“A woman has a head almost too small for intellect but just big enough for love” is a quote that would make most people, women especially, irate, wouldn’t you say? (“Cult”) One-hundred years ago this quote was not so much an insult as it was a social system definition though. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, the author of “The Yellow Wallpaper,” was a woman who felt she had become regulated by definitions like this one illustrated in “The Cult of Domesticity and True Womanhood.” Instead of accepting her “Susie Homemaker” title she decided to do something about it. Gilman was one of few women during the late nineteenth century who felt they were capable of more important things in life other than washing dishes and being the perfect wives for their superior and oppressive husbands. To expose her anger towards oppression from men and the need for women’s individuality and equality, Gilman wrote a short story about a woman suffering from postpartum depression and misogyny. In “The Yellow Wallpaper” Jane represents the oppression of women in the nineteenth century, the ineffective and misogynistic treatments of postpartum depression during that time, and the direct relation of this story to Gilman’s own experiences dealing with depression and men.

During the nineteenth century, submissiveness and domesticity were two of the four main ideals of womanhood laid out by society during the time period, both of which can be clearly seen in Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper” (“Cult”). As the author of “The Cult of Domesticity and True Womanhood” reiterated, “A really sensible woman feels her dependence. She does what she can, but she is conscious of her inferiority and therefore grateful for support.” Jane mentions her own sense of
submissiveness by writing, “He takes all care from me, and so I feel basely ungrateful not to value it more” (Gilman “Yellow”). Even though she disagrees with her husband and brother who support the rest cure and believes “congenial work, with excitement and change, would do me good” she is so accustomed to feeling inferior to the men in her life that she begins to feel guilty for not appreciating something she doesn’t even agree with (Gilman “Yellow”). Insanity was Jane’s fate from the beginning because according to men at that time, “the female reproductive system was also responsible for all of the many ailments which attacked women,” and “Men had headaches; women had ‘female complaints’” (“Cult”). No matter what Jane told her husband he would have nothing of thinking her illness had to do anything with her need to express herself because the only real cause of this “nervous depression” was Jane’s sickly uterus.

Multiple entries in Jane’s journal, especially the first few, show the readers just how misogynistic her husband really is. “John reveals his superior attitude toward his wife by laughing at her ‘fancies’” (Hudock) and describes his child-like view of her by the names he calls her, such as “blessed little goose,” “little girl,” and saying things like “Bless her little heart!” (Gilman “Yellow”). He feels he has to care for her like a child as well and does so when he carries her in his arms up to her room, and reads to her until she feels tired, just like a father would do to his child. The level of oppression towards Jane from John was so great, in fact, that Jane even oppressed herself at the beginning of her journey, saying things like, “John laughs at me, of course, but one expects that in marriage”, “What can one do?”, and “Here I am a comparative burden already!” (Gilman “Yellow”). Jane wanted to obey the rules “Cult of Domesticity and True Womanhood” plainly laid out, but she does the exact opposite and her mental disintegration in the story represents her overcoming John’s oppression. She feels she has become her own superior self and then calls John a “young man,” symbolizing her mentally feeling superior. Not only does she feel mentally superior, but physically as well when she crawls over his body after he has fainted, symbolizing her new-found sense-of-self. Not only this, but it is also important to realize that
Jane did not have a name throughout the story until she had “freed” herself from the wallpaper (Barth). Jane could now be herself, free from the control of her husband like she’d wanted, although now due to her mental disintegration it will most likely happen in an insane asylum.

Another way that Gilman wanted “The Yellow Wallpaper” to represent something that was important to her was to show how ineffective the “rest cure” really was and just as Amy Hudock states, “The Yellow Wallpaper is to condemn not only a specific medical treatment but also the misogynistic principles and resulting sexual politics that make such a treatment possible.” When John forbade his wife from any intellectual activities and then forced upon her the idea that resting would make her well he was actually leading her deeper into her own psychosis. There are many instances in the story where Jane expresses her need for creativity and writing, though every time John shuts her down since, of course, he is the all-knowing physician, and Jane accepts his ridicule and insults because John has successfully taken advantage of her submissiveness and dependence. If John knew anything about the “Cult of Domesticity and True Womanhood” though, he was just following his normal day-to-day misogynist ways since it does claim that, “women were discouraged from intellectual activity because blood was needed for the development of the reproductive organs,” and since the reproductive organs were believed to have everything to do with any illness a woman contracted, John was only doing what his narrow-minded-self thought was best for his wife. Jane acknowledges her husband’s professional flaws when she writes, “John is a physician—perhaps that is one reason I do not get well faster” (Gilman “Yellow”). If only John had not been so oppressive towards his wife, her fall to insanity wouldn’t have been her only escape to freedom.

Lastly, Gilman wanted to express her own experiences and feelings through writing this story and to make it known to the world that the treatment her doctor was giving her was in fact making her symptoms worse. Although most of “The Yellow Wallpaper” is written in metaphors and the main ideas
are expressed through symbols there is one thing Gilman wasn’t afraid to be direct about, and that was Weir Mitchell. In the story he was represented as a consequence, by John, for Jane if she did not improve. He was a physician that Jane already didn’t trust and wrote, “I don’t want to go there at all. I had a friend who was in his hands once, and she says he is just like John and my brother, only more so!” (Gilman “Yellow”). It is clear here that Jane’s “friend” was indeed Gilman herself and this is how Gilman expressed her feelings towards Weir Mitchell, “the best known nervous disease specialist in the country” (Gilman “Why”). The specialist advised her to live as much of a domestic life as possible, to only allow herself to think intellectually for no more than two hours a day, and never to write again for the rest of her life. Three months after Dr. Mitchell prescribed Gilman this “rest cure” she claimed to be “so near the borderline of utter mental ruin that I could see over” (Gilman “Why”). The writing of “The Yellow Wallpaper” led to exactly what Gilman wanted and although it took many years, Dr. Mitchell changed his treatment for depression since reading Gilman’s short story. What was it that led to Gilman’s depression in the first place? Perhaps her story about an oppressive husband was about her own, Charles Stetson. Gilman wrote “The Yellow Wallpaper” in 1892, this was eight years into their marriage (“Charlotte”), and according to Melissa Barth, Gilman wrote this story after she fled from her husband with their daughter to California. Amidst what her specialist had told her to do, she recovered by “work, the normal life of every human being; work, in which joy and growth and service, without which one is a pauper and a parasite” (Gilman “Why”).

It is women like Charlotte Perkins Gilman who the rest of the women in the world should be grateful for. If Gilman had not gone through her own bout of depression and oppression she may not have been inspired to write “The Yellow Wallpaper.” Therefore, Dr. Mitchell might have prolonged his ineffective treatments of neurasthenia and enabled the world to be stuck on the ideas of “The Cult of Domesticity and True Womanhood” for even longer. This story helped lead the idea of misogyny to its decline, although it still comes to life every-so-often even this day and age. This is exactly why stories of
the oppression and mistreatment of women are so important though. Without the desperate housewives like Gilman and Jane to fight for their womanly independence and respect, we may well still be living like they did in the nineteenth-century. One question to ask yourself though is would men this day and age prefer that be the case?
Works Cited


