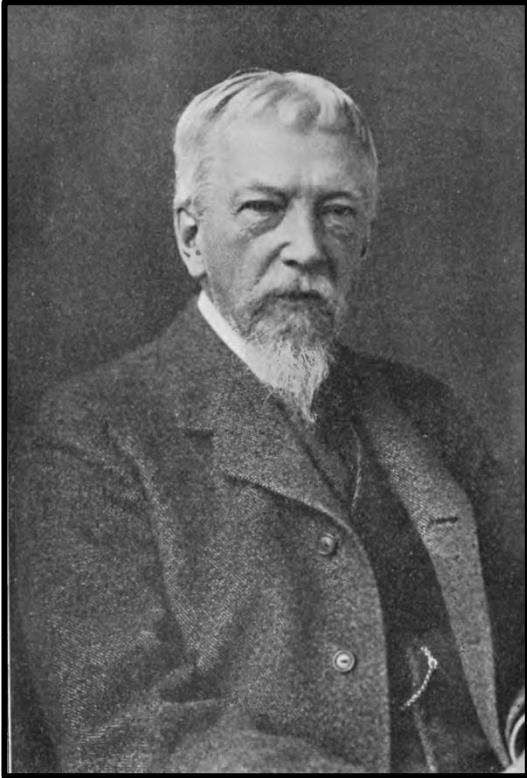


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Dr. Weir Mitchell: The Rest Cure and 19th Century Myths about Women's Bodies

Directions: Read the passages below, written by Dr. Silas Weir Mitchell in an essay he wrote on the nervousness of women called "Fat and Blood." Then, write a brief reaction to each passage, identifying what you find interesting and how you think women would have reacted to such measures.



"In carrying out my general plan of treatment it is my habit to ask the patient to remain in bed from six weeks to two months. At first, and in some cases for four or five weeks, I do not permit the patient to sit up or to sew or write or read. The only action allowed is that needed to clean the teeth. . . . In such cases I arrange to have the bowels and water passed while lying down, and the patient is lifted on to a lounge at bedtime and sponged, and then lifted back again into the newly-made bed. In all cases of weakness, treated by rest, I insist on the patient being fed by the nurse, and, when well enough to sit up in bed, I insist that the meats shall be cut up so as to make it easier for the patient to feed herself."

"I have seen obstinate ...hysteria in the young cured by whipping, I have seen violent angers in a woman resulting in wild hysteria cured by infliction of physical pain when every other method failed.... I have advised it in rare cases."

Common 19th Century Myths About Women:

A) Since women were generally **physically smaller** than men that must mean they are weak and less evolved.

B) The belief that women had **less physical stamina** than men because they seemed so faint so much more (*a problem often related to the restrictive clothing worn by women and the fact that they were not encouraged to exercise*).

C) Since **women menstruated**, they were assumed to be physically incapacitated every month. Menstruation was regarded as a periodic **illness** inflicted upon women. It was even believed that it could bring on temporary insanity in women. Clearly, women were inferior to men, who were not interrupted or incapacitated every month by illness.

- In fact, **Dr. Silas Weir Mitchell**—the physician alluded to in "The Yellow Wallpaper," whom Charlotte Perkins Gilman saw in real life—claimed to have discovered a seventeen-year old girl who "lost" her menstrual cycle while attending a "school in which boys and girls were educated together." Once she was sent home, however, her menstrual flow miraculously returned in a few weeks and the young woman's health was gradually restored.
- In addressing a college's student body in 1890, Dr. Weir Mitchell expressed his view that women often collapsed under the strain that higher education imposed on their physical and emotional state and insisted, "I no more want [women] to be preachers, lawyers, or platform orators, than I want men to be seamstresses or nurses of children." His notion of a proper education for women was one

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that taught only childcare and domestic skills. **Mitchell objected to any girl under the age of seventeen using her brain even moderately.** To do so, he warned, would endanger her health and her future would be limited to "the shawl and the sofa."

D) During Gilman's time, it was even suggested by some scientists that **education took away about 20% of a woman's vital energy!**

E) Observers noted that while men had larger brains than women, women's skulls were proportionately larger to their bodies. Craniologists suggested that **women's large skulls proved their biological immaturity**, placing them on an anatomical parallel with children, who have large heads and delicate bone structure.

1. What evidence in "The Yellow Wallpaper" suggests the narrator has had some kind of an education? (*Look especially at the narrator's vocabulary in the first half in the text. In what area of study does she seem to possess knowledge?*)

2. How do John's actions and statements in "The Yellow Wallpaper" reflect some of the beliefs you read about by Dr. Mitchell and other 19th Century ideas about women, their bodies, and education? (*Support your answer with at least **TWO** pieces of evidence from the "The Yellow Wallpaper".*)

3) Describe a current myth, misperception, or stereotype about women's or men's bodies or minds. Why do you think this myth exists?