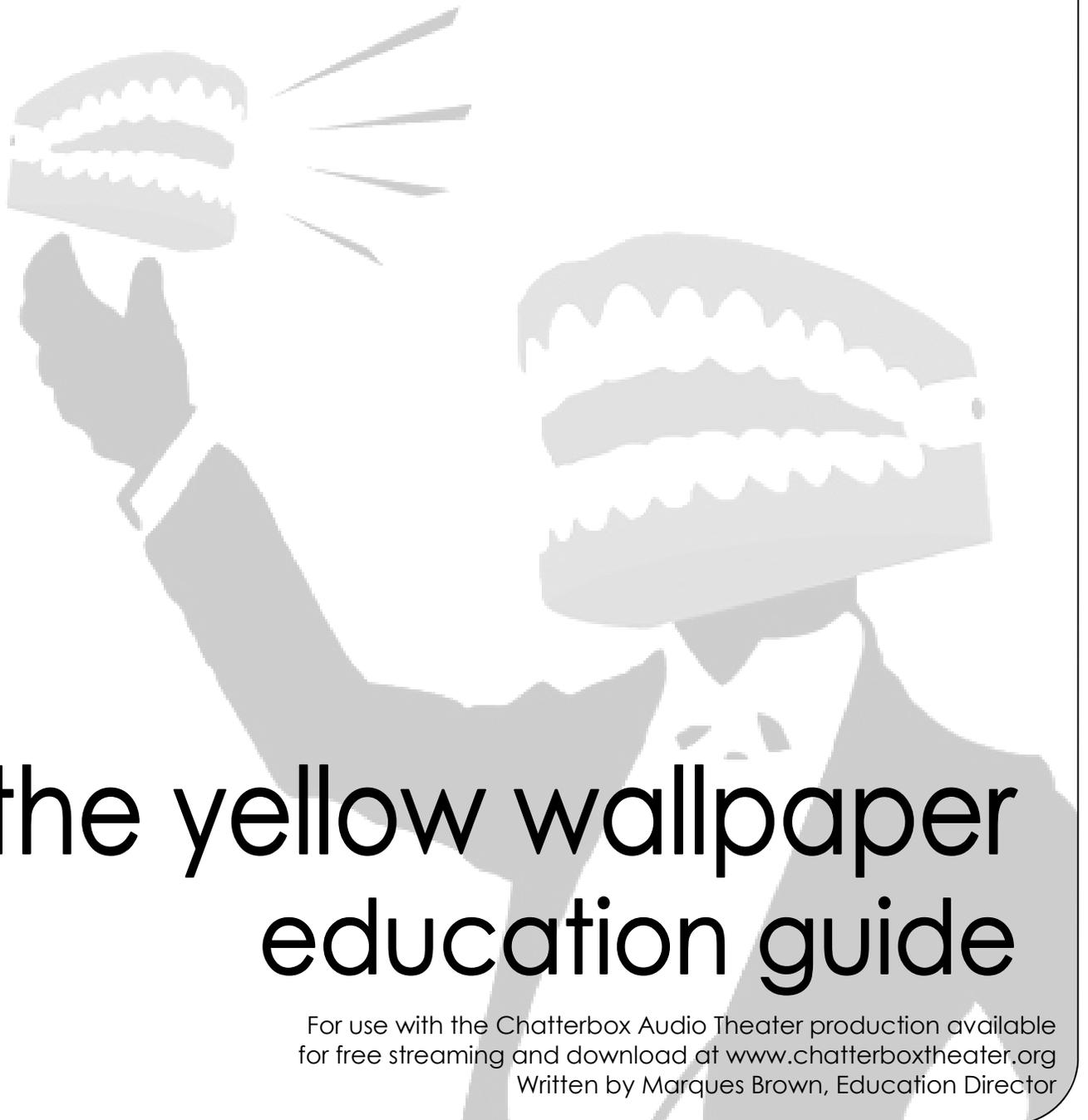


CHATTERBOX AUDIO THEATER

www.chatterboxtheater.org



the yellow wallpaper education guide

For use with the Chatterbox Audio Theater production available
for free streaming and download at www.chatterboxtheater.org
Written by Marques Brown, Education Director



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about chatterbox

Chatterbox Audio Theater was created in 2007 by four friends with a lot of creativity and ambition but very little money. Based in Memphis, TN, Chatterbox creates fully soundscaped audio works for free streaming or download. With rare exceptions, Chatterbox shows are recorded live, with manual sound effects and as little post-production editing as possible.

