



# Female Confinement and Resistance in Charlotte Perkin Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*

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**Abstract**— This qualitative study examines Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* through feminist criticism to explain how the text depicts female confinement and resistance under patriarchal systems. Using close textual analysis, the study focuses on three narrative elements: characters, setting, and symbolism. Findings reveal that confinement is enforced through John's dual authority as husband and physician, which restricts the narrator's mobility, voice, and writing, producing physical and psychological captivity. The nursery environment further materializes control through its isolating and infantilizing features, while the wallpaper functions as a central symbol of oppressive domestic ideology. At the same time, the narrator's secret journal, her identification with the trapped woman in the wallpaper, and her final tearing of the pattern demonstrate resistance as a gradual but disruptive assertion of agency. Overall, the study concludes that the narrator's breakdown emerges from denied autonomy, yet her acts of defiance expose the persistence of female resistance within restrictive social structures. This study recommends exploring gender with class and mental health discourse, comparing historical confinement with modern gendered controls, and examining domestic space as discipline.



**Keywords**— Female Confinement, Resistance, *The Yellow Wallpaper*, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Qualitative Study, Feminist

## I. INTRODUCTION

Female confinement and resistance are core concepts in feminist literary studies because they expose how patriarchal power limits women's agency while also provoking acts of refusal. Female confinement refers to the social, medical, and domestic systems that restrict women's mobility, speech, labor, and self-definition. In Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*, confinement is enforced through the rest cure, marital authority, and the narrator's physical isolation, turning "care" into control. Recent medical-humanities scholarship stresses that such gendered treatments historically positioned women as unreliable narrators of their own bodies, so obedience and silence became part of therapy (Villar, 2024). In contrast, female resistance refers to the strategies women use to contest these constraints, whether quietly through hidden self-expression or openly through disruptive actions. Baruz et al. (2023) describe resistance in Gilman's story as

developing from suppressed awareness into overt rebellion once confinement becomes unbearable.

This study is significant because *The Yellow Wallpaper* continues to speak to present-day concerns about women's autonomy, mental health, and institutional authority. Contemporary research links the narrator's breakdown not to personal weakness but to structural oppression, emphasizing that confinement itself generates psychological harm (Madan, 2025; Villar, 2024). At the same time, recent feminist readings highlight that resistance in the text is meaningful since it represents an attempt to reclaim selfhood within a system designed to erase it (Liu, 2025). These perspectives show that Gilman's story remains a valuable framework for examining how women's suffering and defiance are shaped by power relations that can persist in modern forms.

This study aims to analyze how female confinement and resistance are represented in *The Yellow*

*Wallpaper* by focusing on three narrative elements: characters, setting, and symbolism. This study will contribute to the field by offering an integrated, element-focused account of confinement and resistance in the story. By synthesizing feminist perspectives with textual evidence, the study strengthens current interpretations that connect Gilman's work to ongoing debates about gendered care and domestic control.

## II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

This study examines the text through Feminist criticism, which reviews how literature presents gender roles, power distribution, and social expectations. Tyson (2014) notes that women's voices are often limited in literary representation, and this pattern reflects pressures

present within society. *The Yellow Wallpaper* illustrates this concern through the narrator's inability to influence decisions regarding her own health. John, who functions as both husband and doctor, directs her treatment and daily tasks. This dual role strengthens the structure of authority placed around her. Studies of patriarchal domestic norms show that women were often treated as dependents rather than partners (Hedges, 2009).

The study utilizes feminist criticism to explain how domestic routines and medical instructions restricted women's expression. It also provides a framework for understanding the narrator's resistance. Her writing and symbolic connection to the woman in the wallpaper show an effort to form a sense of identity despite restrictive conditions.

