Charlotte Perkins Gilman

Born in Hartford, Connecticut, on July 3, 1860, Charlotte Anna Perkins grew up in difficult circumstances. Her father left the family when Charlotte was a child, leaving her mother without the financial and emotional resources with which to raise her two children. The family moved often, resulting in a sporadic education. Her mother withheld affection from young Charlotte in an effort to raise her to be self-sufficient—not dependent on others for emotional fulfillment. In her autobiography, The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman—An Autobiography, Gilman notes that this was a well-meaning but misguided action on the part of her mother.

Charlotte married Walker Stetson in 1884, and a year later she gave birth to her first child, a daughter. Throughout her pregnancy and continuing after the birth, she suffered from a crushing depression. She was sent to Dr. Silas Weir Mitchell, a physician famous for his "rest cure" for such a condition—called a "nervous condition" at the time. The "rest cure" meant doing very little—physically or mentally. Gilman abided by the doctor's wishes for three months with disastrous results. This experience became the basis for the story "The Yellow Wallpaper." It also became the impetus for writing the story, as Gilman hoped that, by giving a personal account of the rest cure's effects, she might save others from the mental decline it prompted in her own life. She divorced her husband and moved to California in an effort to find real healing.

After Gilman wrote "The Yellow Wallpaper" in 1891, she sent it to William Dean Howells, a former editor of The Atlantic Monthly. He sent it on to an editor of the magazine, who reacted negatively to the story and rejected it. The reason for the rejection was that it was not very uplifting—not that it was a feminist story. However, in 1892 the story was printed in New England Magazine. Today it is regarded from a range of perspectives, from feminist literature to Gothic horror (genre of literature characterized by fear, horror, and death, as well as nature, individualism, and emotion).
Charlotte Perkins Gilman

As a relative of suffragist Isabella Beecher Hooker, feminist Catherine Beecher, and abolitionist and writer Harriet Beecher Stowe, perhaps it is unsurprising that Gilman grew into a women's rights activist. She wrote Women and Economics (1898) about the necessity for women to have worthwhile work suited not to their gender but to their inherent talents, abilities, and inclinations. She became a noted speaker on women's rights issues and the role of women in society. She married George Gilman in 1900. In 1934 George died, and soon after, Charlotte discovered she had terminal cancer. She committed suicide on August 17, 1935.