



Overview: This lesson is intended to be a kind of “plug and play” support for teachers new to cross-comparison of texts. The lesson will introduce students to the idea of the “conversation” between texts and give them practice in exploring how two American authors can express similar (and divergent) notions about a single topic. (Lesson Duration: 4-5 hours)

Standards:

- **RL 1. Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences from the text, including where the text leaves matters uncertain.**
- **RL 9. Demonstrate knowledge of eighteenth-, nineteenth-, and early twentieth-century foundational works of American literature, including how two or more texts from the same period treat similar themes or topics.**

Objectives:

- Students will read, analyze, discuss, compare, and contrast two works from the same country and century treating the same motif.
- Students will identify each individual author’s message or point about the motif, and then compare how each author’s message or point converges and diverges with the other.
- Students will base their understanding and analysis in the evidence from the text.

Materials:

- Classroom copies of the story “[The Yellow Wallpaper](#),” by Charlotte Perkins Gilman
- Classroom copies of two Emily Dickinson poems:
 - [“I Felt a Funeral in my Brain,”](#)
 - [“Much Madness is Divinest Sense”](#)

Procedure:

Before the Lesson

Students should have received copies of the poems and stories for individual perusal. Students should also have been given basic background information and historical context for both Emily Dickinson and Charlotte Perkins Gilman, stressing especially Gilman’s experience with the then-popular treatment for “hysteria” known as the [Rest Cure](#), a treatment invented and popularized by physician S. Weir Mitchell. Understanding the Rest Cure is important for a full understanding of the background context in which “The Yellow Wallpaper” was written, particularly since the cure foregrounds some of the problems with the social and medical treatment of women in the latter part of the 19th century.



Activity 1: Prereading

Purpose:

- Students will consider the meaning of ambiguous words that occur in the story or poems or both.
- Students will clarify their understanding of insanity versus sanity and discuss opinions with others and the class.
- Students will discuss the impact of gender on societal definitions of insanity.

Individual Reflection

Before students begin to read the story and poems, ask them to answer the following questions individually, jotting down answers on a separate piece of paper.

- What is insanity? How do you personally define that term for yourself?
- What is the “dividing line” between sanity and insanity? That is, what state, act, perception of the world, or other factor is the border between the two states?
- Some acts are considered “normal” by one society but considered “insane” by others. Is insanity entirely or always a matter of society’s definition?
- What role does gender play in our understanding of insanity? Are men less stable than women or women than men?
- Why do we find insanity so threatening or unsettling?

Pair/Small Group Discussion

After students have had sufficient time to digest these questions, have students meet in pairs or small groups to compare and contrast answers. Remind students that they should press their peers for evidence or explanations about the definition of the idea of insanity, learning to rely on specific examples rather than broad-based generalities. (Generalities are fine as a starting-point, but they should be “backed up” by specific evidence -- real people, real events, or events from quality literature or film).

A Brief Note About Small-Group Discussion

Even though the whole-class discussion would just seem to rehash the small-group discussion, the small-group discussion is crucial. Especially



for more reticent students, the opportunity to “test-drive” their initial impressions with their peers and compare impressions of the text before taking the larger risk of sharing in front of the whole class can be invaluable.

Small-group discussion also helps negate or eliminate those “Mount Rushmore moments” in which the teacher asks a question about the text, and the class looks back at her with apparently uncomprehending blankness. A helpful response here is often, “Okay, talk about this amongst yourselves for the next few minutes, and then we’ll reconvene as a class and see what you think.” This decision buys students time and allows them to compose fruitful answers – and allows them to understand that in textual interpretation, the onus has to be on them to be active, engaged readers in conversation with the text.

Whole-Class Discussion

The class discussion should continue the insights shared about the idea of insanity, societal definitions of sanity versus insanity, and the issue of insanity and gender. As always, the teacher should focus on probing beyond the surface, getting students to follow up on their initial answers with specific evidence -- real people, real events, or events from quality literature or film -- to support their contentions. Obviously, students will have different views of insanity. Some students will have had personal or familial experience with mental disorders or conditions. Obviously, discussing this topic should be done respectfully and sensitively.

