Hysteric Aesthetics: The Gendered Aspect of Narrative Form in "The Yellow Wallpaper"

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1

"It was not intended to drive people crazy, but to save people from being driven crazy, and it worked" ("Why I Wrote" 349). Such is the statement made by Charlotte Perkins Gilman soon after the publication of her short story "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892), a story chronicling in the diary form the everyday events of one "hysteric" woman suffering from "a severe and continuous nervous breakdown tending to melancholia—and beyond" (348). Indeed, Gilman's attempt turned out highly successful: the story came to be widely known as the author's path-breaking effort to challenge against the dominant medical treatment for women's neurotic dementia during the late nineteenth century, namely, the "rest cure" propagated by the renowned psychologist S. Weir Mitchell. Paradoxically, though, it was this pragmatic account of Gilman's authorial intention that came to cause the series of negative assessments of the overall performance of Gilman as a novelist. The most conspicuous of such reactions can be seen in the introduction to the Rutgers University Press's edition of The Yellow Wallpaper by Thomas L. Erskine and Connie L. Richards:

Her comment suggests the aesthetic problem with much of Gilman's literary work; often her sociopolitical agenda overwhelms the characters, who become one-dimensional mouthpieces for different ideas. Propaganda all too often threatens art. With the possible exception of Herland, her futuristic feminist novel, "The Yellow Wallpaper" alone unequivocally transcends its didactic origins and agenda. (6)

Erskine and Richards privilege "The Yellow Wallpaper" primarily because of
what they see as its aesthetic achievement, quality they consider to be so often victimized by Gilman’s own “sociopolitical agenda” that prompted her fiction to be overtly “didactic.” The critics’ apprehension of sociopolitical concerns as detrimental to artistic achievement echoes a major concern among modernist artists and formalist critics. As if to avoid the difficult issue of whether sociopolitical agenda and artistic achievement are really incompatible, Erskine and Richards, without developing their own conception of “literariness” of the story, swiftly shift their attention to a different terrain. In the early 1990s when they wrote this introduction to “The Yellow Wallpaper,” feminists’ concern had largely moved away from the utopian impulse to establish “the feminist aesthetics,” shifting its direction toward articulating the more intricate issue of unequal distribution of power among women. Witnessing this radical transformation within the feminist discursive sphere, Erskine and Richards seem to be evading the muddy problem of how aesthetic elements can impact feminist aspiration of freedom and equality, an aspiration so manifestly and yet so “literarily” depicted in “The Yellow Wallpaper.”

My main argument begins with an attempt to reconsider the very problem Erskine and Richards seem to have failed to fully investigate: how can the aesthetic aspect of the literary text be constitutive of the formation of the feminist hermeneutic community? By aesthetic aspect I mean certain formal and rhetorical features that not only convey the narrative plot but present some significant values of their own. I submit that the feminist hermeneutic community, generated in process of the three decades of critical analyses of “The Yellow Wallpaper,” tends to draw its boundary by excluding the stylistic analysis of the text. Style, understood as various modes of presenting written materials including punctuation, typography and arrangement, becomes the constitutive other in this hermeneutic community. I will first examine the curious relationship between the aesthetic elements of the text and their feminist reception, and then proceed to present my own reading of “The Yellow Wallpaper,” focusing on the shifting nature of the narrative voice that can be intimately connected with the exacerbation of the heroine’s nervous dementia. By so doing, my analysis of “The Yellow Wallpaper” will pay close attention to the particular process in which certain modes of expression may come to be repressed by the gendered conventions of narrative development. In my course of analysis, I intend to attribute various symptoms of hysteria to the stylistic idiosyncrasies of the
story. This does not mean that I will diagnose the story’s style as pathological, but rather I would like to consider how the hysteric symptoms can be turned into the aesthetics of a certain kind of literary form, namely, what I call “hysteric aesthetics.”

