



Reader-Response Analysis of “The Yellow Wallpaper”

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Isaiah Young emphasizes the importance of the reader’s experience in Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s landmark short story “The Yellow Wallpaper,” stressing how the story forces readers to make an ethical choice between believing the story’s narrator or dismissing her pronouncements as the ramblings of an insane woman. This essay was written for Writing II with Dr. Ben Wetherbee.

“**T**HE YELLOW WALLPAPER” by Charlotte Perkins Gilman is about a woman who is suffering from what seems to be some sort of hallucinogenic mental condition, though there are myriad elements throughout the work that hint at a larger message than the one simply written down. If one were to analyze this story from a limited, formalist point of view, they would miss the message of censorship and dismissal that Gilman is trying to communicate. Of course, as far as critiquing the finesse with which this story is written, the author’s effective use of symbolism and imagery are worthy of praise. However, this story is so much more than its literary style, since all the literary and rhetorical elements that were used are put in place deliberately to communicate an underlying theme that is not directly present within the text. The

text is a vessel for transmitting this message about the feminine experience at the time, and it was written in order to incite a response from its audience. Ergo, a reader-response analysis of this work proves more practical and effective.

To better understand what this story is trying to say, one must take a look at the intentional contradictions that are present within the text. Towards the beginning, the main character, Jane, who is writing to herself in a diary, claims that she personally disagrees with the ideas of her husband and his brother. They claim that she mustn't dwell on thoughts about her condition and that she must stay inside and abide by the medical regulations that they have in place if she desires to get better. She believes that "congenial work, with excitement and change" would do her good (80). But within the time span of a sentence, something interesting happens: she dismisses herself, saying, "but what is one to do?" This is the first time that the story's implicit message becomes apparent. During the 1890s when "The Yellow Wallpaper" was published, women's opinions and concerns were subjugated to those of their male counterparts, and that was the default practice of society. The speed and nonchalance with which Jane dismisses her intuition seems to hint at the way society's beliefs have seeped into the subconscious of the people, causing it to seem almost second nature to just trust what a man says, even his ideas are less than factual. She does this again two weeks later, when she is trying to ask John, her husband, if they could change the wallpaper because its grotesque appearance is eating away at her sanity. He says that it would be unwise to renovate the house for a three month's rental, and, in response, she asks him if she can go downstairs instead. He proceeds to flirtatiously distract her from her concerns, and she ends up saying that John is "right enough about the beds and windows and things" and moves back to her room (82). It becomes apparent to the reader that repeated instances such as these are in place to illustrate the ordinary and microaggressive nature of men placing their influence over women at the time.

In contrast with the more realistic and relatable aspects of Jane's mind are her hallucinations and apparent misconceptions. She believes that she is in a normal house, when it seems that she is in some sort of mental facility, as evidenced by the bars on the windows, her bed being nailed down, and the scheduled medical visitations. One might go as far as to suggest that her entire perception of the setting is fabricated, and she is in fact in a hospital and John is simply a doctor that she has imagined a relationship with. She believes that there is a woman in the walls and a great deal of other, very eerie occurrences that center on the anathema of the atrocious wallpaper in her room. One must be reminded of the fact that she is writing these things in a diary, with no intention of anyone reading this. (In fact, we have reason to believe that the only reason we are aware of Jane's experience is because a nosy passerby picked up her writings.) Since we are her unintended audience, it is logical to conclude that Jane is writing all of this with conviction; she has no need to entertain since she is honestly charting her experience within this maddening room. So, with this in mind, a question can be posed: Is this story's message delivered more efficiently if we, as her unintended audience, accept that the things that she says are true, or are we supposed to dismiss her work as the ramblings of a mentally ill patient? One could even argue that this very dilemma is the exact commentary that Gilman was trying to show in writing the story. Women's ideas and beliefs and opinions were being dismissed, and Gilman's audience is forced to make the decision between improving or treating Jane just as society treated the women that she was a stand-in for in the real world.

Had one taken this story at face value and only analyzed the way that Gilman wrote and constructed her story, they would miss the point entirely. This story has too much to say for one to muzzle it by simply looking at its use of formalist literary devices. "The Yellow Wallpaper," when approached through the lens of a reader-response critic, becomes a morbid commentary on society and its treatment of women. ►►

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GILMAN, CHARLOTTE PERKINS. "The Yellow Wallpaper." 1892. *Reading and Writing about Literature: A Portable Guide*, by Janet E. Gardner and Joanne Diaz, 4th edition, Bedford/St. Martin's, 2017, pp. 79-92.