Background Information

Students should be reminded about key facts regarding the life of Emily Dickinson, particularly of the reclusiveness, isolation, and alienation that characterizes Dickinson’s life as an adult. Following the review, students should be encouraged to read silently both of the two poems reprinted below. As they read, please instruct the students to write down the following information:

- **Who is the speaker?**
- **What is the situation?**
- **What has happened to disturb the speaker’s status quo? That is, what is the occasion that is the catalyst for the experience of this moment?**
- **Who is the audience? To whom is the speaker speaking -- and why?**
- **What does the speaker want us to understand about madness?**



Poem #1: I Felt a Funeral in my Brain

I felt a funeral in my brain,
And mourners, to and fro,
Kept treading, treading, till it seemed
That sense was breaking through.
And when they all were seated,
A service like a drum
Kept beating, beating, till I thought
My mind was going numb.
And then I heard them lift a box,
And creak across my soul
With those same boots of lead,
Then space began to toll
As all the heavens were a bell,
And Being but an ear,
And I and silence some strange race,
Wrecked, solitary, here.
And then a plank in reason broke,
And I dropped down and down--
And hit a world at every plunge,
And finished knowing--then--

Poem #2: Much Madness is Divinest Sense

Much Madness is divinest Sense --
To a discerning Eye --
Much Sense -- the starkest Madness --
'Tis the Majority
In this, as All, prevail --
Assent -- and you are sane --
Demur -- you're straightway dangerous --
And handled with a Chain --

Reflection

Pause at this point and ask the students to reflect on the two different comments about madness Dickinson makes in both of these poems. Students should answer questions individually and in informal writing before sharing in conversation with their peers. After small-group discussion has occurred, whole-class discussion can track students' responses and ideas.

Whole-Class Discussion

Students should share as a group their answers to the questions above. Discuss possible answers, urging students to substantiate their answers with evidence drawn from the poem or poems themselves, comparing the statements in one with lines, words, or images from another.

A Brief Note About Whole-Class Discussion

The role of the teacher in class discussion is primarily to keep students *focused on the words*. In discussion, require students to explain what element or elements within the words led them to their conclusion. Four questions are absolutely essential to ask students during discussion – and to encourage students to ask of themselves and each other.

WHY?

- Why do you think so?
- Why does your line/your word/your evidence prove your point?
- Why did the author use this particular word and not another, similar word?

WHERE?

- Where in the story/play/poem did you find your information?
- Can you literally put your finger on the place in the text that proves your point?

WHAT?

- What do you mean when you say "___"?
- What does this quote you chose mean? Can you rephrase it?
- What else could the author have said here?
- What "work" is this word doing that a similar one would not do?

For some teachers, this role may represent a change from the usual classroom discussion. **The goal of the teacher is not to lead the students to a**



predetermined insight, but to communicate the crucial idea that although there may not be one “right answer,” there are better and worse ones – and the better ones *are* better because they are supported by the words of the author.

Activity 2: Brain Funerals and Divine Madness

At this point, discussion should proceed to a close reading of the first poem, “I Felt a Funeral in my Brain.” Students have had the chance to explore the issue of insanity and read the two poems, answering questions about the immediate moment and discussing with others the impact of the poems themselves, but now a second reading is productive for answering particular questions about each poem itself and the way in which Dickinson uses language. The teacher can progress essentially stanza by stanza, asking questions about the use of words or images, breaking students into small groups to discuss answers before sharing with the class.

