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Go Crazy, Girl

Breaking the Silence in "The Yellow Wallpaper" through Acts of Reading and Writing by Re-Examining Nineteenth-Century Rest Cures under a Television Talk Show Paradigm

by
Risa P. Gorelick

"Unlike male characters in fiction, women seldom find success, happiness, or answers. They instead are content with mere survival" (Wagner-Martin 62).

Writing has the ability to heal: it can empower the author to overcome psychological disorders. Not only is the pen mightier than the sword, the pen can overwrite a doctor's prescription. There are, of course, risks writers take, especially those who are writing as part of their therapy. Modern psychology encourages patients dealing with various disorders to use journals and other forms of writing as part of their treatment. By placing the "demons" on the page, the writer can confront them in a safe environment.

The nineteenth-century rest cure, however, followed a completely different line of reasoning. Predominantly female patients who "suffered from a severe and continuous nervous breakdown tending to melancholia—and beyond" were often prescribed by patriarchal male doctors to "'live as domestic a life as far as possible' to 'have but two hours' intellectual life a day,' and 'never to touch pen, brush, or pencil again'" (*The Charlotte Perkins Gilman Reader* 19-20). In 1887, when Charlotte Perkins Gilman could no longer handle treating her nervous disorder of three years on her own, she turned to Dr. S. Weir Mitchell of Philadelphia, "a noted specialist in nervous diseases, the best known in the country," who prescribed his now infamous "rest cure" (*The Charlotte Perkins Gilman Reader* 19). Modern scholars and doctors believe that the "nervous disorder" experienced by women like the narrator in "The Yellow Wallpaper" stemmed from hormonal imbalances commonly found in women after child bearing and now referred to as post-partum depression. In her brief essay, "Why I Wrote 'The Yellow Wallpaper?'" which she first published in an October 1913 issue of her magazine *The Forerunner* twenty-one years after the short story appeared, Gilman shares the following with her readers:

I went home and obeyed those directions for some three months, and came so near the borderline of utter mental ruin that I could see over.

Then, using the remnants of intelligence that remained, and helped by a wise friend, I cast the noted specialist's advice to the winds and went to work again . . . ultimately recovering some measure of power.

Being naturally moved to rejoicing by this narrow escape, I wrote "The Yellow Wallpaper," with its embellishments and additions, to carry out the ideal (I never had hallucinations or objections to my mural decorations) and sent a copy to the physician who so nearly drove me mad. He never acknowledged it.

The little book is valued by alienists and as a good specimen of one kind of literature. It has, to my knowledge, saved one woman from a similar fate—so terrifying her family that they let her out into normal activity and she recovered.

But the best result is this. Many years later I was told that the great specialist had admitted to friends of his that he had altered his treatment of neurasthenia since reading "The Yellow Wallpaper."

It was not intended to drive people crazy, but to save people from being driven crazy, and it worked. (*The Charlotte Perkins Gilman Reader* 20)

Feminist critics believe the story is a direct "indictment of the incompetent medical advice" and "patronizing treatment" Gilman received in her month's stay at Dr. Mitchell's sanitarium (Hedges 46-7).

When teaching students this story, instructors must provide an historical background so that readers can understand the narrator's psychological breakdown and learn how "the story was wrenched out of Gilman's own life" (Hedges 37). In an age in which television talk shows highlight psychological terrors that otherwise "average" people face, instructors face a pedagogical dilemma in relating Gilman's narrator's woes to their students. As the narrator tries to break her silence, her psychological

development (or lack thereof) can be traced through the first stage of silence in Mary Field Belenky's book, *Women's Ways of Knowing: Development of Self, Voice, and Mind*, by examining the narrator's actions in light of these theories. By tracing the narrator's behavior, it will be clear that women have been struggling for over a century to regain their voices and take control of their lives. "The Yellow Wallpaper's" narrator, therefore, serves as a model of the early stages of psychological development in *Women's Ways of Knowing*.