Chatterbox is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit corporation. Every Chatterbox production is available for free streaming and download from iTunes or from the group's website, www.chatterboxtheater.org.

mission

Chatterbox Audio Theater is a non-profit web-based community theater that advances the exchange of ideas by channeling creativity and artistic collaboration into recorded audio works that enlighten, entertain, and inspire.

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Study guide designed with help from Heather Klein, www.heatherkleindesign.com



about audio theater

Once known as **radio drama**, audio theater is the production of dramatic performances written and performed specifically for audiences to hear. It had its greatest popularity on radio, before television was introduced, during the period known as the “Golden Age of Radio.”

The development of audio theater began as early as the 1880s, when theatrical performances could be listened to over the telephone! In the next ten years, phonograph recordings were all the rage, and music and comedy acts—like those of the vaudeville stage—were recorded and sold all over the country.

Eventually, the comical “sight gags” that were a part of the hilarious appeal of live vaudeville performances had to be adapted into “sound gags,” and “sound effects” for audiences at home listening to their radios or record players. By the 1920s, these techniques were improved upon—and the art form of audio theater was born.

As “radio drama,” it became the most popular form of mass entertainment from the 1920s through the 1940s, now referred to as the “Golden Age of Radio.” Classic shows such as *Amos ‘n’ Andy*, *The Shadow*, and *The Lone Ranger* kept people of all ages glued to their radios. Some of these shows ran for several decades.



about audio theater (continued)

Television sets began to pop up in American homes in the late 1930s and early 1940s. After WWII, the television started to replace the radio in most American homes as the main source of news and entertainment. By the 1960's, with a few special exceptions, radio networks began shutting down their radio drama productions altogether to make way for television shows, and instead focused on delivering news and popular music.

Since the days that television replaced the radio, audio theater has survived through the efforts of many individual theater groups like Chatterbox. Thanks to technological innovations such as computer software and the internet, audio theater is being resurrected online, and is proving a rapidly growing art form and source of entertainment.

Audio theater also is growing in another way as well. This sensory art form is gaining recognition in educational institutions around the world as an effective teaching method. Audio theater has been employed to teach subjects such as literature, theatre, and technology, but also unexpected fields such as history, social science, and ethics.

about the yellow wallpaper

"The Yellow Wallpaper" is a short story by American writer Charlotte Perkins Gilman, first published in January 1892 in *The New England Magazine*. It is regarded as an important early work of American feminist literature because it challenges nineteenth-century attitudes toward women and their health, both physical and mental. "The Yellow Wallpaper" is often categorized as Gothic or Horror fiction.

The story is presented as a collection of journal entries written by an unnamed Narrator, a woman whose husband, a doctor, has confined her to a country house they have rented for the summer. The Narrator is allowed to do nothing but rest so that she might recuperate from what her husband calls a "temporary nervous depression—a slight hysterical tendency," a diagnosis not uncommon for women in that period.

The Narrator hides her journal entries from her husband, who has taken full control over her activities within the house. In fact, with nothing to occupy or stimulate her, she is effectively confined her to her room—which is lined with yellow wallpaper.

As the story progresses, it explores the effect of the Narrator's solitary confinement on her mental health, and her descent into psychosis. This descent is represented by her obsession with the pattern and color of the wallpaper. Over time, the Narrator's relationship the wallpaper evolves from fascination to terror. She perceives that the paper itself is acting as a sort of oppressor of innocent women, from which there is no escape.

summary

The story opens with a journal entry in which the Narrator describes the house that her husband John, a physician, has chosen as the site for their summer vacation. She describes the house in contradictions, calling it both an aristocratic estate and a haunted house. She expresses surprise that they could afford such a retreat, yet feels uneasy about it as well. We are informed of the Narrator's illness, a "nervous depression," and we see that her husband is condescending to both her and her condition. While the narrator feels that activity and interest would help to relieve her condition, her husband feels that she should do nothing but rest. She is shown to the bedroom to where she is to be confined, and she comments on the "revolting" yellow wallpaper and the bars on the window.