<p>Poem #1: I Felt a Funeral in my Brain</p> <p>I felt a funeral in my brain, And mourners, to and fro, Kept treading, treading, till it seemed That sense was breaking through.</p> <p>And when they all were seated, A service like a drum Kept beating, beating, till I thought My mind was going numb.</p> <p>And then I heard them lift a box, And creak across my soul With those same boots of lead, Then space began to toll</p> <p>As all the heavens were a bell, And Being but an ear, And I and silence some strange race, Wrecked, solitary, here.</p>	<p>Structure</p> <p>What do you notice about the poem’s structure? How is it arranged? Does it have a rhyme scheme? A metrical pattern?</p> <p>Note: The students will probably observe that the poem is divided into equal stanzas of four lines each. They will also notice that the poem’s rhythm is very regular, with alternating lines of iambic tetrameter and iambic trimeter.</p> <p>Why present a poem about insanity in such a regular, ordered way? Why present a poem about insanity in a rhythm that sounds almost sing-song, like a nursery rhyme? What is the effect of those two choices (the order and the rhythm) on the reader? How do these choices complicate our understanding of insanity?</p> <p>Figurative Language and Diction</p>
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And then a plank in reason broke,
And I dropped down and down-And
hit a world at every plunge,
And finished knowing--then--

What is the central metaphor here? Who has died? Who are the “mourners” (2)? Is the speaker one of the mourners herself? Does she mourn the passing of her own sanity?

Consider the words that are repeated sequentially, such as “treading.” Why repeat those words? Why repeat those and not others? What is the effect of the repetition? At what point does the speaker descend irrevocably into madness? Before the poem? During the poem? If during, at what point has the speaker “lost the game,” in effect? What are the “world[s]” she hits “at every plunge”?

Why does the poem end so abruptly with a “then--”? Why can the speaker not finish? What effect does this inconclusive, ambiguous moment have on the reader?



<p>Poem #2: Much Madness is Divinest Sense</p> <p>Much Madness is divinest Sense -- To a discerning Eye -- Much Sense -- the starkest Madness -- 'Tis the Majority In this, as All, prevail -- Assent -- and you are sane -- Demur -- you're straightway dangerous -- And handled with a Chain --</p>	<p>Structure</p> <p>What do you notice about the poem’s structure? How is it arranged? Does it have a rhyme scheme? A metrical pattern?</p> <p>Note: The students will probably observe that the poem is divided into equal stanzas of four lines each. They will also notice that the poem’s rhythm is very regular, with alternating lines of iambic tetrameter and iambic trimeter.</p> <p>Notice where the poem deviates from its own “norm” of rhythm.</p> <p>Note: Students will probably notice that line 3 does not fit the metrical pattern, but “cuts off” before the final syllable. They will also probably notice that, in contrast to the earlier poem’s regular alternation of iambic tetrameter/iambic trimeter rhythms, this one is far less regular. Lines 1-2 seem as if they will follow the “usual” Dickensonian pattern, but lines 3-6 sharply deviate. Rather than sticking to the expected alternation, lines 4-6 are all trimeter. We then get a return to the “norm” in the last two lines.</p> <p>What explains the “deviation from the norm” in line 3? What happens to cause the “return to the status quo” in lines 6-7? Where is the poem “misbehaving” or being deviant from the norm? How do these moments of deviance (and the moments of return to the norm) help Dickinson reinforce her statement about madness?</p> <p>Figurative Language and Diction</p> <p>Explain Dickinson’s central paradox, that “much madness” is “divinest sense” and “sense” the</p>
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	“starkest madness.” Why does she make that assertion? Do you agree? What does she mean by “tis the majority/in this, as all, prevail”? Why is it that if you assent, you are sane -- and if you “demur” you are dangerous? Is this statement particularly true for women at this time? Is Dickinson arguing that women’s sanity is judged proportionally to women’s obedience?
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Closure for Dickinson

Students should summarize their understanding of Dickinson’s view of madness. In what way does the first-person lyric approach help to bridge the gap between a (presumably!) sane reader and a (possibly) insane speaker? In what way do we feel kinship with the speaker?

