

“Yellow Wallpaper”

1. The narrator of “The Yellow Wallpaper” undergoes a profound change from the beginning of the story to the end. How is her change revealed in relation to her response to the wallpaper? How does she feel about the change? How do your feelings differ from the narrator’s?
2. The narrator describes the room with the yellow wallpaper as a former nursery—that is, a room in a large house where children played, ate their meals, and may have been educated. What evidence is there that it may have had a different function? How does that discrepancy help develop the character of the narrator and communicate the themes of the story?
3. Much of the language used to describe the narrator’s experience has both a denotative (descriptive) function and a connotative (symbolic or figurative) function. How do the meanings of such words and phrases as “yellow,” “creeping,” “immovable bed,” and “outside pattern” change as they appear in different parts of the story?
4. Look at the description of the wallpaper in paragraphs 96–104. How does the syntax of the sentences both mirror the pattern on the wallpaper and suggest the narrator’s agitation?
5. The narrator’s husband, John, maintains his composure—and single-mindedness—for nearly the whole story. Characterize his change at the end. How does his fainting add another level of subversion to this early feminist story?
6. “The Yellow Wallpaper” raises the question of what happens when a person is deprived of the chance for creative expression.

“Where are you going, Where have you been?”

1. Explain why you think Connie is or is not a typical teenage girl, as Oates depicts her early in the story. Which of her qualities strike you as specific to an earlier time period, and which seem more characteristic of teenagers in general? How is Connie distancing herself from her family and her perception of their values? Pay particular attention to the contrasts Oates draws in paragraph 5.
2. What part does June play in Connie’s characterization? What elements of Connie’s character and struggle to construct an identity independent of her family does June’s presence emphasize?

3. How is Arnold Friend characterized by the external descriptions Oates provides of his physical features and his clothes? What does his dialogue add? Is he a three-dimensional character or a stereotypical one? Examine the passage where Connie first sees him (para. 7). Why is she drawn to Arnold Friend?

4. How is music used throughout the story, especially to develop character and setting? Why is music so important to Connie? What does Oates mean when she writes in paragraph 94 that “even the music that was so familiar to her [Connie] was only half real”? Why does Oates describe Arnold as having “the voice of the man on the radio now” (para. 88)? What is the significance of Connie’s later recognition that Arnold spoke “with a slight rhythmic lilt, . . . [his words] the echo of a song from last year” (para. 118)?

5. What does Arnold Friend mean when he tells Connie, “ ‘The place where you came from ain’t there any more, and where you had in mind to go is cancelled out’ ” (para. 152)? What does *place* mean in this context, and how is Connie’s identity destined by it?

6. Suspense builds throughout this story. How does Oates generate and control that suspense? At which points does the suspense increase with particular intensity?

7. How does Oates convey the mounting fear Connie feels in the last pages of the story? Note the ways in which she shifts from Connie being the agent of her own actions to Connie being just an observer, such as, “She watched herself push the door slowly open” (para. 160). By the end, is Connie acting out of concern for her family or blind fear? What or who is controlling her actions? Connie’s mounting fear is conveyed by the way she experiences her own actions as though she were an

8. Oates does not provide closure in this story. Why? Does the indeterminate ending add to or diminish the story’s power?

9. Oates has called this story “a realistic allegory.” What does that description mean? What allegorical elements do you see in the story?

10. Oates says she based her story on three Tucson, Arizona, murders committed by Charles Schmid, “the Pied Piper of Tucson,” in the 1960s. Research this incident and explore how the facts match the fiction. How does this link to an actual incident influence your reading of the story?

11. Oates dedicates the story to Bob Dylan and says she was inspired by his song “It’s All Over Now, Baby Blue.” Listen to the song, paying special attention to the lyrics. Why do you think Oates found this song compelling?

Trifles

Choose a passage from *Trifles* that you think is pivotal to one of the themes:

- Sexism can make people blind to the truth.
- People may take desperate measures when they feel entrapped in a loveless marriage, in a cold isolated house, or in a society that doesn't value them.
- Someone who is a criminal by one set of social standards might be a victim according to another set of social standards. Or, in other words, justice is not always the same as the rule of law.

Discuss whether each of the following thesis statements is interpretation or summary. Then discuss whether the interpretive statements clearly focus on how literary elements contribute to the meaning of the work as a whole. Suggest improvements to those thesis statements that you find faulty or weak.

1. *Trifles* is a play about isolation and loneliness.

