

# Trapped Behind the Wallpaper: A Thematic Study of Female Oppression in The Yellow Wallpaper

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## Abstract

This article explores the theme of oppression against women in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story *The Yellow Wallpaper*. Through thematic analysis, this study examines how the mental breakdown of the main character reflects rigid gender roles and patriarchal norms that dominated American society in the 19th century. The story follows a woman undergoing a 'rest cure,' a treatment method that emphasises isolation and prohibits intellectual activity, which only exacerbates her mental condition. Gilman not only criticises medical practices but also the oppressive social structures and marriages that silence women's voices. Symbolism, particularly the yellow wallpaper, plays a crucial role in depicting the protagonist's entrapment and despair. Her mental decline is understood not merely as an illness but as a symbolic form of resistance against oppressive norms. This finding suggests that *The Yellow Wallpaper* functions not only as a psychological study but also as a powerful feminist statement on the importance of autonomy, self-expression, and a gender-sensitive approach to mental health.

**Keywords:** *The Yellow Wallpaper, Oppression of Women, Feminism, Symbolism*

## Introduction

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* is widely recognised as a seminal text in feminist literature. It powerfully depicts the psychological and social oppression faced by women in patriarchal societies, particularly in the domestic and medical spheres. The story follows a woman diagnosed with 'temporary nervous depression,' who is confined to a room and subjected to a 'rest cure,' a real 19th-century treatment that required isolation and prohibited all forms of mental stimulation. This treatment, imposed by her husband who is also her doctor symbolises the broader oppression of women's autonomy and intellect. As her physical isolation intensifies, her psychological condition deteriorates, reflected in her growing obsession with the yellow walls of her room. Her eventual mental breakdown serves as both a personal tragedy and a symbolic rebellion against the structures that imprison her. Gilman uses this descent into madness not only to criticise harmful gender roles and outdated medical practices but also to emphasise the importance of self-expression, creative freedom, and psychological autonomy. This paper explores how these themes are conveyed through the protagonist's inner conflict and the symbolic elements in the story.

In the 19th century, American society was heavily influenced by patriarchal norms that placed women in a subordinate position, especially in the domestic sphere (Arman et al, 2023). Women were considered emotional and weak creatures, so their roles were limited to

childcare and housekeeping (Kashif et al, 2025). Intellectual pursuits and higher education for women were often seen as a threat to their mental and physical stability (Abusamra, 2024). In the medical context, there was a view that psychological disorders in women, such as 'hysteria' and 'nervous depression,' were caused by biological weaknesses. As a result, many women experiencing emotional distress were treated using methods that restricted their freedom, such as the 'rest cure,' which required complete rest and isolation from intellectual activities. This method was widely used by male doctors, including Dr. S. Weir Mitchell, who believed that mental stimulation would worsen women's conditions (Bano et al, 2025).

This culture not only restricts women's movements in the social and medical spheres, but also silences their voices in the arts and literature (Tenrisanna et al, 2024). Women's narratives rarely find a place, and when they do, they are often reduced to clichéd domestic stories. In this situation, literary works become an important medium for women to voice their experiences and criticise the systems that oppress them (Golden, 1993). One example is Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*, which emerged as a protest against the medical and social treatment of women at the time (Özyön, 2020). The 'rest cure' practice, widely used in the late 19th century, was developed by Dr. Silas Weir Mitchell, a leading neurologist in the United States. This method was specifically designed for women who were considered to have mild nervous disorders such as 'hysteria' or 'neurasthenia.' The procedure involved total isolation, restrictions on physical and intellectual activity, and consumption of high-fat foods to increase body weight (Nawaz et al, 2024). Although popular at the time, this practice later received much criticism, especially from intellectual women. Charlotte Perkins Gilman herself underwent the 'rest cure' and felt that the method nearly drove her mad. In her essay titled 'Why I Wrote *The Yellow Wallpaper*', Golden stated that the story was written as a direct protest against the treatment she had experienced (Golden, 1993).