Activity 3: Welcome to My World! Don’t You Love the Décor?¹

Background Information

Before reading “The Yellow Wallpaper,” students should be reminded about key facts regarding the life of Charlotte Perkins Gilman, particularly Gilman’s experience as a patient who underwent the treatment for hysteria known as the [Rest Cure](#). The story “The Yellow Wallpaper” is Gilman’s best (and best-known) story, and it is close to being an autobiographical depiction of her experiences as a patient treated by these means. Stress that the Rest Cure involved the following:

- 6-8 weeks of bed rest
- Constant feeding
- Fatty, milk-based diet
- Force-feeding if needed
- Patients prohibited from talking, reading, writing, sewing

¹ I am forever indebted to Dr. William Veeder of the University of Chicago for his insights into this text, many of which appear in these pages.



Prereading Discussion

Students should be asked for their personal reactions to the description of the Rest Cure. Possibly they have experienced bed rest themselves or know someone who has undergone bed rest for a medical condition. If students are willing to share this information, they should be encouraged to relate the patient's impressions of bed rest. Was it easy? Difficult? Were they allowed to watch television, go on the computer, et cetera? How would the experience have been different if those activities had been restricted?

Students should be informed that this story is a first-person narrative told in diary form by a woman who is being treated by her husband John, a doctor, by being placed in an out-of-the-way residence in the country in order for her health to improve. Ideally, the story should be read aloud. As students read along, they should be instructed to keep track of certain elements in the story.

During-Reading Questions

- As the story begins, what is the narrator's attitude or feeling about her own condition? About John's proposed treatment of it?
- Who is John? What is his role within the house -- that is, what domestic job or outside job does he do?
- Who is Nellie? What is her role within the house? That is, what domestic or outside job does she do?
- Who is Jennie? What is her role within the house?

- Where does the narrator initially want to sleep?
- Where does the narrator end up sleeping?
- What is the word she uses to describe this room?
- List as many features you can about the nursery, including the appearance, the location, the furniture, the décor, the condition of the room, and so on. Some of the information emerges in different places -- the narrator will tell facts 1, 2, 3 on one day and facts 4, 5, 6 on another day.

- Who takes care of the baby?
- Who takes care of the house?
- Who takes care of other domestic duties?
- Why is John so often absent overnight in town?
- Whose baby is it?

- How does the narrator's attitude toward the wallpaper (d) evolve over time? In what ways does her attitude change? Is the change a good thing, or is a barometer indicating a serious problem?



- What is the symbolic significance of the color green? With what do we associate green? Note: Choose positive as well as negative associations.
- What is the symbolic significance of the color yellow? With what do we associate yellow? Note: Choose positive as well as negative associations.
- Who is Jane?

Small-group discussion

After the story has been read either wholly or in part (the reading may have to occur over a period of a few class meetings), students should be encouraged to discuss and compare their answers. Emphasize that it is crucial to get as complete a picture of the upper room (that is, the yellow wallpaper room) and the yellow wallpaper itself.

For many students, the last question (e.g., “Who is Jane?”) might be especially vexing. The narrator refers to this name only once, and only when she has completely identified with the “wallpaper woman.” (Note: It is very likely that Jane is the narrator’s own name -- but students should figure this out for themselves, then explore the implications of what the narrator’s third-person reference suggests about her own identity, other than a simple, “She’s crazy.” Though true, this explanation is not particularly helpful.)

Activity 4: Close Reading

Students should be asked to consider the following quotations and questions. Students can address these individually, in groups or pairs, or as a whole class. Additionally, some of these quotations can be used in class as “practice” while others are taken home or dealt with individually by students to reinforce their independent analysis skills. This assignment has many possibilities for adaptation to specific needs and classes of students.

