

the yellow wallpaper character analysis

The Yellow Wallpaper is a short story written by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, first published in 1892. It is a seminal piece of feminist literature that explores the themes of mental illness, gender roles, and the oppression of women in the late 19th century. The story is narrated by an unnamed woman who is confined to a room by her physician husband, John, for the sake of her mental health. As she spends time in this room, she becomes increasingly obsessed with the yellow wallpaper that adorns its walls. This article will provide a detailed character analysis of the protagonist, her husband, and the implications of their interactions, while also exploring the symbolism and themes present in the story.

Character Overview

The characters in "The Yellow Wallpaper" are intricately constructed, reflecting the societal norms and psychological struggles of the time. The primary characters include:

1. The Narrator: An unnamed woman suffering from what is likely postpartum depression.
2. John: The narrator's husband and physician.
3. Jennie: John's sister, who helps care for the narrator.

Each character plays a significant role in the development of the story, particularly in illustrating the impact of societal expectations on women's mental health.

The Narrator

Background and Mental State

The narrator's mental state is the focal point of the story. Initially, she is portrayed as a sensitive and intelligent woman, but her mental health deteriorates throughout the narrative. The narrator's condition is exacerbated by her forced isolation and the condescending treatment from her husband. She is a victim of the "rest cure," a popular treatment during the 19th century that prescribed complete rest and avoidance of any form of mental stimulation.

- Isolation: The narrator is confined to a room with barred windows and a

bolted door, symbolizing her imprisonment. Her isolation contributes to her growing obsession with the wallpaper.

- Identity Crisis: As her mental health declines, she loses her sense of self. The wallpaper becomes a projection of her inner turmoil.

Symbolism of the Wallpaper

The yellow wallpaper itself is a powerful symbol of the narrator's entrapment. Its chaotic patterns reflect her mental state and her struggle against the constraints placed upon her by society.

- The Pattern: The intricate and confusing design of the wallpaper represents the complexity of the narrator's thoughts and emotions. It reflects her descent into madness as she tries to decipher its meaning.

- The Woman Behind the Wallpaper: As the narrator becomes increasingly obsessed with the wallpaper, she discovers a figure trapped within it. This figure symbolizes her own feelings of entrapment and longing for freedom.

Transformation and Rebellion

Throughout the story, the narrator undergoes a transformation from a passive individual to an active agent in her own life. As she begins to identify with the woman trapped in the wallpaper, she becomes determined to free her.

- Climactic Moment: The climax occurs when the narrator tears down the wallpaper in an attempt to liberate the woman she believes is imprisoned within. This act of rebellion signifies her breaking free from the oppressive constraints of her marriage and societal expectations.

- Final Breakdown: However, this act also leads to her complete psychological breakdown. The narrator's identity becomes so intertwined with the woman in the wallpaper that she ultimately believes she has become her.

John: The Oppressive Husband

Character Traits and Role

John, the narrator's husband, is a representation of the patriarchal society of the time. As a physician, he embodies the medical and societal norms that dictate how women's mental health should be treated.

- Patronizing Attitude: John's condescending demeanor is evident in his treatment of the narrator. He often dismisses her feelings, believing that he knows what is best for her. This patronizing attitude further isolates her

and exacerbates her mental decline.

- Symbol of Patriarchy: John represents the male-dominated medical establishment that views women as fragile and incapable of understanding their own needs.

Conflict and Relationship Dynamics

The relationship between John and the narrator is fraught with conflict, primarily rooted in their differing perceptions of her mental health.

- Miscommunication: John fails to recognize the narrator's genuine distress and insists on controlling every aspect of her life, including her creative expression. This miscommunication serves to deepen her isolation.
- Control vs. Freedom: John's attempts to control the narrator's environment and experiences ultimately lead to her rebellion. His desire to protect her ironically becomes a means of her oppression.

Jennie: The Caregiver

Role in the Household

Jennie, John's sister, serves as a secondary character who reflects the societal norms of the time. She represents the traditional female role of caregiver and reinforces the patriarchal structure.

- Complicity: While Jennie is more sympathetic than John, she still embodies the societal expectations placed upon women. She accepts her role as caretaker without question, reflecting the limited options available to women in her position.
- Contrast to the Narrator: Jennie's practical nature contrasts sharply with the narrator's increasingly erratic behavior. This contrast highlights the narrator's unique struggle and the societal pressure to conform.

Symbol of Conformity

Jennie symbolizes the women who conform to societal norms and accept their roles without question. Her acceptance of her position serves to underscore the narrator's rebellion.

