

## A New Role for Women

# The Yellow Wallpaper

Short Story by Charlotte Perkins Gilman



**READING 2B** Relate the characters of traditional literature to 20th and 21st century American novels, plays, or films. **5A** Evaluate how different literary elements shape the author's portrayal of the setting in works of fiction. **5B** Analyze the internal development of characters through a range of literary devices.

### DID YOU KNOW?

Charlotte Perkins Gilman ...

- moved 19 times in her first 18 years.
- produced eight novels, six nonfiction books, almost 200 short stories, hundreds of poems, and thousands of essays.
- founded and ran her own feminist magazine, the *Forerunner*.

### Meet the Author

## Charlotte Perkins Gilman 1860–1935

As a feminist writer, social activist, public lecturer, editor, and publisher, Charlotte Perkins Gilman rode the wave of reform that washed over the United States in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Her 1898 landmark study, *Women and Economics*—called “the Bible of the woman’s movement” at the time—argued persuasively that women’s economic dependence on men made them veritable slaves in U.S. society. To rectify the inequities, she advocated child-care centers and communal kitchens so that women could earn money outside the home. In addition, her startlingly original story “The Yellow Wallpaper,” published in 1892, discredited a popular treatment for women’s so-called “nervous disorders.” Looking beyond suffrage, Gilman sought to free women from domestic servitude and foster their intellectual and emotional growth.

**Formative Early Years** Gilman got a rather shaky start in life. Her father abandoned the family shortly after her birth in Hartford, Connecticut.

Her mother, possibly in reaction to her dire circumstances, adopted the odd child-rearing habits of withholding affection and forbidding her daughter to read fiction or form close

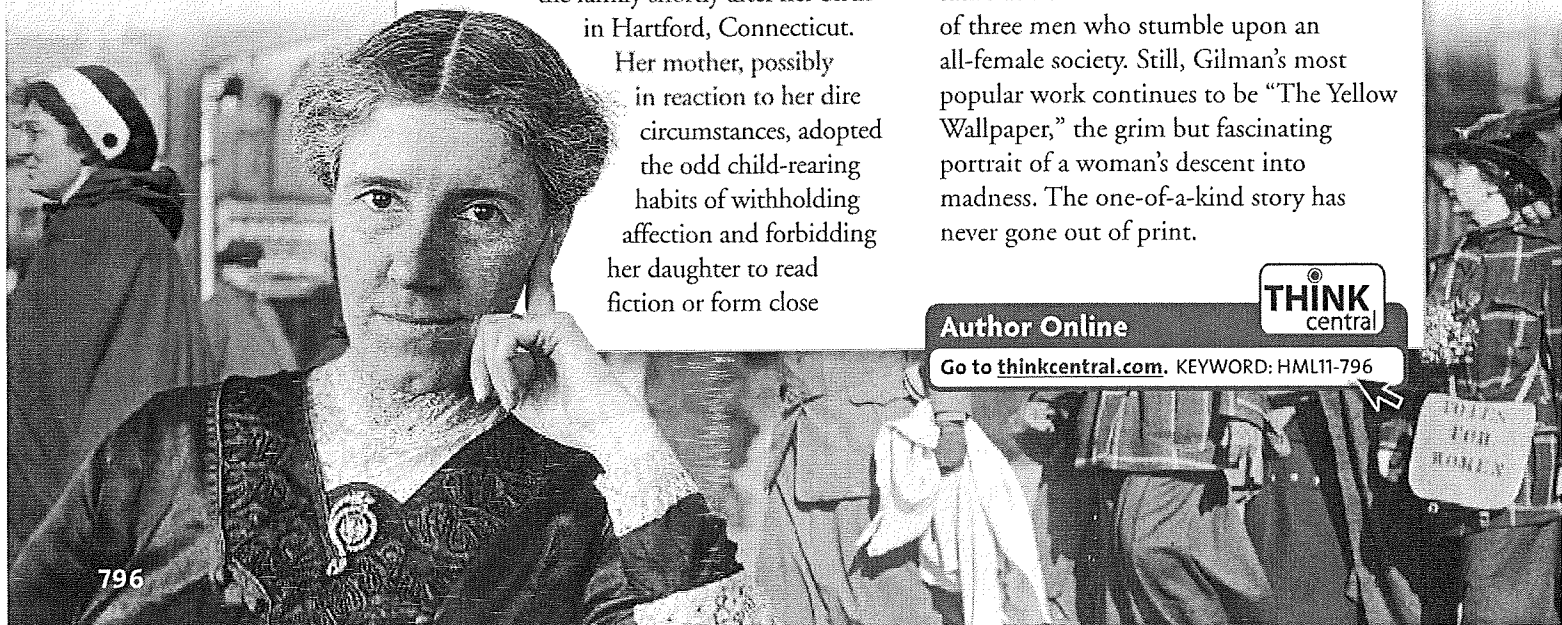
friendships. Fortunately, financial hardship forced the family to live with relatives, the most prominent among them being Harriet Beecher Stowe, the abolitionist author of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, and the feminists Catherine Beecher and Isabella Beecher Hooker. Guided by her strong, successful aunts, young Charlotte grew into a well-adjusted, independent woman.

**Sweetening Reform with Humor** Gilman’s first published work was a volume of poetry, *In This Our World*, which attracted attention for the humorous way she ridiculed social injustice and inequality. *Women and Economics* garnered similar praise despite its frontal assault on conventional marriage. One reviewer praised the “wit and sarcasm” that made Gilman’s “profound social philosophy” such an entertaining read. After publishing several more sociological studies, Gilman returned to writing fiction. *Herland* (1915) is a science-fiction satire about the comic misadventures of three men who stumble upon an all-female society. Still, Gilman’s most popular work continues to be “The Yellow Wallpaper,” the grim but fascinating portrait of a woman’s descent into madness. The one-of-a-kind story has never gone out of print.

Author Online



Go to [thinkcentral.com](http://thinkcentral.com). KEYWORD: HML11-796



## ● LITERARY ANALYSIS: FIRST-PERSON NARRATOR

A story's **narrator**—the character or voice that relates events to the reader—can have a marked effect on how you perceive the events of the story. A **first-person narrator** is a character in the story. “The Yellow Wallpaper” is narrated by an unnamed woman diagnosed with a “nervous condition.” From reading her journal entries, you learn what she is experiencing mentally and emotionally. As you read, analyze her character’s internal development. Ask yourself how she changes and what causes her to change.

## ● READING SKILL: UNDERSTAND SOCIAL CONTEXT

**Social context**, or the social conditions that inspired or influenced the author, serve as the most important part of the **setting** for this story’s narrator. In 1892, when the story was written, women held a very different place in society than they do today. Use your own knowledge, as well as the background on page 796, to analyze the social context of this story. Note what the annotated passages reveal about how women were treated and how they were expected to behave. Consider what Gilman may have thought about these conditions and how they influence her narrator in “The Yellow Wallpaper.”

