

"The Yellow Wallpaper" by Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1892)

Adapted for English Language Learners—Easier Version (B1)

Introduction

"The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892) is a famous American short story by Charlotte Perkins Gilman. It is written as a secret diary. A woman has recently had a baby. Her husband, John, is a doctor. He says she has "nervous depression," similar to postpartum depression (after childbirth). He takes her to a big country house for the summer so that she can rest.

The woman is confined to a room with strange yellow wallpaper. Over time, she becomes uneasy about the wallpaper. She begins to believe a woman is trapped behind it.

Diary Entry 1

John rented a large, old house in the country for us this summer. It is beautiful and cheap, but I feel uneasy about why it has been empty for years. John laughs when I say the house feels creepy.

John is very practical. He is a doctor and believes I simply need rest to heal my mind. My brother, also a doctor, agrees. I must take medicine, breathe fresh air, and not work or write, they say. I tell them I think interesting work would help me, but they won't allow it. I sometimes write in secret, but hiding it from John makes me tense.

When we arrived, I chose a charming bedroom downstairs for myself. It had a plush rug and cheerful floral curtains. However, John insisted that I needed more sunlight, so he moved me upstairs. The room I am in now used to be a nursery. The windows have bars. The walls are covered in bright, ugly yellow wallpaper with a messy pattern. The paper is torn and dirty. I hear John coming. I must hide this diary.

Diary Entry 2

We have been here two weeks. John is away all day and many nights visiting patients. When I try to talk to him about my condition, he holds me like a baby and tells me my problem is "not serious." To me, it is serious. My mind feels heavy and dull. I am sad all the time. I cannot sleep at night. I have no appetite. I feel angry, and then I feel guilty for feeling angry. I want to be thankful for all John does for me—I really do—but I feel resentful.

I hate the wallpaper more and more each day. At first, John said we could replace it, but then he changed his mind. He said I must learn not to let "small things" bother me.

Right now I see a shape behind the pattern. I am sure someone is hiding there.

Diary Entry 3

The Fourth of July has come and gone. Several family members visited us. John's sister, Jennie, stayed to help take care of the house. I suspect that she is also here to take care of me.

John makes a schedule for me. He warns me that if I don't improve, he will send me to Dr. Weir Mitchell in the fall. A friend told me Dr. Mitchell is even more strict than John.

I sob when I am alone. During the day, I rest, walk in the garden, and study the wallpaper. The design repeats but makes no sense. It looks like staring eyes. Sometimes it looks like a woman crawling behind the pattern. When I asked John if I could visit my cousins, he told me to use willpower and stop these ideas. Every day I see the same shape more clearly—a woman behind the pattern.

Diary Entry 4

It is hard to talk to John because he loves me and thinks he knows best. I told him I am not getting better and asked to go home. He refused. The lease has three weeks left, and he says he cannot leave now because his patients need him. He insists I am improving.

The wallpaper changes with the light. In the day, the woman is quiet. At night, she moves. Sometimes John and Jennie glance at the wallpaper when they think I'm not looking. Do they see the woman too? I wonder.

Diary Entry 5

I think I am better, but I do not sleep at night. I watch the wallpaper. It now has a strong odor that clings to my hair and clothes, and it follows me around the house.

I made an important discovery today: the front pattern looks like bars. The woman behind the paper seems to be trying to free herself. Sometimes there seem to be many women, and sometimes only one. In bright places, the woman stays still; in shadows, she grips the bars and rattles them. I think she escapes in the daytime. I have seen her crawling outside and hiding when people pass by. I lock my door when I crawl during the day so no one sees me.

Diary Entry 6

Today is the last day. John will be away until evening. Jennie wanted to sleep in my room so she could watch over me, but I told her I need to rest alone.

When the moon rose tonight, the woman began crawling and shaking the pattern again. I helped her. We pulled off the wallpaper together. By morning, much of the paper was gone. I told Jennie I did it because I hated it. She did not seem to mind.

I locked the door and threw the key outside. I wish I could throw the bed out, too, but it is bolted to the floor. I have pulled down all the paper I can reach. I have never felt more alive. I think all the women who creep and crawl and escape from the wallpaper feel like this. I am proud to be one of them. I feel safe here.

John is home now. He rattles the doorknob. I tell him the key is under a leaf by the front steps. He gets it, unlocks the door, enters the room, and then stops. Staring first at the walls and then at me as I crawl around the room, he cries, "What are you doing?"

"I got out at last!" I scream. "I pulled off the paper so you can't put me back."

John faints at my feet. This annoys me because I must now creep over him each time I circle the room.