A number of modern studies also show that 'rest cure' is not only ineffective, but actually harmful to patients' mental health. Notes that this method reflects social control over women's bodies under the guise of medicine. Even refers to the 'rest cure' as a repressive symbol against women's expression, where their voices and feelings are seen as disturbances that must be controlled by male authority (Monisha et al, 2024). Thus, the rest cure is not merely a medical practice but also a symbolic tool within the patriarchal system that reinforces gender inequality in both domestic and institutional spheres. Although *The Yellow Wallpaper* has been a widely studied object in feminist literary criticism, most previous studies have focused on medical aspects, madness, or the personal history of Charlotte Perkins Gilman. Many studies emphasise the relationship between the 'rest cure' and the psychological condition of the main character (Bano et al, 2025; Treichler, 1984). But few have specifically examined how the symbolism in the story thematically shapes the narrative of female oppression and resistance simultaneously. Furthermore, the thematic analysis approach in understanding the construction of symbols as a form of resistance is still rarely the main focus in similar studies, especially in the context of post-structural and contemporary feminist readings (Khan et al, 2025).

Furthermore, most existing analyses tend to be general in nature and fail to examine the direct relationship between patriarchal social structures, the symbolism of objects in the story (such as wallpaper), and the psychological transformation of the characters thematically (Ağır, 2023). Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap by presenting an analysis that not only describes the suffering of female characters but also highlights how symbols in the story function as a medium of resistance against oppressive gender structures. Based on the above exposition, the objective of this study is to analyse the theme of oppression against women in *The Yellow Wallpaper* through a thematic analysis approach, with a particular focus on the

symbolism of the 'rest cure,' yellow wallpaper, and the main character's madness as forms of resistance against patriarchal structures.

The uniqueness (novelty) of this research lies in its approach, which combines symbolic analysis with thematic analysis to show how narratives of oppression and female resistance are simultaneously formed in the text. Thus, this study not only contributes to feminist readings of classic literary works but also expands our understanding of how literary texts can represent women's trauma and agency through narrative structures and visual symbols.

## **Method**

### ***Literary Review***

*The Yellow Wallpaper* has been the subject of extensive academic study, particularly in the context of feminist literary criticism. Many scholars see this story as more than just a tale of mental illness; it is viewed as a protest against the social and medical structures that oppress women. For example, refers to this work as a 'women's text' that subtly challenges the patriarchal language and medical discourse of its time (Ragami, 2017). The protagonist's madness not only reflects psychological suffering but also constitutes a hidden form of resistance against a system that regards women's expressions as disorders. A similar view is expressed by researcher, who interprets the narrator's mental breakdown as a direct result of gender-based oppression, particularly through male-controlled medical practices in the late 19th century (Fatima, 2025). Both figures see Gilman's story as a powerful feminist statement against systemic silencing. Drawing on these perspectives, this article analyses how the theme of female oppression is brought to the fore through the story's setting, rich symbolism, and increasingly fragmented narrative voice.

### ***Thematic Analysis***

This study is a qualitative descriptive research aimed at exploring and describing the theme of oppression against women in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story *The Yellow Wallpaper*. This approach was chosen because it is in line with the characteristics of literary studies that focus on text interpretation through narrative, symbolic, and contextual interpretations. Data was collected from the main text through in-depth reading and analysed using thematic analysis, which is the process of identifying and interpreting the main themes that emerge in literary texts. The object of this study is Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story *The Yellow Wallpaper*, which was first published in 1892 in *The New England Magazine*. This study uses a reprinted version published by The Feminist Press in 1973, which is widely used in contemporary feminist studies because it contains an introduction and critical commentary relevant to the historical and social context of the work.

The thematic analysis method was chosen because it is suitable for exploring implicit and explicit meanings in literary texts, particularly in analysing social issues and symbolic representations. This approach allows researchers to identify thematic patterns that emerge in the narrative and symbols used by the author. In the context of *The Yellow Wallpaper*, thematic analysis is effective for exploring how the main character's symbolism and inner conflict reflect the dynamics of oppression and resistance to patriarchal structures. This method is also flexible for use in qualitative studies because it allows for in-depth interpretation of the text without ignoring its sociocultural context.

