

UNIT III: AMERICAN GOTHIC

Lesson 3: The Yellow Wallpaper

This week, we're going to be considering Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story "The Yellow Wallpaper." As you read, think about the big questions we've established for this unit:

- ★ What are the characteristics of American Gothic literature?
- ★ How are they represented in this text?
- ★ How might this text subvert the characteristics and conventions of Gothic literature?

❑ Read and annotate "The Yellow Wallpaper."

For this first reading, focus on:

- What happens? What is the plot of the story?
- What is your emotional response to the story? How do you feel as you're reading? Are there any places that seem to elicit a strong emotional reaction?
- How is *your* understanding of the story (as the reader) different from *the protagonist's* understanding of the story she is telling?
- What is the titular "yellow wallpaper?"

❑ Listen to Lecture 3.3: The Yellow Wallpaper.

- Take notes in your literature notebook.

○ **Reread the story**, considering the following questions: *(Remember to pull specific words and details from the text to support your answers — these are fact-based comprehension questions, so while there might not be one right answer, there are definitely answers that are supported by the text. You don't need to write out the answers to these questions unless you want to..)*

- Where are the narrator and her husband spending the summer? What is the narrator's reaction to their summer home? Does she feel comfortable there?
- What is John like? How does his job affect his relationship with the narrator? How does the narrator see him?

VOCABULARY CHECK

These words appear in the text, and a clear, specific understanding of their meanings may help you read more thoughtfully.

- felicity
- hysterical
- congenial
- sly
- stimulus
- base
- galore
- flamboyant
- repellent
- lurid
- whim
- gnarly
- vicious
- loll
- ravage
- peculiarity
- skulking
- subtle
- gouge
- misconstrue

- At the beginning of the story, what is the character of the narrator like? (Hint: Look for the places where she says some version of the phrase “*what can one do?*”)
- Describe the wallpaper in the bedroom based on the narrator’s initial description of it. How does she react to it?
- Who is Jennie? What is her relationship to the narrator? What role does she play in the story?
- By the Fourth of July, what does the narrator admit about the wallpaper? What clues can we find about the narrator’s personal life and emotional state? What effect does the summer seem to be having on her ability to think and communicate?
- How does the narrator try to reach out to John? What is his reaction?
- The point of view shifts from first to second person for a moment as the narrator describes the wallpaper. When does this happen? What is its effect? How might it connect to the narrator’s description of the effect light has on the wallpaper?
- Who does the narrator see in the wallpaper? How do the narrator’s perceptions of John and Jennie change over the course of the story of the story? What are the assumptions that underlie these changes? What are the implications of these changes?
- Near the end of the story, the narrator’s mood abruptly switches from boredom and frustration to excitement. To what does she attribute this shift?
- By the final section of the story, what is the narrator’s relationship to her husband?

TERMS YOU SHOULD KNOW

irony

In literature, irony occurs whenever the way things SEEM is different from the way they really ARE. There are three kinds of irony, and we can find all three of them in “The Yellow Wallpaper.”

VERBAL IRONY

*When what you say isn’t what you mean, you’re using **verbal irony**. (If you’ve ever said, “Oh, great” when you spilled your coffee all over yourself, congratulations! You’ve used verbal irony.)*

“John laughs at me, of course, but one expects that in marriage.”

Does the narrator really mean that? Of course not! We’d definitely expect our partner not to laugh at our serious feelings in a healthy marriage.

“I am glad my case is not serious.”

The narrator is saying this, but she’s clearly concerned that her case really IS serious.

SITUATIONAL IRONY

If events turn out in a way that is pretty much the opposite of what you would expect – say, if a fire station burns down – you’ve probably got situational irony on your hands.

The narrator’s “cure” is making her sick.

All of the isolation and rest is supposed to help the narrator “get over” what seems to be a case of postpartum depression, but the loneliness and forced indolence is actually increasing her depression.

John is a doctor, who is making his wife sicker.

It’s especially ironic that John is a doctor who can’t treat his own wife.

DRAMATIC IRONY

Dramatic irony is when we, the readers, know something that the characters in a text don’t know.

The “nursery” is just as likely to have been a room for an insane person.

It’s obvious to us that the “rings and things,” the barred windows, the nailed-down furniture are just as appropriate – maybe more appropriate – for keeping an insane person safe as for keeping a baby safe.

The narrator doesn’t know she’s losing her sense of reality.

But we do know, way before she starts identifying with her woman in the wallpaper.

Irony is a cool term to be able to use correctly, but the real point of literary devices like this is to help us read more thoughtfully. So identifying irony is just the first step — the second step, and the one that can take you to some really interesting places, is to be able to understand the effect of irony in a given text. Irony always clues you in that there's more to a text than what's happening on the surface — someone is missing something, and you don't want that someone to be you.

- What is the significance of the woman behind the yellow wallpaper? What does the ending of the story suggest about the woman behind the wallpaper? How are this woman and the wallpaper itself symbolic?

○ **Notice the structure.** “The Yellow Wallpaper” is divided into six short sections with breaks between them.

- Can you identify a change in the narrator's physical/emotional state at the beginning of each section and the end of that section? What is the change?
- Consider each section as its own individual story. Does each section have its own plot (with beginning, middle, and end), or are they set up in a different way? What is the purpose of each section in telling this particular story?
- What is happening with the yellow wallpaper in each section? How does that connect to what's happening with the narrator in each section?

- **Reread “The Yellow Wallpaper”** for a third time. This time, you know the story — you know what happens. You know how it is set up to move from one section to the next. It's time, now, to think about what all this could mean, to dive into the different ways we could read this text and the different meanings we could put together and take apart using our understanding of “The Yellow Wallpaper.” One of these questions might spark your interest:

🔗 Sometimes critics call “The Yellow Wallpaper” feminist Gothic. What do you think this term might mean? What distinguishes a feminist Gothic from American Gothic literature in general? You may find it helpful to contrast “The Yellow Wallpaper” and “The Black Cat” in considering your answer.

🔗 One thing to consider is the voice of the story: You've got the (increasingly unreliable) narrator, but you've also got the author behind the story, kind of like the woman in the wallpaper, shaping our experience of the story in a specific way. We know Gilman was worried about how “rest cures” to treat women with postpartum depression caused deeper psychological problems for many of these women, and she's totally upfront about the fact that she's writing “The Yellow Wallpaper” as a cautionary tale for doctors. (Gilman even sent a copy to the doctor who prescribed a rest cure to her after the birth of her child, so this is personal.) Knowing this, do you read the story differently? Does Gilman's intention matter?

🔗 What's in a name? Everybody in the story — including the housemaid — gets a name except for the narrator, her child, and the woman in the wallpaper. What do you think this might suggest about identity and personhood in the Victorian world? How does namelessness connect to the story's themes?

🔗 In some ways, “The Yellow Wallpaper” reads like a series of diary entries — we absolutely see the world through the narrator's eyes, and she tells us what to think about her life, her house, her husband, and her herself. What kind of writer is she, and how does she feel about her writing? What connection could her role as a writer have to the way she “reads” the wallpaper in her bedroom?