

Charlotte Perkins Gilman was a famous 19th century feminist whose social activism was rooted a painful childhood. (1st **sentence**)

How much responsibility must each person accept for his or her fate?
(1st **sentence**)

In 1913, Charlotte Perkins Gilman clearly stated her reasons for writing "The Yellow Wallpaper" - to convince her doctor, prominent neurologist S. Weir Mitchell, of the error of his ways in using his famous "rest cure" to treat all women who suffered from neurasthenia. (1st **sentence**)



In writing "The Yellow Wallpaper" to reach Mitchell, Gilman was really striving to reach a sexist society. (**thesis**)

The narrator's inability to believe in herself is the primary cause of her insanity.
(**thesis**)

Gilman's internal conflicts are clearly reflected in the narrator's struggle with herself. (**thesis**)

Although Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" is not usually read as a commentary on personal responsibility, approaching it this way can help readers make sense out of details that are often overlooked in feminist interpretations of the story. The narrator of Gilman's story struggles against a medical treatment she doesn't trust and against a husband who seems determined to patronize her as he inflicts that treatment on her. John, the husband, moves the narrator to a country house away from all society and forbids her to engage in any intellectual activity while she undergoes the popular 19th century "rest cure" devised by a famous neurologist, S. Weir Mitchell. Early in the story, readers learn that the narrator is a woman who longs for stimulating company and the opportunity to write. But instead of listening to herself and taking her desires seriously, the narrator convinces herself that she must cooperate with her husband's agenda, a decision that ultimately leads to her going mad. **(orientation A)**

Some readers take Gilman's published declaration at face value and dismiss later feminist interpretations of the short story as contrary to the author's intentions. These readers refuse to see John, the husband in the short story, as the patronizing character he is. John imposes his will on the narrator, his wife, in every conceivable way, from determining how (idly) and where (in almost complete isolation) she spends each minute of the day to trying to control her thoughts by admonishing her never to use her imagination. Since John is the narrator's doctor as well as her husband, we can assume that Gilman's portrait of him is intended to double as an indictment of Mitchell. And beyond that, we can assume that Mitchell's practices and attitudes reflect the historical period during which he and Gilman lived. **(orientation B)**

When Gilman was a girl, her father deserted the family, leaving her mother to cope with two young children, Charlotte and her older brother. Gilman watched her mother, a previously pampered and much sought-after woman, struggle to survive financially and emotionally. In order to teach her daughter to be strong, the mother withheld affection and insisted that Charlotte stifle her active imagination in favor of channeling her energies to good acts and careful studying. Gilman grew up believing it was her duty to forego personal happiness for the sake of serving humanity.

By the time Gilman met her first husband, artist Charles Stetson, she had already spent years preparing for a life of social service. When Stetson proposed, Gilman had grave doubts about accepting his offer of marriage; she believed she was going against everything she was meant to do in life. However, in spite of these doubts, Gilman accepted the proposal and became Charlotte Stetson in _____ at the age of _____. Not long after the marriage, Gilman became pregnant and began suffering from a nervous disorder known as neurasthenia, which was treated by what was called the "rest cure" - a regimen of isolation and forced idleness coupled with excessive eating. The combination of forced inactivity and self-doubt came close to driving Gilman insane, an experience she captured in her famous short story "The Yellow Wallpaper." The narrator of that story is a woman like Gilman who preferred intellectual to domestic activity and who struggled to make her life her own. **(orientation C)**