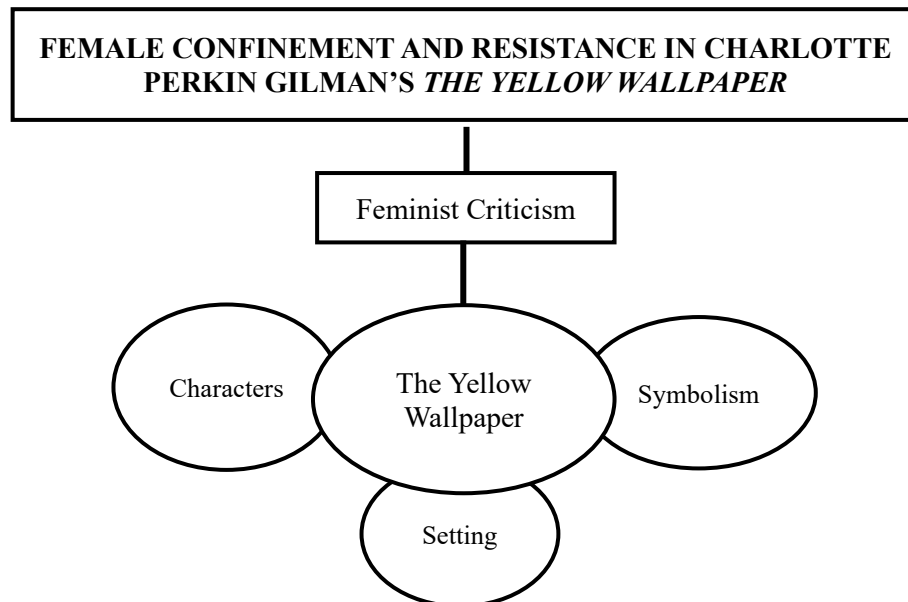


Fig.1. Schematic Diagram of the theoretical and conceptual framework of the study

## III. LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholars widely interpret *The Yellow Wallpaper* as a feminist critique of patriarchal marriage, rigid gender roles, and women's oppression. Contemporary criticism argues that the text exposes how marriage functions as a structure of male dominance that limits women's autonomy and silences their self-expression. Hume (2010) notes that the narrator's marriage places her in a position where obedience is expected and emotional dependence is reinforced, reducing her identity to that of a compliant wife. Similarly, Lanser (2014) emphasizes that Gilman portrays marriage as a site where male authority is normalized, allowing husbands to exert control over women's physical and psychological lives under the guise of care.

Building on this feminist perspective, recent studies further examine how male authority within marriage is reinforced through professional and social power. John's dual role as husband and physician has been interpreted as a representation of institutionalized patriarchy, where medical discourse legitimizes male control over women's bodies and voices. Treichler (2012) argues that the narrator's opinions are dismissed precisely because they challenge masculine rationality, reinforcing the idea that women's perspectives are unreliable. Likewise, Smith (2018) explains that the story critiques how women's submission is framed as necessary for marital harmony, thereby restricting self-expression and reinforcing gendered oppression.

In addition to confinement, scholars have explored the narrator's actions as forms of resistance that develop throughout the narrative. Acts such as secret writing, fixation on the wallpaper, and the final breakdown are interpreted as strategies through which the narrator asserts agency within oppressive conditions. Gilbert and Gubar's ideas have been extended by later critics, with Baruiz et al. (2023) arguing that resistance in the story progresses gradually from internal awareness to overt rebellion. Similarly, Liu (2021) suggests that the narrator's breakdown should be read not as madness alone but as a refusal to comply with the roles imposed upon her, marking a shift from silence to defiance.

The yellow wallpaper itself has been widely analyzed as a powerful symbol of patriarchal ideology, mental imprisonment, and silenced female creativity. Scholars interpret the wallpaper's chaotic patterns as reflecting the oppressive structures that entrap women within domestic spaces. Delashmit and Long (2015) connect the wallpaper to the narrator's psychological deterioration, arguing that her obsession mirrors her growing awareness of confinement. More recent studies, such as Villar (2024), view the wallpaper as a site of awakening, where the narrator projects her suppressed identity and ultimately recognizes the constructed nature of her oppression.

