

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

Adapted for English Language Learners—Advanced Version (B2+)

Introduction

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892) is a landmark short story written as a secret diary. It critiques the 19th-century "rest cure" for postpartum or "nervous" depression—an approach that enforced idleness, no writing, and minimal mental stimulation.

Sent by her husband to recover in an old country house, the narrator is confined to a former nursery with lurid yellow wallpaper. Her uneasy interest in the pattern becomes an obsession. She comes to believe a woman is trapped behind the wallpaper and grows desperate to free her—and, in doing so, to free herself.

Diary Entry 1

We've leased a grand old country mansion for the summer at a surprisingly reasonable rate. It has been vacant for a long time, which leaves me with a persistent sense of unease. I worry that there is something wrong with it. Why else would the former tenants have moved away? My husband, John, teases me for having an active imagination and laughs at my sense that something is "off."

John is intensely practical and analytical—a physician who trusts only what he can verify. He and my brother, also a physician, insist I suffer merely from "nervous depression." They have prescribed a strict regimen of rest. I'm to take medicine, breathe fresh air, and avoid work or writing. I believe purposeful work would help me recover, but I defer to John. For this reason I must write in secret. Defying John's orders leaves me agitated, but I feel as though I will die if my words remain locked in my mind.

Upon arriving, I selected a charming downstairs bedroom for myself. A solid mahogany bed rested on a plush crimson rug. Cheerful floral curtains framed a quaint window from which I could gaze upon a meadow blanketed in wildflowers. The walls were papered in tasteful pastel hues that swirled in delicate, predictable motifs. In short, the room was peaceful and homey. I liked it. John, however, did not. He insisted that I needed more sunlight, so he promptly whisked me upstairs to a room that had been a nursery and, later, a playroom. Here, the bed is bolted to the floor, and the windows are barred. But the walls are the worst feature. They are covered in lurid yellow paper that is torn in places, no doubt long ago by little fingers. The design is chaotic and imbalanced. It makes me almost nauseous to study it.

I must cease writing. John is coming, and I must hide these words under my mattress.

Diary Entry 2

We have been here two weeks, but it feels like two years. John is away most days and some nights, attending to his patients. When I try to discuss my condition, he gathers me into his arms like an infant and whispers that my problem is "not serious." To me, it is. My mind feels heavy and dull. I am sad all the time. I cannot sleep at night. My appetite is gone. Anger flares—then guilt follows. I want to be grateful for all John does—truly I do—but instead I feel resentful. He calls my case "mild," yet the fatigue and low mood are crushing. Gratitude is expected; resentment remains.

My hostility toward the wallpaper intensifies. John had agreed to replace it but later refused, saying I mustn't let trifles rule me. Lately I notice a secondary silhouette behind the main design—as if someone were lurking there.

Diary Entry 3

The Fourth of July has come and gone. Family visited us. Jennie, John's sister, stayed behind to oversee the house. I suspect that she is also here to oversee me.

John warns that if I don't improve, he'll send me to Dr. Weir Mitchell; a friend found him even more rigid. I cry in private and scrutinize the wallpaper for hours. The pattern repeats yet refuses logic—like rows of watchful eyes. At times it resolves into a figure: a woman, hunched over, crawling behind the design. When I proposed visiting our cousins, John gathered me close and told me to dismiss my "foolish" notions.

The shadowy shape appears clearer each day—the same restless woman, crawling in the moonlight.

Diary Entry 4

Speaking plainly to John is difficult; he adores me and is certain he knows best. I said I'm not improving and begged to go home. He refused: the lease has three weeks left, and his patients need him. He insists I'm better, whether I feel it or not.

There is one feature only I seem to notice: the wallpaper shifts with the light. By day, the woman is quiet; by night, she stirs. The outer pattern of the paper forms bars, and the woman rattles them. Sometimes I catch John or Jennie staring at the wall when they think I'm not looking. Do they see the woman too? I wonder.

Diary Entry 5

I declare I'm better—though I hardly sleep. The wallpaper now has a penetrating odor that clings to my hair, saturates my clothes, and stalks me from room to room.

I've made a discovery: the front design moves because the woman behind it shakes it. Sometimes there seem to be many women; then just one, swiftly crawling. In bright spots she is still; in shadow she grips the bars and strains to get through, as if the pattern were strangling her. I think she escapes by day—I've seen her outside, creeping along the lanes, hiding when anyone approaches. I lock my door when I crawl during the day. I do not think John or Jennie would approve.

Diary Entry 6

The final day. John stays in town tonight. Jennie offered to sleep here; I told her I needed rest.

At sunset, the poor woman began to rattle the bars. I rose to assist her. Together, we tore at the paper, and by dawn long strips hung loose, like skin on a corpse. When Jennie saw, I confessed I did it because I detested it. She only laughed.

Now the room is almost bare. The bed—bolted to the floor—will not move. I've locked the door and tossed the key into the garden. I've peeled every reachable scrap from the walls. I clawed away the countless heads and eyes in the pattern that once mocked me. I now enjoy the last laugh. A host of creeping women join me in my room. I wonder if they all come from wallpaper like this. I am out now—safe—though I must keep to the room.

John is at the door, calling, then crying for an axe. I tell him gently that the key lies under a leaf by the front steps. He enters and stops, stunned to find me on my hands and knees, crawling around the room. "What are you doing?" he cries.

"I've got out at last," I say, "in spite of you. I've pulled off the paper so you can't put me back!"

He faints, right in my path, but I am undeterred. I simply creep over him each time I circle the room.