- Lack of Awareness: Jennie is largely oblivious to the narrator's mental struggles. Her focus on domestic duties prevents her from seeing the deeper issues at play.
- Reflection of Choices: By contrasting the narrator's plight with Jennie's

compliance, the story illustrates the limited choices available to women, forcing the reader to question the implications of such societal expectations.

Thematic Implications

The character dynamics in "The Yellow Wallpaper" are deeply intertwined with the story's overarching themes, including mental illness, gender oppression, and the quest for identity.

Mental Illness and Misunderstanding

The story illustrates how mental illness was misunderstood and mistreated, particularly in women. The narrator's descent into madness is exacerbated by her isolation and lack of understanding from those around her.

- **Diagnosis and Treatment:** The "rest cure" reflects the inadequate treatment options available for women's mental health, showcasing the dangers of dismissing their experiences.
- **Isolation:** The psychological impact of isolation becomes a central theme, emphasizing the need for understanding and support rather than confinement.

Gender Roles and Oppression

The story serves as a critique of the gender roles prevalent in the late 19th century. Women's identities were often defined by their relationships to men, and their autonomy was stifled by societal expectations.

- **Patriarchal Control:** John's treatment of the narrator exemplifies the broader societal control exerted over women during this period.
- **Quest for Freedom:** The narrator's ultimate act of rebellion highlights the struggle for autonomy and self-expression, resonating with feminist themes of self-identification.

The Search for Identity

The narrator's journey reflects a broader search for identity in a world that seeks to define and confine her.

- **Self-Discovery:** The story emphasizes the importance of self-discovery and the dangers of losing oneself to societal expectations.
- **Empowerment through Rebellion:** The narrator's rebellion, despite its tragic outcome, symbolizes the struggle for empowerment and the assertion of one's

identity against oppressive forces.

Conclusion

"The Yellow Wallpaper" presents a complex character analysis that sheds light on the struggles faced by women in the 19th century. Through the depiction of the narrator, John, and Jennie, Charlotte Perkins Gilman crafts a narrative that critiques societal norms and highlights the importance of understanding mental health. The characters' interactions serve as a microcosm of the broader themes of oppression, identity, and the quest for freedom, making the story a powerful exploration of the human condition. Ultimately, the tale remains relevant today, reminding readers of the ongoing struggles for autonomy and understanding in the face of societal constraints.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the significance of the narrator's descent into madness in 'The Yellow Wallpaper'?

The narrator's descent into madness symbolizes the oppressive nature of societal norms regarding women's mental health in the 19th century. It highlights the consequences of isolation and lack of autonomy, ultimately critiquing the treatment of women.

How does the character of John represent patriarchal authority in 'The Yellow Wallpaper'?

John, the narrator's husband, embodies patriarchal authority as he dismisses her feelings and opinions, enforcing the 'rest cure' that leads to her deterioration. His controlling behavior reflects the broader societal attitudes toward women's health and autonomy.

In what ways does the yellow wallpaper itself serve as a character in the story?

The yellow wallpaper acts as a character by reflecting the narrator's mental state. Its changing patterns symbolize her growing obsession and the struggle for self-identity, ultimately becoming a manifestation of her repressed desires and creativity.

What role does isolation play in the development of the narrator's character?

Isolation intensifies the narrator's mental decline, as she is cut off from

social interaction and intellectual stimulation. This enforced solitude exacerbates her feelings of entrapment and fuels her obsession with the wallpaper, illustrating the detrimental effects of isolation on mental health.

How does the narrator's relationship with her child influence her character in 'The Yellow Wallpaper'?

The narrator's relationship with her child adds to her feelings of inadequacy and guilt. Her inability to care for her child while grappling with her own mental health issues highlights her internal conflict and deepens her sense of loss and isolation.

What does the climax of the story reveal about the narrator's character transformation?

The climax, where the narrator tears down the wallpaper, reveals her complete break from reality and her assertion of identity. This act symbolizes her rebellion against the constraints imposed on her, showcasing her transformation from a passive figure to one who claims her own agency.

How does the ending of 'The Yellow Wallpaper' reflect the narrator's final state of mind?

The ending reflects the narrator's complete identification with the woman she perceives in the wallpaper, signifying her total descent into madness. It underscores the tragic outcome of her struggle against oppression and the ultimate loss of her sanity as a result of societal constraints.

[The Yellow Wallpaper Character Analysis](#)

The Yellow Wallpaper Character Analysis

Related Articles

- [traditional stories from around the world](#)
- [this is what happy looks like jennifer e smith](#)
- [tms therapy ruined my life](#)

[Back to Home](#)