

Name: _____

Date: _____

Period: _____

“The Yellow Wallpaper”

Charlotte Perkins Gilman | Discussion Questions

Directions: You will be expected to answer these discussion questions from the short story. If you have questions or do not understand something, please ask. It will save your time and your grade. Use COMPLETE SENTENCES when responding to the following questions.

1. How does “The Yellow Wallpaper” begin? Why the description of the summer rental as “a colonial mansion, a hereditary estate, I would say a haunted house”? In what ways does the narrator enjoy the estate? What about the house disturbs her? Is “The Yellow Wallpaper” a Female Gothic production?

Gothic, when applied to literature, is defined by Bedford as, “a **genre** characterized by a general mood of decay, action that is dramatic and generally violent or otherwise disturbing, loves that are destructively passionate, and **settings** that are grandiose, if gloomy or bleak.”

The *Gothic Novel*, according to Bedford, is a “**romance** typically written as a long prose horror **narrative** that exhibits the Gothic qualities of doom and gloom as well as an emphasis on chivalry and magic. Dark, mysterious medieval castles chock full of secret passageways and (apparently) supernatural phenomena are common elements used to thrill the reader.”

The *Female Gothic* is defined by Carol Margaret Davison in “Haunted House, Haunted Heroine” as centering on “a young woman’s **rite of passage** into womanhood and her ambivalent relationship to contemporary domestic ideology, especially the joint institutions of marriage and motherhood” (48).

2. Why has the family taken this summer home?

- Is the narrator suffering from post-partum depression?
- Of what significance is the birth of a son instead of a daughter?
- How does her husband’s way of addressing her and his choice of living space for her complicate her identity crisis?
- Do you think the restraints that the narrator’s physician husband places on her life are motivated by love and a sincere effort to effect a cure?
- Does her husband give her the room she desires in the house?

The narrator states, “It is a big, airy room, the whole floor nearly, with windows that look all ways, and air and sunshine galore” (648). Why, then, does she find the room oppressive and even sinister? Why does the narrator tell us the room is a nursery? In what ways does John assault Jane’s individual autonomy and identity?

3. Examine the extent to which Jane conforms to or subverts the definition of “the true woman.”

How does her relationship with her brother predispose her to womanhood? Jane describes her husband as “practical in the extreme. He has no patience with faith, an intense horror of superstition, and he scoffs openly at any talk of things not to be felt and seen and put down in figures” (647). Consider this description compared to the definition of masculinity in the late 1800’s.

- Is Jane a successful counterbalance to her husband?
- How does her attitude toward her husband progressively change?
- Who is the domestic ideal in “The Yellow Wallpaper”?

4. Do you think she loves her husband? Trusts him? Fears him? What effect does his repeated denial that his wife is sick have upon her? Compare the communication styles of John, Jane and Jennie. It has been pointed out that instead of fighting back against a silencing patriarch, her husband, Gilman's narrator *writes* back, at times using masculine, rational language, "just a scientific hypothesis-that perhaps it is the paper"(Davison 61). How would this writing undermine her husband? Does Jane successfully illustrate the irony of her husband's care? Discuss the ways in which the narrator was gifted with a creative and active imagination. How is the forbidden writing an outlet? When thwarted, what form does her imagination take?

Identify John's modes of escape from the situation? Is he blind to his wife's progressive mental deterioration or does he choose to ignore it? Why? Given that Jane's husband is threatened by her use of imagination and does not seem to value art, can she survive in his world, devoid of self-expression?

5. Discuss the layers of symbolism with which Gilman imbues the wallpaper.

"Sprawling flamboyant pattern committing every artistic sin" (648).

"The color is repellent---" (649).

"There is one place where the breadths didn't match, and the eyes go all up and down the line, one a little higher than another" (649).

"They connect diagonally, and the sprawling outlines run off in great slanting waves of optic horror" (649).

"Behind that outside pattern the dim shapes get clearer every day" (652).

"On a pattern like this, by daylight, there is a lack of sequence, a defiance of law, that is a constant irritant to a normal mind" (653).

"At night... it becomes bars" (653).

"But there is something else about the paper---the smell!"(654).

"I pulled and she shook, I shook and she pulled, and before morning we had peeled off yards of that paper" (655).

Contrast what she sees in the wallpaper in the first part of the story with what she sees later. Explore the significance of the woman in the wallpaper who is trying to escape. Discuss the bars in the room in comparison to those she sees as a submerged design in the wallpaper.

6. The narrator states, "It must be very humiliating to be caught creeping by daylight." In what way does this statement symbolize the woman's predicament? Jane's senseless crawling at the end of the story signifies freedom, insanity, sanity, or something else?

**Why does she remain unnamed until the end of the story?
Of what significance is John's fainting at the end of the story?**

With the changes in treatments available today, could her "sanity" have been saved? How have attitudes toward nervous disorders and mental illness changed or remained the same?

7. Would you blame the protagonist as the source of her own troubles?

Or as Barbara A. Sues states in “The Writing’s on the Wall: Symbolic Orders in The Yellow Wallpaper,” would you find, “the arrogant abuse of patriarchal authority, as the primary source of the protagonist’s ultimately complete inability to separate fantasy from reality” (81)?

Or would you agree with Charlotte Perkins Gilman who, according to Cynthia Davis, states that, “Women’s economic dependence on men has caused them to become more feminine and less human?” (Cynthia Davis, “Love and Economics: Charlotte Perkins Gilman on the Woman Question” 243).

8. Charlotte Perkins Gillman wrote three utopian romances, seven novels, seven non-fiction books, some 200 short stories, approximately 500 poems, a handful of plays, hundreds of essays and articles and an autobiography. From your reading, what skill does she have as a writer of fiction? What demands does she make on the reader? In the age of realism how is her technique ahead of its time?

In what respects do the narrator’s experiences in “The Yellow Wallpaper” reflect the author’s own experiences? What reason did Charlotte Perkins Gilman give for writing “The Yellow Wallpaper?”

9. “Point-of-view has often been considered the technical aspect of fiction which leads the critic most readily into the problems of meaning of a novel or a short story” (G. Hugh Holman, *Handbook of Literature 4th edition* 344). How is the diary form with a first person narrator used to great advantage in this story? How reliable is the protagonist/narrator? What other words would you use to characterize her perspective? Naïve? Limited? What else?