A cliché is that children should be seen and not heard; in nineteenth-century America, most men believed women should also be invisible and silent. Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" shatters this statement by having the narrator tell her horrible tale. Much like the "No Name Woman" in Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, which begins by the narrator recalling, "'You must not tell anyone,' my mother said, 'what I am about to tell you'" (3), Gilman senses the importance of the unnamed narrator's story since she, too, must break her silence and the patriarchy which enclose her in order to survive. According to nineteenth-century standards, the belief that "nothing could or should be done except maintain silence or conceal problems—is fairly clear" (Hedges 41). However, if the narrator remains silent—both orally and in written form—she will go mad.

As an author, Gilman writes to break the silence of the rest cure which did more harm than good to herself and countless other women. The narrator "seems to tell *the* story that all literary women would tell if they could speak their 'speechless woe'" (Gilbert and Gubar 119, their emphasis). However, since most women could not speak of such horrors, Gilman must become their spokeswoman. And as a spokeswoman, she needs an audience. While her autobiography claims she wrote "The Yellow Wallpaper" in response to the treatment she received from Dr. S. Weir Mitchell's Victorian rest cure, she wanted to get her message across to others as well (*The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman* 95-106). "Weir Mitchell was to be her audience" in addition to the other doctors, including the fictitious husband, who followed such medical procedures (Black 63). According to Catherine Golden, "she defied her doctor in 1890 not only by writing 'The Yellow Wallpaper' but also, more specifically, by creating a protagonist who also writes. Her creative life and her fiction reveal that she ultimately 'overwrote' Mitchell's efforts to make her more like the ideal female patients predominant in his affluent medical practice and his fiction" (145). Without breaking her silence via Gilman's writing, the narrator cannot develop her self, voice, and mind and advance her psychological well being.

Feminist critic Elaine R. Hedges suggests readers approach "The Yellow Wallpaper" in terms of "one of the rare pieces of literature we have by a nineteenth-century woman which directly confronts the sexual politics of the male-female, husband-wife relationship" (39). Seen under this political lens, in order to preserve her sanity, Gilman's narrator "must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies—for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text—as into the world and into history—by her own movement" (Cixous 245). After Gilman's own experience with the rest cure, she must expose the terrible treatment she received in order to regain her authority. Thus, the story becomes "a feminist document, dealing with sexual politics at a time when few writers felt free to do so, at least so candidly" (Hedges 39). This "feminist document," transformed into fiction, allows the narrator, though

forcibly stripped of choice and voice, . . . to furiously affirm her right to self-determination—in the flesh, in the written word. She does so in the face of the fact that her right to write herself has been systematically denied her, the story maintains, by the violent process of feminization to which she, as a privileged white American woman, has been forced to submit. (Ammons 259)

Through writing "The Yellow Wallpaper," Gilman begins emancipating women's voices and the "violent process of feminization."

Belenky's text cites Tillie Olsen's 1987 book *Silences* where it is noted that "in the twentieth century, only one out of twelve published and acclaimed writers is a woman" (Belenky 17). Breaking the silence to allow women to write is at the core of "The Yellow Wallpaper." In the story, the narrator desperately wants to write but she is "absolutely forbidden to 'work' until [she] is well again"; in fact, her husband "John says *the very worst thing [she] can do is to think*" ("The Yellow Wallpaper"¹ 10, my emphasis). Belenky notes that silenced women find "[t]hinking for themselves violates their conceptions of what is proper for a woman," yet the narrator, like Gilman herself, knows she must have mental stimulation or she cannot function (30). Therefore, in protest, the narrator writes, but she must do so slyly.