Story Passages	Notes on Social Context
<i>“John laughs at me, of course, but one expects that in marriage.”</i>	<i>The narrator does not expect that a husband would take his wife’s ideas seriously. At this time, men wielded the power in most American households.</i>

## ▲ VOCABULARY IN CONTEXT

Gilman uses these words in her harrowing story of stress and power. Determine the meaning of each word from its context.

1. doctor’s orders **misconstrued** because of their complexity
2. a **recurrent** ailment, returning every few months
3. a delicate **temperament**, prone to worrying
4. disturbed by intense, **lurid** dreams
5. flashy, **flamboyant** drawings representing her state of mind
6. **undulating** patterns that made her feel seasick
7. a twisted **convolution** of nightmarish thoughts
8. ignorant remarks that demonstrated her **fatuity**

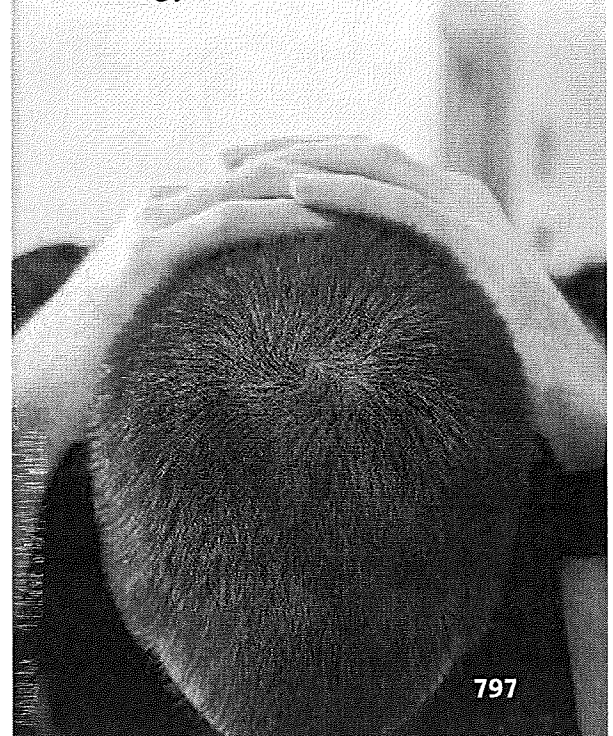


Complete the activities in your Reader/Writer Notebook.

## What if no one took you SERIOUSLY?

A friend rolls his or her eyes in disbelief as you tell a story. Your parents don’t believe that you really are sick, not just feigning illness to get out of a test. A teacher or coach refuses to listen to your perspective before launching into a lecture. On at least one occasion, you’ve probably felt the sting of someone dismissing your feelings or refusing to listen to you. An isolated instance is bad enough, but if everyone around you refused to take you seriously, you might feel utterly powerless.

**QUICKWRITE** Try to imagine a whole day during which, no matter what happened, no one took you seriously. Envision yourself in the middle of such a day; then write a journal entry describing your reaction.



# The Yellow WALLPAPER

CHARLOTTE PERKINS GILMAN

**BACKGROUND** If a woman sought medical treatment for a disorder such as depression or anxiety in 1892, her ills were often diagnosed as trivial “nervous conditions,” curable through isolation and prolonged rest. Today it is believed that some of these disorders were caused in part by the stress of living within the rigid social roles to which women were confined. Doctors of the time, however, typically felt that their patients’ gender lay at the root of the problem. Many saw women as weak and emotionally unstable, and thus predisposed to illness.

## Analyze Visuals ►

Examine this painting. Describe the woman’s size, position, and coloring relative to the flowers in the foreground. How does she look next to the flowers? Explain.

It is very seldom that mere ordinary people like John and myself secure ancestral halls for the summer.

A colonial mansion, a hereditary estate, I would say a haunted house, and reach the height of romantic felicity—but that would be asking too much of fate!

Still I will proudly declare that there is something queer about it.

Else, why should it be let so cheaply? And why have stood so long untenanted?

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

John is practical in the extreme. He has no patience with faith, an intense horror of superstition, and he scoffs openly at any talk of things not to be felt and  
10 seen and put down in figures.

John is a physician, and *perhaps*—(I would not say it to a living soul, of course, but this is dead paper and a great relief to my mind)—*perhaps* that is one reason I do not get well faster.

You see he does not believe I am sick!

And what can one do? **A**

## **A** SOCIAL CONTEXT

Consider what you learned from the background paragraph at the top of this page. How does Gilman convey the belief prevalent in her time that women were emotionally unstable and prone to illness?

*Geraniums* (1888), Childe Hassam. 18 1/4" × 12 7/8".  
The Hyde Collection, Glens Falls, New York. Photo ©  
Michael Fredericks.



If a physician of high standing, and one's own husband, assures friends and relatives that there is really nothing the matter with one but temporary nervous depression—a slight hysterical<sup>1</sup> tendency—what is one to do?

My brother is also a physician, and also of high standing, and he says the same  
20 thing.

So I take phosphates or phosphites—whichever it is, and tonics, and journeys, and air, and exercise, and am absolutely forbidden to “work” until I am well again.

Personally, I disagree with their ideas.

Personally, I believe that congenial work, with excitement and change, would do me good.

But what is one to do?

I did write for a while in spite of them; but it *does* exhaust me a good deal—having to be so sly about it, or else meet with heavy opposition.

I sometimes fancy that in my condition if I had less opposition and more  
30 society and stimulus—but John says the very worst thing I can do is to think about my condition, and I confess it always makes me feel bad.

So I will let it alone and talk about the house.

The most beautiful place! It is quite alone, standing well back from the road, quite three miles from the village. It makes me think of English places that you read about, for there are hedges and walls and gates that lock, and lots of separate little houses for the gardeners and people.

There is a *delicious* garden! I never saw such a garden—large and shady, full of box-bordered paths, and lined with long grape-covered arbors with seats under them.

40 There were greenhouses, too, but they are all broken now.

There was some legal trouble, I believe, something about the heirs and coheirs; anyhow, the place has been empty for years.

That spoils my ghostliness, I am afraid, but I don't care—there is something strange about the house—I can feel it.

I even said so to John one moonlight evening, but he said what I felt was a *draft*, and shut the window.

I get unreasonably angry with John sometimes. I'm sure I never used to be so sensitive. I think it is due to this nervous condition.

But John says if I feel so, I shall neglect proper self-control; so I take pains to  
50 control myself—before him, at least, and that makes me very tired. ⑤

I don't like our room a bit. I wanted one downstairs that opened on the piazza and had roses all over the window, and such pretty old-fashioned chintz hangings!<sup>2</sup> but John would not hear of it.

He said there was only one window and not room for two beds, and no near room for him if he took another.

He is very careful and loving, and hardly lets me stir without special direction.

