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# THE YELLOW WALLPAPER

CHARLOTTE PERKINS GILMAN

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## TRUE OR FALSE

1. All people with mental health disorders are crazy.
2. Anxiety is a mental health disorder.
3. Only veterans can suffer from PTSD.
4. Postpartum depression is when a woman who can't get pregnant feels depressed.
5. "Female hysteria" was a common diagnosis up until the 1950s.
6. 1 in 4 women experience postpartum depression.
7. People with good lives can't get depressed.
8. You can always tell when someone has a mental health disorder.
9. More than 260 million people worldwide live with depression.
10. Mental health treatment was non-existent before the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

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## MENTAL HEALTH DISORDERS

A mental health disorder is a medical condition that affects a person's mood, personality, or emotional state. Some are hereditary, and some are a result of an injury or traumatic event. Some disorders last forever while others are temporary.

- Anxiety
- Depression
- Eating disorders
- Schizophrenia
- Dissociative identity disorder
- Post traumatic stress disorder
- Bipolar disorder
- Obsessive compulsive disorder
- Borderline personality disorder
- Hypochondria
- Postpartum depression
- Many more

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**WHAT DO YOU THINK ARE  
SOME BEHAVIORS THAT  
EITHER IMPROVE OR  
WORSEN A MENTAL  
HEALTH CONDITION?**

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## COPING MECHANISMS

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Positive

Negative

Physical Exercise  
Create art / music  
Breathing Exercises  
Reading / Writing / Journaling  
Therapy  
Medication  
Support Animal or care for a pet  
Get involved in something  
Shower and get dressed  
Eat healthy

Use alcohol or drugs  
Isolate yourself  
Avoid friends and family  
Mask your feelings  
Deny your symptoms  
Avoiding sleep  
Stay at home in bed for days

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## SETTING

1. Describe the house that the narrator is currently living at. Describe the room she is staying in. What type of mood does the setting of the story create?

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## MENTAL ILLNESS

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2. What type of illness does the narrator suffer from? What symptoms does she have?

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## GENDER ROLES

3. What is the marriage/relationship like between the narrator and John?

4. Do you think John is a good husband, why or why not?

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## POINT OF VIEW

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5. What is the point of view of this story? Is the narrator reliable, why or why not?

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6. Why is the narrator so excited toward the end of the story? How has her attitude changed?

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## IRONY

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7. What has caused the narrator to go mad? Why is it ironic?

8. What is one example of dramatic irony from the story?

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## **FORESHADOWING**

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9. What hints are revealed that the narrator will eventually go insane?

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## THEME

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10. What is one universal theme present in the story? What evidence supports this theme?

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## SUMMARIZE

- Write TWO brief summaries of the short story, The Yellow Wallpaper; one will be objective, and one will be subjective.
- Objective Summary: must be only **explicitly true** information. No opinions or assumptions can be included. Use only what the story has told you.
- Subjective Summary: your summary can be influenced by your opinion of events and inferences you've made about the characters and the plot.

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# Teacher Guide to the Lesson

## TRUE OR FALSE ACTIVATING STRATEGY

Have students number a piece of paper 1-10. Then show the following statements on the board and ask students to write down "true" or "false" for each sentence. (Although some of these statements are clearly a "true" or a "false," some statements are subjective in nature and are meant to generate conversation more than anything.) Once students are done, review the answers. Have conversations about the answers at your own discretion.

1. All people with mental health disorders are crazy. **FALSE**

**This question is meant to eliminate negative stigmas about mental health disorders; however, you could mention to students that some disorders have more severe symptoms such as hallucinations and delusions while some disorders are easier to function regularly in society. Overall, most people with mental health disorders can treat their disorder with either medication, therapy, and some type of support system.**

2. Anxiety is a mental health disorder. **TRUE**

3. Only veterans can suffer from PTSD. **FALSE**

**Anyone who has experienced a traumatic event can experience post traumatic stress disorder, such as someone who was mugged with a weapon.**

