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THE WRITING OF "THE YELLOW WALLPAPER": A DOUBLE PALIMPSEST

Catherine Golden*

The first-person narrative of "The Yellow Wallpaper" unfolds as a diary written by a woman undergoing a three-month rest cure for a postpartum depression.[1] Judith Fetterley has argued that the wallpaper functions as a text through which the narrator expresses herself; its pattern becomes the dominant text and the woman behind the pattern the subtext with which the narrator identifies.[2] To recall the terminology of *The Madwoman in the Attic,* the yellow wallpaper thus can be perceived as a "palimpsest." Similarly, Charlotte Perkins Gilman's story itself can be read as a palimpsest. The hallucinations and dramatic actions of tearing the wallpaper and creeping on the floor comprise the dominant text, but the writing comprises the second muted text, informing the narrator's final characterization. This muted text shows how the narrator fictionalizes herself as the audience of her story. Forbidden to write but continuing to do so in secret, the narrator comes to express herself by writing her own text. As she comes to see the wallpaper as a palimpsest, she presents herself on paper in a way that suggests that, although mad, she is not completely "destroyed"[3] by her patriarchal society. As the story unfolds, the narrator's writing ceases to match her thoughts and actions or to convey a cohesive characterization of a timid oppressed figure. The increased use of "I" and her syntactical placement of the nominative case pronoun within her own sentences demonstrate a positive change in self-presentation precisely at the point when her actions dramatically compromise her sanity and condemn her to madness.[4]

The narrator records her stay in a country ancestral hall through ten diary-like entries, each undated and separated only by several lines of blank space. The separateness of these units can be seen as a spatial indication of the narrator's own fragmented sense of self.[5] As Walter Ong notes, the audience of a diarist is oneself "encased in fictions. . . . The diarist pretending to be talking to himself has also, since he is writing, to pretend he is somehow not there. And to what self is he talking? To the self he imagines he is? Or would like to be?"[6] Although the narrator may in fact be writing for a fictional self, the way she imagines this self to be changes as the entries continue. The writing in her early entries matches the dominant text of

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her thoughts and actions. In the opening sentence the narrator introduces her husband before herself: "It is very seldom that mere ordinary people like John and myself secure ancestral halls for the summer."[7] Rarely used for self-expression, the reflexive case more effectively emphasizes an antecedent rather than replaces a subject. The narrator who claims she wants very much to write also hides her own belief that writing is "a great relief to my mind" (p. 10) by placing this insight in parentheses. Punctuation marks eclipse the forcefulness of this belief, which directly confronts the opinion of those who prescribe her rest cure: her physician-husband, John, who "hates to have [her] write a word" (p. 13); her physician brother; the socially prominent nerve specialist S. Weir Mitchell, who is "just like John and [her] brother, only more so!" (p. 19); and even John's sister Jennie, an "enthusiastic housekeeper" who "thinks it is the writing which made [her] sick!" (pp. 17–18). At this point in the story the self-consciousness displayed through punctuational subordination keeps the narrator in a subordinate place within her sentences. The muted text matches the dominant text of her actions, which at this point reveals the narrator as fanciful and fearful. Even though her room initially repulses her, she rests in the former nursery because John chose it for her. The narrator prefers a room "that opened on the piazza and had roses all over the window, and such pretty old-fashioned chintz hangings!" (p. 12), yet she does not pursue her softly expressed conviction: "'Then do let us go downstairs'" (p. 15). Asserting herself only through her secret act of writing, she hides her journal when she senses John's entry. Fear of detection restricts the amount she writes; she remains aware of her larger social reality at this point in the story and does not perceive of her private journal as a place for self-expression or a safe domain.

The dominant text of her actions and the muted text of her writing no doubt initially concur, in part, because the narrator is not only oppressed by those who forbid her to write but by language itself.[8] The language through which the narrator writes is imbued with a social, economic, and political reality of male domination of the late nineteenth-century that governs the way the narrator perceives language. The doctors pronounce the narrator "sick!" (p. 10). There is no escaping the words through which the doctors deliver their diagnosis, their prescription of a rest cure, or the language the narrator must produce to maintain her sanity.

In the initial entry the narrator refers frequently to "Dear John" as well as what "John says" (p. 16). "John" appears four times on the opening page, the last three of which successively introduce a new paragraph:

> John laughs at me, of course, but one expects that in marriage.
>
> John is practical in the extreme. He has no patience with faith, an intense horror of superstition, and he scoffs openly of any talk of things not to be felt and seen and put down in figures.