### Language Coach

**Antonyms** An **antonym** is a word with a meaning opposite that of another word. Gilman is contrasting the words *opposition* and *society* in lines 29–31. Knowing that *opposition* means “action working against something or someone,” what must *society* mean here?

### ⑤ FIRST-PERSON NARRATOR

Reread lines 32–50. Notice how the narrator combines details of the house with her personal feelings about it. How does the author's use of first-person point of view lend to the internal development of the narrator? Support your answer with evidence from the selection.

1. **hysterical**: Hysteria is the presence of a physical ailment with no underlying physical cause.

2. **chintz hangings**: curtains made out of chintz, a printed cotton fabric.

I have a schedule prescription for each hour in the day; he takes all care from me, and so I feel basely ungrateful not to value it more.

He said we came here solely on my account, that I was to have perfect rest and all the air I could get. “Your exercise depends on your strength, my dear,” said he, “and your food somewhat on your appetite; but air you can absorb all the time.” So we took the nursery at the top of the house.

It is a big, airy room, the whole floor nearly, with windows that look all ways, and air and sunshine galore. It was nursery first and then playroom and gymnasium, I should judge; for the windows are barred for little children, and there are rings and things in the walls.

The paint and paper look as if a boys’ school had used it. It is stripped off—the paper—in great patches all around the head of my bed, about as far as I can reach, and in a great place on the other side of the room low down. I never saw a worse paper in my life.

One of those sprawling **flamboyant** patterns committing every artistic sin.

It is dull enough to confuse the eye in following, pronounced enough to constantly irritate and provoke study, and when you follow the lame uncertain curves for a little distance they suddenly commit suicide—plunge off at outrageous angles, destroy themselves in unheard of contradictions.

The color is repellent, almost revolting; a smouldering unclean yellow, strangely faded by the slow-turning sunlight.

It is a dull yet **lurid** orange in some places, a sickly sulphur tint in others.

No wonder the children hated it! I should hate it myself if I had to live in this room long.

There comes John, and I must put this away, —he hates to have me write a word.

**W**e have been here two weeks, and I haven’t felt like writing before, since that first day.

I am sitting by the window now, up in this atrocious nursery, and there is nothing to hinder my writing as much as I please, save lack of strength. ❖

John is away all day, and even some nights when his cases are serious.

I am glad my case is not serious!

But these nervous troubles are dreadfully depressing.

John does not know how much I really suffer. He knows there is no *reason* to suffer, and that satisfies him.

Of course it is only nervousness. It does weigh on me so not to do my duty in any way!

I meant to be such a help to John, such a real rest and comfort, and here I am a comparative burden already!

Nobody would believe what an effort it is to do what little I am able,—to dress and entertain, and order things.

**flamboyant** (flăm-boi’ənt)  
*adj.* marked by strikingly elaborate or colorful display

**lurid** (lōōr’id) *adj.*  
shocking; gruesome

❖ **GRAMMAR AND STYLE**  
Notice that Gilman chose to tell this story in the **present tense**. This lends the narrative a sense of immediacy and allows readers to feel as though they’re witnessing new developments in the narrator’s condition as they unfold.

It is fortunate Mary is so good with the baby. Such a dear baby!  
And yet I *cannot* be with him, it makes me so nervous.

I suppose John never was nervous in his life. He laughs at me so about this  
100 wallpaper!

At first he meant to repaper the room, but afterwards he said that I was letting  
it get the better of me, and that nothing was worse for a nervous patient than to  
give way to such fancies.

He said that after the wallpaper was changed it would be the heavy bedstead, and  
then the barred windows, and then that gate at the head of the stairs, and so on.

“You know the place is doing you good,” he said, “and really, dear, I don’t care  
to renovate the house just for a three months’ rental.”

“Then do let us go downstairs,” I said, “there are such pretty rooms there.”  
Then he took me in his arms and called me a blessed little goose, and said he



*A Woman Seated at a Table by a Window*, Carl Holsoe. Oil on canvas. © SuperStock.

### ◀ Analyze Visuals

How would you describe the **mood** of this painting? In your opinion, is it similar to or different from the mood of the story? Explain, citing specific details from each that influenced your answer.

110 would go down to the cellar, if I wished, and have it whitewashed into the bargain. **D**

But he is right enough about the beds and windows and things.

It is an airy and comfortable room as anyone need wish, and, of course, I would not be so silly as to make him uncomfortable just for a whim.

I'm really getting quite fond of the big room, all but that horrid paper.

Out of one window I can see the garden, those mysterious deepshaded arbors, the riotous old-fashioned flowers, and bushes and gnarly trees.

Out of another I get a lovely view of the bay and a little private wharf belonging to the estate. There is a beautiful shaded lane that runs down there from the house. I always fancy I see people walking in these numerous paths and arbors,  
120 but John has cautioned me not to give way to fancy in the least. He says that with my imaginative power and habit of story-making, a nervous weakness like mine is sure to lead to all manner of excited fancies, and that I ought to use my will and good sense to check the tendency. So I try.

I think sometimes that if I were only well enough to write a little it would relieve the press of ideas and rest me.

But I find I get pretty tired when I try.

It is so discouraging not to have any advice and companionship about my work. When I get really well, John says we will ask Cousin Henry and Julia down for a long visit; but he says he would as soon put fireworks in my pillowcase as to  
130 let me have those stimulating people about now.

I wish I could get well faster.

But I must not think about that. This paper looks to me as if it *knew* what a vicious influence it had!

There is a **recurrent** spot where the pattern lolls like a broken neck and two bulbous eyes stare at you upside down.

I get positively angry with the impertinence of it and the everlastingness. **E**  
Up and down and sideways they crawl, and those absurd, unblinking eyes are everywhere. There is one place where two breadths didn't match, and the eyes go all up and down the line, one a little higher than the other.

140 I never saw so much expression in an inanimate thing before, and we all know how much expression they have! I used to lie awake as a child and get more entertainment and terror out of blank walls and plain furniture than most children could find in a toy store.

I remember what a kindly wink the knobs of our big, old bureau used to have, and there was one chair that always seemed like a strong friend.

I used to feel that if any of the other things looked too fierce I could always hop into that chair and be safe.

The furniture in this room is no worse than inharmonious, however, for we had to bring it all from downstairs. I suppose when this was used as a playroom they  
150 had to take the nursery things out, and no wonder! I never saw such ravages as the children have made here.

**D SOCIAL CONTEXT**

Reread lines 99–110 and describe the relationship between the narrator and her husband. What might Gilman be saying about how women were viewed in the late 1800s?

**recurrent** (rĭ-kŭr'ənt) *adj.*  
occurring time after time

**E FIRST-PERSON NARRATOR**

How are the narrator's feelings about the wallpaper changing? Explain whether or not her response to the room's décor seems rational to you.