Quote Analysis -- “The Yellow Wallpaper”	
<i>The most beautiful place! It is quite alone standing well back from the road, quite three miles from the village. It makes me think of English places that you read about, for there are hedges and walls and gates that lock, and lots of separate little houses for the gardeners and people.</i>	What is so appealing to the narrator about the hedges, walls, locking gates, and “separate little houses”? Why does she find these various borders and enclosures appealing?
<i>It is a big, airy room, the whole floor nearly, with windows that look all ways, and air and sunshine galore. It was nursery first and then</i>	Is this description consistent with the narrator’s decision that the room was a “nursery”?



<p><i>playroom and gymnasium, I should judge; for the windows are barred for little children, and there are rings and things in the walls. The paint and paper look as if a boys' school had used it. It is stripped off--the paper-- in great patches all around the head of my bed, about as far as I can reach, and in a great place on the other side of the room low down. I never saw a worse paper in my life.</i></p>	<p>Why does she <i>need</i> to see this room as a nursery?</p>
<p><i>This paper looks to me as if it knew what a vicious influence it had! There is a recurrent spot where the pattern lolls like a broken neck and two bulbous eyes stare at you upside down. I get positively angry with the impertinence of it and the everlastingness. Up and down and sideways they crawl, and those absurd, unblinking eyes are everywhere There is one place where two breaths didn't match, and the eyes go all up and down the line, one a little higher than the other. I never saw so much expression in an inanimate thing before, and we all know how much expression they have!</i></p>	<p>What words or images in this description are particularly startling or disturbing? What do those words or images suggest about the narrator's state of mind?</p> <p>Why are the figures with the "bulbous eyes" upside-down?</p> <p>What are the associations with the word "crawl"?</p>
<p><i>There's one comfort, the baby is well and happy, and does not have to occupy this nursery with the horrid wallpaper. If we had not used it, that blessed child would have! What a fortunate escape! Why, I wouldn't have a child of mine, an impressionable little thing; live in such a room for worlds. I never thought of it before, but it is lucky that John kept me here after all, I can stand it so much easier than a baby, you see. Of course I never mention it to them any</i></p>	<p>Who else would the baby not have to occupy the nursery with besides the wallpaper?</p> <p>Track the pronoun "it." To what does the pronoun refer? Why is there a sudden barrage of "it" throughout this passage?</p> <p>What is the narrator's stated or apparent attitude toward the baby? Does her actual</p>



<p><i>more--I am too wise,--but I keep watch of it all the same.</i></p>	<p>feeling about the baby match her explicit statements?</p> <p>What piece of information does the narrator not clarify about her relationship to the baby?</p>
<p><i>It is the strangest yellow, that wallpaper! It makes me think of all the yellow things I ever saw--not beautiful ones like buttercups, but old foul, bad yellow things.</i></p> <p><i>But there is something else about that paper--the smell! I noticed it the moment we came into the room, but with so much air and sun it was not bad. Now we have had a week of fog and rain, and whether the windows are open or not, the smell is here.</i></p> <p><i>It creeps all over the house.</i></p> <p><i>I find it hovering in the dining-room, skulking in the parlor, hiding in the hall, lying in wait for me on the stairs.</i></p> <p><i>It gets into my hair.</i></p> <p><i>Even when I go to ride, if I turn my head suddenly and surprise it--there is that smell! Such a peculiar odor, too! I have spent hours in trying to analyze it, to find what it smelled like.</i></p> <p><i>It is not bad--at first, and very gentle, but quite the subtlest, most enduring odor I ever met.</i></p> <p><i>In this damp weather it is awful, I wake up in the night and find it hanging over me. It used to disturb me at first. I thought seriously of burning the house--to reach the smell.</i></p> <p><i>But now I am used to it. The only thing I can think of that it is like is the color of the paper! A yellow smell.</i></p>	<p>Refer to your prereading questions regarding the color yellow.</p> <p>Why does the narrator attach such importance to the smell?</p> <p>What is the significance of the word “creeps” in this context?</p>