Offering a mere nod to interpretation, without more development this statement delivers little more than summary. Mention of the isolation of the cold marriage and the awful consequences such isolation and loneliness can bring about would make this statement much stronger. It would also provide an opportunity for the student to discuss the symbolism of the cold.

Rewritten:

Trifles is a play about the isolation of a cold marriage and the awful consequences that loneliness can bring about.

2. The broken birdcage in *Trifles* functions both as a clue to the circumstances of the murder and as a symbol that illuminates the role of Mrs. Wright in her marriage.

This statement is much more effective than the first one, but it could do more to connect the symbolism of the birdcage with Mrs. Wright.

Rewritten:

The broken birdcage in *Trifles* functions both as a clue regarding the motive for the crime itself and as a symbol that suggests an analogy between Mrs. Wright and the bird.

3. The character of Mrs. Peters, the wife of the sheriff, undergoes a significant change during the course of *Trifles*, a play set during a time when women were defined primarily through their husbands.

This statement would be improved by adding a recognition that the men are "static" characters, while Mrs. Peters is developed as a "round" character.

Rewritten:

In *Trifles*, a play set in a time when women were defined primarily through their husbands, Mrs. Peters is a 'round' character, undergoing a significant change

during the course of the play, while the men are 'static' throughout.

4. The frigid setting of Susan Glaspell's *Trifles* contributes to the characterization of all three women: it highlights the cold and isolated existence of the absent Mrs. Wright, while evoking the sympathetic responses of Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters. *Its specificity makes this a good thesis statement, one that invites discussion of symbolism.*

5. Even though we never actually meet her, Mrs. Wright exerts a powerful presence in *Trifles*.

Here we have an obvious statement, rather bland in its summary; it wants specificity. The statement could be improved by mentioning the influence of Mrs. Wright's act on the thoughts of the men, and of her behavior and the nature of her life on the women.

Rewritten:

Though Mrs. Wright is absent, her crime drives the action of the men throughout the play, while her past behavior and felt presence exert powerful influence over the women.

6. In the opening scene of *Trifles*, the men dominate the room as they stand near the stove, while the women remain near the door and quietly tolerate the cold. *Without at least a mention of what the cold might signify, this is mere summary. A better statement would be: In the opening scene of Trifles, it is ironic that the men are both literally cold, heading to the stove for warmth, and also "cold" on the trail for clues.*

7. The absent Mrs. Wright, suspected of murder in Susan Glaspell's *Trifles*, embodies the idea that loneliness, abuse, and isolation can lead a person to despair and even violence. *This one is good and offers an opportunity for the student to discuss the importance of an absent character.*

8. In *Trifles*, the male authority figures, including the sheriff himself, dismiss the female characters' investigation into the murder of Mr. Wright. *This statement could be fleshed out nicely with specific content. Rewritten, it could say: Mr. Hale speaks for the men, the authority figures in the play, remarking, "Well, women are used to worrying over trifles," while ironically missing all of the important clues.*

9. The kitchen, the dead bird, and the knots in the quilt have symbolic significance for the overall meaning of *Trifles*.

This one cries out for specific reference to the text. What is the symbolic significance? Recast, the statement might say, The unkempt kitchen, the dead bird, and the knots in the quilt come to represent the troubled state of Mrs. Wright and provide clues to the mystery of her sad life.

10. In *Trifles*, the discovery of the dead bird is a pivotal complication, especially for Mrs. Peters, that changes how the women view the role of the law.

This statement wants direct reference to the text. For example, In Trifles, the discovery of the dead bird presents a pivotal complication—especially to Mrs. Peters, who is “married to the law,” which she finds herself questioning.

11. Sometimes you will be asked to consider how a quotation applies to a piece of literature. Choosing one of the following quotations, develop a thesis statement and four points explaining how it applies to *Trifles*.

“The writers, I do believe, who get the best and most lasting response from their readers are the writers who offer a happy ending through moral development. By a happy ending, I do not mean mere fortunate events—a marriage or a last minute rescue from death—but some kind of spiritual reassessment or moral reconciliation, even with the self, even at death.”

—FAY WELDON

“In a dark time, the eye begins to see.”

—THEODORE ROETHKE

“All literature is protest.”

—RICHARD WRIGHT“

Literature is the question minus the answer.”

