

The Yellow Wallpaper

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Plot Overview

The narrator begins her journal by marveling at the grandeur of the house and grounds her husband has taken for their summer vacation. She describes it in romantic terms as an aristocratic estate or even a haunted house and wonders how they were able to afford it, and why the house had been empty for so long. Her feeling that there is “something queer” about the situation leads her into a discussion of her illness—she is suffering from “nervous depression”—and of her marriage. She complains that her husband [John](#), who is also her doctor, belittles both her illness and her thoughts and concerns in general. She contrasts his practical, rationalistic manner with her own imaginative, sensitive ways. Her treatment requires that she do almost nothing active, and she is especially forbidden from working and writing. She feels that activity, freedom, and interesting work would help her condition and reveals that she has begun her secret journal in order to “relieve her mind.” In an attempt to do so, the narrator begins describing the house. Her description is mostly positive, but disturbing elements such as the “rings and things” in the bedroom walls, and the bars on the windows, keep showing up. She is particularly disturbed by the yellow wallpaper in the bedroom, with its strange, formless pattern, and describes it as “revolting.” Soon, however, her thoughts are interrupted by John’s approach, and she is forced to stop writing.

As the first few weeks of the summer pass, the narrator becomes good at hiding her journal, and thus hiding her true thoughts from John. She continues to long for more stimulating company and activity, and she complains again about John’s patronizing, controlling ways—although she immediately returns to the wallpaper, which begins to seem not only ugly, but oddly menacing. She mentions that John is worried about her becoming fixated on it, and that he has even refused to repaper the room so as not to give in to her neurotic worries. The narrator’s imagination, however, has been aroused. She mentions that she enjoys picturing people on the walkways around the house and that John always discourages such fantasies. She also thinks back to her childhood, when she was able to work herself into a terror by imagining things in the dark. As she describes the bedroom, which she says must have been a nursery for young children, she points out that the paper is torn off the wall in spots, there are scratches and gouges in the floor, and the furniture is heavy and fixed in place. Just as she

begins to see a strange sub-pattern behind the main design of the wallpaper, her writing is interrupted again, this time by John's sister, Jennie, who is acting as housekeeper and nurse for the narrator.

As the Fourth of July passes, the narrator reports that her family has just visited, leaving her more tired than ever. John threatens to send her to Weir Mitchell, the real-life physician under whose care Gilman had a nervous breakdown. The narrator is alone most of the time and says that she has become almost fond of the wallpaper and that attempting to figure out its pattern has become her primary entertainment. As her obsession grows, the sub-pattern of the wallpaper becomes clearer. It begins to resemble a woman "stooping down and creeping" behind the main pattern, which looks like the bars of a cage. Whenever the narrator tries to discuss leaving the house, John makes light of her concerns, effectively silencing her. Each time he does so, her disgusted fascination with the paper grows.

Soon the wallpaper dominates the narrator's imagination. She becomes possessive and secretive, hiding her interest in the paper and making sure no one else examines it so that she can "find it out" on her own. At one point, she startles Jennie, who had been touching the wallpaper and who mentions that she had found yellow stains on their clothes. Mistaking the narrator's fixation for tranquility, John thinks she is improving. But she sleeps less and less and is convinced that she can smell the paper all over the house, even outside. She discovers a strange smudge mark on the paper, running all around the room, as if it had been rubbed by someone crawling against the wall.

The sub-pattern now clearly resembles a woman who is trying to get out from behind the main pattern. The narrator sees her shaking the bars at night and creeping around during the day, when the woman is able to escape briefly. The narrator mentions that she, too, creeps around at times. She suspects that John and Jennie are aware of her obsession, and she resolves to destroy the paper once and for all, peeling much of it off during the night. The next day she manages to be alone and goes into something of a frenzy, biting and tearing at the paper in order to free the trapped woman, whom she sees struggling from inside the pattern.

By the end, the narrator is hopelessly insane, convinced that there are many creeping women around and that she herself has come out of the wallpaper—that she herself is the trapped woman. She creeps endlessly around the room, smudging the wallpaper as she goes. When

John breaks into the locked room and sees the full horror of the situation, he faints in the doorway, so that the narrator has "to creep over him every time!"