<p><i>Sometimes I think there are a great many women behind, and sometimes only one, and she crawls around fast, and her crawling shakes it all over.</i></p> <p><i>Then in the very bright spots she keeps still, and in the very shady spots she just takes hold of the bars and shakes them hard.</i></p> <p><i>And she is all the time trying to climb through. But nobody could climb through that pattern--it strangles so; I think that is why it has so many heads.</i></p> <p><i>They get through, and then the pattern strangles them off and turns them upside down, and makes their eyes white!</i></p> <p><i>If those heads were covered or taken off it would not be half so bad.</i></p>	<p>What is the significance of the word "crawl" in this context?</p> <p>In what other context does the narrator mention heads being upside down?</p>
<p><i>... most women do not creep by daylight.</i></p>	<p>Analyze the implication of this statement. If most women do not crawl by daylight, then...?</p>
<p><i>I wonder if they all come out of that wallpaper as I did?</i></p>	<p>What is the implication of this statement for the narrator's identity and sense of self?</p>
<p><i>It is so pleasant to be out in this great room and creep around as I please!</i></p> <p><i>I don't want to go outside. I won't, even if Jennie asks me to.</i></p> <p><i>For outside you have to creep on the ground, and everything is green instead of yellow.</i></p>	<p>Refer to the prereading questions regarding the color green.</p> <p>Why does the narrator find the color green to be repellent?</p>



	How did the greenhouses get broken?
<i>"I've got out at last," said I, "in spite of you and Jane. And I've pulled off most of the paper, so you can't put me back!"</i>	Who is Jane? Why is this moment significant for an understanding of the narrator's identity?

Quote Analysis -- "The Yellow Wallpaper"	
<i>The most beautiful place! It is quite alone standing well back from the road, quite three miles from the village. It makes me think of English places that you read about, for there are hedges and walls and gates that lock, and lots of separate little houses for the gardeners and people.</i>	What is so appealing to the narrator about the hedges, walls, locking gates, and "separate little houses"? Why does she find these various borders and enclosures appealing?
<i>It is a big, airy room, the whole floor nearly, with windows that look all ways, and air and sunshine galore. It was nursery first and then playroom and gymnasium, I should judge; for the windows are barred for little children, and there are rings and things in the walls. The paint and paper look as if a boys' school had used it. It is stripped off--the paper-- in great patches all around the head of my bed, about as far as I can reach, and in a great place on the other side of the room low down. I never saw a worse paper in my life.</i>	Is this description consistent with the narrator's decision that the room was a "nursery"? Why does she <i>need</i> to see this room as a nursery?



<p><i>There's one comfort, the baby is well and happy, and does not have to occupy this nursery with the horrid wall-paper. If we had not used it, that blessed child would have! What a fortunate escape! Why, I wouldn't have a child of mine, an impressionable little thing, live in such a room for worlds.</i></p> <p><i>I never thought of it before, but it is lucky that John kept me here after all, I can stand it so much easier than a baby, you see. Of course I never mention it to them any more--I am too wise,--but I keep watch of it all the same.</i></p>	<p>What words or images in this description are particularly startling or disturbing? What do those words or images suggest about the narrator's state of mind?</p> <p>Why are the figures with the "bulbous eyes" upside-down?</p> <p>What are the associations with the word "crawl"?</p>
<p><i>It is the strangest yellow, that wall-paper! It makes me think of all the yellow things I ever saw--not beautiful ones like buttercups, but old foul, bad yellow things.</i></p> <p><i>But there is something else about that paper-- the smell! I noticed it the moment we came into the room, but with so much air and sun it was not bad. Now we have had a week of fog and rain, and whether the windows are open or not, the smell is here. It creeps all over the house.</i></p> <p><i>I find it hovering in the dining-room, skulking in the parlor, hiding in the hall, lying in wait for me on the stairs.</i></p> <p><i>It gets into my hair.</i></p> <p><i>Even when I go to ride, if I turn my head suddenly and surprise it--there is that smell! Such a peculiar odor, too! I have spent hours in trying to analyze it, to find what it smelled like.</i></p> <p><i>It is not bad--at first, and very gentle, but quite the subtlest, most enduring odor I ever</i></p>	<p>Who else would the baby not have to occupy the nursery with besides the wallpaper?</p> <p>Track the pronoun "it." To what does the pronoun refer? Why is there a sudden barrage of "it" throughout this passage?</p> <p>What is the narrator's stated or apparent attitude toward the baby? Does her actual feeling about the baby match her explicit statements?</p> <p>What piece of information does the narrator not clarify about her relationship to the baby?</p>



