

inequality

Charlotte Perkins Gilman writing at her desk, ca. 1916–1922



Courtesy Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University

In the late nineteenth century, at a time when women were challenging traditional ideas about gender that excluded them from political and intellectual life, medical and scientific experts drew on notions of female weakness to justify inequality between the sexes. Artist and writer Charlotte Perkins Gilman, who was discouraged from pursuing a career to preserve her health, rejected these ideas in a terrifying short story titled "The Yellow Wall-Paper." The famous tale served as an indictment of the medical profession and the social conventions restricting women's professional and creative opportunities.

Charlotte and her second husband, George Houghton Gilman, 1909

In the years after the publication of the story, Charlotte enjoyed great professional success and personal happiness. In 1900 she wed her cousin, George Houghton Gilman, and she was able to rebuild her relationship with her daughter. Charlotte became a well-known author and was regularly invited to speak on the subject of women's rights and economic independence.



Courtesy Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University

success



Courtesy Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University

Charlotte on a trip to campaign for women's right to vote, ca. 1900

Charlotte's influential writings include several books, essays, poetry, a novel, and *The Forerunner*, a monthly magazine of her work published from November 1909 to December 1916. While some nineteenth-century readers did appreciate the message hidden in "The Yellow Wall-Paper," the story also resonated with many in the women's movement of the 1970s. Since their rediscovery of the story, the text has been republished many times, continuing to enthrall audiences more than a century after it was written.

THE LITERATURE OF PRESCRIPTION CHARLOTTE PERKINS GILMAN AND "THE YELLOW WALL-PAPER"



Courtesy National Library of Medicine

The story's narrator, imprisoned in her room.

The New England Magazine, January 1892

independence

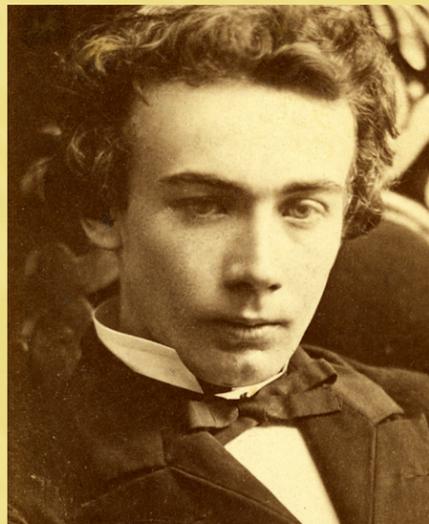


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*“Live as domestic a life as possible . . .
And never touch pen, brush, or pencil
as long as you live.”*

Gilman describes Dr. Mitchell's advice (1913)



Courtesy Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University

**Charles Stetson,
Charlotte's first husband, 1880**

Charlotte met Walter Stetson, an artist, when she was twenty-one years old. The couple married in 1884, and had a child three years later. Soon after her daughter's birth, Charlotte began to experience episodes of depression. She resented the narrow confines of married life and motherhood, and like many other women of her era, longed for greater intellectual and creative fulfillment. Her husband, however, insisted on a more traditional marriage, and she became increasingly despondent.

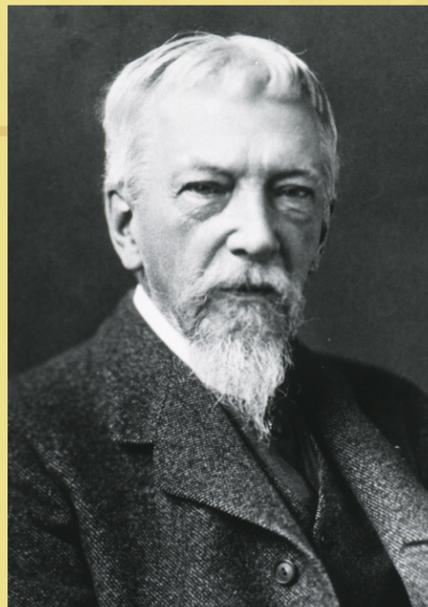
**Charlotte's daughter,
Katharine Stetson, 1887**



Courtesy Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University

Dr. S. Weir Mitchell, *Wear and Tear: Hints for the Overworked*, 1871

Charlotte consulted nervous diseases specialist Dr. Silas Weir Mitchell for treatment. As one of many medical and scientific experts who debated "the woman question," he defended the notion of significant differences between the sexes and argued that an epidemic of neurasthenia, or nervous exhaustion, was rife among women who attempted to exceed their natural limits. He recommended a "rest cure" in which the patient was not allowed to read, write, feed herself, or talk to others.



Courtesy National Library of Medicine

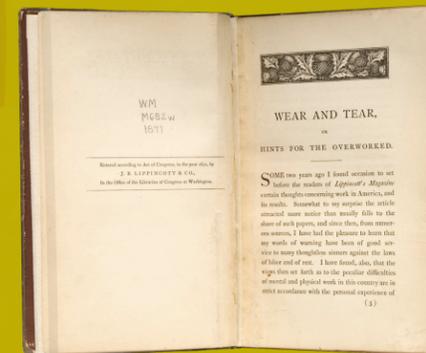
Dr. S. Weir Mitchell (front, left) at the Infirmary for Nervous Diseases, Philadelphia, 1902



Courtesy National Library of Medicine

"The Yellow Wall-Paper"

As Charlotte undertook the regimen, she became increasingly distressed, and began to fear that the rest cure was bad for her health. She decided to end the treatment and her marriage. Soon after she and her husband separated, Charlotte wrote "The Yellow Wall-Paper," during a heat wave in Pasadena, California, in the summer of 1890. She took two days to complete the terrifying tale.



Courtesy National Library of Medicine

The narrator is a woman prescribed the rest cure by her husband John, a physician. Confined to her bedroom, a former children's nursery with bars on the windows, she secretly writes in her diary. As the weeks go by, her mind deteriorates as her forced isolation and the prohibition against intellectual pursuits take their toll.



Courtesy National Library of Medicine

The narrator with her husband, who has fainted after finding her in deep distress.

With only her immediate surroundings to look at, the character becomes increasingly perplexed by the garish color and intricate patterns of the wallpaper all around her. She begins to see distorted shapes, eventually identifying a woman trapped behind the paper fighting to get out. The story ends with the narrator's husband discovering his wife maniacally circling the bedroom, surrounded by the tattered shreds of paper she has torn from the walls. He faints at the sight.

depression

isolation