

Name: _____

“Why I Wrote ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’”

by Charlotte Perkins Gilman as it appeared in the October issue of *The Forerunner*, 1913.

Many and many a reader has asked that. When the story first came out, in the New England Magazine about 1891, a Boston physician made protest in *The Transcript*. Such a story ought not to be written, he said; it was enough to drive anyone mad to read it.

Another physician, in Kansas I think, wrote to say that it was the best description of incipient insanity he had ever seen, and--begging my pardon--had I been there? Now the story is this:

For many years I suffered from a severe and continuous nervous breakdown tending to melancholia [*depression*]--and beyond.

**[many scholars and doctors now believe what Gilman was suffering from was Postpartum Depression—a form of clinical depression suffered after giving birth, which affects between 5-25% of all women. In Gilman’s time, this condition yet not yet been identified or studied.]*

During about the third year of this trouble I went, in devout faith and some faint stir of hope, to a noted specialist in nervous diseases, the best known in the country. **[The doctor Gilman saw was Dr. S. Weir Mitchell, who is referred to in the story].* 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.

**[The “rest cure” was a real treatment given to many women, invented by Dr. Mitchell. Women were often isolated from their families and friends for up to three months where they did nothing but sleep, ate a diet high in fat, and were not permitted to engage in thinking or mental work.]*

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.

Then, using the remnants of intelligence that remained, and helped by a wise friend, I cast the noted specialist's advice to the winds and went to work again--work, 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.

Being naturally moved to rejoicing by this narrow escape, I wrote "The Yellow Wallpaper," with its embellishments and additions, to carry out the ideal (I never had hallucinations or objections to my mural decorations) and sent a copy to the physician who so nearly drove me mad. He never acknowledged it.

The little book is valued by alienists and as a good specimen of one kind of literature. It has, to my knowledge, saved one woman from a similar fate--so terrifying her family that they let her out into normal activity and she recovered.

But the best result is this. Many years later I was told that the great specialist had admitted to friends of his that he had altered his treatment of neurasthenia [*depression*] since reading "The Yellow Wallpaper."

It was not intended to drive people crazy, but to save people from being driven crazy, and it worked.

Name: _____

Read Charlotte Perkins Gilman's explanation "Why I Wrote the Yellow Wallpaper," then answer the questions below.

1. A personal experience with what kind of illness inspired Gilman to write "The Yellow Wallpaper"?

2. Gilman, when describing her own experience of following her doctor's advice, recalls, "I went home and obeyed those directions for some three months, and ... came so near the borderline of utter mental ruin..."

A) What specific directions had Gilman followed?

B) Why do you think following the doctor's advice affected her mental state so severely?

C) What parts of your life or "work" (your passion) would send you to "utter mental ruin" if you were asked to give them up?

"Every kind of creature is developed by the exercise of its functions. If denied the exercise of its functions, it can not develop in the fullest degree."

quote from Charlotte Perkins Gilman's testimony before the House of Representatives Judiciary Committee on behalf of the National American Woman Suffrage Association. January 28, 1896

Decode/paraphrase this quote into everyday language (What's her point?):

How does the statement apply to "The Yellow Wallpaper"?