In this study, the thematic analysis steps follow the adapted model of (Singha, 2024), namely: 1). Reading and understanding the text thoroughly to gain an initial understanding of the story, characters, and dominant symbols. 2). Generating initial codes from relevant parts

of the text, such as character quotes, setting descriptions, and symbolic elements (e.g., wallpaper, narrator's voice, husband's treatment). 3). Grouping codes into main themes, namely: (1) rest cure as a symbol of patriarchal control, (2) wallpaper as a metaphor for women's entrapment, and (3) madness as a form of resistance. 4). Reviewing and refining themes, ensuring that each theme is interconnected and supported by sufficient quotations in the text. 5). Interpreting the themes in depth, linking them to feminist theory and the social and cultural context of the 19th century.

Data validation in this study was conducted through triangulation of theory and sources. Thematic findings from the text of *The Yellow Wallpaper* were analysed and compared with interpretations from several feminist theories as proposed by (Golden, 1993; Treichler, 1984). Additionally, the interpretive results were linked to the social and historical context of the 19th century, as well as Gilman's own non-fiction work (*Why I Wrote The Yellow Wallpaper*, 1913) as a primary supporting source. This approach ensures that the analysis is not based solely on the researcher's personal assumptions but is also supported by a strong theoretical and historical foundation.

## Results

This study identified three main themes that dominate the story *The Yellow Wallpaper*, based on the results of reading and coding textual data. These themes are: 1). Rest cure as a form of patriarchal control. 2). Yellow wallpaper as a symbol of entrapment, and. 3). Madness as a form of reaction to oppression.

Each theme was derived from observations of direct quotations, narratives, and symbolic elements in the story. Each theme was obtained from the process of coding recurring text quotations closely related to the narrative of oppression and the internal conflict of the main character. To clarify the findings, the following table summarises the main quotations from each theme:

**Table 1. Thematic Patterns and Key Quotes from the Story**

| No | Theme                                      | Narrative Excerpts from Text                                                                                                                                               | Emerging Patterns                                                               |
|----|--------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1  | Rest Cure as a form of patriarchal control | "John says the very worst thing I can do is to think about my condition..."<br>"He takes all care from me, and I feel so basely ungrateful not to value it more."          | Silence of voices and coercion of silence<br>Dual dominance: husband and doctor |
| 2  | Wallpaper as a symbol of entrapment        | "The woman behind it is as plain as can be... but now I'm quite sure it is a woman."<br>"Sometimes I think there are a great many women behind, and sometimes only one..." | Visual symbols of repression<br>Images of imprisoned women                      |
| 3  | Madness as a form of resistance and escape | "I've pulled off most of the paper, so you can't put me back!"<br>"Now why should that man have fainted? But he did, and right across my path by the wall."                | Symbolic action of liberation<br>Power change: from passive to active           |

### ***"Rest Cure" Treatment as a Form of Patriarchal Control***

The narrator is not allowed to think or write because it is considered that it will worsen his condition. This treatment was completely determined by John, her husband, who was also a doctor. Researchers found patterns of male dominance controlling women in the name of "medical protection". Some of the quotes categorized in this theme show how the main character is not given control over his own body and mind. She was not allowed to write, read,

or think too hard because her husband believed that this would aggravate her condition. Her husband, John, was also her doctor, which reinforced her dual dominance. Examples of quotes categorized in this theme include: 1). "John says the very worst thing I can do is to think about my condition..." 2). "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." This narrative shows restrictions on the mental activity and personal expression of the main character, which is then mapped as part of the theme of patriarchal domination through the medical system.

