

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's explanation behind "The Yellow Wallpaper"

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 borderline 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 a good 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.

published in *The Forerunner*, October 1913.

The Rest Cure

- Common treatment for hysteria in women
- Great popularity in the 19th century as a way to treat women with mental illness
- mostly anxiety and depression
- Might also be applied to upper class women who were exhausted by the demands of life and running a large household
- Or who were suffering from postpartum depression
- exclusively applied to women
 - women thought to be guided by hormones
 - supposed to be applied to disease of the female mind
 - cure almost always applied to women of the middle to upper classes
 - women who were working classes were thought to be sturdier and less susceptible to hysteria
- Involved complete bed rest for four weeks to two months
 - Essentially imprisoned women for up to two months
 - patients secluded and prohibited from contact with family members to reduce dependence on others
 - only contact was with the nurses who massaged them
- first few weeks not allowed to engage mind by reading or small activities
 - some patients not allowed to use hands at all
- sometimes even prohibited from rolling over in their beds—may have needed to be restrained
- after fifth or sixth day women became “tractable” did not resist imposed monotony
- Husbands were allowed to make decisions regarding wife’s treatment perceptions of husbands might have influenced care
- Faded into obscurity with the advent of Freud and psychotherapy

