

Speech and Silence in “The Yellow Wallpaper”

Judy Simons suggests that at the heart of this enigmatic and troubling novella is the powerful and disturbing voice of its 1st-person narrator - a woman resisting the (male) attempts to silence her.

A Refusal to be Silenced

'I MUST say what I feel and think in some way - it is such a relief! declares the narrator of “The Yellow Wallpaper” almost half way through her story. Her pronouncement encapsulates one of the central themes of this short book, the primacy of self-expression. Isolated from human company - her husband is increasingly absent, her sister-in-law is occupied with managing the house, her baby has been taken away by Mary, presumably a nursemaid - the young wife whose story this is has no outlet for her feelings other than writing, something she has been expressly forbidden to do. Yet despite all attempts to silence her, her voice refuses to be suppressed, and without any individual in whom to confide, the act of writing acquires the status of speech. The story illustrates both the life-giving importance of being able to articulate ideas and the destructive power of frustration when communication is denied.

The Narrative Voice

Yet whose is the voice that dominates this surreal narrative? Is it a voice of reason or of madness? Does the narrator describe an observed realistic environment or does she rather indulge in fantasy, allowing her imagination to take over and distort her perception of the external world so that perfectly ordinary household objects take on bizarre shapes and become invested with absurd meanings? Are her family caring individuals who only want the best for her or are they jailers out to crush her individuality? John, her physician husband, who in this story comes to represent the medical profession in general, is convinced that his wife is suffering from post-natal depression, which can only be cured by extreme rest. Although consistent with contemporary medical belief, in particular the misplaced theories of the eminent American neurologist, Silas Weir Mitchell, whose patient Gilman had been, his treatment serves only to exacerbate her condition and reduce her to a state of insanity.

Discovering a Powerful Voice

Or does it? It could equally be argued that it is only through the enforced regime of seclusion and idleness that the wife discovers her true voice, a voice which is surprising in its intensity. The persona that emerges towards the end of the story is markedly different from the passive young woman of the beginning, who obeys her husband's every word and conforms meekly to his wishes. Instead, the woman who creeps behind and ultimately materialises from the wallpaper is an unafraid, angry and energetic creature, who steps over her husband as he lies prone on the floor, having fainted away at the sight of his unruly wife. The positions of husband and wife are thus reversed. So is it the case that she can only realise her identity through a descent into madness? Or is it rather that the voice that comes to dominate the narrative expresses the woman's real personality and that her original submissive mode echoes her vacuous, illusory existence that conceals her identity? These questions reflect the ambivalence at the heart of this troubling story, one of the reasons it has so intrigued readers and critics for over a hundred years.

Inviting Intimacy - a Conversational Style

Written in the first person, "The Yellow Wallpaper" establishes doubts about the reliability of the narrative voice right from the start. "*And what can one do?*", "*But what is one to do?*" asks the narrator, posing open questions that go unanswered, questions that carry extra resonance when uttered by an individual who is not allowed to 'do' anything at all. Note too how the voice, with the conversational 'And' and 'But', replicates speech patterns, as if the speaker is talking directly to an invisible confidante. With no introductory paragraphs to set the scene, the text plunges the reader directly into the middle of an on-going account. The tone is chatty, inviting intimacy, and the opening sentence, "*It is very seldom that mere ordinary people like John and myself secure ancestral halls for the summer*" is a line that could come from a letter to a friend. It assumes a pre-knowledge on the part of the reader, and stamps the character of the journal entry as informal and friendly.

Narrative Modes Held in Tension

Yet comments made in a reasonable manner about doctors or how her husband doesn't understand her are interspersed with overt allusions to fictional genres, fictions that are removed from the contemporary time and place in which the story is set. The use of archaic language in 'ancestral halls' recalls the medieval romance; 'a hereditary estate' suggests the mid 19th-century English country house novel; and the reference to the 'haunted house' immediately indicates that this might be a ghost story. The unanswered questions, "*why should it be let so cheaply? And why have stood so long untenanted?*"

reinforce the sense of mystery, and help to create the psychological uncertainty which infuses the narrative. From the beginning then we find narrative modes in tension, the voice of a 'modern' late 19th-century woman competing with those more disturbing voices of literary fictions that hint at dangerous secrets.