### ***Yellow Wallpaper as a Symbol of Entrapment***

The quotes describe how wallpaper becomes an object that slowly turns from a distraction to an obsession. The narrator imagines another woman trapped behind him, which reflects the projection of his own feelings. This pattern is repeated in different parts of the text. As the story progresses, the narrator becomes increasingly obsessed with the wallpaper patterns in the room where he is confined. She depicted the wallpaper with negative words and felt the presence of a female figure who was "trapped" behind the motif. Some of the quotes included in this theme are: 1). "The woman behind it is as plain as can be... but now I'm quite sure it is a woman." 2). "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." The data showed the narrator's emotional projection of the objects around him, especially the wallpaper, which then formed a repetitive narrative pattern of confinement, observation, and the desire to liberate oneself.

### ***Madness as a Reaction to Structural Pressure***

At the end of the story, the narrator undergoes a change in behaviour and loses control of reality. He begins tearing off the wallpaper, crawling on the floor, and refusing to be recognised as himself. Quotes categorised under this theme include: 1). "I've pulled off most of the paper, so you can't put me back!" 2). "I wonder if they all come out of that wallpaper as I did?". The data shows a transition from passive observation to active physical action towards the environment, as well as a change in the narrator's speech patterns, which become increasingly fragmented and illogical. All quotes are collected and grouped according to narrative order to show the development of the main character's mental state. This study also found linguistic and symbolic patterns in the narratives that reinforce the themes of oppression and resistance. The following are the three main types of data identified:

#### ***Character Quotes: Representations of Oppression and Powerlessness***

Several quotes explicitly show that the narrator has no control over his life and thoughts. The character John (husband) represents patriarchal authority: "John says the very worst thing I can do is to think about my condition." "He does not believe I am sick!" These quotes are used to identify the theme of silencing women's voices, where the narrator's opinions are considered invalid and unworthy of being heard.

#### ***Changes in Narrative Voice: From Obedient to Fragmented***

The narrative style shifts throughout the story: initially calm and obedient, it becomes increasingly unstable and fragmented towards the end. Examples: 1). Beginning of the story: "John is very careful and loving, and hardly lets me stir without special direction." 2). Middle of the story: "I lie here on this great immovable bed—it is nailed down, I believe." 3). End of the story (approaching madness): "I've got out at last, in spite of you and Jane! And I've pulled off most of the paper, so you can't put me back!" This change is linguistic data reflecting the psychological progression of the character from obedience to resistance, as well as the loss of narrative stability.



### ***Patterns in Wallpaper: Active Symbolic Objects***

Wallpaper plays the role of the most dominant symbolic element. Initially, it was described as visually distracting: “It is dull enough to confuse the eye in following, pronounced enough to constantly irritate and provoke study...” However, it later evolved into an imaginative and obsessive space: 1). “There are things in that paper that nobody knows but me, or ever will.” 2). “It is the same woman, I know, for she is always creeping, and most women do not creep by daylight.” This pattern indicates a shift in wallpaper from an inanimate object to an active entity, identified as a hiding place and representation of the narrator herself. Additional Thematic Patterns Found: 1). Use of passive verbs (“I am put here”, “I am shut in”) → indicates helplessness. 2). Creeping imagery → repeated as a form of silent resistance. 3). Repetition of visual motifs (bars, patterns, cages) → becomes a visual symbol of social and psychological imprisonment. Preliminary Conclusion of the Findings: All the data collected points to the formation of three main themes: patriarchal control through rest cure, symbols of entrapment through wallpaper, and mental transition towards madness as a form of resistance. Each theme is supported by direct quotations, narrative shifts, and repetition of symbols.

## **Discussion**

The results of this study indicate that *The Yellow Wallpaper* conveys sharp criticism of the social and medical structures that oppressed women in the 19th century through symbolism and the narrative of the main character. These findings are consistent with a number of previous feminist critiques, but also offer a new interpretation of madness not as an end, but as a form of resistance.