<p><i>met.</i></p> <p><i>In this damp weather it is awful, I wake up in the night and find it hanging over me.</i></p> <p><i>It used to disturb me at first. I thought seriously of burning the house--to reach the smell.</i></p> <p><i>But now I am used to it. The only thing I can think of that it is like is the color of the paper! A yellow smell.</i></p>	
<p><i>Sometimes I think there are a great many women behind, and sometimes only one, and she crawls around fast, and her crawling shakes it all over.</i></p> <p><i>Then in the very bright spots she keeps still, and in the very shady spots she just takes hold of the bars and shakes them hard. And she is all the time trying to climb through. But nobody could climb through that pattern--it strangles so; I think that is why it has so many heads.</i></p> <p><i>They get through, and then the pattern strangles them off and turns them upside down, and makes their eyes white!</i></p> <p><i>If those heads were covered or taken off it would not be half so bad.</i></p>	<p>Refer to your prereading questions regarding the color yellow.</p> <p>Why does the narrator attach such importance to the smell?</p> <p>What is the significance of the word “creeps” in this context?</p>
<p><i>... most women do not creep by daylight.</i></p>	<p>What is the significance of the word “crawl” in this context?</p> <p>In what other context does the narrator mention heads being upside down?</p>
<p><i>I wonder if they all come out of that wallpaper as I did?</i></p>	<p>Analyze the implication of this statement. If most women do not crawl by daylight, then...?</p>
<p><i>It is so pleasant to be out in this great room</i></p>	<p>What is the implication of this statement for the</p>



<p><i>and creep around as I please!</i> <i>I don't want to go outside. I won't, even if Jennie asks me to.</i> <i>For outside you have to creep on the ground, and everything is green instead of yellow.</i></p>	<p>narrator's identity and sense of self?</p>
<p><i>I've got out at last," said I, "in spite of you and Jane. And I've pulled off most of the paper, so you can't put me back!"</i></p>	<p>Refer to the prereading questions regarding the color green.</p> <p>Why does the narrator find the color green to be repellent?</p> <p>How did the greenhouses get broken?</p>
	<p>Who is Jane?</p> <p>Why is this moment significant for an understanding of the narrator's identity?</p>

Postreading Discussion

Students should analyze quotations together, individually, in small groups, or as a whole class. Discussion is vital to an understanding of the story. Generally, students will come to a number of conclusions about the narrator and her situation, specifically the following:



- The narrator IS “Jane.”
- The nursery was a place where other people -- very possibly women -- were kept. Textual evidence, particularly the barred windows, the nailed-down bed, the height of the tattered wallpaper, and most of all the “rings and things” in the walls suggest the room’s previous use as a place of confinement.
- The narrator initially sees images of fetuses or embryos or babies in the wallpaper. The textual descriptions -- large eyes, umbilical cord vines, “creeping” figures, upside-down figures (growing as a baby does *in utero*) -- support this answer.
- The narrator herself has had a baby and is suffering from post-partum psychosis. (John refers to “our child” during his midnight conversation with the narrator.)
- The narrator needs to see herself as the baby, which is why she refers to the room as a “nursery.”
- The figure behind the wallpaper is a projection from the narrator’s mind of the narrator’s own self.
- The “freeing” of the woman from the wallpaper represents (simultaneously) the narrator’s desire to free herself but also her own descent into madness.
- Green, like the greenhouses, represents fertility, growth, fecundity -- all of which the narrator rejects in her postpartum state. (Students may theorize that a previous postpartum patient broke out of the house and destroyed the greenhouses for similar symbolic reasons prior to the narrator’s arrival.)

