

# "The Yellow Wallpaper" Feminist Criticism

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Locked away in a mental prison of her husband's machination, the protagonist of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" is the embodiment of the struggles faced by women in seeking freedom of thought. Where others would see this story as a psychological thriller of sorts, it is clear from a feminist standpoint that this is a commentary on the state of women in the late 1800s, and perhaps even of the author's own struggles with a society run by males. This theme is made clear through the characterization of John (the protagonist's husband), the thoughts and writing of Jane, and the environment in which she is placed. Combined, these elements describe the imprisonment of women, and the control held over them by men.

John is a textbook example of a dominating spouse, a husband who holds absolute control over his wife. He treats her as an inferior, as seen here: "John laughs at me, of course, but one expects that in marriage" (1). John sees his wife's ideas and thoughts as laughable, never taking them seriously until it is too late to save her from madness. It is also clear from this statement that John laughs at his wife because it is what is expected by society. Later, when Jane takes control of her own thoughts, his role as a strong, protective husband and leader is reversed, and he becomes much like a woman himself: "Now why should that man have fainted?" (17). Having seen his wife in a state of delirium (symbolically, breaking the hold he has over her), he faints, much like the stereotypical shocked woman. In accepting her delirium, Jane has reversed the traditional roles of husband and wife; John's shock at this reversal further shows his need to control his wife, lest he be seen as a "woman" by society.

Aiding the expression of the author's feminist views are the thoughts and dialogue of Jane. Her desire to express her thoughts and ideas breaks through even society's toughest barriers: "I did write for a while in spite of them" (1). As an individual woman, she feels depressed and ill until she is able to express herself through writing, at which point she feels exhausted due to the need to hide her thoughts from society and her husband. On the other hand, she feels pressured by society to stay in her husband's care: "he takes all care from me, and so I feel basely ungrateful not to value it more" (2). Though her husband has removed all control and responsibility from her hands, making her feel imprisoned and useless, she is pressured by society to worship and thank her husband for eliminating the need to think from her life.

With the majority of the story taking place in a room that induces nothing but scorn and insanity from the female protagonist, it is clear that feminist views are further accentuated through Jane's surroundings. Her environment is almost prison-like; when Jane wishes for the walls to be repapered, her husband refuses, stating "that after the wall-paper was changed it would be the heavy bedstead, and then the barred windows, and then that gate at the head of the stairs, and so on" (3). Though Jane may feel repressed by these bars and gates, her husband refuses to change her environment; he wishes to keep her imprisoned. But perhaps the most obvious use of setting to emphasize feminist views comes in the wallpaper itself: "At night in any kind of light, in twilight, candlelight, lamplight, and worst of all by moonlight, it becomes bars!" (10). The paper itself, though not physically restraining her like the gates and bars, represents a psychological prison. All of her thoughts are devoted entirely to the paper; she is captivated by it, unable to pull her mind from the strange allure of its pattern. This all connects to the image of the woman trapped behind the paper; the protagonist's mind is not freed until the end of the story, when she has removed most of the paper.

As a whole, this story is used as a tool to express the author's feminist views, illustrating the physical and

mental hardships faced by women in this time period. These ideas are expressed through the actions of John, the thoughts of Jane, and the setting of the story. Through this story, Gilman speaks of the imprisonment and psychological struggles placed on women by society. In her mind, gender roles must be removed from the social order for women to ever be free.

<http://www.teenink.com/nonfiction/academic/article/317600/The-Yellow-Wallpaper-Feminist-Criticism/>