

SHORT FILM DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR  
***MESHES OF THE AFTERNOON***

BY MAYA DEREN



CROSS-MEDIA CONNECTION TO  
***THE YELLOW WALLPAPER***  
BY CHARLOTTE PERKINS GILMAN



# ABOUT *MESHES OF THE AFTERNOON*

*Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943) is a 14-minute film by experimental filmmaker Maya Deren (1917–1961). Deren, a Ukrainian immigrant who lived in the U.S., was a prominent figure in the avant-garde art movement of the 1940s and 50s. Her work explores the unconscious, gender roles, and the body in movement. Deren believed that film could depict and share what an experience felt like for a person in the same ways that it could create accurate documentation of an event.

In *Meshes of the Afternoon*, viewers follow an unnamed woman over an afternoon as she explores her inner psychological landscape through her domestic space and environs. Through dream-like sequences and clever edits, the main character, played by Deren, replicates herself into doubles and triples throughout the film. She also repeats various actions in a repetitive loop. Symbols like keys, a knife, a cloaked figure, and mirrors add to the psychological depth and suggest decipherable meaning for viewers. The film is considered one of the most “influential works in American experimental cinema,” according to MOMA (the Museum of Modern Art).

The Library of Congress selected it for preservation in 1990.

---

## ESSENTIAL QUESTION

*How can an experimental film express a protagonist's emotions and experience of an event differently than a representational film?*

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Gauge your initial response to an experimental film. A great technique when watching nontraditional films is to watch once to get a sense of what happens. Then, watch it a second time and annotate. Much like you would when reading for English class, write notes about the scenes, imagery, story beats, and interesting shots or ideas that occur to you as you watch the film. This outline can then be used for critical discussion and analysis.
- There are many repeated actions and objects in the film. Watch and compile a list. (You could do this as a class.) What might some of these symbols stand for?
- How effectively does the film convey the protagonist's inner landscape? What feelings and moods do you notice? Can you think of other examples from film, TV, or music where this approach is also used?
- What interesting film techniques stood out to you as you watched the film? How did those add to your understanding of the themes? How could you adapt any of those themes to writing? (for example, how could you use a match cut in a short story)?
- Do you feel Deren's exploration of self and consciousness is specific to her time (remember this film is 80 years old!) or addresses something universal that we think about today, too? Explain.

# LEARNING ACTIVITIES

*These hands-on activities can be completed individually or in groups and extend learner engagement with the film.*

- Have students make 1-5 minute films mimicking Deren's style. Choose an emotion, compile a list of symbols, and then shoot and quickly edit.
- Use magazines and found images to create collages that hint at a psychological journey. Consider exploring Hannah Hoch (link below), a German Dada collage artist working 20 years earlier.
- Create a classroom card set of symbols to be used as writing prompts. Use index cards, magazine images, drawings, and words. Each card should have one symbol and its possible meanings. Let students pull a few for quick writing prompts throughout the semester.
- Write short scenes individually or with a partner, where you adapt an editing technique from the film to writing. Consider match cuts, quick cuts, telescoping perspective, and others.

---

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Maya Deren's Film Philosophy is an excellent [short video](#) about Deren's cinematic philosophy, which includes amateurism, the use of the body, and the manipulation of reality.
  - [Hannah Hoch](#), the German Dada artist who used collage.
-

# ABOUT *THE YELLOW WALLPAPER*

*The Yellow Wallpaper* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman is a short story published in 1892 about a woman who is sequestered to an attic nursery in the country estate her husband, a doctor, has rented for the summer to help her rest and cure her nerves. As she spends day after day in the room deprived of mental stimulation, she turns her attention to the hideous yellow wallpaper hanging damaged on the walls. She studies the patterns, aged smudges, smells, and even what she perceives as a hunched-over woman stuck in the wallpaper, trying to get out. She slowly begins losing her grip on reality.