A Structural Tension - Gendered Oppositions

In constructing a distinctively female consciousness as the narrative tool for the story, Charlotte Perkins Gilman also sets up conflicts that present the irreconcilable oppositions around which the tale is structured as highly gender specific. Masculine logic is set against feminine intuition; male articulacy is contrasted with female silence; the husband's liberty and action are thrown into sharp relief against the wife's imprisonment and immobility. Most significantly perhaps, man's reason and health rule over woman's irrationality and illness. In her book, *The Female Malady* (1985), the cultural historian, Elaine Showalter, argues that the history of psychiatric medicine in the 19th century reflects a history of power relations between men and women, as the male-dominated medical profession categorised as lunacy anything in women's behaviour that did not conform to their rational norm. In her essay, 'Why I Wrote The Yellow Wallpaper' (1913), Charlotte Perkins Gilman gives weight to Showalter's theory as she describes her own response to the rest cure which brought her 'so near the border line of utter mental ruin that I could see over'. Gilman's conclusion, that it is 'work', which in her case meant writing, 'without which one is a pauper and a parasite', is mirrored in "The Yellow Wallpaper," where it is only through writing that the narrator recovers 'some measure of power'.

Finding Power in Silence

In following the prescribed therapy, John tries to mould his wife according to a set of rigid principles that are designed to infantilise her. Like a child, she is confined to a nursery, which resembles a prison with its barred windows, rings on the walls and a bed nailed to the floor. She is fed on nursery food, carried around in her husband's arms, and addressed as a child, sometimes in the third person as if she were not present.

"Bless her little heart!" said he with a big hug, 'she shall be as sick as she pleases! But now let's improve the shining hours by going to sleep, and talk about it in the morning!"

He prevents her from moving, either out of the house or from her bed: *"What is it, little girl?"* he said. *"Don't go walking about like that - you'll get cold."*

Reduced to the condition of a baby, the wife has the power of speech gradually removed from her. *'It's so hard to talk with John about my case'*, she complains, and when she attempts it, she becomes inarticulate and cries like a child. In contrast, his speech carries the power of authority, and the recurrent phrases, *'John says'*, *'he said'*

and 'said he', become increasingly sinister. Moreover, whenever she begins to speak about her feelings, he quietens her. Gradually she retreats into a silence of her own choosing so that when he observes for instance that she appears *"to be flourishing in spite of the wallpaper"*, she avoids responding directly:

"I turned it off with a laugh. I had no intention of telling him it was BECAUSE of the wallpaper - he would make fun of me."

This reticence, however, is deceptive. In its progressive oppositions between day and night, passivity and action, silence and expression, "The Yellow Wallpaper" establishes an alternative existence for its central character. The narrative voice is private, revealing thoughts and emotions that must remain illicit and can't be spoken aloud. Yet, by internalising her frustration and the concomitant sense of outrage at her treatment, the protagonist finds a new energy, and as she does so, she gains the voice of conviction that was once her husband's privilege. In the closing stages of the story she is in control, the verbs are active instead of passive, and relate to movement rather than lethargy - 'lift', 'push', 'bit', 'peeled' 'jump', 'creep' etc. 'I must get to work,' she announces.

"I am here and no person touches this paper but me - not ALIVE!"

This authority is reflected in her return to speech as she instructs John what to do, and he becomes the impotent juvenile (*"It's no use, young man, you can't open it!"*) to her new adult persona. Now he is the one who is 'silenced', while she is articulate:

"I said it again, several times, very gently and slowly, and said it so often that he had to go and see."

When John obeys her directions, he discovers a wife changed into a form that is both challenging and powerful, with the result that he becomes incapable while she roams free in a new liberated identity.