—ROLAND BARTHES

“Young Goodman Brown”

1. What is the significance of the names Goodman Brown and Faith, especially in such statements as “Faith kept me back a while” in paragraph 12 and “My Faith is gone!” in paragraph 50?

2. Hawthorne presents contrasting imagery in the story. What, for example, is the effect of juxtaposing “melancholy air” with “pink ribbons” (para. 6)? How do the various contrasts develop a theme?

3. Discuss the imagery developed in paragraph 8. What effect does it create?

4. In paragraph 37, the narrator remarks, “there was a world of meaning in this simple comment.” What is the “world of meaning” he is referring to?

5. What is the nature of Goodman Brown’s quest? Where is he going? Why? In paragraph 41, the reader learns that Goodman Brown was “conscious of the guilty purpose that had brought him thither, though now so happily turned from it.” How conscious is he? Does he happily turn from it?

6. Paragraph 53 begins: "In truth, all through the haunted forest, there could be nothing more frightful than the figure of Goodman Brown." Does that description refer more to how others might see him or to how he sees himself? What does Hawthorne mean when he points out that the "fiend in his own shape is less hideous than when he rages in the breast of man"? Why at the end of the paragraph is his cry "lost to his own ear, by its unison with the cry of the desert"?

7. Paragraph 71 reads, in its entirety: "Had Goodman Brown fallen asleep in the forest, and only dreamed a wild dream of a witch-meeting?" Do you believe it was a dream, or did Goodman Brown actually live his experience? Explain. What is the effect of Goodman Brown's experience, whether it was a dream or not?

8. Considering the symbolism, discuss the story as an allegory. How might Goodman Brown's quest serve as a symbolic representation of the development of identity?

Multiple-choice Test

1. In this context, "grave" (para. 10) most likely means both

- a. formal and outdated
- b. drab and dirty
- c. serious and deathly
- d. gray and pallid
- e. decomposed and desiccated

2. In paragraph 12, Goodman Brown says, "Faith kept me back a while." Here, "Faith" refers not only to his wife but also to his faith in

- a. the goodness of his fellow man
- b. his own inner strength
- c. God
- d. the devil
- e. his ability to sense danger

3. The imagery in the first sentence of paragraph 13 emphasizes that Goodman Brown is walking into the forest and

- a. descending into hell
- b. falling into a pit of vipers
- c. wandering lost in despair
- d. facing his own worst fears
- e. searching for Faith

4. Based on clues in this passage, we can infer that Goodman Brown's "fellow-traveller" is actually

- a. his grandfather
- b. the devil
- c. an angel
- d. King William
- e. a witch hunter from Salem

5. The depiction of the "fellow-traveller's" staff in paragraph 13 is an example of

- I. symbolism
 - II. personification
 - III. allusion
- a. I only
 - b. II only
 - c. II and III
 - e. I and III
 - f. I, II, and III

6. In paragraph 15, the term "covenant" is ironic because

- a. mankind's covenant was with God, not the devil
- b. he keeps his promise but immediately wants to go back on it
- c. this was an informal arrangement; calling it a "covenant" is hyperbole
- d. one can only enter into a covenant if there is a contract
- e. a group of witches is called a "coven"

7. In this passage, we learn that

- a. Goodman Brown's ancestors served the devil
- b. Faith has been kidnapped by witches
- c. the devil is Goodman Brown's grandfather
- d. there is a fine line between "good works" and "wickedness"
- e. it was the devil who started King Philip's war

8. In paragraph 18, it can be inferred that the “Quaker woman” was

- a. oppressed because of her political beliefs
- b. accused of being a witch
- c. caught stealing
- d. an adulteress
- e. burned at the stake

9. The word “boot” in paragraph 19 most likely means

- a. a type of footwear, or shoe
- b. to kick, or punt
- c. as well, or in addition
- d. many, or of a great amount
- e. common people, or those who wear boots to work

10. In paragraph 23, the “fellow-traveller” says “prithee, don’t kill me with laughing.” This is an example of

- a. understatement
- b. sarcasm
- c. hyperbole
- d. non sequitur
- e. satire

11. Understanding that Nathaniel Hawthorne had ancestors who participated in the Salem witch trials, what seems to be the author’s purpose in this passage?

- a. to see if he can escape the evil that runs in the family
- b. to atone for the crimes of his ancestors
- c. to struggle with the notion of faith in a world beset by greed
- d. to reinforce his belief in God in the face of the Enlightenment
- e. to excuse his family’s involvement in the witch trials because the devil made them do it