The narrator continues to write, hiding her entries from her husband. She longs for activity, company, and other diversions, and feels increasingly patronized by John, who seems to grow more controlling. Much time and detail is spent on describing the wallpaper of the room, which begins to appear not only ugly but menacing. John refuses to paper over it, however, or to allow the Narrator to change bedrooms, arguing that this will only support and strengthen her neurotic behavior.

The Narrator's observation of the wallpaper becomes more specific, intense, and strange as she imagines different levels of patterns within it. Even visits from her family—including her sister-in-law Jennie, who is acting as her nurse—do not cheer the Narrator, but leave her feeling tired and confused.

As her solitude continues, the Narrator's perceptions grow even more delusional, and she begins to hallucinate patterns, images, and even movement within and behind the wallpaper. These hallucinations take the form of an imprisoned woman who crawls in an enclosed space and tries to escape but can't. As the images grow more intense, so does the Narrator's sporadic and disconnected behavior, as observed by John and Jennie.

Eventually, the multiplying figures of women trapped behind the wallpaper persuade the Narrator to take action. In a frenzy, she begins to tear away the wallpaper, becoming more and more frantic. Ultimately, once the Narrator can no longer distinguish between herself and the hallucinations of the women behind the wallpaper, she succumbs to insanity.

about the author

Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860-1935)



Charlotte Perkins Gilman was born on July 3, 1860, in Hartford, Connecticut. Perkins had a very difficult childhood. Her father, Frederick Beecher Perkins, was a relative of the influential Beecher family (including the writer Harriet Beecher Stowe, author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*). But he abandoned his family, leaving Charlotte's mother to raise two children on her own. Gilman's mother relocated her children often, and their early education suffered greatly for it.

In 1884, at the age of 24, Charlotte Perkins Gilman married artist Charles Stetson, and shortly thereafter gave birth to a daughter named Katherine. During her ten-year marriage to Stetson, Gilman experienced severe depression, for which she was treated in a myriad of ways. These experiences are believed to have been the inspiration for "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1899).

Gilman is best remembered for her works of fiction, but was also known for her intellect, strong opinions on women's rights, and lectures. One of her greatest works of nonfiction, *Women and Economics* (1898), helped cement Gilman's standing as a social theorist and activist. In it, she calls for women to gain economic independence. Other important nonfiction works followed, such as *The Home: Its Work and Influence* (1903) and *Does a Man Support His Wife?* (1915). Gilman also established *The Forerunner* magazine, which allowed her to openly express her ideas on social reform. The magazine was published from 1909 to 1916 and included fiction, poetry, essays, and opinion pieces.

By 1894, Gilman had divorced Stetson, and in 1900 she wed for the second time, this time marrying her cousin George Gilman. The two remained together until his death in 1934. The very next year, Gilman was diagnosed with inoperable breast cancer. After a period of physical and emotional struggle, Charlotte Perkins Gilman ended her own life by taking an overdose of chloroform on August 17, 1935.

cast & crew

Role	Performer
Narrator	Jane Kilgore
John	Robert Arnold
Jennie	Katherine Whitfield
Musician	Jeremy Howard
Sound Effects	Katherine Whitfield
Dramaturge	Rebecca Bates
Producer	Andrew Sullivan
Adaptation	Robert Arnold
Director	Robert Arnold
Announcer	Tom Badgett
Artist	Matt Reed

characters

The Narrator

The Narrator is a young wife and mother, presumably of upper-middle class, who is being treated for depression. We are never told her name, though there are allusions to the name "Jane." It is clear that she possesses a talent for writing and is very imaginative, though her doctors take this as a sign of her "slight hysterical tendency." The story is told from her perspective by means of a secret journal, which she uses to record her thoughts as her obsession with the yellow wallpaper grows.