> John is a physician, and *perhaps*—(I would not say it to a living soul, of course, but this is dead paper and a great relief to my mind)—*perhaps* that is one reason I do not get well faster (pp. 9–10).

Her husband appears ten times as "John" and eleven times as the forceful nominative "he" within the initial entry of thirty-nine short paragraphs. Reference and deference to her husband keep John firmly the subject of her sentences that describe how he "scoffs" and "laughs" at her and loses "patience" with her. Within her own journal of "dead paper" meant to be read by no "living soul" (except, of course, the narrator), she privileges the man who laughs at her, misunderstands her nature, and calls her, albeit affectionately, his "blessed little goose" (p. 15).

While she calls John by his proper name, the narrator elects to remain nameless until the very end of the story, where she hints that her name may be Jane.[9] Moreover, she rarely presents herself through "I." To recall the opening sentence of the story, "It is very seldom that mere ordinary people like John and myself secure ancestral halls for the summer" (p. 9). Herein "like" functions as a preposition meaning "similar to." Usage favors "me" rather than "myself" after a preposition; the reflexive case is heavier and more cumbersome in English than in other languages.[10] In introducing "myself" and "John," the narrator intensifies her awkward positioning in her sentence and society; she is not even on par with "ordinary people like John." Since the muted text of her writing initially concurs with her actions, it is not surprising that the narrator concludes at the end of the first entry: "There comes John, and I must put this away,—he hates to have me write a word" (p. 13). Using "I" becomes not an act of assertion but rather of acquiescence determined by John's authority. The blank space confirms that the narrator has put away her writing in compliance to John's prescription.

The narrator also elects to present herself anonymously as "one," "a kind of disguised *I*."[11] The narrator disguises her autonomy when she begins to question John's authority: "You see he does not believe I am sick! And what can one do?" (p. 10). "One" dominates the second page of the first entry (it occurs three times in close proximity). The syntactic positioning calls further attention to this pronoun. The expression "what is one to do" (p. 10) semantically conveys the narrator's helplessness and perceived inability to change her uncomfortable situation; the repetition of "one" creates a haunting echo of anonymity throughout this entry and the entire story.

As the entries unfold, the narrator comes to write for a different self hinted at on the opening page through her three-fold presentation of self as "I" (one time hidden in parentheses). To recall Ong once again, the narrator comes to write for the more forceful self she "would like to be." Simply by writing and exercising grammatical options within her patriarchal language, she writes in a way that questions and ultimately challenges the authorities that confine and oppress her. Her visible expansion on the

sentence level[12] shows the muted text diverging from the dominant text. Learning to read the subtext of the yellow wallpaper, the narrator gives way to fancy and loses sight of her larger social reality. However, she concomitantly fictionalizes an identity overriding the fragmentation inherent within the discrete units of language she produces and the fragmentation she feels as a woman within her society. The narrator's greater self-awareness, emerging through her self-presentation beginning in the third entry, undermines her original compliance to John's orders to "lie down ever so much now" and "to sleep all [she] can" (p. 26).

When the narrator begins to cry uncontrollably at "nothing" (p. 19), to obsess with her reading of the shapes of the wallpaper's dominant and muted pattern, and to perceive that the muted text "is like a woman stooping down and creeping about behind that [dominant] pattern" (p. 22), she begins to write for a forceful fictionalized self, beginning successive sentences with "I":

> I don't know why I should write this.
>
> I don't want to.
>
> I don't feel able.
>
> And I know John would think it absurd. But I *must* say what I feel and think in some way—it is such a relief! (p. 21).

The contents of the "I" sequence records the narrator's vacillation and questioning of her own prescription of writing to improve her nervous condition. Janice Haney-Peritz even suggests that "such contradictions . . . betray the narrator's dependence on the oppressive discursive structure we associate with John."[13] But the clustering of "I," the italicized emphatic "must," and the exclamation point following "relief" convey an emerging sense of self and conviction precisely when she begins to have delusions leading to her final actions of tearing the wallpaper from the walls in order to free the woman and that part of herself trapped behind the restrictive bars of the dominant pattern of the wallpaper.

Appearing a total of seven times in this sequence, "I" introduces each of four consecutive sentences, three of which begin a new paragraph. No longer deferring to "John" or the social authority he represents, she conspicuously positions "I" in a configuration suggestive of a stronger albeit fictionalized self. The positioning and four-fold use of "I" most noticeably recalls the four-fold repetition of John on the opening page. However, in the third entry the narrator dramatically inverts her original pattern; by beginning the first three rather than the last three paragraphs with "I," the narrator gives heightened emphasis to self. The introductory positioning of the subject connotes power, and her use of "I" demonstrates a reversal of the dynamics of power between the narrator and John.

