

Repression of Women Exposed in The Yellow Wallpaper

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Repression of Women Exposed in The Yellow Wallpaper

The short story "The Yellow Wallpaper" by Charlotte Perkins Gilman gives a brilliant description of the plight of the Victorian woman, and the mental agony that her and many other women were put through as "treatment" for depression when they found that they were not satisfied by the life they had been given. In the late nineteenth century when the Yellow Wallpaper was written, the role of wife and mother, which women were expected to adopt, often led to depression or a so-called "hysteria". Women of this period were living in a patriarchal society where they were expected to be demure and passive, supportive yet unquestioning of their husbands, and good mothers to their husband's children. The conflict for women in the society thus became a question of how to be all of these things while still conserving herself as a person and most importantly, conserving her sanity (Wagner-Martin 51). In this Victorian society "the boredom and confinement of affluent women fostered a morbid cult of hypochondria - 'female invalidism'" - where it became popular and even appropriate for women to fall into bed at the slightest provocation with a "sick headache" or "nerves" (Ehrenreich 92-93). Charlotte Perkins Gilman, author of the Yellow Wallpaper (among other things), said of this phenomenon that "American men 'have bred a race of women

weak enough to be handled as invalids; or mentally weak enough to pretend that they are and like it." (93). As a result of this "female invalidism" the respected physician, Dr. S. Weir Mitchell developed a rest cure "which depended upon seclusion, massage, electricity, immobility and overfeedi..... middle of paperublications, 1997. 1-15.---The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman: An Autobiography Univ of Wisconsin Press, Reissue edition 1991. Hedges, Elaine R. Afterword. The Yellow Wallpaper. 1973: 37-63. Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism 9. Detroit: Gale: 1988. Schopp-Schilling, Beate. "' The Yellow Wallpaper': A Rediscovered Realistic Story." American Literary Realism 1870-1910. 8 (1975): 107-108. Shumaker, Conrad. "'Too Terribly Good to Be Printed': Charlotte Gilman's The Yellow Wallpaper" American Literature. 57 (1985): 194-198. Treichler, Paula A. "Escaping the Sentence: Diagnosis and Discourse in The Yellow Wallpaper" Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature. 3 (1984): 61-77. Wagner-Martin, Linda. "The Yellow Wallpaper." Reference Guide to Short Fiction. Ed. Noelle Watson. Detroit: St. James Press, 1994. 981-982.

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