



The Yellow Wallpaper

Charlotte Perkins Gilman

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The Yellow Wallpaper is a story by the American writer Charlotte Perkins Gilman. It is regarded as an important early work of American feminist literature, illustrating attitudes in the 19th century toward women's physical and mental health.

Presented in the first person, the story is a collection of journal entries written by a woman (Jane) whose physician husband (John) has confined her to the upstairs bedroom of a house he has rented for the summer. She is forbidden from working and has to hide her journal from him, so she can recuperate from what he calls a "temporary nervous depression – a slight hysterical tendency," a diagnosis common to women in that period. The windows of the room are barred, and there is a gate across the top of the stairs, allowing her husband to control her access to the rest of the house.

Gilman's novel is even more relevant today than when it was first printed. More than merely a narrative of female intellectual oppression or a critique of late 19th century social mores, "The Yellow Wallpaper" documents a practice that was common among the middle and upper class. Known as the "rest cure," women who displayed signs of depression or anxiety were committed to lie in bed for weeks at a time, and allowed no more than twenty minutes of intellectual exertion a day. Believing that intellectual activity would overwhelm the fragile female mind, "rest cure" refers to the prevention of women from thinking, relying on the assumption that the natural state of the female mind was one of emptiness. Seeing as how the women were confined to empty rooms with no exercise or stimulation of any kind, the obvious consequence was that the women became still more anxious, which reinforced the convictions of the doctors and husbands that their wives needed further rest.

The "rest cure" was prescribed most commonly to women who had recently given birth. Suffering from what we now know is post-partem depression (caused by hormonal fluctuations of serotonin that result from the female body adjusting to not having a fetus to delivering hormones to), women were locked up and kept from seeing their newly born children.

Gilman's book, therefore, is not only an American literary classic, but it also provides insight into America's social history; a history which will not be forgotten as long as people continue to carefully read this psychologically wrought story.

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