Golden states, "If we conceive the narrator and protagonist as one, she continues to defy John merely through the act of writing her story" (153). Deprived of a talk show format to share her horrors, the narrator can only tell her story to "dead paper"; however, this medium of expression can yield trouble for her: "There comes John, and I must put this away,—he hates to have me write a word" ("YW" 10, 13). She admits, "I did write for a while in spite of them; but it *does* exhaust me a good deal—having to be so sly about it, or else meet with heavy opposition" ("YW" 10, author's emphasis). While she is writing (albeit behind John's back), her husband/physician is the "authority who had traditionally wielded the power to determine what may be written and how it shall be read" (Kolodny 175). This power-play affects her views towards her writing and makes her afraid to continue writing in fear of her health and John's reaction. The narrator writes,

John has cautioned me not to give way to fancy in the least. He says that with my imaginative power and habit of story-making, a nervous weakness like mine is sure to lead to all manner of excited fancies, and that I ought to use my will and good sense to check the tendency. So I try. ("YW" 16)

As she tries to follow John's advice, she has a difficult time writing because she is defying what is considered sound medical treatment. According to Judith Fetterly, "she finds it increasingly difficult to put pen to paper. Blocked from expressing herself *on* paper, she seeks to express herself *through* paper. Literally, she converts the *wallpaper* into her text," (186, her emphasis). At this point in the story, though, it is unclear what the consequences are if she defies the patriarchal treatment she is under. As a woman in the realm of patriarchy, she, as are most women, is fearful of the consequences, so she silences herself to telling her story to "dead paper" only ("YW" 10).

In Belenky's study, the authors find that women whom they define as "silenced" had one belief in common: "Words were perceived as weapons. Words were used to separate and diminish people, not to connect and empower them. The silent women worried that they would be punished just for using words—any words" (Belenky 24). This fear of words and the power which silenced women associated with patriarchal life, force them to proceed cautiously, as the narrator does. How can the narrator tell anyone that she believes she is not getting well when her husband, John, is a physician who "does not believe [she] is sick! And what can one do?" ("YW" 10). Frustrated that she cannot "say it to a living soul," she breaks her silence to the "dead paper" which is "a great relief to [her] mind," but this form of therapy does not save her sanity ("YW" 10).

The narrator, in the midst of a mental breakdown, though, would be just whom the talk show producers would love to book on their show during Sweeps Week. Students who read this text may have an easier time relating to the nineteenth-century rest cure by imagining the narrator sharing her story to the millions of Americans who watch talk shows. Under the talk show format, the narrator would have a network to protect her from the husband/doctor she fears, an audience to cheer her on and jeer the medical profession, and an "expert" professional hired by the show's staff to analyze her condition and point her to a 12-Step recovery program. If the show also could book both the narrator's husband John and Dr. S. Weir Mitchell as guests, think of how the sparks would fly! Under this imaginary paradigm, students can see how nineteenth-century women had little power available to them. While politicians and other Americans now are beginning to question the lack of morals that talk shows thrive on, one advantage that these shows offer is that they give a voice to those who want to tell their stories. Students can gain a better understanding of why the narrator fears telling her story because she believes, as do the silenced women in the Belenky study, that "[w]ords arise out of wrath, and they provoke wrath" (25).

The narrator's fear of breaking her silence sentences her to an undesirable room in addition to having John "take all care from [her]" by hardly letting her "stir without special direction" ("YW" 12). By placing her in a former nursery which has barred windows, her "room of one's own" becomes her prison instead of the haven about which Virginia Woolf writes. Wagner-Martin states, "Gilman presents the perils of unsympathetic isolation. The protagonist has all too much a room of her own, but she is isolated within it, and made to think that any artistic or intellectual activity is worthless. Rather than nurturing her efforts, the room suffocates them" (61). Since Mary looks after her baby and Jennie "sees to everything now," all of the narrator's responsibilities are taken away from her, but still she is not recovering ("YW" 18). She links her lack of recovery to the fact that she is "literally confined in a room" and "locked away from creativity" (Gilbert and Gubar 120). In fact, she believes she is getting worse rather than better because, in addition to her imprisonment, she has no intellectual stimulation in her life—no tangible audience with whom to share her torturous imprisonment—yet she *cannot* remain

silenced. According to Belenky, silent women "do not cultivate their capacities for representational thought" (25). While trying to break her silenced position, the narrator rebels via writing. However, without an audience with whom to share her problems, the narrator's sanity drastically declines. Forced into isolation and without a peer with whom to share her feelings, her only point of reflection is to read the horrid wallpaper in her nursery/prison-like room and to try to make meaning out of her life through communicating with the trapped woman inside the paper. She longs to share her thoughts with someone. "It is so discouraging not to have any advice and companionship about my work," the narrator writes ("YW" 16). When presented to students under this light, the story "involve[s] a sane mind entrapped in an insanity-inducing situation" as the narrator tries to gain a voice of her own (Kolodny 165).