A popular treatment for women in the 19th century was to deprive them of mental work like reading and writing, and to limit contact with others and force bed rest. Ironically, this often worsened symptoms. When Perkins Gilman suffered from what today we would call postpartum depression or psychosis, she received a similar treatment, and it nearly induced a psychotic break. She wrote this story to dissuade doctors and well-meaning family members from applying similar methods to other women, and there is evidence from her doctor that she affected a change in perspective.

---

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

*For group discussion or written responses.*

- How does the protagonist feel about the wallpaper when she first settles in the room? How does her perspective change throughout the story?
- What is the effect of the protagonist speaking directly to the reader? What sort of things does she say? What is her tone?
- What symbols and motifs do you notice throughout the story?
- How do the other characters, specifically the protagonist's husband, affect the story? Do you find him reliable? Do you trust his assessment of the situation?
- How does knowing this story reflects Perkins Gilman's lived experience change your reaction? Perkins Gilman wrote this story to instigate change in medical practices for women; do you think it is effective? How might someone who read this in the late 19th century react to this? Can you think of a current medical treatment that should be changed?

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Explore *The Yellow Wallpaper* through [Project Gutenberg](#).
- [Crash Course: The Yellow Wallpaper](#).
- Informative [article](#) from *The Conversation* about women's healthcare in the late 19th Century.

# CROSS-MEDIA CONNECTION

Although nearly half a century separates *The Yellow Wallpaper* from *Meshes of the Afternoon*, both works seek to depict women's conscious and unconscious minds, surreal hallucinations, and unsettled connections to reality. By studying the techniques used in both to depict dream-like fantasies, students can build their formal vocabulary to use in further analysis or their creative work.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

*These can be adapted for essays or small group discussions. Consider using graphic organizers or giving students access to the whiteboard to brainstorm their comparisons.*

- Compare how Maya Deren and Charlotte Perkins Gilman used repetition to create unstable or unreliable characters. List the instances of repetition in the film and the story. In your opinion, how does repetition work in film? How does it work in literature? Compare and evaluate the effectiveness of each.
- Compare the endings of each. In the film, the protagonist dies. In the story, she wants to die, and although she doesn't, the uncertainty of her fate leaves a dark feeling. Do the endings suggest a resolution or an opening for more exploration and questions?
- In both the film and the book, there is another mysterious figure taunting the protagonist. Discuss how the author and film director used this mysterious character to develop their narrative. Are there ways you might use a similar character in your creative work?
- Consider the film and story titles. Meshes are nets that catch things. Can you relate that to the wallpaper's design in *The Yellow Wallpaper*?
- Compare the idea of freedom and confinement in each. List actions, dialogue, thoughts, and symbols that imply freedom or confinement. Are there similarities between the film and the story? What major differences do you notice?
- Write a speculative dialogue or story in which the two protagonists exist in the same space. How would they communicate? What might they talk about? What circumstance would put them in the same space at the same time? Be creative, weird, and experimental in your ideas!

# ABOUT JOURNEYS IN FILM

Journeys in Film is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization dedicated to the use of film to promote a richer understanding of our diverse and complex world.

---

## JOURNEYS IN FILM RESOURCES AND SERVICES

**We create educational resources** that spark community discussions and/or promote proactive learning for youth, parents, educators in K-12 and higher education, homeschoolers, and other learning communities. We also **create impact materials for libraries and community organizations**.

We leverage our established educational relationships to **promote materials in active outreach** to these audiences. We **extend the reach of a film and its lifespan** in the educational marketplace and beyond.

We work with a wide array of partners (non-profit organizations, educational institutions, educators, museums, teacher training institutes) to **develop resources tailored to the individuals and communities we work with and the audiences they seek to reach**.

**Our resources** focus on cultivating human empathy and compassion, developing a deeper knowledge of global issues and current challenges, and encouraging civic engagement.



**JOURNEYS IN FILM**<sup>TM</sup>  
educating for global understanding

[journeysinfilm.org](http://journeysinfilm.org)