The narrator occasionally reverts to the reflexive case, such as within the fourth entry when she writes about solving the wallpaper's pattern: "I am determined that nobody shall find it out but myself!" (p. 27). In

this sentence, however, the weight of the reflexive gives added force to her assertion, further accentuated through the surrounding words and the punctuation. A coordinating conjunction of contrast placed directly in front of the reflexive, "but" underscores her conviction and calls attention to "myself"; an exclamation mark reiterates this force. In the eighth, ninth, and tenth entries, the narrator uses "I" for self-presentation as well as to initiate short direct sentences, such as in the final entry when she tells John she cannot open the door to her room: "'I can't,' said I" (p. 36). "I" becomes the first and the last word. The narrator syntactically occupies the two most powerful positions within her own sentence.

The choice and positioning of pronouns suggest a forceful sense of self complicating the narrator's final characterization. Independent of the muted text, the dominant text of her actions incrementally reveals her destruction. The later entries in which the narrator also comes to creep by daylight and to gnaw her bed in anger (pp. 34–35) demonstrate her delusional actions, which become increasingly dominant. In fact, "a slight hysterical tendency" (p. 10) grows into eventual madness as she gets into the muted text of the yellow wallpaper. Given to fancy from the start, she begins to see the wallpaper come to life as she cries "at nothing . . . most of the time" (p. 19) and cannot sleep. Within the wallpaper she sees "strangled heads and bulbous eyes and wadded fungus growths" (p. 34). Personified midway through the second entry ("This paper looks to me as if it *knew* what a vicious influence it had!" [p. 16]), the muted side of the wallpaper assumes a human shape as the narrator sees within it "a strange, provoking, formless sort of figure" (p. 18). The muted figure within the wallpaper increasingly gains more definition for her. Although in the third entry she qualifies that the figure looks "like a woman" (p. 22), she confirms this perception in the fourth entry when she claims "now I am quite sure it is a woman" (p. 26). As the muted pattern becomes dominant to the narrator, her delusions translate into actions of madness that become most apparent during the final four entries. She sees the woman behind the wallpaper creeping and begins to creep herself, at first secretively just as she begins her writing: "I always lock the door when I creep by daylight. I can't do it at night, for I know John would suspect something at once" (p. 31). The dominant wallpaper pattern becomes prison bars, and the woman locked behind "just takes hold of the bars and shakes them hard" (p. 30). Sympathizing with the muted text, she writes more forcefully but acts more madly. She begins to peel the wallpaper from the walls to release that part of herself trapped by her own social condition as mirrored by the barred pattern of the wallpaper. The muted woman behind bars becomes a symbol and a message for women as the narrator sees outside the window "so many of those creeping women, and they creep so fast" (p. 35); in fact, she begins to "wonder if they all come out of that wallpaper as I did?" (p. 35).

Born of an hallucination, her identification leads the narrator to free herself from the restrictive pattern of her own society, and this liberation is conveyed on paper through her pronoun choice. Particularly the opening of the tenth entry celebrates the narrator's fusion of identity with the subtext of the wallpaper: "I pulled and she shook, I shook and she pulled, and before morning we had peeled off yards of that paper" (p. 32). But following her dramatic freeing of the woman behind the wallpaper, the narrator emerges independent and forceful. Hiding the key to her room under a plantain leaf, she seals herself in her room so that she can "creep around as I please!" (p. 35). The narrator tells her husband where he can find the key. Unlike the initial entry in which she senses John's entrance and puts away her journal, she does not allow his intrusion to disrupt her creeping in the finale. The narrator, mad, is no longer timid in her action. Echoing her use of "one" to avoid self-confrontation, the narrator now speaks with detachment of her husband: "Now why should that man have fainted? But he did, and right across my path by the wall, so that I had to creep over him every time!" (p. 36).