### ***Rest Cure as a Form of Dual Power: Medical and Patriarchal***

The first finding that rest cure treatment functions as a tool of patriarchal control reinforces view that madness in women's literature is often a response to structural social pressures (Kresnawaty et al, 2025). In this story, the character John is not only a husband but also a doctor, reflecting the dual form of male authority. However, this study goes further by showing how the narrator becomes aware of and then rejects this dominance, rather than remaining a passive victim. Adds that medical treatments such as rest cures are not neutral but part of a discourse that silences women. This study confirms this but also highlights how the narrator attempts to negotiate her space through symbolic actions: secretly writing, observing the wallpaper, and eventually rebelling against her husband's treatment (Treichler, 1984).

### ***Wallpaper as Psychological and Political Space***

The symbolism of wallpaper has been widely interpreted in previous studies as a reflection of the mental state of the main character. Linked wallpaper to the limitations of women's bodies in 19th-century American culture (Poitras, 2020). However, the findings of this study highlight the active function of wallpaper as a subversive space, where the main character projects her alternative identity and her desire for freedom. The woman “crawling” behind the wallpaper is not merely a representation of madness but also a mirror of the collective women trapped, as stated in the quote “there are many women behind.” This is where the analysis becomes critical and distinct: wallpaper is not merely passively represented but also serves as an internal tool of resistance. The act of tearing down wallpaper can be interpreted as a symbol of ‘breaking free from the oppressive system.’ In this context, the researcher views wallpaper not only as a symbol of imprisonment but also as a stage for personal liberation.

### ***Madness as a Feminist Paradox***

The protagonist's madness is often interpreted as tragic. However, this research highlights madness as a form of resistance when all logical and social avenues are closed, the only way to regain control is to "exit the system." The narrator's actions of crawling, tearing the wallpaper, and declaring that she has "exited" are the pinnacle of reclaiming personal agency. States that by the end of the story, the narrator can no longer be distinguished from the wallpaper itself she becomes part of the symbol she has conquered. This study's findings compare this to other feminist works such as *The Awakening* (Kate Chopin), in which female characters choose to "exit" social structures through death or the erasure of identity (Golden, 1993). However, unlike *The Awakening*, Gilman's character does not die literally, but rather 'erases' herself from the system through madness, so that she remains symbolically alive but outside the reach of the patriarchal order. Thus, the discussion shows that *The Yellow Wallpaper* is not only a story about female mental illness, but a complex representation of how social, medical, and cultural structures are shaped and destroyed by women themselves. This story rejects the dichotomy between victim and perpetrator; the narrator is both. Oppression and resistance occur in the same body and that is the narrative power that Gilman offers. Theoretical reinforcement in the Discussion, with reference to major feminist theories:

### ***Radical Feminism: Rejection of Patriarchal Medical Structures***

This research is directly related to radical feminism, which criticises male-controlled social institutions such as family, marriage, and medicine. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, through the narrator, shows how women deemed "sick" are actually responding to social and domestic pressures. This aligns with Shulamith Firestone's critique that control over women's bodies is the most fundamental form of oppression in the patriarchal system. John's application of the rest cure is a concrete representation of that control. This is reinforced by researcher who states that the "madness" in the story is a metaphor for patriarchal diagnosis that marginalises women's narratives (Tenrisanna et al, 2024). This theory reinforces the finding that the narrator is not only a medical victim but also a symbol of rebellion against the oppressive system through the discourse of "healing."

### ***The Idea of the "Madwoman in the Attic" by Gilbert & Gubar***

In their book *The Madwoman in the Attic* (Golden, 1993). Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar highlight how many female characters in classical literature are unable to express themselves directly and can only "scream" through madness. In this context, the narrator of *The Yellow Wallpaper* represents the archetype of the 'madwoman' who is physically and symbolically imprisoned, and whose only form of freedom is to destroy those boundaries in this case, the wallpaper. This study aligns with that view but adds that the visual symbols in the story (wallpaper, motifs, patterns) are active media of resistance, not merely symbols of suffering. This offers a new interpretation of the 'madwoman' as a symbolic agent, not merely a victim of patriarchy.

