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The Feminist Themes in The Yellow Wallpaper

In this analysis, I would like to consider gender and sexual relationships as they have been explored in the story *The Yellow Wallpaper* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman. By shedding light on the subtle and direct ways in which Charlotte uses her story to portray women's domestic life in her time, I hope to pinpoint the feminist themes in her story.

The story of the family, although different in their circumstances, falls along traditional domestic lines. John, the husband, is rational, practically minded, protective, and the ultimate decision-maker in the couple. He infantilizes his wife, referring to her as his "little girl" and brushing off her complaints. However, John is not purely the irredeemable villain of the story, he is only acting out of the best interest of her wife because her illness has made her unable to think clearly. We see how his ability to communicate effectively with his wife is constrained by the structure of their gender roles.

Being the "man" of the house, he is unable to give in to her wife's irrational thoughts and can only shut them down because of his role of being consumed too much in his reality of managing work and finances and real world dilemmas. This is an important point: John's happiness is also ruined by the strictures of traditional domestic life, he loves his wife and

wishes to support her as best he can but her mental turmoil of being consumed in her mind makes both of them unable to understand each other.

The narrator, his wife, is confined to the home, not allowed to work (or to write), and considered by her husband to be fragile, emotional, and self-indulgent. Differing readings of the text lead to separate interpretations of her willing submission to this role, but it is clear that her forced inability to work was awful for her. Her diary becomes a symbol of her rebellion against John's commands. Unable to pursue her art freely, the narrator indulges her creativity in the most secretive ways, so as to not have any external influence impact her reluctant and angry mind that is often being repressed.

Therefore, the mysterious figure of a woman trapped behind the yellow wallpaper of her room becomes a metaphor for the ways in which the narrator herself feels trapped by her role in the family. The wallpaper represents the domestic domain that confines women and restricts their self-expression in a man-dominated society.

As the story progresses, the narrator becomes increasingly obsessed with the wallpaper, seeing within its hypnotizing patterns the figure of a woman trapped behind bars. This trapped woman mirrors the narrator's own situation, denoting the broader societal imprisonment and powerlessness of women within their homes. The wallpaper's chaotic and oppressive patterns reflect the complex and stifling restrictions imposed on women, both physically and mentally.

The narrator's urgent desire to free this woman, and to hide her existence from John and Jennie comes from an explosion of her inner feelings of being repressed and

misunderstood for too long. This leads to her raging final breakdown as she tears the paper, "creeping" around the room and over her husband – who, in a reversal of their traditional roles as strong protector and fragile child, has fainted in shock at the sight of his wife. The act of tearing down the wallpaper at the story's climax is a powerful moment of rebellion and freedom. It represents a desperate bid of the narrator for self-assertion and independence, even as she descends into madness. This act can be seen as a metaphor for the feminist struggle to deconstruct the patriarchal pillars that defined that century's society.

To conclude, *The Yellow Wallpaper* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman portrays sexual and gender relationships as deeply oppressive, reflecting the patriarchal norms of the late 19th century. The narrator's ultimate descent into madness signifies that she would rather lose her sanity than remain in the repressive atmosphere of her household. Through her last tragic act of defiance, Charlotte critiques the societal standards that limit women's freedom and self-expression, calling for greater recognition of women's intellectual capabilities.