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Psychiatrists in 19th-century fiction

The Yellow Wallpaper (1892), Charlotte Perkins Gilman

Fiona Subotsky

The narrator of *The Yellow Wallpaper* has been taken by her medical husband to 'a colonial mansion, a hereditary estate', perhaps 'a haunted house', to recover from 'a temporary nervous depression – a slight hysterical tendency'. She has been forbidden to write, though she does so secretly, and is increasingly confined to her bedroom at the top of the house, an old nursery with barred windows, a heavy bed fastened to the floor and badly damaged yellow wallpaper with a strange pattern and smell which becomes increasingly hideous yet fascinating to her. Weeks go by. She seems to see behind the pattern a woman, or many women, creeping, as if behind bars, and tries to release her or them by creeping round the walls herself and stripping off the paper. The ending is both shocking and uncertain, in itself deranged.

Where is the psychiatrist in this? The narrator's husband says that if she does not improve, he will send her 'to Weir Mitchell in the fall'. Silas Weir Mitchell was in fact an eminent contemporary physician in the United States, author both of scientific books and papers and also of a considerable amount of fiction. He had treated Charlotte Perkins Gilman for depression, in her view disastrously. He was especially famous for his 'rest cure', which required his patients, usually women considered to be suffering from hysterical nervous complaints, to be confined to bed and do nothing exciting at all but passively undergo electrical and massage treatments and consume a large quantity of food. He described his method in *Fat and Blood, and How to Make Them* (1877). While highly fashionable for a while, by 1896 our own *Journal* concluded that this treatment 'has frequently proved a most conspicuous failure'.

Charlotte Gilman, however, did escape her confines and became an active feminist lecturer and writer; her novel has become a feminist classic.

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