The wallpaper, as I said before, is torn off in spots, and it sticketh closer than a brother—they must have had perseverance as well as hatred.

Then the floor is scratched and gouged and splintered, the plaster itself is dug out here and there, and this great heavy bed which is all we found in the room, looks as if it had been through the wars.

But I don't mind it a bit—only the paper.

There comes John's sister. Such a dear girl as she is, and so careful of me! I must not let her find me writing.

160 She is a perfect and enthusiastic housekeeper, and hopes for no better profession. I verily believe she thinks it is the writing which made me sick!

But I can write when she is out, and see her a long way off from these windows. **F**

There is one that commands the road, a lovely shaded winding road, and one that just looks off over the country. A lovely country, too, full of great elms and velvet meadows.

This wallpaper has a kind of sub-pattern in a different shade, a particularly irritating one, for you can only see it in certain lights, and not clearly then.

But in the places where it isn't faded and where the sun is just so—I can see a strange, provoking, formless sort of figure, that seems to skulk about behind that  
170 silly and conspicuous front design.

There's sister on the stairs!

**W**ell, the Fourth of July is over! The people are all gone and I am tired out. John thought it might do me good to see a little company, so we just had mother and Nellie and the children down for a week.

Of course I didn't do a thing. Jennie sees to everything now.

But it tired me all the same.

John says if I don't pick up faster he shall send me to Weir Mitchell<sup>3</sup> in the fall.

But I don't want to go there at all. I had a friend who was in his hands once, and she says he is just like John and my brother, only more so! **G**

180 Besides, it is such an undertaking to go so far.

I don't feel as if it was worth while to turn my hand over for anything, and I'm getting dreadfully fretful and querulous.

I cry at nothing, and cry most of the time.

Of course I don't when John is here, or anybody else, but when I am alone.

And I am alone a good deal just now. John is kept in town very often by serious cases, and Jennie is good and lets me alone when I want her to.

So I walk a little in the garden or down that lovely lane, sit on the porch under the roses, and lie down up here a good deal.

I'm getting really fond of the room in spite of the wallpaper. Perhaps *because*  
190 of the wallpaper.

It dwells in my mind so!

I lie here on this great immovable bed—it is nailed down, I believe—and

**F** SOCIAL CONTEXT

Examine the narrator's description of John's sister in lines 158–162. How do these lines add to your understanding of the story's setting and how it affects the narrator?

**G** SOCIAL CONTEXT

Reread lines 177–179. What is suggested or highlighted by the fact that all the male characters in the story share common **traits**? What role does the social context play in shaping the story's setting? Cite evidence to support your answer.

3. **Weir Mitchell**: Dr. Silas Weir Mitchell, a physician famous for his "rest cure" for nervous diseases, which is no longer considered effective.

follow that pattern about by the hour. It is as good as gymnastics, I assure you. I start, we'll say, at the bottom, down in the corner over there where it has not been touched, and I determine for the thousandth time that I *will* follow that pointless pattern to some sort of a conclusion.

I know a little of the principle of design, and I know this thing was not arranged on any laws of radiation, or alternation, or repetition, or symmetry, or anything else that I ever heard of.

200 It is repeated, of course, by the breadths, but not otherwise.

Looked at in one way each breadth stands alone, the bloated curves and flourishes—a kind of “debased Romanesque” with *delirium tremens*<sup>4</sup>—go waddling up and down in isolated columns of **fatuity**.

But, on the other hand, they connect diagonally, and the sprawling outlines run off in great slanting waves of optic horror, like a lot of wallowing seaweeds in full chase.

The whole thing goes horizontally, too, at least it seems so, and I exhaust myself in trying to distinguish the order of its going in that direction.

They have used a horizontal breadth for a frieze, and that adds wonderfully to  
210 the confusion.

There is one end of the room where it is almost intact, and there, when the crosslights fade and the low sun shines directly upon it, I can almost fancy radiation after all,—the interminable grotesques seem to form around a common center and rush off in headlong plunges of equal distraction.

It makes me tired to follow it. I will take a nap I guess.

I don't know why I should write this.

I don't want to.

I don't feel able.

And I know John would think it absurd. But I *must* say what I feel and think  
220 in some way—it is such a relief!

But the effort is getting to be greater than the relief.

Half the time now I am awfully lazy, and lie down ever so much.

John says I mustn't lose my strength, and has me take cod liver oil and lots of tonics and things, to say nothing of ale and wine and rare meat.

Dear John! He loves me very dearly, and hates to have me sick. I tried to have a real earnest reasonable talk with him the other day, and tell him how I wish he would let me go and make a visit to Cousin Henry and Julia.

But he said I wasn't able to go, nor able to stand it after I got there; and I did not make out a very good case for myself, for I was crying before I had finished. **H**

230 It is getting to be a great effort for me to think straight. Just this nervous weakness I suppose.

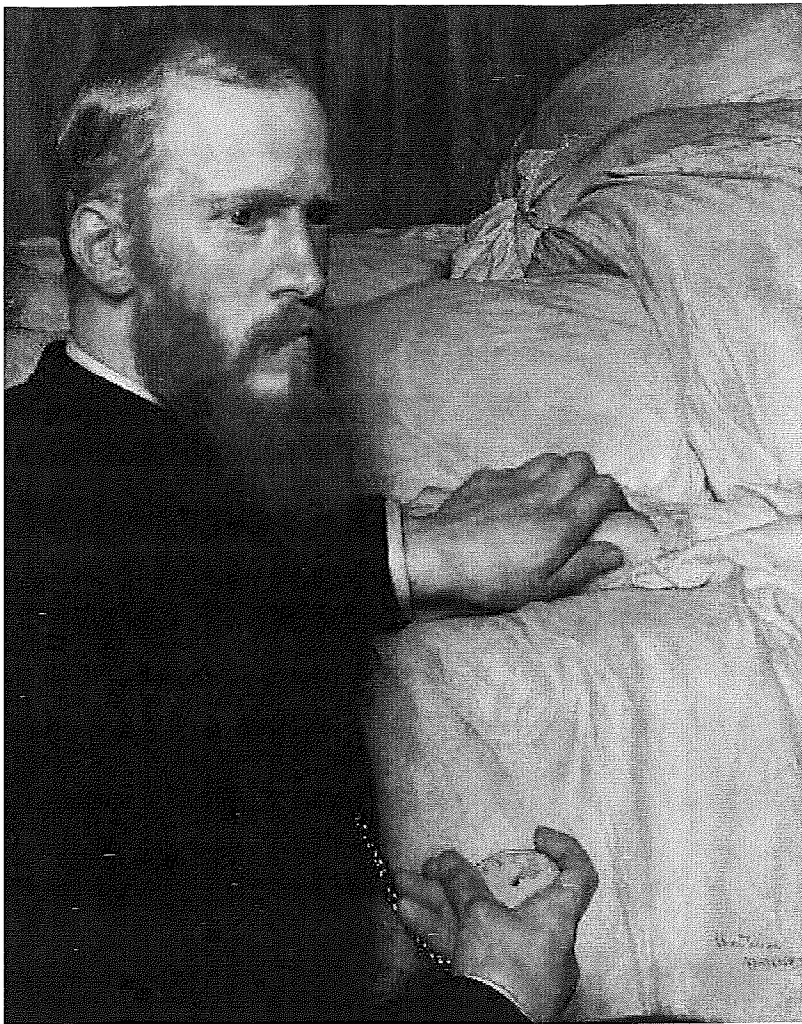
And dear John gathered me up in his arms, and just carried me upstairs and laid me on the bed, and sat by me and read to me till it tired my head.