2

The dominant reading strategy circulated among the critics of “The Yellow Wallpaper” is to pay scrupulous attention to the story’s metaphoricity, an approach that focuses on the symbolism of particular objects in the story such as the wallpaper and the crawling woman whom the narrator comes to envision within the wallpaper. Take for example two of the earliest and perhaps the most influential readings—one by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (1979) and the other by Annette Kolodny (1980), both of which contemplate what the story signifies rather than how the story is signified. Locating “The Yellow Wallpaper” within the tradition of the female literary writings that utilize the “metaphors of imprisonment,” Gilbert and Gubar regard the story as a parable of literary women’s “confinement and escape” observed in Victorian patriarchal society (117-19). Kolodny’s analysis, on the other hand, focuses on the narrator and her husband’s conflicting interpretations of the wallpaper, maintaining that “Gilman’s story represents ... an exploration ... of the gender-inflected interpretive strategies” that create a crevasse between male and female (169). As is suggested by their uses of words like “metaphors” and “represent,” both seek to bring to light what is not depicted but just obliquely expressed in the story. Mary Jacobus aptly names those feminist critics’ practice “hysterical” reading because it seems as if the narrator’s “obsessive quest for the meaning” were transferred onto the critics themselves (280).¹

Granted that each of these readings constitutes an added contribution to

¹ Other readings also seem to follow the same path of “hysterical” reading, even though some of them touch upon the formal aspect of the story. Marianne DeKoven attempts to resituate “The Yellow Wallpaper” within the school of modernist literature by equating its formal characteristics with those of modernist writings. However, her reading does not exert any kind of stylistic analysis that could justify her own thesis but simply devotes itself to deciphering the meaning of the wallpaper, designating it as the “double figure of ambivalence about female freedom” (35). Jane Thrailkill highlights the affect of the story, but her argument is solely constructed through the historicization of the story’s affective quality and thereby failing to explicate the specific rhetorical strategies which generate such affect (529).
the ever-evolving field of feminist literary criticism, none seems to pay enough attention to the stylistic aspect of the story. If ever it be mentioned, it is done only in a cursory manner. It is as though the formalist reading were strangely repressed within “The Yellow Wallpaper” hermeneutic community, a phenomenon, in fact, not very surprising when we consider that the so-called Anglo-American feminism had originated in its reaction against the New Criticism, a reaction soon to find its powerful support in the variety of the post-New Critical approaches, such as poststructuralism, psychoanalysis, and New Historicism, approaches eager in their efforts not to fall into the trap of separating themselves from the feminist inquiry into the historically specific locations of women.

One notable exception to this anti-formalist tendency in Gilman studies can be seen in the 1996 PMLA article by Julie Bates Dock which reveals the appalling condition surrounding the publication of “The Yellow Wallpaper.” Dock reports that none of the major editions of the story published before the mid-1990s accurately reproduced the original 1892 version of the story. Indeed, two of the most referenced editions, published respectively by the Feminist Press and Rutgers University Press, seriously distort the original version, including random omissions of sentences and section breaks (54). As Dock stresses, the alteration of the number of breaks can cause a crucial distortion of the text’s meaning. Particularly so is the case of “The Yellow Wallpaper” since it purports to convey the deteriorating process of the female mental condition through the style of diary (55).

Dock’s careful survey of the story’s textual history gives us one important fact: the critics did not care much about the textual variants since they were so much obsessed with their desire to read beyond what is actually written, thereby suppressing what the surface level of the text may imply. The result is a strange reversal of the relationship between text and theme, signifier and signified, the apparent and the hidden. It is as though the textual form, naturally the most foregrounded, turned into a blind spot for the feminist readers of the story.