There is much that can be considered when interpreting this character, including the fact that we, as audience, are never privy to her name, and what that says about her feelings of identity. She also represents a common literary paradox associated with the "descent into madness": as she loses touch with the reality of her daily life, she comes to understand her inner life more clearly. By seeing the progression of this mental and emotional collapse in first-person form, we gain a better understanding of the Narrator's conflict and subsequent suffering.

John

John is the narrator's husband and doctor. Literarily, John acts as a foil to the Narrator in that he is very practical, preferring facts rather than "fancy" or imagination. From the beginning of the story, John restricts the Narrator's behavior as part of her treatment. It seems clear that John does love his wife, and does not understand the negative effect his treatment has on her.

Though it would seem that John plays the part of the antagonist in this story, we are never given any evidence that suggest that he is deliberately evil. That is, he seems to antagonize his wife unintentionally. As a late-nineteenth-century husband and doctor, he holds all-encompassing authority over his wife. John is confident that he knows what is best for his wife, and this comes across as disregard for her opinion. In this, John represents not necessarily a tyrannical dictator or prison guard, but an emotionally ignorant society that, through social pressures, victimizes its own citizens by finding little value in a woman's point of view.

Jennie

Jennie is John's sister and acts as housekeeper for the couple and nurse for the Narrator. Jennie serves as yet another foil to the Narrator; her presence and complacency in her domestic role heighten the Narrator's guilt over her own inability to act as a traditionally subservient wife and mother. Jennie does possess intuition and insight, though, and seems, at times, to suspect that the Narrator is more troubled than she lets on.

themes, motifs, and symbols

Literary works often use **themes** (unifying or dominant ideas), **motifs** (recurring subjects, ideas, or other patterns), and **symbols** (an object or image used to represent a larger idea). Below are just a few examples and suggestions of these literary devices to explore in your classroom discussions.

THEME: Marriage and the subordination of women

In its own time, many readers of “The Yellow Wallpaper” likely took it as a short and scary tale about a woman in the midst of a mental breakdown—an entertaining, if off-putting, story. It is clear to more modern readers, however, that Gilman used conventions of the psychological thriller genre to comment on the position of women within society, and more specifically within the institution of marriage.

Gilman shows the conventional middle-class marriage of her time as a means of keeping women in their place as second-class citizens, with rigid distinctions between the active work of the husband and the domestic role of the wife. This story illustrates (rather literally) these gender divisions, which keep women in a childish state of dependence, preventing them from achieving their full potential as individuals.

John’s misguided confidence in his own wisdom leads him to patronize and dominate his wife, all in an attempt to “cure” her. The Narrator is reduced to behaving like a frustrated child, unable to stand up for herself without seeming petulant. It is the mental constraints placed upon the Narrator, much more than the physical ones, which ultimately drive her insane.

THEME: The “Resting Cure” and its ineffectiveness

Before writing “The Yellow Wallpaper,” Gilman herself was “treated” for her own depression, and felt that she was almost destroyed by Dr. S. Weir Mitchell’s “resting cure.” It is clear that she intended to use her story as an attack on this ineffective and cruel type of treatment. The story illustrates how a mind that is already plagued with anxiety can be affected when it is kept from any activity or worthwhile work. To his credit, the real Dr. Mitchell (who is mentioned by

themes, motifs, and symbols (continued)

name in the story) took Gilman's criticism seriously, and discontinued the practice of the "resting cure." From Gilman's other writings and lectures, it is clear that she heavily criticized any form of medical care that ignored the concerns of the patient and considered him or her a passive object for treatment and experimentation.

MOTIF: Irony

"The Yellow Wallpaper" is a story that is full of irony of every kind: verbal, dramatic, and situational. Verbal irony is the use of words to convey multiple and often conflicting ideas or meanings. The Narrator exemplifies verbal irony through her wit and sarcasm when she refers to her husband: "John laughs at me, of course, but one expects that in marriage." Though *she* has come to expect this behavior, it is clear that one does not really expect such patronizing acts in a healthy marriage. Later, she says, "I am glad my case is not serious," when she is obviously concerned that her case is quite serious indeed.

