feels imprisoned at first, "... barred windows, and then that gate at the head of the stairs..."(393). The narrator's husband dismisses her comments on the room as an adult might brush aside the concerns of a child, "He laughs at me so about this wallpaper" (393).

The psychological impact of such a situation must have been devastating for the narrator. Throughout the story, she is submitted to more than one type of psychological torture. The many days spent staring at empty, decaying walls is the most obvious torture. However, she must also constantly witness her sister-in-law's behavior, which only adds to her misery. Her sister-in-law represents the way men would like women to behave, "She is a perfect and enthusiastic housekeeper, and hopes for no better profession" (395). It is no surprise that the narrator's condition worsens when she is sent to her *prison*. She

is forced to make a decision; she can choose to become like Mary, or listen to her inner voice and let the woman inside of her come out.

She lets the woman out. The yellow wallpaper in the room (and later the woman behind it) represents the narrator's sub-conscious longing to be what she is — a woman with ideas of her own. At first she sees various designs, "...lame uncertain curves suddenly commit suicide — plunge off at outrageous angles, destroy themselves in unheard of contradictions" (392). This vision could be compared to the narrator's own condition, and it could even suggest her possible end. The images change as the story develops, "...great slanting waves of optic horror, like a lot of wallowing seaweeds in full chase" (396). This could refer to the confusion she encounters when she is forced to look deeply into herself. The narrator is obviously at risk of "spiritual suicide," as described by Gilbert Segura in "The Woman's View in a Subjugated Role." It is brought on by her husband's attitude toward her. The narrator would be committing "spiritual suicide" should she continue her life in her previous role.

The narrator's condition worsens with each journal entry. She writes that the shapes in the wallpaper materialize into a woman. The woman is in fact the narrator herself. The woman in the wallpaper is trapped behind bars, which can only represent the limitations placed on the narrator by society. The woman in the wallpaper exhibits a pattern of behavior similar to that of the narrator, "By daylight, she is subdued, quiet" (399). At the beginning of the story, the narrator behaves normally during the day, submitting to her husband's ideas. As the story develops, however, the narrator sleeps more and more during the day, and spends most of her nights exploring the world of the

yellow wallpaper. The hallucinations also usually appear at night. It is also noteworthy to mention the narrator's observance of the woman "...on the long road under the trees, creeping along..." (401). "Creeping" could be defined as doing something one wants to do, even if forced to do so in secrecy. The narrator had already mentioned going on walks by herself in the country, and it was probably on these walks that she was able to be herself, not what her husband wanted her to be.

Later in the story it becomes evident that the narrator and the woman in the wallpaper are in fact the same person. The narrator has come face to face with her subconscious self. She has adopted a new role in life and will not be forced back into the old one. Her husband is overcome with shock and is unable to deal with wife's new role. He is not accustomed to seeing his wife with so much determination.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" was ahead of its time in its portrayal of what women had to go through to acquire the personal freedom all human beings deserve. Today, women *have* assumed a new role in society, allowing them to rise up from the shadows of men and face the yellow sun, just as Charlotte Perkins Gilman narrator once faced the yellow wallpaper — with courage and determination.

**Works cited:**

Segura, Gilbert. "The Woman's View in a Subjugated Role", Austin, Texas, 2002