Indeed, it seems unreasonable that those feminist readers should neglect the formal aspect of the story, for the story itself seems to encourage us to appreciate its

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2 See Kate Millett’s preface to the groundbreaking Sexual Politics (1970) in which she designates “New Criticism” as a historical approach devoted to “aesthetic considerations” that fails to take into account “the larger cultural context in which literature is conceived and produced” (xx).
aesthetic quality. As Barbara Hochman suggests, many of the narrator's statements about the wallpaper attest to the fact that she herself is quite familiar with the vocabulary of aesthetic discourse (96). It should be noted that the narrator's initial qualms about the wallpaper result from its utter lack of beauty. She castigates the pattern of the wallpaper as "committing every artistic sin" (43). This comment serves to characterize the narrator as a female aesthete, who shows a strong concern with the aesthetic aspect of her surrounding objects. As is depicted in the following passage, the way she appreciates the wallpaper seems to show a strong affinity with the very reading methodology established by the New Criticism, an interpretative school that flourished in the mid-twentieth century: 

I know a little of the principle of design, and I know this thing was not arranged on any laws of radiation, or alternation, or repetition, or symmetry, or anything else that I ever heard of. (48) 

"Alternation," "repetition" and "symmetry"—these are exactly the words often recognized in the works of the New Criticism, whose main interest was to assess the formal integrity of literary texts. Thus, the narrator in the passage behaves like a proto-New Critic, feeling ill at ease in the face of those formal features which she cannot adequately interpret. 

As is shown in the above quotation, the narrator seems to have a particular set of assumptions about the patterns of wallpaper. She is irritated by the pattern of the yellow wallpaper because it does not fit into any patterns she is familiar with: the yellow wallpaper registers the disruption of the conventional form. It is this transgression of the conventional form that I would like to feature in my reading of "The Yellow Wallpaper." Just as the wallpaper in the narrator's room resists any categorization of the ordinary wallpaper, the story itself does not follow the conventional novelistic form. Instead, it mimics and unsettles various stylistic conventions usually employed in fictional writing. According to the tradition of the "standard" feminist reading of the text, it is possible that my own reading, too, should be labeled as "hysterical" in that it parallels with the narrator's own obsessive reading behavior. However, I will argue that the kind of obsession I inherit from the narrator differs from that of other readers since what I want to emphasize is the
formal aspect of the text, not just the metaphoricity of the specific objects in the story.

3

What then can one say about the form of "The Yellow Wallpaper"? In order to closely examine what kind of rhetorical device the narrator employs in her writing of diary, let us take a look at the opening passage:

"It is very seldom that mere ordinary people like John and myself secure ancestral halls for the summer.

A colonial mansion, a hereditary estate, I would say a haunted house, and reach the height of romantic felicity—but that would be asking too much of fate!

Still I will proudly declare that there is something queer about it.

Else, why should it be let so cheaply? And why have stood so long untenanted?

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 at 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.

You see he does not believe I am sick! (41; italics original; my underlines)

As I have underlined, the narrator uses conjunctions very frequently, a sign, one may say, of her strong desire to put her own situation as logically as possible. Indeed, at a glance, readers of this passage may recognize the narrator as quite rational, searching as she does for the logical explanation of the unreasonably low-rate of the rent. However, as the passage proceeds, the narrator’s confidence in her logic diverges toward a sense of hesitation, signaled by the italicized adverb “perhaps.” Since this “perhaps” marks the shift of the narrator’s logic, it plays a role similar to that of the conjunctives in the text. Thus, the logicality of her argument constructed
through various conjunctions is disrupted by yet another quasi-conjunctive term "perhaps." Such a logical disruption transcribes the narrator’s mental instability: her emotional shift from confidence ("Still, I will proudly declare") into hesitation ("perhaps") suggests the fragility of her self-assertiveness as well as the tenacity of the fear she feels toward her own husband. This fear of her husband, intimated by her repeated use of the italicized "perhaps," is so deep-rooted that she cannot "proudly declare" it even in her diary. The shifting nature of those conjunctions should be regarded as a product of the gender inequality between the narrator, a typical bourgeois housewife, and her husband, a discipliner of her life. The careful reading of the opening passage thus proves the extent to which the seemingly gender-free stylistic characteristic such as the conspicuous use of conjunctive terms can be connected with the gendered imbalance of power within a marriage life.