Dramatic irony exists when what the audience knows or can infer is in contrast with what a character believes to be true. In "The Yellow Wallpaper," dramatic irony occurs when the Narrator first describes her bedroom. She mentions that the room must have once been a nursery when she sees such strange features as "rings and things" in the walls, nailed-down furniture, and the torn wallpaper itself. To the reader, these features suggest that the room has been some sort of prison or holding room for someone in the past—perhaps someone who was thought insane. Later, the narrator claims that Jennie has taken a great interest in the wallpaper. To the reader, however, it seems obvious that Jennie is only showing a passing realization that the paper may be responsible for the yellow stains on their clothing.

The entire story exemplifies situational irony, in which a character's actions have the opposite of their intended effect. All of John's good intentions backfire, and his attempts at treatment serve only to further drive his wife

themes, motifs, and symbols (continued)

toward insanity. Also, the Narrator herself seems to gain insight while simultaneously losing her reason and self-control. All three forms of irony allow us to feel an underlying conflict throughout the story, and help us consider its events from several perspectives.

MOTIF: The Journal

The story is told from the perspective of the Narrator, in the form of journal entries. Chatterbox's audio interpretation of the story is told in the same way, though we also hear the voices of other characters as they represent past events or interrupt the Narrator's writing. Through this kind of storytelling, the reader or listener observes the Narrator's descent into madness from both the inside and the outside. We are given the opportunity to see and hear the events from a first-person perspective as they unfold. The "journal entry" form of narration creates an intimacy with the Narrator by allowing the reader or listener to experience her thoughts directly, forcing us to decipher her ambiguity and strange perceptions.

SYMBOL: The Wallpaper

Wallpaper is a simple home decoration that we generally regard as domestic and benign. It is used to beautify a room—but only by putting up a false front, or by hiding imperfections in the wall behind it. The titular yellow wallpaper is clearly the most important piece of symbolism in Gilman's story. As the intense relationship between the Narrator and the wallpaper develops, it begins to symbolize things that affect her directly. The paper becomes a text that must be interpreted and a pattern that must be deciphered. Eventually, as the Narrator continues to decipher the many existing sub-patterns within the paper, it becomes a prison for ghostly figures trapped within. In this way, the wallpaper is symbolic of the Narrator's own fragile psychological condition, as well as the way her full potential is trapped behind barriers of social conformities. The wallpaper represents the oppression of all marginalized citizens who are forced to hide their identities and potentialities behind societal customs.

entry points for teachers

1. Charlotte Perkins Gilman
2. The Feminist movement
3. Mental illness and perceptions of reality
4. Character creation and description
5. Short story format
6. Audio theater
7. Narrative theater
8. Music in a story
9. Sound effects in a story

curriculum connections

English/Language Arts

1. Literary forms/fiction
2. Rhythmic nature of language found in the play
3. Recurring themes
4. Observation
5. Compare and contrast
6. Cause and effect
7. Outcomes, conclusions
8. Figurative Language
9. Make predictions about stories
10. Draw, dictate, or write stories that include settings, characters, problem/solution situations, a series of events, and a sense of sequence
11. Participate in group discussions
12. Express personal opinions about the play/story
13. After reading or hearing the play/story, identify the main idea, describe main characters, re-enact or map major plot elements, draw conclusions, and make inferences
14. Dramatize or re-enact story events
15. Describe the plot, characters, and setting in the play
16. Explain a speaker's message and purpose
17. Speak to express an opinion, persuade, or entertain

Social Studies

1. Show how social perceptions affect thoughts and behavior of individuals
2. Show how personalities are similar and different
2. Explain and respect the diversity of people and their experiences

Science:

1. Discuss or report on the technical process of recording and reproducing sound
2. Examine the psychological connection between experience and behavior

shorter activities

1. Write short, original narratives that include characters, settings, and a sequence of events.
2. Write about a real-life experience that can be fictionalized through exaggeration.
3. Compare/contrast “The Yellow Wallpaper” with other works of the feminist movement, or other gothic/horror fiction.
4. Write about or discuss relationships between music, story, and literature.
5. Adapt a familiar story into play form.

longer activities

1. The students will write letters about the play to specific people, depending on the content of your class. Students may write letters to the characters within the stories, discussing their choices and motivation, and/or making predictions about what may happen to them in the future. Students may write letters to the actors, discussing choices the actor made in bringing his/her character to life, or techniques used within the play. Other students can write a letter to a newspaper as a play critic, describing the play he/she heard, the production elements (sound effects, voices, music, etc.) and what he/she thought was effective (or ineffective).