As she tries to follow "one of those sprawling flamboyant patterns committing every artistic sin . . . [which] suddenly commit suicide" while lying "on this great immovable bed," she attempts to figure out a way to get better so she can escape her confinement ("YW" 13, 19). While she "disagree[s] with their [the doctors'] ideas," she follows their prescription and "take[s] phosphates or phosphites— whichever it is, and tonics, and journeys, and air and exercise" even though she does not sense any improvement in her condition ("YW" 10). The narrator, like other silenced women, "see[s] authorities as being all-powerful, if not overpowering" (Belenky 27). From the tone her husband takes with her in the patronizing way he consistently addresses her throughout the story, the narrator becomes impatient with her lack of involvement in her treatment. She is unable to communicate with her physician-husband, and, therefore, she does not know what to do with her lack of authority. Belenky states, "authorities seldom tell you what they want you to do; they apparently expect you to know in advance. If authorities do tell you *what* is right, they never tell you *why* it is right. Authorities bellow but do not explain" (28). Unable to cope with the breakdown in communication between herself and John, the narrator states, "I get unreasonably angry with John sometimes" ("YW" 11). This pent-up anger makes her question her "proper self-control" which makes her cautious to "control [herself]—before him, at least" ("YW" 11).

The narrator's psychological development can be traced in the early stages of Belenky's second way of knowing: received knowledge. While she is developmentally more aligned with the characteristics of a silenced woman, the narrator begins to experience, in her own way, the act of "Listening to the Voices of Others" (Belenky 35). Women in this category "learn by listening" (Belenky 37). However, instead of "listening" as most people do, the narrator reads meaning into the wallpaper and "hears" the woman who is trapped inside of it, but since the narrator cannot verbally tell her story, she writes to express her feelings. "She actively explores the only text allowed to her—the yellow wallpaper in her prison/sanitarium," Golden suggests. "In defying her physician's attempt to suppress her, she writes herself into a position of power . . . in order to stay 'sane'" (154). The narrator observes that the wallpaper "changes as the light changes" which "is why [she] watch[es] it always" ("YW" 25-6). During the night, "it becomes bars . . . and the woman behind it is as plain as can be" ("YW" 26). While the wallpaper has a "lack of sequence," she continues to revise what she observes throughout her narrative ("YW" 25). The "smoldering, unclean yellow" is a "repellent, almost revolting color" ("YW" 13). She senses that the "paper looks to me as if it *knew* what a vicious influence it had!" ("YW" 16, author's emphasis). The image of "a broken neck and two bulbous eyes stare at [her] upside down . . . as they crawl . . . those absurd, unblinking eyes are everywhere" ("YW" 16). While "the great heavy bed . . . looks like as if it had been through the wars," in actuality, it is the narrator who is experiencing the war of mental anguish ("YW" 17).

However, the narrator does not "see only blacks and whites" (Belenky 41). Instead, the narrator reads the wallpaper in various shades of gray (actually, in repugnant hues of yellow). "There are always new shoots on the fungus," she writes, "and new shades of yellow all over it" ("YW" 28). As she reads new meanings into the wallpaper, the narrator begins to write "what is quite literally her own text—or rather, herself as text" (Kolodny 168). The narrator continues to listen/read the wallpaper, and, as her sanity slips away, she begins to see herself inside of it. Trapped in her situation, the woman behind the paper is in actuality the narrator trying to break out of the confines of nineteenth-century womanhood. "Eventually it becomes obvious to both reader and narrator that the figure creeping through and behind the wallpaper is both the narrator and the narrator's double," according to Gilbert and Gubar (121). The bars on the nursery's windows ("YW" 12) and the bars which hold the woman behind the wallpaper ("YW" 26) portray the jail in which she is imprisoned.