Another and definitely the more significant stylistic idiosyncrasy of the text is the frequent line changes that occur throughout the text. On the one hand, this formal characteristic might be read as a reflection of the narrator’s mental condition. Since line change creates a rupture between sentences, the fragmented nature of the narrator’s style created by the frequent line changes may appear to resonate with the stereotypical image of a hysteric woman as “highly liable,” incapable of maintaining a coherent mind-set (Smith-Rosenberg 84). To interpret the incessant line changes as symptomatic of hysteric behavior can at first be seen as a mere reenactment of the kind of reading often employed by the male doctors whose remedy Gilman herself seems to have felt ineffectual. However, if we pay closer attention to the narrator’s mode of expression, my proposed reading can turn out to be more productive than it first appears.

In the opening passage previously quoted, what is readily recognizable is the fact that the narrator often states her idea through her use of utterance: "I would say," "I will proudly declare," "I would not say." These emphatic expressions of utterance seem to highlight the narrator’s confidence in her own opinions, and what is more, they expose the narrator’s strong desire to talk aloud. While the critics of “The Yellow Wallpaper” never fail to note the narrator’s writing and reading as proscribed activities in the story, they seldom pay attention to the obvious fact that the narrator’s act of vocalization is also severely limited. She has to remain silent not only for her lack of companion but also for her need to obey the socially prescribed
behavioral patterns of a “sane” woman. Watching at one point when the narrator “eat[s] better” and becomes “more quiet” than before, her husband appears to be “so pleased” to see her “improve” (53). Her husband, a professional doctor of “high standing,” believes that a sane woman should not talk much, which explains in part why he forbids the narrator to see her cousins. Banned from the network of human communication, the only way she can resort to is to write a diary. As she says in the opening passage, the narrator cannot talk to “a living soul” but only to “dead paper.” In the middle of the story, the narrator confesses that she does not want to write any longer because it makes her feel exhausted, and yet she cannot quit since “I must say what I feel and think some way—it is such a relief!” (49; italics original). Writing is an agonizing exercise for the narrator because she cannot get any response, but still she “must say” her thoughts since otherwise she would feel suffocated. Thus, the narrator’s act of writing functions as a substitute for talking.

Considering the narrator’s insatiable desire for human interaction, it might be possible to read the frequent line changes as the narrator’s way of vocalizing herself through writing. Usually in transcribing dialogue, one needs to change lines and put quotation marks in order to make readers understand who is speaking. If we assume that the narrator is talking through writing, the incessant line changes can be seen as the narrator’s stylistic strategy for creating a scene of dialogue with her fictional companion. The following passage may best exemplify such practice of a fictional dialogue:

I think that woman gets out in the daytime!
And I’ll tell you why—privately—I’ve seen her!
I can see her out of every one of my windows! (55)

Although these lines are not put in quotation marks, we can read them as if the narrator were talking to someone else. Along with her use of the vocal term “tell,” the narrator’s line changes imitate the novelistic form of dialogue, thereby producing the vocalizing effect of her diary. Through her conflation of the first person monologue with the second person dialogue, the narrator invents a new mode of expressing her voice, a voice which cannot be generated in the actual conversation.
The impossibility of forming any meaningful conversation between the narrator and her husband is highlighted by one of the two sections that feature the actual dialogue taking place between them. The very opening of the section anticipates such impossibility: “It is so hard to talk to John about my case, because he is so wise, and because he loves me so” (50). When their conversation begins, the narrator’s husband would not listen to her suggestion that they should leave the house, merely repeating the phrase, “Really dear you are better!” (51). Feeling desperate, the narrator further insists on her need in vain: “Better in body perhaps—’ I began, and stopped short, for he sat up straight and looked at me with such a stern, reproachful look that I could not say another word” (51). Faced with her husband’s silent and silencing look, the narrator’s effort for expressing herself falls short of being articulated. The narrator’s tongue-tied circumstance in her actual world necessitates her to contrive a writing style that materializes her voice, a style that conflates the formal features of monologue and dialogue, as has already been pointed out.

