

The Gilded Cage – Evelyn De Morgan (1919; The De Morgan Collection)

<https://www.demorgan.org.uk/collection/the-gilded-cage/>



- This is a very detailed painting with lots to look at. Although it was painted after the Victorian era the artist continued to paint in style that began its popularity during the Victorian age. The Victorians loved looking at a painting for a long time and piecing together a story. They were the films of their day. Do you think this one show us a real scene that the artist observed or a made-up story? **Even though aspects of the painting are based on real things, for example the furniture, clothes and jewellery, it's entirely fictional.**
- Who are the main characters? **There is a bored or sad looking man. There is a much younger woman looking out of the window. Sometimes people suggest that instead of a window it is**



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actually a painting. It is a good idea and might well be true although the mullion (window bar) in the middle possibly makes the window theory more plausible.

- What is the woman looking at? **People dancing and making music outside (or in a painting if you prefer).**
- What objects has the artist painted in the room? **On the floor is a book that has been dropped or thrown there as well as some broken jewellery. There is a desk with books and an incense burner and hanging from the ceiling is a canary in a cage.**
- What do you think the story is? **Evelyn De Morgan was involved in the movement for women's suffrage, meaning the campaign for women to get the vote. Although this was just one of many areas of life from which women were excluded it became the symbol of the fight for equality. This painting is one of her most powerful in terms of its message. The man and woman are not father and daughter as some people assume at first. They are husband and wife. But as a woman over 100 years ago she was expected to have a completely different life to her husband. How do you think her life was different to her husband? She was meant to be at home most of the time, taking care of the household and children. The husband was allowed to have a career and ambitions. In the painting the woman looks out of the window at a life she can only dream of: music, dancing, freedom. The people outside look happy.**
- What additional clues has the artist given us to help us piece it together? **The couple look wealthy and there are books on the shelf (and floor) that show that the man is educated. Combined with the husband's expression we are possibly meant to think that the woman does not care about these things but that freedom is more important.**
- The painting is called The Gilded Cage. Why do you think the artist gave it that title? **Gilded means covered with gold. We immediately think of the canary in its fancy cage. Maybe the title refers not just to the birdcage but also the woman's situation. She has all the belongings she could possibly want but that means nothing if she feels like she is in a prison. To underline this the artist has included a bird that is not in a cage outside the window, adding to the freedom that the woman can see but not enjoy.**
- If we could see thought bubbles on each character what would we hear?

Follow on ideas

- Imagine a film had been made based on the story in this painting. Design a film poster to advertise it. Think about which aspects of the painting and story will work best. Come up with a title and tagline, and, if you want, cast and director.
- Think about what the woman inside the house might do next. Perhaps she has had enough and finally escapes the house and her husband. Write her diary entry to describe how she is feeling and what she has decided to do.
- Life in Lockdown activity: The woman in this painting is forced to stay inside her house and does not have the freedom to go where she wants or do what she likes. Write a list of words that help build up a picture of her feelings e.g. frustration then use those words to write a poem about life in lockdown.



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Topic Links

- PHSE: Historical role of women
- History: The Victorians
- Art: Symbolism