Rigidly enforced confinement and absolute passivity—elements significant in the lives of women of her time and carried to an extreme in Mitchell's treatment—contributed strongly to the madness in her short story, and needed to be discarded, as Gilman herself

had discarded them, if women were to achieve sanity and strength. In "The Yellow Wallpaper" we see what happens to our lives if we let others run them for us. (Lane xviii) Without approval of the husband/physician, the narrator cannot escape the room or her role as wife and mother. "Gilman revises the typical (male) doctor-(female) patient relationship by reversing the heroine's progress" (Golden 151). She "fanc[ies] it is the pattern that keeps her so still" which symbolized the reign her husband/physician and society has on her ("YW" 26). After spotting "a woman stooping down and creeping about behind the pattern," she begins to question her mental wellness ("YW" 22). She admits, "I don't like it a bit. I wonder—I begin to think—I wish John would take me away from here!" ("YW" 22). Yet when she tries to communicate with John about her condition, she finds it "hard to talk to John about [her] case" ("YW" 23). From this encounter, she realizes it is of no use to try to reason to him.

Confined to a "haunted house," she is patronized by John's references to her as a "little girl," "his darling," "his comfort," and a "blessed little goose" who "shall be as sick as she pleases!" ("YW" 9, 23, 21, 15, 24). Therefore, the "subtext becomes text; repressed discourse becomes visible" out of fear of what John will do to her if he knew she was defying the doctor's order for rest (Wagner-Martin 60). Yet unable to rest because of the wallpaper's influence on her psyche, she begins to unravel it, and, in doing so, her sanity becomes more fragile. The wallpaper becomes the only item which she possesses where she has any power. By stripping the walls of this paper, she empowers herself the only way she knows how.

Aware that she is violating the Victorian rest cure, she realizes she is "getting a little afraid of John" ("YW" 26).

In his doubly authoritative role as both husband and doctor, John not only appropriates the interpretive processes of reading—diagnosing his wife's illness and thereby selecting what may be understood of her "meaning"; reading to her, rather than allowing her to read for herself—but as well, he determines what may get written and hence communicated. (Kolodny 166)

Thus, John controls all aspects of her life. "Writing from the point of view of a character trapped in that male text . . . Gilman's narrator shifts the center of attention away from the male mind that has produced the text and directs it instead to the consequences for women's lives of men's control of textuality" (Fetterly 182). Since reading and writing are taken away from her—and talk shows are not an option—she only has the wallpaper on which to write. Thus, the subtext of the wallpaper gives her a space, albeit a small one, in which to communicate. "The wallpaper has replaced the writing paper that he [John] would have taken from her, and she has in some ways won back her right to speech and control" (Wagner-Martin 60). By "refus[ing] to read his text, refus[ing] to become a character in it, and insist[ing] on writing her own, behavior for which John will define and treat her as mad," the narrator advances on Belenky's stages of psychological development by breaking her silence and deteriorating her patriarchal confinement (Fetterly 183). In her act of breaking the silence, "she turns the wallpaper into her primary text: what she writes on this paper cannot be read by John" (Fetterly 184).

As she begins to strip the walls of the yellow wallpaper to gain her freedom, she risks losing everything. Belenky states, "as a woman becomes more aware of the existence of inner resources for knowing and valuing, as she begins to listen to the 'still small voice' within her, she finds an inner source of strength" (54). Once the paper is unravelled, she has nothing left in her life where she can express herself through writing, reading, or other creative means. Thus, while she breaks her silence and frees herself, the Victorian medical community's belief that insanity overtakes her is, unfortunately, the only explanation of the time; therefore, she must, as talk show hosts would say, "Go Crazy, Girl."

Endnote

¹ Although a short story, Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" was published in its own edition by The Feminist Press in 1973. To avoid confusion, references to "The Yellow Wallpaper," which I have chosen to put in quotations instead of in italics, will be abbreviated "YW" and followed by a page number from The Feminist Press edition.

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