**fatuity** (fə-tōō'ĭ-tē) *n.*  
something foolish or  
stupid

**H** **FIRST-PERSON  
NARRATOR**

Reread lines 223–229. Imagine the “real earnest reasonable talk” the narrator describes. How might the account of this scene be different if John were the narrator? How do you think the change in point of view would affect your perception of the main character? Explain your answer.

4. “debased Romanesque” with *delirium tremens*: Romanesque is an artistic style characterized by simple ornamentation. *Delirium tremens* refers to violent trembling and hallucinations caused by excessive drinking.



*Portrait of Dr. Washington Epps, My Doctor* (1885), Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema. Oil on canvas, 64.2 cm × 51 cm. Private collection. © Bridgeman Art Library.

### ◀ Analyze Visuals

Study this painting, then describe the emotion conveyed by the subject's facial expression.

Does this image make you feel more or less sympathetic toward John, the narrator's husband? Explain your answer.

He said I was his darling and his comfort and all he had, and that I must take care of myself for his sake, and keep well.

He says no one but myself can help me out of it, that I must use my will and self-control and not let any silly fancies run away with me.

There's one comfort, the baby is well and happy, and does not have to occupy this nursery with the horrid wallpaper.

240 If we had not used it, that blessed child would have! What a fortunate escape! Why, I wouldn't have a child of mine, an impressionable little thing, live in such a room for worlds.

I never thought of it before, but it is lucky that John kept me here after all, I can stand it so much easier than a baby, you see.

Of course I never mention it to them any more—I am too wise,—but I keep watch of it all the same.

There are things in that paper that nobody knows but me, or ever will.

Behind that outside pattern the dim shapes get clearer every day.

It is always the same shape, only very numerous.

250 And it is like a woman stooping down and creeping about behind that pattern. I don't like it a bit. I wonder—I begin to think—I wish John would take me away from here!

It is so hard to talk with John about my case, because he is so wise, and because he loves me so.

But I tried it last night.

It was moonlight. The moon shines in all around just as the sun does.

I hate to see it sometimes, it creeps so slowly, and always comes in by one window or another.

John was asleep and I hated to waken him, so I kept still and watched the  
260 moonlight on that **undulating** wallpaper till I felt creepy.

The faint figure behind seemed to shake the pattern, just as if she wanted to get out.

I got up softly and went to feel and see if the paper *did* move, and when I came back John was awake.

"What is it, little girl?" he said. "Don't go walking about like that—you'll get cold."

I thought it was a good time to talk, so I told him that I really was not gaining here, and that I wished he would take me away.

"Why darling!" said he, "our lease will be up in three weeks, and I can't see how  
270 to leave before.

"The repairs are not done at home, and I cannot possibly leave town just now. Of course if you were in any danger, I could and would, but you really are better, dear, whether you can see it or not. I am a doctor, dear, and I know. You are gaining flesh and color, your appetite is better, I feel really much easier about you."

"I don't weigh a bit more," said I, "nor as much; and my appetite may be better in the evening when you are here, but it is worse in the morning when you are away!"

"Bless her little heart!" said he with a big hug, "she shall be as sick as she pleases! But now let's improve the shining hours<sup>5</sup> by going to sleep, and talk about it in the morning!"

280 "And you won't go away?" I asked gloomily.

"Why, how can I, dear? It is only three weeks more and then we will take a nice little trip of a few days while Jennie is getting the house ready. Really dear you are better!"

"Better in body perhaps—" I began, and stopped short, for he sat up straight and looked at me with such a stern, reproachful look that I could not say another word.

"My darling," said he, "I beg of you, for my sake and for our child's sake, as well as for your own, that you will never for one instant let that idea enter your mind! There is nothing so dangerous, so fascinating, to a **temperament** like yours. It is a false and foolish fancy. Can you not trust me as a physician when I tell you so?"

**undulating** (ŭn'jə-lā'tīng)  
*adj.* appearing to move in waves **undulate** *v.*

**temperament**  
(tĕm'prə-mĕnt) *n.* a person's characteristic mode of emotional response

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5. **improve the shining hours**: make good use of time—an allusion to the poem "Against Idleness and Mischief" by Isaac Watts.

290 So of course I said no more on that score, and we went to sleep before long.  
He thought I was asleep first, but I wasn't, and lay there for hours trying to decide  
whether that front pattern and the back pattern really did move together or  
separately.

On a pattern like this, by daylight, there is a lack of sequence, a defiance of law,  
that is a constant irritant to a normal mind. ❶

The color is hideous enough, and unreliable enough, and infuriating enough,  
but the pattern is torturing.

You think you have mastered it, but just as you get well underway in following,  
it turns a back-somersault and there you are. It slaps you in the face, knocks you  
300 down, and tramples upon you. It is like a bad dream.

The outside pattern is a florid arabesque,<sup>6</sup> reminding one of a fungus. If you  
can imagine a toadstool in joints, an interminable string of toadstools, budding  
and sprouting in endless **convolutions**—why, that is something like it.

That is, sometimes!

There is one marked peculiarity about this paper, a thing nobody seems to  
notice but myself, and that is that it changes as the light changes.

When the sun shoots in through the east window—I always watch for that first  
long, straight ray—it changes so quickly that I never can quite believe it.

That is why I watch it always.

310 By moonlight—the moon shines in all night when there is a moon—I wouldn't  
know it was the same paper.

At night in any kind of light, in twilight, candle light, lamplight, and worst of  
all by moonlight, it becomes bars! The outside pattern I mean, and the woman  
behind it is as plain as can be.

I didn't realize for a long time what the thing was that showed behind, that dim  
sub-pattern, but now I am quite sure it is a woman.

By daylight she is subdued, quiet. I fancy it is the pattern that keeps her so still.  
It is so puzzling. It keeps me quiet by the hour.

I lie down ever so much now. John says it is good for me, and to sleep all I can.  
320 Indeed he started the habit by making me lie down for an hour after each meal.

It is a very bad habit I am convinced, for you see I don't sleep.

And that cultivates deceit, for I don't tell them I'm awake—O no!

The fact is I am getting a little afraid of John.

