The word “hysteria” comes from the Greek word for uterus, and for over thousands of years the belief was sustained that problems within the female organ made the illness strictly feminine. “The dizzying range of symptoms linked to hysteria included physical weakness, depression, crying episodes, anxiety, irrational thoughts or behavior (including women who insisted on pursuing "unwomanly activities" such as higher education), as well as sexual complaints of any kind” (Vitelli). When learning about the symptoms of hysteria in our modern world—where it is no longer considered a mental disorder—it becomes blatantly obvious that this “illness” was invented by men in order to keep women in their socially acceptable state of passivity and obedience. Hysteria could be used by men as the reason behind any complaint or qualm that a woman had about her situation in life.

In Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper”, the female narrator is depressed and nervous, so her husband forces her to stay in a room and undergo a type of rest-cure treatment to get rid of the hysteria. The rest-cure, developed by Silas Weir-Mitchell, was a common treatment for those with mental disorders, and included enforced bed rest, isolation, force-feeding, and massage. He originally developed this treatment for traumatized Civil War Veterans, who had grown extremely nervous after their experiences in battle. But in men, he called the affliction neurasthenia, which simply meant a weakness of the nerves.

During the Victorian period, due to the repressive rigidness of the era, mental disorders and hysteria were becoming increasingly common in young women, described by Weir-Mitchell as “nervous women, who, as a rule, are thin and lack blood.” Gilman’s story is an exaggeration of her real experience, the narrator goes mad from being locked away in the room, a fate forced upon her by her husband. The narrator’s mental illness and her descent into insanity represent the
misogyny of hysteria and rest-cure, and how the treatment became a device to oppress women into an almost child-like state of dependence and submissiveness.

Charlotte Gilman had suffered from depression her entire life, and after the birth of her daughter it severely worsened. She struggled to balance her career ambitions of writer and social reformer with the predisposed gender roles of wife and mother. She sought help from Weir-Mitchell, the most acclaimed specialist in the country. Gilman explains what Weir-Mitchell told her to do, and her reaction to his treatment in the essay “Why I Wrote The Yellow Wallpaper”: “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.”

Through rest-cure treatment, he was forcing Gilman to remain in the prison of the domestic sphere, forbidding her to do anything academic. Appalled by Weir-Mitchell and his methods, Gilman stopped following his orders and began working again. She was able to gain mental clarity again and said that "… 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.” More than a decade later, she wrote “The Yellow Wallpaper” as an exposé of Weir-Mitchell’s misogynistic practices.

To Gilman, domestic life was a prison, and in the story, the room with the yellow wallpaper is a representation of that prison. The narrator, who is clearly based on Gilman herself, has grown depressed and unhappy in her domestic life. When she tells her husband John,
who is also a doctor, he of course, immediately calls it hysteria and wants to lock her up in a room. Being a woman of the time period, she really has no option but to obey. “If a physician of high standing, and one’s own husband, assures friends and relatives that there is nothing the matter with one but temporary nervous depression—a slight hysterical tendency—what is one to do? My brother is also a physician, and also of high standing, and he says the same thing” (Gilman 792).

Both her husband and brother have decided what is wrong with her. She has absolutely no say in the matter and since they are both men and doctors, their word must be followed. The narrator does seem skeptical about her treatment, but she mainly seems to be obliged to believe in what her husband tells her, further exposing that she is trapped in a situation where she must always be compliant to men.

Just as Gilman did, the narrator wishes to pursue writing, but is forbidden by her husband, because it will disrupt her recovery. However, she does mention that she continued to write “in spite of them” (792). John also tells her to not think about her condition, because the more she does, the worse it will get. He does not want his wife to think too intensely about her illness, because she might realize that she is being mistreated, and that would be disadvantageous to him. With his wife safely locked away, she is unable to do anything that might disrupt the social norm, and John can go about his business with peace of mind.

While in the room, the only company offered to the narrator is her infant son, but she says he makes her nervous. She loves her son, but does not want to be trapped in the gender role of nurturer. These feelings of anxiousness about being a mother are common to those who suffer postpartum depression, a serious mental disorder which needs sensitive, specialized treatment.
But in the late nineteenth century, it was unheard of and improper to feel this way, so it was instantly dismissed as hysteria.

As time goes by and she remains trapped in the room, the narrator begins to slowly lose her mind. The longer she stays in the room, the more dependent upon it she becomes, and eventually she appears to find a twisted sense of false freedom within the walls. She begins to imagine things, seeing ghosts of women crawling around the room, and someone to whom she refers to as Jennie, trapped behind the wallpaper. These hallucinations symbolize women of the nineteenth century and their oppression. Jennie is an especially powerful symbol, as she is literally trapped by the wallpaper and needs the narrator to free her.

Everything that happens to the narrator in this story is related to a chain of events which are all related to misogyny and female oppression. Her feelings of entrapment and repression are caused by her husband and the patriarchal society in which she lives, which lead her to feeling extremely depressed and nervous. This then leads him to ignore her real problems and concerns, quickly diagnose her as a hysteric, and lock her in the room, isolating her from life completely. The isolation and literal entrapment inflicted upon her by her husband cause the narrator to go insane.

Years later, Gilman’s powerful statement about the unethical, sexist methods of Weir-Mitchell provoked the doctor to alter his treatment of hysteria/neurasthenia. “The Yellow Wallpaper” is a social commentary, as well as a warning for women about the misogynistic evils of rest-cure treatment. She achieved her goal, as the short story was heralded as a great piece of writing by mental health physicians, and even supposedly saved a woman from suffering a fate similar to the narrator. And as Gilman succinctly explains in the last line of “Why I Wrote The
Yellow Wallpaper”, “It was not intended to drive people crazy, but to save people from being driven crazy, and it worked.”


