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Reading Questions for "The Yellow Wall-Paper"

1. Early in the story, the narrator says "John laughs at me, of course, but one expects that in marriage." (first page) What comment does this make about the role of women in marriage? What gender assumption does it establish/reinforce? Over time, how could it make the narrator or any person feel?
2. The narrator says, "Personally, I believe that congenial work, with excitement and change, would do me good. But what is one to do?" (p. 648) as well as "I cry at nothing, and cry most of the time...I determine for the thousandth time that I will follow that pointless pattern to some sort of a conclusion...The effort is getting to be greater than the relief...It is getting to be a great effort for me to think straight." (pp. 650-651) What feelings does the narrator describe? Where might these feelings lead to if left unchecked?
3. "It was nursery first and then playroom and gymnasium, I should judge, for the windows are barred for little children, and there are rings and things in the walls." (p. 648) What inferences can you make about the narrator's status from the described setting and imagery say? How does it generalize the gender assumptions about women in the late nineteenth century?
4. The narrator describes her feelings about the wallpaper as "repellent, almost revolting; a smouldering unclean yellow...It is a dull yet lurid orange in some places, a sickly sulphur tint in others" (p. 649) and "I get positively angry with the impertinence of it and the everlastingness. Up and down and sideways they crawl, and those absurd, unblinking eyes are everywhere." (pp. 649-650) What atmosphere does the wallpaper create? What is the wallpaper beginning to symbolize and what effect is it beginning to have on her mental health? What mental condition is she beginning to manifest?

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5. The narrator describes the figure behind the wallpaper as a “strange, provoking, formless sort of figure” (p. 650); “The faint figure behind seems to shake the pattern, just as if she wanted to get out.” (p. 652) What could the figure represent and why is “behind” the appropriate word? What does the pattern symbolize? What gender assumption do these symbols underscore?

6. “‘Better in body perhaps—’ I began, and stopped short, for he [John] sat up straight and looked at me with such a stern, reproachful look that I could not say another word.” (p. 652) What seems to be John’s attitude about the narrator’s condition? How does this mirror society’s attitude—both past and present—regarding mental health conditions?

7. Why must the woman in the wallpaper “creep” by daylight, and why must it be “humiliating” (p. 654) for her to do so? What could the daylight symbolize? How does her feeling of humiliation contradict the assumptions about women at the time?

8. How does the story end? What inferences can you make about Gilman’s perspective on gender assumptions and their ultimate effects?