He seems very queer sometimes, and even Jennie has an inexplicable look.

It strikes me occasionally, just as a scientific hypothesis,—that perhaps it is  
the paper!

I have watched John when he did not know I was looking, and come into the  
room suddenly on the most innocent excuses, and I've caught him several times  
*looking at the paper!* And Jennie too. I caught Jennie with her hand on it once.

330 She didn't know I was in the room, and when I asked her in a quiet, a very  
quiet voice, with the most restrained manner possible, what she was doing with

### ❶ FIRST-PERSON NARRATOR

Consider the narrator's  
statement in lines  
294–295. Based on  
her description of the  
wallpaper, would you say  
she has “a normal mind”?  
Explain your answer.

### convolution

(kŏn've-lŏŏ'shən) *n.*  
a form or shape that  
is folded into curved,  
complicated windings

### Language Coach

**Prefixes** A **prefix** is a  
word part attached  
to the beginning of a  
word root. The prefix  
*sub-* means “under” or  
“beneath.” What does  
*sub-pattern* (line 316)  
mean, and what clues to  
its meaning can you find  
in lines 315–316?

6. florid arabesque: an elaborate interwoven pattern.

the paper—she turned around as if she had been caught stealing, and looked quite angry—asked me why I should frighten her so!

Then she said that the paper stained everything it touched, that she had found yellow smooches<sup>7</sup> on all my clothes and John's, and she wished we would be more careful!

Did not that sound innocent? But I know she was studying that pattern, and I am determined that nobody shall find it out but myself! ❶

Life is very much more exciting now than it used to be. You see I have something  
340 more to expect, to look forward to, to watch. I really do eat better, and am more quiet than I was.

John is so pleased to see me improve! He laughed a little the other day, and said I seemed to be flourishing in spite of my wallpaper.

I turned it off with a laugh. I had no intention of telling him it was *because* of the wallpaper—he would make fun of me. He might even want to take me away.

I don't want to leave now until I have found it out. There is a week more, and I think that will be enough.

I'm feeling ever so much better! I don't sleep much at night, for it is so interesting  
to watch developments; but I sleep a good deal in the daytime.

350 In the daytime it is tiresome and perplexing.

There are always new shoots on the fungus, and new shades of yellow all over it. I cannot keep count of them, though I have tried conscientiously.

It is the strangest yellow, that wallpaper! It makes me think of all the yellow things I ever saw—not beautiful ones like buttercups, but old foul, bad yellow things.

But there is something else about that paper—the smell! I noticed it the moment we came into the room, but with so much air and sun it was not bad. Now we have had a week of fog and rain, and whether the windows are open or not, the smell is here.

It creeps all over the house.

360 I find it hovering in the dining room, skulking in the parlor, hiding in the hall, lying in wait for me on the stairs.

It gets into my hair.

Even when I go to ride, if I turn my head suddenly and surprise it—there is that smell!

Such a peculiar odor, too! I have spent hours in trying to analyze it, to find what it smelled like.

It is not bad—at first, and very gentle, but quite the subtlest, most enduring odor I ever met.

In this damp weather it is awful, I wake up in the night and find it hanging  
370 over me.

It used to disturb me at first. I thought seriously of burning the house—to reach the smell.

❶ FIRST-PERSON NARRATOR

Reread lines 323–338. How has the narrator's attitude toward John and Jennie changed? What do you think they might say about her feelings if they were aware of them?

**Language Coach**

**Word Definitions**

*Skulking* (line 360) means "moving in a secretive manner" or "hiding with a bad intent." What human qualities is the narrator giving to the smell?

7. *smooches*: smudges.



*In Bed* (1878), Federico Zandomenighi. Oil on canvas, 60.5 cm x 73.5 cm. Galleria d'Arte Moderna, Florence. © Alinari/Art Resource, New York.

But now I am used to it. The only thing I can think of that it is like is the *color* of the paper! A yellow smell. **K**

There is a very funny mark on this wall, low down, near the mopboard. A streak that runs round the room. It goes behind every piece of furniture, except the bed, a long, straight, even *smooch*, as if it had been rubbed over and over.

I wonder how it was done and who did it, and what they did it for. Round and round and round—round and round and round—it makes me dizzy!

380 I really have discovered something at last.

Through watching so much at night, when it changes so, I have finally found out.

The front pattern *does* move—and no wonder! The woman behind shakes it!

Sometimes I think there are a great many women behind, and sometimes only one, and she crawls around fast, and her crawling shakes it all over.

**K FIRST-PERSON NARRATOR**

How would an impartial, omniscient narrator describe the woman's mind at this point? How would this change in the story's point of view affect Gilman's depiction of her main character? Explain your answer.

Then in the very bright spots she keeps still, and in the very shady spots she just takes hold of the bars and shakes them hard.

And she is all the time trying to climb through. But nobody could climb through that pattern—it strangles so; I think that is why it has so many heads.

They get through, and then the pattern strangles them off and turns them  
390 upside down, and makes their eyes white!

If those heads were covered or taken off it would not be half so bad.

I think that woman gets out in the daytime!

And I'll tell you why—privately—I've seen her!

I can see her out of every one of my windows!

It is the same woman, I know, for she is always creeping, and most women do not creep by daylight.

I see her on that long road under the trees, creeping along, and when a carriage comes she hides under the blackberry vines.

I don't blame her a bit. It must be very humiliating to be caught creeping by  
400 daylight!

I always lock the door when I creep by daylight. I can't do it at night, for I know John would suspect something at once.

And John is so queer now, that I don't want to irritate him. I wish he would take another room! Besides, I don't want anybody to get that woman out at night but myself.

I often wonder if I could see her out of all the windows at once.

But, turn as fast as I can, I can only see out of one at one time.

And though I always see her, she *may* be able to creep faster than I can turn!

I have watched her sometimes away off in the open country, creeping as fast  
410 as a cloud shadow in a high wind.

If only that top pattern could be gotten off from the under one! I mean to try it, little by little.

I have found out another funny thing, but I shan't tell it this time! It does not do to trust people too much.

There are only two more days to get this paper off, and I believe John is beginning to notice. I don't like the look in his eyes.

And I heard him ask Jennie a lot of professional questions about me. She had a very good report to give.

She said I slept a good deal in the daytime.

420 John knows I don't sleep very well at night, for all I'm so quiet!

He asked me all sorts of questions, too, and pretended to be very loving and kind.

As if I couldn't see through him! ❶

❶ **FIRST-PERSON NARRATOR**

Consider the narrator's statements in lines 403–404 and line 423. Why is she turning against her husband? Explain what John's real concerns might be.



Still, I don't wonder he acts so, sleeping under this paper for three months. It only interests me, but I feel sure John and Jennie are secretly affected by it.

Hurrah! This is the last day, but it is enough. John to stay in town overnight, and won't be out until this evening.