Despite extensive feminist interpretations, much of the existing scholarship places strong emphasis on thematic concerns such as patriarchy, madness, and resistance while giving limited attention to how these ideas are embedded in the narrative structure itself. Few studies closely examine how character roles, setting, and

symbolism work together to formally construct confinement and resistance within the text. This study addresses this gap by offering an integrated, element-focused analysis that demonstrates how oppression and resistance are not only thematic but also structurally embedded in Gilman's narrative, thereby contributing a more comprehensive understanding of *The Yellow Wallpaper*.

#### IV. METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative textual-analysis design to examine Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* and explain how female confinement and resistance are represented in the narrative. Guided by feminist literary criticism, the analysis relies on close reading of the primary text, with passages systematically selected and interpreted according to three elements: (1) characters; (2) setting; and (3) symbolism. Through repeated reading, relevant textual evidence is extracted under these categories, coded for themes of restriction and defiance, then interpreted using feminist concepts to synthesize how confinement is constructed and how resistance develops within it.

#### V. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings of the textual analysis of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* in relation to female confinement and resistance. The discussion is organized through three analytic tables that examine characters, setting, and symbolism.

Table 1. Characters

<i>Characters</i>	<i>Textual Evidence</i>	<i>Relevance to Female Confinement and Resistance</i>
The Narrator	"I am absolutely forbidden to 'work' until I am well again." "There comes John, and I must put this away." "I've pulled off most of the paper, so you can't put me back!"	Confined patient; resists through secret writing.
John	"He is very careful and loving, and hardly lets me stir without special direction." "He hates to have me write a word."	Patriarchal doctor enforcing rest-cure control.
Jennie	"Jennie is a perfect and enthusiastic housekeeper." "She takes all care of the house."	Domestic enforcer reinforcing female compliance.

Table 1 shows that female confinement and resistance in *The Yellow Wallpaper* are primarily carried by the characters' roles and interactions. The narrator's quoted lines ("forbidden to work," hiding her writing, and later asserting she has "pulled off most of the paper") illustrate a

movement from enforced passivity to open defiance. Recent medical-humanities readings explain that her confinement is not self-chosen but produced by the rest cure and by John's authority over her daily life. Roethle (2021) notes that the narrator is positioned as a patient whose creativity

and autonomy are treated as dangerous, so silence becomes part of “treatment.” Villar (2024) similarly argues that the story exposes how gendered medical practice discredits women’s self-reporting, making the narrator’s deterioration a result of being controlled rather than cared for. Within this pressure, her secret journaling functions as an early, covert form of resistance that preserves her voice against suppression (Roethle, 2021; Villar, 2024).

John’s textual evidence in the table (“careful and loving,” restricting her movement, “hates to have me write a word”) supports recent views of him as the key agent of confinement. This emphasizes that his power is structural because he combines marital and clinical authority, enabling

him to define reality for the narrator and dismiss her protests as symptoms (Roethle, 2021). Madan (2025) describes John as a figure of patriarchal rationality who frames restriction as protection, which intensifies the narrator’s dependence and helplessness. Jennie, while less overtly controlling, reinforces confinement through her role as the “perfect” housekeeper. Recent feminist analyses argue that such characters embody internalized domestic ideology and normalize women’s caretaker compliance, helping sustain the patriarchal order John represents (Baruiz et al., 2023). Together, the characters show how confinement is enforced through male authority and maintained through domestic femininity, while resistance develops through the narrator’s escalating refusal to accept those roles.