4. Postpartum depression is when a woman who can't get pregnant feels depressed. **FALSE**

5. "Female hysteria" was a common diagnosis up until the 1950s. **TRUE**

6. 1 in 4 women experience postpartum depression. **TRUE**

7. People with good lives can't get depressed. **FALSE**

**For example, Michael Phelps, Robin Williams, Katy Perry, Lady Gaga, and Kristen Bell all have suffered from depression at least once in their lives. (This is important because the narrator's husband doesn't believe the narrator is depressed simply because she has no reason to be.)**

8. You can always tell when someone has a mental health disorder. **FALSE**

9. More than 260 million people worldwide live with depression. **TRUE**



10. Mental health treatment was non-existent before the 19<sup>th</sup> century. **TRUE**

**This activating strategy hopefully gets your students talking about mental health and how it looks different on everyone. It will also bring to light how prevalent mental health issues are and how little awareness was present up until the last 50 years.**

### **COPING MECHANISMS**

Ask your students to generate a list of positive and negative behaviors that either improve or worsen a medical health condition that doesn't involve hospitalization. The purpose of this activity is not to teach that mental health conditions can be healed with reading or exercise, but to illustrate there are behaviors that can **WORSEN** someone's depression—such as isolation—which is what the narrator of "The Yellow Wallpaper" experiences. It also illustrates that behaviors such as journaling, talking about your feelings, and working (which gives someone purpose) could help improve someone's mental health condition—all of which the narrator is forbidden to do or limited to do. The point is, mental health cannot and should not be ignored.

## **LITERARY ANALYSIS QUESTIONS ANSWER KEY**

Option A: You can print a copy of the questions for your students and they can complete the questions independently or in groups.

Option B: You can project the questions using the PowerPoint presentation and complete the questions as a class or independently.

### **SETTING**

1. Describe the house that the narrator is currently living at. Describe the room she is staying in. What type of mood does the setting of the story create?

The house is described as a beautiful, possibly haunted mansion—which should be beyond the financial means of the narrator and her husband (it's readily available to rent though, maybe indicating something is wrong with it). The narrator notes there is something strange about it. It has large gardens, hedges, and gates that are isolated from the rest of the street.

The room is covered in yellow wallpaper that the narrator states is "committing every artistic sin." It is provoking and outrageous, yet dull and sickly in other places. It is a hideous color of yellow. The narrator notes that the windows look all ways and are barred; "there are rings and things in the walls."

The description of the house creates an ominous mood and the room itself is creepy and mysterious. The narrator says she thinks it was an old nursery, but readers are left thinking she is wrong and she's either in denial or naive. The fact that the house is isolated makes it feel like she is more in captivity than on summer vacation.

### MENTAL ILLNESS

2. What type of illness does the narrator suffer from? What symptoms does she have?

The narrator states she suffers from a nervous condition, although readers infer it's possible she might have severe depression or postpartum depression since a young baby is mentioned. Her symptoms include hysteria, sadness, anger, exhaustion, sensitivity, and eventually hallucinations.

### GENDER ROLES

3. What is the marriage/relationship like between the narrator and John?

The narrator states, "what can one do?" regarding her illness, indicating that she does not have much (or any) control in the relationship. What John says, goes. He does not believe she is sick, and so she is not getting the help she needs.

John treats her like a child, calling her a "blessed little goose" and walking on eggshells around her. It does not help her situation because he won't listen to her needs as he believes—just like a child—she doesn't know what's best for herself.

The narrator is aware her husband is hindering her recovery process. "John is a physician, and perhaps—(I would not say it to a living soul, of course, but this is dead paper and a great relief to my mind)—perhaps that is one reason I do not get well faster."

Overall, their marriage seems lopsided, with John being the one in control, and there appears to be little romance.

4. Do you think John is a good husband why or why not?

Opinion question. Answers will vary.

### POINT OF VIEW

5. What is the point of view of this story? Is the narrator reliable why or why not?

This story is told from first person point of view. The narrator is not reliable because she is suffering from a mental health disorder that is causing paranoia and hallucinations.