Jennie wanted to sleep with me—the sly thing! but I told her I should undoubtedly rest better for a night all alone.

430 That was clever, for really I wasn't alone a bit! As soon as it was moonlight and that poor thing began to crawl and shake the pattern, I got up and ran to help her.

I pulled and she shook, I shook and she pulled, and before morning we had peeled off yards of that paper.

A strip about as high as my head and half around the room.

And then when the sun came and that awful pattern began to laugh at me, I declared I would finish it today!

We go away tomorrow, and they are moving all my furniture down again to leave things as they were before.

Jennie looked at the wall in amazement, but I told her merrily that I did it out  
440 of pure spite at the vicious thing.

She laughed and said she wouldn't mind doing it herself, but I must not get tired.

How she betrayed herself that time! **M**

But I am here, and no person touches this paper but me,—not *alive!*

She tried to get me out of the room—it was too patent! But I said it was so quiet and empty and clean now that I believed I would lie down again and sleep all I could; and not to wake me even for dinner—I would call when I woke.

So now she is gone, and the servants are gone, and the things are gone, and there is nothing left but that great bedstead nailed down, with the canvas mattress we found on it.

450 We shall sleep downstairs tonight, and take the boat home tomorrow.

I quite enjoy the room, now it is bare again.

How those children did tear about here!

This bedstead is fairly gnawed!

But I must get to work.

I have locked the door and thrown the key down into the front path.

I don't want to go out, and I don't want to have anybody come in, till John comes.

I want to astonish him.

I've got a rope up here that even Jennie did not find. If that woman does get  
460 out, and tries to get away, I can tie her!

But I forgot I could not reach far without anything to stand on!

This bed will *not* move!

I tried to lift and push it until I was lame, and then I got so angry I bit off a little piece at one corner—but it hurt my teeth.

Then I peeled off all the paper I could reach standing on the floor. It sticks horribly and the pattern just enjoys it! All those strangled heads and bulbous eyes and waddling fungus growths just shriek with derision!



TEKS 2B

**M** FIRST-PERSON NARRATOR

The anonymous narrator of this story influenced the development of a character type in American literature and film—the emotionally disturbed wife. Sue Kaufman's 1967 novel *Diary of a Mad Housewife*, which was later made into a film, owes much to Gilman's disturbing experiment in first-person narration. Laura Brown, a character in the novel and film *The Hours*, is a more recent example of the "mad housewife." Reread lines 426–442. Which details in this section of the narrative do you find compelling? Explain your answer.

I am getting angry enough to do something desperate. To jump out of the window would be admirable exercise, but the bars are too strong even to try.  
470 Besides I wouldn't do it. Of course not. I know well enough that a step like that is improper and might be **misconstrued**.

I don't like to *look* out of the windows even—there are so many of those creeping women, and they creep so fast.

I wonder if they all come out of that wallpaper as I did? **N**

But I am securely fastened now by my well-hidden rope—you don't get *me* out in the road there!

I suppose I shall have to get back behind the pattern when it comes night, and that is hard!

It is so pleasant to be out in this great room and creep around as I please!

480 I don't want to go outside. I won't, even if Jennie asks me to.

For outside you have to creep on the ground, and everything is green instead of yellow.

But here I can creep smoothly on the floor, and my shoulder just fits in that long smooch around the wall, so I cannot lose my way.

Why there's John at the door!

It is no use, young man, you can't open it!

How he does call and pound!

Now he's crying for an axe.

It would be a shame to break down that beautiful door!

490 "John dear!" said I in the gentlest voice, "the key is down by the front steps, under a plantain leaf!"

That silenced him for a few moments.

Then he said—very quietly indeed, "Open the door, my darling!"


"I can't," said I. "The key is down by the front door under a plantain leaf!"

And then I said it again, several times, very gently and slowly, and said it so often that he had to go and see, and he got it of course, and came in. He stopped short by the door.

"What is the matter?" he cried. "What are you doing!"

I kept on creeping just the same, but I looked at him over my shoulder.

500 "I've got out at last," said I, "in spite of you and Jane.<sup>8</sup> And I've pulled off most of the paper, so you can't put me back!"

Now why should that man have fainted? But he did, and right across my path by the wall, so that I had to creep over him every time! 

**misconstrued**  
(mɪs'kən-strōod')  
*adj.* misunderstood;  
misinterpreted  
**misconstrue** *v.*

**N FIRST-PERSON NARRATOR**  
What does the narrator now believe about the wallpaper?

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8. **in spite of you and Jane:** As Jane is, previously unmentioned, the name may be a typographical error by the original printer of the story in place of the name of the housekeeper, Jennie, or Cousin Julia; or it may denote the narrator herself, freed from her commonplace, wifely, "Jane" persona.

## Reading for Information

**JOURNAL ARTICLE** Charlotte Perkins Gilman herself suffered a profound depression and was prescribed a “rest cure” by a noted neurologist of the day. In this 1913 article from her feminist journal *Forerunner*, she says she wrote “The Yellow Wallpaper” to bear witness to the horrors of this “cure” and to attest to her recovery.

# THE FORERUNNER

A MONTHLY MAGAZINE

CHARLOTTE PERKINS GILMAN

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## WHY I WROTE “THE YELLOW WALLPAPER”

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Many and many a reader has asked that. When the story first came out, in the *New England Magazine* about 1891, a Boston physician made protest in *The Transcript*. Such a story ought not to be written, he said; it was enough to drive anyone mad to read it.

Another physician, in Kansas I think, wrote to say that it was the best description of incipient insanity he had ever seen, and—begging my pardon—had I been there?

Now the story of the story is this:

For many years I suffered from a severe and continuous nervous breakdown tending to melancholia—and beyond. During about the third year of this trouble I went, in devout faith and some faint stir of hope, to a noted specialist in nervous diseases, the best known in the country. This wise man put me to bed and applied the rest cure, to which a still good physique responded so promptly that he concluded there was nothing much the matter with me, and sent me home with solemn advice to “live as domestic a life as far as possible,” to “have but two hours’ intellectual life a day,” and “never to touch pen, brush or pencil again as long as I lived.” This was in 1887.

I went home and obeyed those directions for some three months, and came so near the border line of utter mental ruin that I could see over.

Then, using the remnants of intelligence that remained, and helped by a wise friend, I cast the noted specialist’s advice to the winds and went to work again—work, the normal life of every human being; work, in which is joy and growth and service, without which one is a pauper and a parasite; ultimately recovering some measure of power.

Being naturally moved to rejoicing by this narrow escape, I wrote *The Yellow Wallpaper*, with its embellishments and additions to carry out the ideal (I never had hallucinations or objections to my mural decorations) and sent a copy to the physician who so nearly drove me mad. He never acknowledged it.

The little book is valued by alienists and as good a specimen of one kind of literature. It has to my knowledge saved one woman from a similar fate—so terrifying her family that they let her out into normal activity and she recovered.