In addition to the frequent line changes, another formal characteristic of the story is the excessive use of exclamation marks, a trait which, just like line changes, can be interpreted as a symptom of hysteria. If we follow the late nineteenth century medical discourse which defines a hysteric woman as being “occasionally interrupted by violent outbursts of passion” (Meadows 175), the narrator’s constant use of exclamation marks can be seen as the formal reflection of her nervous excitement. At the same time, this formal characteristic can be regarded as the narrator’s stylistic device for making her voice audible. Since exclamation marks are commonly used not only to show the strong emotion but also to express the loudness of the speaker’s voice, their conspicuous presence in the narrator’s diary suggests her thwarted desire to make her mute writing heard. Her obsessive use of exclamation marks graphically expresses her struggle to make her inaudible voice audible.

Although exclamation marks appear from the beginning, they are used more often as the story proceeds. The narrator’s voice becomes louder and louder until it reaches the culminating cry, “Hurrah!” at the very last entry of her diary (56). The last section, filled with exclamation marks, records the narrator’s final encounter with her husband. When he tries to break into her locked room, the narrator responds as follows:
Why there's John at the door!
It is no use, young man, you can't open it!
How he does call and pound!
Now he's crying for an axe.
It would be a shame to break down that beautiful door! (58)

The loudness of her voice permeates the entire passage. It is extremely hard to decipher whether she actually shouts aloud to her husband or merely shouts to herself. This difficulty stems partly from the fact that, here again, the narrator seems to strategically conflate the first person monologue with the second person dialogue (note the second and third lines in particular). We should also note that at this climactic moment, the narrator still remains a female aesthete, which is obvious from her concern that her husband would "break down that beautiful door!" This cry demonstrates how inextricably the narrator’s hysteric traits are linked with her aesthetic judgment.

The quasi-dialogue style quoted above is ensued by the actual dialogue between the couple. Contrary to the earlier dialogue in which the husband eventually silenced the narrator, this time it is the narrator who mutes the husband by telling him to use the key instead of breaking down the "beautiful door"—a somewhat bizarre order which "silenced him for a few moments" (58). But it turns out that this reversal of power can only be achieved through the narrator’s complete loss of selfhood. The narrator’s last shout to her husband reveals that she has transformed herself into the woman in the wallpaper: "‘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!’" (58). At this last moment of the story, the narrator’s name, Jane, is finally exposed to the reader. By referring to herself as if in a third person narrative, the narrator abandons her former self and becomes the creeping woman coming out of the wallpaper.

In terms of its formal structure, this conversational scene comes closest to the conventional novelistic form. Three points can be made as the novelistic elements of the scene. Firstly, while nearly most sentences are written in the present tense throughout the diary, the last scene is written in the past tense. Secondly, unlike the passage I quoted earlier in which the first person narration merges with that
of the second person, the last scene seems to mark a clear distinction between monologue and dialogue. Lastly, the frequent line changes, which produce a quasi-dialogue mode, no longer appear in this scene. It is as though the narrator’s stylistic experiment in her writing so as to include multiple levels of voices into one heterogeneous voice were replaced by the conventional mode of expression, in which each voice is strictly differentiated from the other by quotation marks:

Then he said—very quiet indeed, “Open the door, my darling!”
“I can’t,” said I. “The key is down by the front door under a plantain leaf!”
And then I said it again, several times, very gently and slowly, and said it so often that he had to go and see, and he got it of course, and came in. He stopped short by the door.
“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! (58)