Table 2. *Setting*

<i>Setting</i>	<i>Textual Evidence</i>	<i>Analytic Meaning</i>
Nursery	“The windows are barred for little children.” “It is a big, airy room... and rings and things in the walls.”	Infantilizing surveillance
Nailed bed, scratched floor	“The bed is nailed down.” “There are scratches and gouges on the floor.”	Forced immobility, past struggle
Country-house isolation	“We are here for three months.” “I don’t want to go outside.”	Separation, rising pressure

Table 2 indicates that confinement is materialized in space. The nursery operates as a gendered cage. The nursery room is not a neutral bedroom but a space designed for control: barred windows, wall rings, and its former function as a child’s room position the narrator in an infantilized, monitored state. Recent studies argue that this infantilizing domestic setting mirrors patriarchal logic, where women are treated as dependent subjects whose choices must be managed “for their own good” (Roethle, 2021). The room’s size and airiness only heighten the irony because the openness does not equal freedom; instead, it disguises restriction under the appearance of care (Roethle, 2021).

The nailed bed and scratched floor intensify the setting’s meaning by embedding immobility and past

struggle into the space itself. The bed that cannot be moved literalizes forced stillness, while the gouges on the floor suggest earlier attempts to resist, implying a repeated history of female confinement in this same room. Finally, the narrator’s isolation in the country house extends confinement beyond the room. Being removed “for three months” from neighbors, work, and community cuts her off from social grounding. A recent feminist study on isolation in the text maintains that separation from support systems accelerates identity breakdown, making the country estate a structural pressure that pushes the narrator inward toward obsession (Social Science Review Archives, 2025). Taken together, the setting shows a layered environment of restriction where space itself participates in producing psychological collapse.

Table 3. *Symbolism*

<i>Title</i>	<i>Symbol</i>	<i>Relevance</i>
The Yellow Wallpaper	Yellow wallpaper	Patriarchal trap; site of revolt
	Woman behind the wallpaper	Female self seeking freedom
	Secret journal writing	Covert defiance under control

Table 3 shows how Gilman’s symbolism maps the movement from female confinement to resistance. The

yellow wallpaper functions as a material sign of patriarchy that surrounds and invades the narrator’s life; its “unclean”

color and chaotic pattern embody the disorder produced by enforced silence and rest. Recent journal studies read the wallpaper as a structural trap that mirrors medical and marital domination, while also becoming the object through which the narrator recognizes oppression (Baruiz et al., 2023). As her attention to the wallpaper intensifies, the symbol shifts from décor to a coded system she must interpret, and scholars argue that this interpretive labor is itself a resistant act because it creates meaning against John's imposed narrative of illness (Liu, 2025).

The woman behind the wallpaper develops that symbolism by personifying confinement. Recent feminist analyses describe this figure as a collective female self trapped in social roles, so the narrator's obsession signals awakening to a shared condition of enclosure rather than a purely private delusion (Baruiz et al., 2023). Finally, secret journal writing symbolizes covert resistance under censorship. Because the rest cure forbids creative work, writing becomes a hidden survival practice that preserves identity and voice. Contemporary mental-health scholarship links this silenced self-expression to psychological collapse, supporting the view that the narrator's writing and her final tearing of the paper are related stages of rebellion against the same patriarchal structure (Hassan & Farooq, 2024). Together, the symbols form a progression: patriarchy as enclosure (wallpaper), the confined female self (woman in the pattern), and resistance first hidden then unleashed (journal writing and the paper's destruction).

## VI. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study examined how *The Yellow Wallpaper* portrays female confinement and resistance through characters, settings, and symbolism. The findings show that John's medical and marital authority enforces the rest cure, silencing the narrator and intensifying her physical and psychological captivity, while the nursery setting and the wallpaper itself embody patriarchal control. At the same time, the narrator's secret writing, identification with the trapped woman, and final tearing of the wallpaper reveal resistance as a growing, if disruptive, assertion of agency under oppression.

Future research may explore intersections of gender with class and mental health discourse, compare historical confinement with modern gendered controls, and examine domestic space as discipline. Educators may also integrate feminist criticism with rest-cure history to connect the story to real social institutions.

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