But the best result is this. Many years later I was told that the great specialist had admitted to friends of his that he had altered his treatment of neurasthenia since reading *The Yellow Wallpaper*.

It was not intended to drive people crazy, but to save people from being driven crazy, and it worked.

## Comprehension

1. **Summarize** Describe the “rest cure” treatment and explain why it is prescribed for the narrator.
2. **Recall** Why does the narrator hate the wallpaper at first?
3. **Clarify** Who does the narrator think she is at the end of the story?



**READING 5A** Evaluate how different literary elements shape the author’s portrayal of the setting in works of fiction. **5B** Analyze the internal development of characters through a range of literary devices.

## Literary Analysis

4. **Analyze First-Person Narrator** The narrator of this story is **unreliable**—you can’t always trust that what she says is true. How does her highly subjective account contribute to your perception of her character’s internal development? Cite evidence from the story to support your answer.
5. **Interpret Symbolism** Reread lines 380–391 and consider the narrator’s **powerlessness**. What might the yellow wallpaper symbolize in the story? Consider the following as you formulate your answer:
  - the narrator’s attitude toward both her “condition” and her marriage
  - what she sees in the “strangling” pattern of the paper
  - her exhilaration when she rips the wallpaper off the wall
6. **Understand Social Context** Examine the chart you filled in as you read. What conclusions can you draw about the social context that forms the setting for this story? Citing evidence from both the short story and “Why I Wrote ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’” (page 814), explain
  - how wives were expected to behave in the 1890s
  - how women seem to have been treated by the men—husbands, brothers, doctors—who cared for them
  - what Gilman thought about women’s being denied meaningful work and personal power, and how she addresses these issues in this story

## Literary Criticism

7. **Different Perspectives** At the time “The Yellow Wallpaper” was published, most critics read it as a horror tale about madness or, after Gilman’s explanation appeared in 1913, as an exposé of women’s medical treatment. Only a few saw what feminists in the 1970s would interpret as Gilman’s **political assumptions**. Feminists read the story as a criticism of marriage and the oppression of women. Explain which of these interpretations you favor, citing evidence from the text.

### *What if no one took you* **SERIOUSLY?**

In “The Yellow Wallpaper,” the narrator is doubted by the doctor and her own husband, with devastating consequences. Is it possible to believe in yourself if no one else seems to? Explain your answer.

## Vocabulary in Context

### ▲ VOCABULARY PRACTICE

Choose the word that is not related in meaning to the other words.

1. (a) extravagant, (b) showy, (c) flamboyant, (d) lowly
2. (a) undulating, (b) flying, (c) soaring, (d) gliding
3. (a) consideration, (b) convolution, (c) intricacy, (d) complexity
4. (a) periodic, (b) repeated, (c) refused, (d) recurrent
5. (a) fatuity, (b) favor, (c) silliness, (d) folly
6. (a) miscellaneous, (b) misconstrued, (c) various, (d) diversified
7. (a) vivid, (b) lurid, (c) sensational, (d) vapid
8. (a) humidity, (b) personality, (c) disposition, (d) temperament

### WORD LIST

convolution  
fatuity  
flamboyant  
lurid  
misconstrued  
recurrent  
temperament  
undulating

### ACADEMIC VOCABULARY IN WRITING

• apparent • confine • focus • expose • perceive

“The Yellow Wallpaper” **exposes** social issues from the late 1800s. If you were writing a short story, which issues would you **focus** on? Explain your answer in a short paragraph, using at least two of the Academic Vocabulary words.

### VOCABULARY STRATEGY: WORD ANALOGIES

A **word analogy** is a statement that compares, or shows the relationships, between pairs of words. Relationships frequently expressed include synonyms, antonyms, cause and effect, part and whole, and location. Analogies are normally written like the following example.

FLAMBOYANT : PLAIN :: textured : smooth

Studying the word relationships in analogies can increase your vocabulary.

**PRACTICE** For each item, choose the word pair that expresses a relationship most similar to that of the capitalized words. Then identify the relationship type.

1. HURRICANE : FLOOD ::  
a. plumber : pipes   b. calm : agitated   c. drought : famine   d. lawyer : court
2. SAGACIOUS : SHREWD ::  
a. messy : tidy   b. shy : careless   c. joy : gloom   d. retribution : punishment
3. EXTRAVAGANT : FRUGAL ::  
a. accept : forbid   b. crime : robbery   c. merry : cheerful  
d. courage : bravery
4. CHOIR : TENOR ::  
a. key : lock   b. rider : horse   c. shallow : deep   d. garden : tomato



**READING 1C** Infer word meaning through the identification and analysis of analogies.

Interactive **THINK**  
Vocabulary central

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KEYWORD: HML11-816

## Conventions in Writing

### ◆ GRAMMAR AND STYLE: Choose Effective Verb Tense

Review the **Grammar and Style** note on page 801. The immediacy and power of “The Yellow Wallpaper” comes in part from Gilman’s choice to have the narrator tell the story mostly in the **present tense** as though writing in a diary. In this way, the reader plunges directly into the narrator’s mind and follows its dark descent. Notice the use of **present-tense verbs** in this chilling example from the end of the story:

*But I am securely fastened now by my well-hidden rope—you don’t get me out in the road there!* (lines 475–476)

**PRACTICE** The following paragraph is a sample from another short story. Notice how the past-tense verbs create a certain distance between the reader and the events. Revise the paragraph, writing it in the present tense to achieve a different effect.

I threw another log on the fire, waiting for Ahmer to come home. Dinner sat on the table, growing cold. Ahmer had been gone for hours and I was sure he had left with hurt feelings. Why did we always argue this way on special occasions? It was as though we didn’t really want to celebrate, or didn’t know how.

### READING-WRITING CONNECTION



Expand your understanding of “The Yellow Wallpaper” by responding to this prompt. Then, use the **revising tips** to improve your interpretation.

#### WRITING PROMPT

**WRITE AN INTERPRETATION** Although most contemporary readers respond positively to “The Yellow Wallpaper,” the editor of the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1892 rejected it for publication. By way of explanation, he offered this candid reaction: “I could not forgive myself if I made others as miserable as I have made myself.” How did the story affect you? Write a **three-to-five-paragraph interpretation** explaining your own thoughts and feelings about the story. In your interpretation, discuss the effect Gilman’s present-tense narration had on you.

#### REVISING TIPS

- In your first paragraph, include a thesis statement that brings out the main point of your interpretation.
- Reference examples and quotes from the story to support your conclusions.
- Include your personal thoughts and comments about the examples you used from the story.
- Respond to objections or contradictions that readers might have to your thesis.



**WRITING 15C** Write an interpretation of an expository or a literary text. **ORAL AND WRITTEN CONVENTIONS 17** Understand the function of and use the conventions of academic language when speaking and writing.

Interactive Revision **THINK** central

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