

Neurasthenia, Rest Cure, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman

The entrance of neurasthenia into medical knowledge, coined by Dr. George Miller Beard in the late 19th century, spawned a pandemic throughout Europe and North America affecting the middle class, especially women. Dr. S. Weir Mitchell, a physician deeply interested in psychological ailments after working with Civil War soldiers experiencing “phantom limb syndrome,” became the leading expert in treating neurasthenia with his rest cure. Denying the patient any movement, thought, or extraneous effort for a long period of time was thought to relieve their symptoms and cure them of their ailments. Dr. Mitchell received a letter from Charlotte Perkins Gilman imploring his help. He diagnosed her with neurasthenia and prescribed his rest cure method. In a few weeks Ms. Gilman became thoroughly depressed and alarmed that her mind was deteriorating. She abandoned the treatment. She wrote “The Yellow Wallpaper” as a reactionary tale towards Dr. Mitchell and others like him who advocated that women shun intellectual advancement for fear of it being a detriment to their health. The short story was disturbing to many at the time and later brought back into the public eye by feminists in the mid-20th century. Ms. Gilman’s work revealed the deep division between the sexes during the early 20th century and how detrimental prevailing thought on “modern” medicine was to women. Neurasthenia was eventually removed as a legitimate disease from medical journals, however, the disease and its cure are fascinating topics still today.

For more information on Neurasthenia and the Rest Cure:

Beard, George Miller. *American Nervousness: Its Causes and Consequences, a supplement to nervous exhaustion (neurasthenia)*. 1881, Putnam: New York. [Tompkins-McCaw Library: RC552.N5 B368A 1881]

Mitchell, S. Weir. *Fat and Blood: and how to make them*. 1877, J.P. Lippincott & Co.: Philadelphia. [Tompkins-McCaw Library: RC343.M6 1878]

Mitchell, S. Weir. *Lectures on the Diseases of the Nerves, Especially in Women*. 1885, Lea Brothers & Co.: Philadelphia. [Tompkins-McCaw Library: RC340.M682 1885]

For more information on Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Feminist Theory:

Golden, Catherine; Gilman, Charlotte Perkins. *The Captive Imagination: A casebook on The Yellow Wallpaper*. 1992, Feminist Press at the City University of New York: New York. [Cabell Library: PS1744.G57 Y453 1992]

Bassuk, Ellen L. [The Rest Cure: Repetition or Resolution of Victorian Women’s Conflicts?](#) *Poetics Today*, 1985, 245-257

Gilman, Charlotte Perkins. *Herland, The Yellow Wallpaper and selected writings*. 1999, Penguin Books: New York. [Cabell Library: PS1744.G57 A6 1999a]

For more information online, go to:

Reflections on Health in Society and Culture.

<http://www.hsl.virginia.edu.proxy.library.vcu.edu/historical/reflections/fall2008/index.html>.

University of Virginia, Historical Collections at the Claude Moore Health Sciences Library, Charlottesville, Va.