More than the tone of writing or pronoun usage, the placement of pronouns in this closing paragraph reveals the narrator's growing sense of awareness of her former submissive state and a reversal of the power dynamics of gender. Relegating John to a modifying phrase following an intransitive verb, the narrator assumes the subject position within the final clause. This sentence, in fact, exchanges the grammatical positions the narrator originally elected for each to occupy in a grammatically similar sentence on the opening page of "The Yellow Wallpaper": "John laughs at me, of course, but one expects that in marriage" (p. 9). In selecting an intransitive verb to convey John's abuse, the narrator in her early writing undeniably isolates herself from his emotional cruelty. The verb "to laugh" can only function intransitively and thus cannot possess or envelop the narrator, "me," as its object.[14] But, in doing so, the narrator relegates herself (and later John) to a weak position within the formal bounds of the sentence. Not a basic or essential sentence part, the prepositional phrase "at me" functions as a modifier embellishing the sentence (in this case adverbially).[15] Governed only by the preposition "at," the narrator in the first entry can be dropped from her sentence, which would thus read grammatically: "John laughs . . . , of course, but one expects that in marriage" (p. 9). With such a revision her presence would remain only through a disguised reference to self ("one"). However, by changing positions with John in the grammatically similar sentence in the tenth entry, the narrator now sends John—who has fainted to the floor—to a nonessential, powerless, syntactical place. Governed only by the preposition "over," John can be dropped from her final clause, which would thus read grammatically: "I had to creep . . . every time!" (p. 36). The narrator's actions are outside the realm of sanity, but the syntactic position she comes to

occupy conveys her emerging sense of defiance against one of the forces in her patriarchal society that has fragmented her.

Other examples, particularly in the final four paragraphs of the tenth entry, join with this exchange of grammatical positions to affirm the narrator's newly imagined self:

> "What is the matter?" he cried. "For God's sake, what are you doing!"
>
> I kept on creeping just the same, but I looked at him over my shoulder.
>
> "I've got out at last," said I, "in spite of you and Jane. And I've pulled off most of the paper, so you can't put me back!"
>
> "Now why should that man have fainted? But he did, and right across my path by the wall, so that I had to creep over him every time!" (p. 36).

John's name seems conspicuously absent from these paragraphs. Four times the narrator substitutes the nominative case for John's name ("he cried" and "he did" within her narration and "you" twice in her dialogue). Within these paragraphs she thrice substitutes the objective case for John and further reduces his status by making each pronoun an object of a preposition ("at him," "of you," and "over him"). In the final paragraph she also uses the demonstrative pronoun "that" in "that man," a detached and generic reference to John. Unlike the demonstrative "this," "that" points the reader to something or someone who is respectively farther away in a spatial sense and thus works to distance the reader and the narrator from John and his authority, to which she once readily adhered. Used to direct the reader to a preceding rather than a subsequent reference, "that man" also orients the reader to the previous rather than the two future references to him, occurring in the final sentence; the wording anticipates John's disappearance from the final dramatic clause and close of "The Yellow Wallpaper," which leaves the narrator creeping flamboyantly in the daylight as she desires.

The narrator presents herself as "I" six times in the final four paragraphs, twice forcefully beginning her own paragraphs. She displays her growing sense of self, power, and confidence at the point at which she has uncoded the text of the yellow wallpaper and liberated its muted side. In addition, an exclamation point at the end of both the last and the penultimate paragraphs gives emphasis to her final sentences, in which she moves into the subject place initially reserved for John.[16] When referring to self, she uses the possessive case twice and the objective case once, but she no longer positions the objective case reference for self in a precarious place. Importantly, in the sentence "can't put me back," "me" functions as a direct object of the transitive verb "put." Securely positioned, "me" becomes essentially connected to the action verb. The use of negation in this sentence subtly undermines the contents of earlier sentences containing transitive verbs, such as "John gathered me up in his arms, and just carried me upstairs and laid me on the bed" (p. 21); while in both sentences "me" carries the

force of her male oppressor, the negation in the later sentence equally negates his force and matches the writing in the finale, where the narrator is able to write a sentence that can function grammatically without "John."

Examining the muted text of the narrator's writing within this palimpsest in relation to the dominant text of her delusional actions permits the narrator a dubious victory. Her widening use of "I" and grammatical repositioning of "I" and "John" hint at a degree of personal liberation for her fictionalized self recorded within this tale of a woman's breakdown. The muted text of her writing comes to reflect her growing self-awareness as she moves beyond the prescription of healthy eating, moderate exercise, and abundant rest and chooses literal madness over John's prescription for sanity. As the narrator tears the paper to free the woman and that part of herself trapped within the story's mirrored palimpsest and creeps over her husband, she acts in a way that implies a cogent madness, rid of the timidity and fear that punctuate her earlier entries. Only at the point at which she acts out of madness does she find a place within the patriarchal language she uses, although not yet within her larger social reality. Creeping deeper into madness and her fictionalized self, the narrator writes in a defiant voice, circumvents John's force, and banishes "him" to the outer boundaries of her own sentence.

