

Symbolic Orders in The Yellow Wallpaper Literary Analysis

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Introduction

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" is a short story about confinement, authorship, marriage, medical authority, and a narrator whose deteriorating mental state is expressed through increasingly intense interpretations of the wallpaper in her room. Barbara A. Suess's article "The Writing's on the Wall: Symbolic Orders in 'The Yellow Wallpaper'" uses Lacanian psychoanalysis to examine how language and symbolic authority shape that deterioration. Her reading is valuable because the narrator's conflict is not merely with an unpleasant room or an insensitive husband; it concerns who has the power to define reality and to authorize speech. John, both husband and physician, names the narrator's condition, prescribes inactivity, dismisses her interpretations, and limits the writing through which she tries to organize experience. The wallpaper gradually becomes an alternative field of meaning in which the narrator projects, discovers, and finally identifies with a trapped woman. A Lacanian interpretation can illuminate that movement without requiring readers to treat every psychological concept as a literal clinical diagnosis. The story's power lies in the collision between patriarchal symbolic authority and a consciousness attempting to create meaning under enforced dependence (Suess, 2003; St. Jean, 2002).

The Mirror Stage and a Fractured Sense of Self

Suess draws on Jacques Lacan's account of the mirror stage, in which the developing subject identifies with an apparently coherent image and begins forming an ego through a relationship between self, image, and others. In Gilman's story, the narrator lacks stable authority over her own identity because John repeatedly defines what she feels, what treatment she requires, and which interpretations of her experience are legitimate. Her private writing becomes one of the few practices through which she can articulate a self not completely organized by his language. The wallpaper then functions like a distorted mirror: at first it is an irritating external object, but repeated observation produces patterns, figures, and eventually a woman whose confinement resembles the narrator's own. This does not mean the wallpaper reveals a hidden literal person. It becomes a symbolic surface on which divided identity can be represented. The narrator recognizes herself indirectly through the figure behind the pattern because direct opposition to John remains difficult. Suess's Lacanian reading therefore interprets the visual obsession as a struggle over self-constitution rather than as a

decorative gothic device alone.

Mental Illness, Postpartum Context, and Diagnostic Caution

The story is often discussed in relation to [postpartum depression](#), [postpartum blues](#), and [postpartum psychosis](#) because the narrator has recently had a child and displays severe emotional and perceptual disturbance. Modern readers should nevertheless avoid assigning a definitive retrospective diagnosis from a fictional narrative written before contemporary diagnostic categories existed. The narrator reports nervous depression, exhaustion, secrecy, fear, insomnia, fixation, and later hallucination-like experiences and profound disorganization. These features can be compared with modern postpartum disorders, but the literary function of her condition is broader than diagnosis. Gilman connects mental deterioration with isolation, loss of meaningful work, lack of intellectual stimulation, marital power, and a treatment regime that suppresses the narrator's own account of what helps her. Sues's psychoanalytic interpretation goes further by treating the breakdown as a crisis in symbolic order: the language provided by husband, medicine, and domestic convention no longer accommodates the narrator's experience. Diagnostic caution therefore strengthens the analysis because it allows medical history and psychological symbolism to inform the story without reducing a complex literary text to a case report.

The Wallpaper, the Trapped Woman, and Symbolic Resistance

The wallpaper gradually changes from an ugly domestic surface into a system the narrator feels compelled to decipher. She first notices its chaotic pattern, then perceives a second figure behind it, and eventually identifies that figure as a woman who appears trapped behind bars. The image mirrors the narrator's own confinement in a former nursery whose windows are barred and whose domestic arrangement has been chosen for her. In the related analysis of ["The Yellow Wallpaper"](#) and ["A Room of One's Own"](#), private space is closely connected with women's intellectual freedom; Gilman's room instead becomes a place where rest is imposed and authorship must be hidden. Sues reads the woman behind the wallpaper as part of the narrator's attempt to form an alternative symbolic order outside John's authority. Tearing the paper can therefore be understood simultaneously as resistance and breakdown. The narrator acts against the material structure that has absorbed her sense of confinement, yet her liberation depends on a delusional identification that also marks profound loss of shared reality.

The Final Scene and the Irony of “Getting Out”

The story’s final scene creates its central ambiguity. The narrator locks the room, tears away the wallpaper, circles the walls, and announces that she has finally “got out,” while John faints after seeing her condition. On one level, the reversal is dramatic: the husband who has controlled space, treatment, and interpretation becomes physically powerless, while the narrator continues moving over him. Her declaration sounds like victory over the restrictions that have defined her. On another level, the scene cannot be celebrated as uncomplicated emancipation because her new freedom exists within severe psychological disorganization. Even the statement “in spite of you and Jane” has produced debate about whether “Jane” names the narrator, refers to someone else, or represents textual instability; Gilman never clearly establishes the narrator’s name earlier in the story. Suess’s question about whether psychosis can be called triumphant captures this tension. The narrator escapes one symbolic order only by entering a private system that cannot support ordinary communication. The conclusion is therefore both rebellion and catastrophe, refusing a simple choice between heroic liberation and passive victimhood (Gilman, 1892).

Gender, Medical Authority, and the Politics of Language

A Lacanian reading becomes most persuasive when connected with the story’s social structure. John’s authority is not based only on personality; it is reinforced by his roles as husband, physician, economic provider, and interpreter of respectable behavior. When the narrator says that writing helps her, her judgment is treated as unreliable because the medical and marital system has already defined her as someone whose perceptions require correction. Language itself becomes political: John’s labels sound rational and affectionate, while her private descriptions are dismissed as fantasy until fantasy becomes the only language through which resistance seems possible. Gilman’s story therefore exposes the danger of treatment that silences the patient’s account, especially when gender hierarchy makes disagreement appear pathological. This does not imply that every medical recommendation in the story is wrong simply because it comes from a male physician. The critique concerns authority without genuine listening, individualized assessment, or meaningful participation. Suess’s symbolic-order framework clarifies why the narrator’s hidden journal matters so much: writing preserves a competing version of reality until the pressure of secrecy and confinement transforms that alternative voice into a total private world.

Conclusion

Suess’s Lacanian interpretation of “The Yellow Wallpaper” reveals the story as a struggle over language, identity, and the authority to define reality. The narrator’s fixation on the wallpaper develops because ordinary channels of self-expression have been constrained by a husband and

medical regime that repeatedly override her descriptions of her own experience. The woman behind the pattern becomes a symbolic double through which confinement can be visualized, while tearing the wallpaper becomes both an act of resistance and evidence of escalating psychological disorganization. The mirror-stage framework helps explain why the narrator seeks coherence through an external image, but the story should not be reduced to one psychoanalytic formula or one retrospective psychiatric diagnosis. Its force comes from the interaction of mental illness, domestic power, gender expectations, restricted authorship, and medical authority. The final declaration of escape remains intentionally unstable because freedom has been achieved only inside a private symbolic system that separates the narrator from shared reality. Gilman thus leaves readers with a troubling paradox: resistance to oppressive authority can be genuine even when the form that resistance takes is also destructive.

Works Cited

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