2. The students will write reactions to specific questions and/or prompts relating to the story. Some examples are: Who does the author ultimately blame for the Narrator's descent into madness? Why? What is the significance of the first-person, journal-entry style of narrative? How would "The Yellow Wallpaper" be different if it were told from John's point of view? What happens to the Narrator after the story ends?

3. The students will write original short stories based upon their own real-life experiences. They may choose to write their stories as journal entries or 'blogs,' or to write in another narrative form. They will take their own experience and adapt it to address far-reaching themes, perhaps representing their experience as a horror or fantasy story.

4. The students will listen to samples of sound effects used in the audio theater piece. They will discuss the role of sound in audio theater, and in theater in general. Students will speculate on what objects or devices were used to create sound effects in the audio theater piece, and will create their own sound effects using everyday objects.

vocabulary

Arabesque. A swirling, spiraling, undulating, or serpentine line or linear motif. *"The outside pattern is a florid arabesque, reminding one of a fungus."* (15:25)

Bulbous. Bulb-shaped; bulging. *"There is a recurrent spot where the pattern lolls like a broken neck, and two bulbous eyes stare at you upside down."* (07:26)

Buttercups. Any of numerous plants of the genus *Ranunculus*, having glossy yellow flowers and deeply cut leaves. *"It makes me think of all the yellow things I ever saw—not beautiful things like buttercups, but old, foul, bad yellow things."* (19:11)

Chintz. A printed cotton fabric used especially for draperies. *"I wanted the [room] downstairs, which opens onto the piazza and has roses all over the window, and such pretty old-fashioned chintz hangings!"* (03:20)

Grotesque. Something odd or unnatural in shape, appearance, or character; something fantastically ugly or absurd. *"The interminable grotesques seem to form around a common center and rush off in headlong plunges of equal distraction."* (10:35)

Hysterical. Irrational from fear, emotion, or an emotional shock. Related to the Greek word *hystericus*, "of the womb," since it was originally defined as a neurotic condition peculiar to women and thought to be caused by a dysfunction of the uterus. *"If a physician of high standing, and one's own husband, assures friends and relatives that there is really nothing the matter with one but temporary nervous depression—a slight hysterical tendency—what is one to do?"* (01:31)

Phosphate. A carbonated drink of water and fruit syrup containing a little phosphoric acid, intended to strengthen the metabolism. *"What you need are some phosphates, a few tonics, fresh air, and rest."* (01:20)

Plantain. A tropical plant of the banana family. *"The key is down by the front steps, under a plantain leaf."* (27:54)

Querulous. Full of complaints; complaining. *"I don't feel as if it is worthwhile to turn my hand over for anything, and I'm getting dreadfully fretful and querulous."* (09:08)

vocabulary (continued)

Smooch. A smudge or stain. *"I've found yellow smooches on all your clothes, and on Mr. John's, too." (17:33)*

Sulfur. A chemical element used especially in making gunpowder and matches. It is yellow in color and burns with a blue flame and a suffocating odor. *"It is a lurid orange in some places, a sickly sulfur tint in others." (05:03)*

Temperament. The combination of mental, physical, and emotional traits of a person; natural predisposition. *"There is nothing so dangerous, so fascinating, to a temperament like yours." (14:20)*

Tonic. Any medicine that invigorates or strengthens; in this case, probably quinine water, a carbonated water containing lemon, lime, sweetener, and quinine, a chemical used as medicine. *"What you need are some phosphates, a few tonics, fresh air, and rest." (01:20)*