6. Why is the narrator so excited toward the end of the story? How has her attitude changed?

The narrator is excited because she has found purpose in the small room where she resides. She once hated the wallpaper, but now she sees it as an opportunity to save



the woman trapped behind it. She has gone from depressed and uncomfortable, to thrilled and determined.

### IRONY

7. What has caused the narrator to go mad? Why is it ironic?

It is ironic that the narrator has gone mad based on her husband's diagnosis and suggestions for treatment since he is a well-respected physician.

8. What is one example of dramatic irony from the story?

One example is that we know the narrator is keeping a journal while her husband is unaware.

One example is that readers know the room was never previously used as a nursery but for an insane asylum, though the narrator has not figured this out.

One example is that we know the narrator is trying to free a woman from the wall, and her health condition is worsening, but her husband has no idea. Plus, we know there is no woman behind the wall.

One example is when Jennie is staring at the wallpaper and the narrator thinks Jennie sees the woman and thus becomes angry, readers know she does not actually see this woman because she is not there and she is just putting together that the yellow stains on her clothes are from the wall.

### FORESHADOWING

9. What hints are revealed that the narrator will eventually go insane?

There are many indications that this room will drive someone insane, to include the bite marks on the bed, the bars on the windows, and the scratched floors that are gouged and splintered. Plus, the bed is nailed to the floor.

The narrator sees a woman creeping outside, "I see her on that long shaded lane, creeping up and down. I see her in those dark grape arbors, creeping all around the garden," foreshadowing that her condition is getting worse and worse, and that she will soon be creeping around herself.

### THEME

10. What is one universal theme present in the story? What evidence supports this theme?

People need a way to express themselves or an outlet for their thoughts. (The narrator secretly records her thoughts on paper because she has no one to talk to and no one believes her about her condition, to include her husband and brother—both physicians.)



People deserve a say in their own medical treatment. (The narrator feels uncomfortable in the room upstairs and that the wallpaper is driving her mad. Her husband thinks she is being sensitive and ignores her requests. We know how *that* ends.)

Captivity with little to no interaction with others can exasperate someone's mental health condition. (The narrator is not allowed to work or care for her baby which means her life lacks purpose. She does not start to feel good about herself until she finds purpose in freeing the woman from behind the wallpaper. She created her own purpose and it was her demise.)

Someone's life can appear normal from the outside, but you never know what someone is thinking. (Jennie and John thought the narrator was getting better because she was complaining less. In reality, she was keeping more secrets from them than ever. Perhaps because of their previous judgements about her and the fact that they never listen to her, she felt it useless.)

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### SUMMARIZE

(Direct your students to write two summaries about the same story. One objective and one subjective. Because the story is written from an unreliable narrator in first person point of view, readers must make many inferences. This leaves some of the story up for interpretation. It's a great exercise to get students to write an objective summary. Here are some examples below.)

**Objective Summary:** A woman and her husband rent a large mansion. The woman suffers a nervous medical condition and her husband is a physician. The woman stays in one room except for the occasional walk outside. The couple has a baby, but the woman is not in charge of taking care of it. The woman spends most of her time in a large room upstairs with yellow wallpaper where she is supposed to be getting rest and calming her nerves. The woman believes she sees women creeping outside and in the wallpaper as noted in her diary. One night, she locks her husband out of the room, and when he finally enters, she is crawling around the room shouting she is free.

**Subjective Summary:** A woman and her husband rent an old colonial mansion for the summer that is isolated from society. It is not a romantic getaway but the couple rents the house because the woman suffers a serious mental health condition. Her condition is most likely depression, and her husband wants her to calm her nerves by repressing her feelings. The husband is a physician and believes because her life is good, this condition is not real and will go away on its own. The woman is boarded in the room upstairs with barred windows and a gate at the top, so she can't leave. The isolation she is subjected to worsens her condition to the point of hallucinations and paranoia.

She believes she's become trapped inside the wallpaper and must break free, peeling it off hastily, ultimately losing her mind at the end of the story.

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Name:

Class:

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**Objective Summary:**

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**Subjective Summary:**

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