Closure for Gilman

Students may be asked to discuss or write about the following topic:

Obviously, Gilman is not suggesting that madness is categorically better than sanity. However, for the heroine of “The Yellow Wallpaper,” the descent into madness proves unexpectedly liberating -- and empowering. In what ways is this true? In what ways is madness liberating or empowering for this heroine?

The Conversation Together: Dickinson and Gilman

The fact that the heroine is liberated by her madness -- and in some ways finds madness preferable to being “sane” -- is a crucial issue Dickinson suggests in her own text, particularly

“Much Madness.” At this point, the students are ready to compare the texts in writing or discussion.



In essence, the discussion or writing could center on the following issues:

- In what way do both Dickinson and Gilman indict society as the cause of women's madness?
- What do both Dickinson and Gilman suggest society "creates its own monsters," as it were, out of a desire to enforce "assent" from women as well as from men?
- In what way do both authors suggest that female rebellion is "dangerous"? To whom?
- Note that John, a doctor, has both a personal and a professional reason to want the rest cure to succeed -- and yet at the end of Gilman's story, he is entirely powerless, lying in a faint on the floor while his wife crawls over him. In what way does Gilman, in her portrayal of John, suggest that society's rigid roles (and insistence on "assent") is disempowering for *men* as well as women? (Note: If the class is also reading Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, this question could bridge both the figure of John in this story and the character of Torvald Helmer in Ibsen's drama.)

Assessment

There are a variety of ways in which these activities may be assessed. Simple class participation points for relevant, engaged contributions to the conversation would be one method, or the insights gained during class discussion may be used as prompts for a shorter or longer writing assignment in which students substantiate their insights about the poem with specific reference to the text. One such writing prompt occurs below and should take place after the students have had time to read and analyze the texts as a whole. Please note that if this assignment will be used, the specific poem in question should NOT be discussed at any length in class so as to avoid "lecture recap" papers: papers which merely repeat or paraphrase the whole-class insights without genuinely analyzing the material individually.

Prompt 1

One interesting approach to any collection of works from a single author is to regard those works as not three (or four, or fourteen) separate, individual statements that have only a nodding acquaintance with each other, but as *different stages of a single journey*, as if the poems themselves told a story in three parts.² With that in mind, have the students explore the stages of the journey as told through the two previously-assigned poem by Emily Dickinson plus "I Felt a Cleaving" below. Alternately, the students may seek three or four completely different poems by Dickinson on this subject.

² For example, it is fairly common to look at the 150-plus sonnets of William Shakespeare as telling a sequential love story, one in which a mentorship turns into a romance, the romance is broken by jealousy and rivalry with a woman the poet and his friend both love, and so on.



I Felt a Cleaving in my Mind

I felt a Cleaving in my Mind—
As if my Brain had split—
I tried to match it—Seam by Seam—
But could not make it fit.

The thought behind, I strove to join
Unto the thought before—
But Sequence ravelled out of Sound
Like Balls—upon a Floor.

Link: ["I Felt a Cleaving in my Mind"](#)

Prompt 2

Dickinson's poem above echoes one of the passages in "The Yellow Wallpaper" below:

I get positively angry with the impertinence of it and the everlastingness. Up and down and sideways they crawl, and those absurd, unblinking eyes are everywhere There is one place where two breaths didn't match, and the eyes go all up and down the line, one a little higher than the other.

Both writers use the metaphor of a pattern that does not match or "line up" as a metaphor for madness. To what degree does our definition of sanity reflect our desire for order, sequence, patterns, matching, or conformity to a specific "principle of design," as it were? Why might Gilman or Dickinson (or both) find this idea particularly appropriate to describe the condition of writers, particularly women writers. Do they, in effect, not fit the pattern?