The narrative form finally restores its stability at the cost of the narrator’s complete loss of mental stability. In this sense, the story’s narrative form is intensely gendered. That is to say, the emergence of a conventional novelistic form in the story is contingent upon the establishment of the rigid gender boundary between the narrator and her husband. When the narrator tries to express her strong skepticism toward her confined situation, the narrative form gestures toward a radical departure from the novelistic conventions, but when the narrator depicts her status either under the total submission to her husband (as is depicted in the earlier-mentioned scene in which she becomes “silenced” by her husband’s reproachful stare) or at the expense of her selfhood (expressed at the end of the story), the narrative voice follows a relatively conventional mode where there occur no frequent line changes or conflation of voices.
As has been outlined above, the stylistic idiosyncrasies in "The Yellow Wallpaper," such as the frequent line changes and the exclamation marks, can be read in two sharply different ways: as symptoms of hysteria, and as the narrator's rhetorical devices. If we adopt the former approach, the frequent line changes should connote the "highly liable" temperament of a hysterical woman, while the obsessive use of exclamation marks can indicate a hysterical woman's nervous excitability—the kind of reading largely in step with many of the foregoing critical readings. By bypassing the formalistic aspect, those earlier critics' readings tend to reduce the protagonist's writing to a more or less linear process in which the heroine increasingly loses her control, eventually ending up with total insanity. However, if we adopt the latter approach, the stylistic idiosyncrasies can be read as the narrator's deliberate device for vocalization through writing, an active effort for regaining her sense of interaction with other "living souls."

It is my proposition that rather than assuming either/or attitude toward such stylistic ambiguity, we consider it as the author's highly provocative exploration both into the destructive and productive aspects of a hysterical woman's writing. Gilman here seems to foreshadow Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément in their famous account of a hysterical woman in The Newly Born Woman—as a person who "unites familiar bonds, introduces disorder into the well-regulated unfolding of everyday life, gives rise to magic in ostensible reason" (5). What seems original about Gilman's novelistic attempt to dismantle the gendered premises of male-female relationship are the ways in which she connects stylistic conventions with those of gender. By focusing on a character who assumes an extremely skeptical stance toward gender norms, Gilman employs unique narrative strategies that express the loudness of a hysterical woman's mute written voice. At the same time we should bear in mind that Gilman never fails to remind us of the ultimate danger of such a challenge, a warning that again resonates with that of Cixous and Clément: "Every hysterical ends up inuring other to her symptoms, and the family closes around her again, whether she is curable or incurable" (5). In Gilman's short story, the eventual defeat of the defiant hysterical is suggested through the recuperation of conventional formal integrity in the final part of the story.

"The Yellow Wallpaper" challenges not only against the late nineteenth-century...
medical discourse about hysteric women but also the very novelistic conventions by
documenting a hysteric female aesthete’s literary attempt to break the boundaries
between dialogue and monologue, speech and writing, the audible and the
inaudible. This extraordinary fusion of pathological gestures and aesthetic devices in
my eyes is what keeps enticing endless re-readings of the text.

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Synopsis of “Hysteric Aesthetics: The Gendered Aspect of Narrative Form in ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’”

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This paper attempts to reconsider the aesthetic aspect of Charlotte Perkins’s Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper.” By aesthetic aspect I mean certain formal and rhetorical features that not only convey the narrative plot but present some significant values of their own. I submit that the feminist hermeneutic community, generated in process of the three decades of critical analyses of “The Yellow Wallpaper,” tends to draw its boundary by excluding the stylistic analysis of the text. Style, understood as various modes of presenting written materials including punctuation, typography and arrangement, becomes the constitutive other in this hermeneutic community. I will first examine the curious relationship between the aesthetic elements of the text and their feminist reception, and then proceed to present my own reading of “The Yellow Wallpaper,” focusing on the shifting nature of the narrative voice that can be intimately connected with the exacerbation of the heroine’s nervous dementia. By so doing, my analysis of “The Yellow Wallpaper” will pay close attention to the particular process in which certain modes of expression may come to be repressed by the gendered conventions of narrative development. In my course of analysis, I intend to attribute various symptoms of hysteria to the stylistic idiosyncrasies of the story. This does not mean that I will diagnose the story’s style as pathological, but rather I would like to consider how the hysterical symptoms can be turned into the aesthetics of a certain kind of literary form.