





Jan Steen's The Lovesick Maiden (c. 1660-1665)

Historical Context

In the 17th century, women's illnesses were often explained by the wandering womb theory. Symptoms like fainting, sadness, or nervousness were linked to the womb's "restlessness." The cure was thought to be marriage, sex, and childbearing. Painters of the Dutch Golden Age often included moral lessons and humor in their works, using symbols to comment on human weakness.

The Artist: Jan Steen (1626-1679)

Steen was a Dutch painter known for lively, humorous domestic scenes. He produced more than 800 works, many filled with symbolism. Steen often used everyday life to tell stories about love, folly, and morality.

Themes and Motifs in the Painting

A young woman reclines as a doctor checks her pulse. She appears weak and lovesick, while the men stand strong and in control. Around her are symbols that point to desire, the womb, and her supposed "cure":

- Cupid statue - love and desire.
- Foot warmer with coals - heat in the womb, linked to lovesickness.
- Urine flask - her body is being tested and judged.
- The woman's cleavage - emphasizes her sexuality and physicality.
- The bed in the background - hints at the "remedy": marital sex and reproduction.
- The men's postures - active, authoritative, in contrast to the woman's passivity.
- Mating dogs (background) - blunt symbol of sexual activity, reinforcing the diagnosis.
- Sleeping dog (foreground) - symbol of loyalty and faithfulness; contrasts ironically with the erotic cues, suggesting the tension between ideal domestic life and unruly desire.

Connection to The Yellow Wallpaper

Like Steen's maiden, the narrator in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892):

- Is treated as fragile and mysterious, her illness tied to her body.
- Is observed and controlled by a man (husband/doctor).
- Becomes passive, while men claim expertise.

Both works show how women were made into objects to be studied rather than voices to be heard.

Big Idea

The Lovesick Maiden uses humor and symbolism to reflect cultural beliefs about women: that their health, emotions, and very identities were ruled by their wombs. When paired with "The Yellow Wallpaper," the long history becomes clear—women were often treated as mysteries to be solved, not people to be understood.

André Brouillet's A Clinical Lesson at the Salpêtrière (1887)

Historical Context

By the late 19th century, the ancient idea of the wandering womb had faded, but its legacy lived on in the diagnosis of hysteria. At the Salpêtrière Hospital in Paris, neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot became famous for studying women diagnosed with hysteria. His lectures drew crowds of medical students, writers, and even artists. Hysteria was still seen as largely a female condition, tied to weakness, emotions, and the body rather than the mind.

The Artist: André Brouillet (1857-1914)

André Brouillet was a French academic painter, trained in the classical tradition. He is best remembered for *A Clinical Lesson at the Salpêtrière*, which became a famous image of Charcot's teaching. Brouillet's work is less about artistic innovation and more about documentation – presenting science, medicine, and authority through a carefully staged scene.

Themes and Motifs in the Painting

The painting shows Charcot demonstrating a patient's hysterical fit before a room full of male students and doctors. Details show the contrast between female weakness and male authority:

- The hysterical patient – a woman collapses into an assistant's arms, body arched in the dramatic arc-en-cercle pose, a posture Charcot identified as a sign of hysteria.
- Charcot's posture – he gestures toward the patient like a lecturer presenting evidence, calm and in control.
- The audience – rows of serious male students and doctors watch intently, treating the woman as an object of study.
- The setting – the lecture hall resembles a theater, turning illness into a spectacle.
- The patient's passivity – she is silent, her body "speaks" for her, while the men interpret her condition.

Connection to The Yellow Wallpaper

Like Brouillet's patient, Gilman's narrator is:

- Observed rather than heard – her body is monitored, while her own words are dismissed.
- Defined by weakness – faintness, nervousness, and fragility are emphasized.
- Controlled by medical authority – in the painting by Charcot and his students, in the story by her husband.

Both works show how women's suffering was framed as a public lesson, not a private voice.

Big Idea

The *Clinical Lesson at the Salpêtrière* captures how medicine turned women's illness into theater. The patient's body becomes a stage on which male authority performs. Placed beside *The Lovesick Maiden* and *The Yellow Wallpaper*, the message is consistent: women's minds and bodies were treated as mysteries to be solved, diagnosed, and displayed – but rarely believed.