### ***Postmodern Feminism: Fragmentation of Identity and Language***

The increasingly fragmented and unstable narrative voice can also be seen through the lens of postmodern feminism, which highlights the fragmentation of women's identities within social structures. The main character experiences a fragmentation of identity: between being a wife, a patient, and a thinking woman who is forbidden to write. The destruction of linguistic structure in the narrative approaches Derrida's form of deconstruction, which shows that meaning and identity are not fixed.

This study shows that narrative fragmentation is not only the result of illness, but also a form of resistance against language and the masculine system that constrains it. This enriches

previous readings that only considered narrative fragmentation as a psychological symptom. By linking the findings of this study to the framework of classical and postmodern feminist theory, this article shows that *The Yellow Wallpaper* is not only historically important but also theoretically significant. This work not only portrays women as victims of the patriarchal system but also as subjects who attempt to dismantle and reject that system from within, even at the cost of their sanity.

### ***Comparison with Other Feminist Works***

Reinforce *The Yellow Wallpaper*'s position as a feminist text, this story can be compared to two major works in the canon of women's literature: Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* and Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*. All three show how women in the late 19th and early 20th centuries had to struggle against social structures that silenced their voices and desires. In *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf states that a woman needs "money and a room of her own" to be able to write and think independently (Woolf, 2014). Woolf emphasises the importance of economic independence and intellectual freedom as absolute prerequisites for women's freedom. This view aligns with the suffering of the main character in *The Yellow Wallpaper*, who is forbidden from writing or engaging in intellectual activities as part of her "treatment." However, unlike Woolf's character, who theoretically advocates for private space, Gilman's narrator is literally confined to a physical space that restricts her, making the conflict she faces more directly physical and psychological. Meanwhile, in *The Awakening* (Mikolchak, 2004), the character Edna Pontellier experiences an identity crisis and ultimately chooses to 'escape' from domestic pressures and her role as wife and mother. She realises that freedom is impossible within the existing social system. Her choice to end her life at sea reflects a form of total resistance to social expectations.

Parallels the character in *The Yellow Wallpaper*, who also liberates herself through extreme symbolic actions: tearing down the wallpaper and shedding her identity as a 'sick wife.' However, unlike Edna, who physically 'dies,' Gilman's narrator remains alive but mentally liberates herself, making madness a form of survival and resistance. Thus, if *A Room of One's Own* offers a theoretical solution, and *The Awakening* shows a tragic way out, then *The Yellow Wallpaper* lies between the two: a narrative of internal resistance, in which the prison cell becomes a place of transformation and self-liberation. Through symbolism, narrative fragmentation, and oppressive medical structures, *The Yellow Wallpaper* reveals that the oppression of women is not only present in the form of physical violence, but also through discourse—medical, social, and linguistic. However, through her madness, the narrator finds a way to reclaim her autonomy. This makes Gilman's story not only a study of trauma but also of the rebirth of female identity through unconventional means.

### **Conclusion**

This study reveals that Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story *The Yellow Wallpaper* is a feminist text rich in symbolism and complex narrative strategies. Through a thematic analysis approach, it was found that the rest cure functions as a tool of patriarchal domination within medical institutions; the yellow wallpaper symbolises women's entrapment within social structures; and the protagonist's madness is a form of resistance against oppressive gender roles. The symbols and narrative changes in the story show that oppression against women does not only occur physically, but also through the arrangement of space, language, and power over the body. By comparing this work with other feminist texts such as *A Room of One's Own* and *The Awakening*, this study affirms that *The Yellow Wallpaper* is one of the pioneering works in voicing women's liberation symbolically and psychologically. The narrative of madness is not the end point, but a gateway to regaining control over oneself.



The implication of these findings is that the implementation of this service will be more effective and efficient if applied with a more varied and character-oriented method according to the needs of the students. This research has intellectual limitations, where it provides space to create a living collection using simple images and symbols, as a means to convey the meaning of their works and aspirations. Thus, further research is expected to help teachers in providing a depiction and reinforcing the idea that madness in this context for women is a subversive act that restores personal agency as a form of resistance arising from within the system.

## **Acknowledgment**

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