Notes

[1]In "Monumental Feminism and Literature's Ancestral House: Another Look at 'The Yellow Wallpaper,'" *Women's Studies*, 12, No. 2 (1986), 113–28, Janice Haney-Peritz calls the ten sections "diary-like entries" (p. 114). See also Paula A. Treichler's essay, "Escaping the Sentence: Diagnosis and Discourse in 'The Yellow Wallpaper,'" in *Feminist Issues in Literary Scholarship*, ed. Shari Benstock (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1986), p. 63.

[2]Judith Fetterley, "Reading About Reading: 'A Jury of Her Peers,' 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue,' and 'The Yellow Wallpaper,'" in *Gender and Reading: Essays on Readers, Texts, and Contexts*, ed. Elizabeth A. Flynn and Patrocinio P. Schweikart (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1986), pp. 147–64. Fetterley advances that "blocked from expressing herself *on* paper, she seeks to express herself through paper" (p. 162). Although my reading concurs with and draws upon Fetterley's analysis, I would argue that the narrator does not experience writer's "block." While writing less and less frequently, she, in fact, writes more forcefully as she expresses herself through the paper and gets into the subtext.

[3]Elaine R. Hedges, "Afterword," *The Yellow Wallpaper* (Old Westbury: Feminist Press, 1973), p. 55. Hedges praises the late nineteenth-century work because it authenticates the experience of women restricted by a patriarchal society, but she concludes that the narrator's final actions confirm her destruction.

[4]The relationship between language and the mental and social condition of the narrator has not gone undetected in previous literary and biographical criticism. See Hedges, pp. 48–49, on paragraphing and mental state; Annette Kolodny, "A Map for Rereading: Or, Gender and the Interpretation of Literary Texts," *New Literary History*, 11 (1980), 458–59, on pronouns and identity; and Treichler, p. 75, on the narrator as language user. These observations suggest a need for a systematic examination of the way the narrator writes to herself and for

herself in her patriarchal society. Verb usage, discussed only briefly in this article, remains a rich field for systematic examination.

[5]Akin to diary writing, the epistolary form divides writing into separate entities with discrete beginnings and endings and so accentuates the gaps inherent within all language. For more discussion, see Christina Gillis, *The Paradox of Privacy* (Gainesville: Univ. of Florida Press, 1984); Janet Altman, *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form* (Columbus: Ohio Univ. Press, 1982).

[6]Walter Ong, "A Writer's Audience Is Always a Fiction," *PMLA*, 90 (1975), 20.

[7]Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper* (Old Westbury: Feminist Press, 1973), p. 9. Further references will be included in the text and cited by page number.

[8]For discussion of the relationship between language and social reality, see, for example, Robin Lakoff, *Language and Woman's Place* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975) and two useful collections: Barrie Thorne, Chris Kramarae, and Nancy Henley, eds., *Language, Gender, and Society* (Rowley: Newbury House, 1983); Sally McConnell-Ginet, Ruth Borker, and Nelly Furman, eds., *Women and Language in Literature and Society* (New York: Praeger, 1980).

[9]Hedges, pp. 62–63. The narrator's reference to "Jane" at the end of the story may be a printer's error, but it equally can be the narrator referring to her respectable and socially defined "Jane" self, of which she is also free at the end of the story. However, "Jennie" can also be a nickname for "Jane" and thus suggests she has freed herself despite John and Jennie.

[10]For more explanation of the reflexive see Otto Jespersen, *Essentials of English Grammar* (University: Univ. of Alabama Press, 1981), p. 112.

[11]Jespersen, p. 150.

[12] For further discussion of deep surface structure, see Scott Soames and David Perlmutter, "Meaning and Underlying Structure," in *Syntactic Argumentation and the Structure of English* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1979), pp. 533–36.

[13]Haney-Peritz, p. 116.

[14]Although "laugh" is an intransitive verb, Jespersen points out that the sentence "everybody laughed at Jim" can be interpreted in two ways. Jim is governed by the preposition "at" and thus may be considered the object of the preposition. But "laughed at" can equally be considered a transitive verb phrase having Jim as its object. This latter interpretation explains the possibility of passivization for the sentence "Jim was laughed at by everybody" (pp. 122–23). This same reasoning can be applied to the sentences the narrator constructs in "The Yellow Wallpaper."

[15]For more discussion of the roles of the prepositional phrase in sentence structure (passivization), see Soames and Perlmutter, pp. 552–68, and Jespersen, p. 121.

[16]The narrator undeniably places an exclamation point following John's statement of outrage at her actions of tearing down the wallpaper, but her consecutive two-fold usage of this forceful punctuation mark weights the attention in favor of her own declaration.