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I Write Therefore I Am

Rewriting the Subject in “The Yellow Wallpaper”
and
The Singing Detective

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Abstract

Focusing on “The Yellow Wallpaper” (1892) by Charlotte Perkins Gilman and The Singing Detective (1986) by Dennis Potter in dialogue with theories from Freud, Szasz, Foucault and Butler, my thesis considers the role of medicine in encouraging a patient toward a normative subjectivity. The protagonists of each text have become ill as a result of their inability to accept the social contradictions and lies upon which gendered subjectivity is reliant; the unnamed narrator of “The Yellow Wallpaper” comprehends femininity as servitude to male demands, while Marlow of The Singing Detective desires the power patriarchy offers him as a male, but his loss of belief and faith prevent his ascension to masculine status.

Both the narrator of “The Yellow Wallpaper” and Marlow resist the imposition of normative gender by practitioners of mainstream medicine. Therefore, a more complex and subtle method of treatment, the psychoanalysis developed by Freud, is employed in The Singing Detective, thereby encouraging the patient to identify illness and discontent as personal, not societal, responsibility.

I commence the thesis with an overview of the unequal power relations presupposed and encouraged by medical discourse. Through a process of ‘hystericisation’ the patient is infantilised and made dependent upon medical care. Linguistic control is central to manipulating patient behaviour within the hospital, and correspondingly the narrator of “The Yellow Wallpaper” and Marlow both seek a new subjectivity through their writing. Difficulties in appropriating language leads to internal incoherency for the protagonists, met by a split subjectivity – a defence mechanism which allows the protagonists to deviate from, at the same time as preserving, their ‘good self’.

The refusal of “The Yellow Wallpaper’s” narrator to relinquish her defiant self and assume femininity is contained by patriarchy – embodied by her husband, John - as insanity. The strict limitation upon a nineteenth-century woman’s expression prevents her from positively escaping her physician/husband’s script leading to her mental demise. By contrast, Marlow successfully resocialises himself by modifying the hypermasculine persona he idealises, and is finally situated to confront and reform the social contradictions that precipitated his ill-health. However, subdued by having been led to identify discontent as a personal problem, Marlow is unlikely to challenge the power relations which have made his subjectivity possible. His capitulation to normalisation demonstrates a fundamental point linking the otherwise divergent theories of Freud and Foucault, that the creation of agency first requires the subject’s subordination.

Acknowledgements

In the television program Blackadder the Third, Blackadder feigns ignorance of Doctor Samuel Johnson's New English Dictionary: "And what dictionary would this be?" The doctor responds passionately:

The one that has taken 18 hours of every day for the last ten years!
My mother died; I hardly noticed. My father cut off his head and
fried it in garlic in the hope of attracting my attention; I scarcely
looked up from my work. My wife brought armies of lovers to the
house, who worked in droves so that she might bring up a huge
family of bastards; I cared not! (Ink or Incapability)

While it would be grossly exaggerating to say that this project has occupied me for as long, or has diverted me so totally from social life, it has been an all-encompassing endeavour! But, as I hope to explicate in this thesis, writing does not occur in isolation, and so there are some people to thank:

I am very grateful to my supervisor, Jenny Lawn, for her generous assistance, loaning of books, interest and encouragement throughout the year.

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Foreword

French psychoanalyst Andre Green, an internationally honoured member of the Freudian community, has joked that “we are all hysterics . . . except when we are writing papers.” Any honest scholar knows that we are all hysterics especially when we are writing papers. (Showalter, Hystories 13)

This Masters thesis, in content, is about the narrator protagonists of “The Yellow Wallpaper” and The Singing Detective, and their attempts to write themselves anew. The function of the protagonists’ self-narrativity is to generate a new subjectivity, a subjectivity that does not make them sick. Specifically in these texts, the protagonists wish to defy the medical diagnosis which purports to tell the truth of their health, and redirects their troubled subjectivity towards conformity.

During the course of the year I recognised the role this thesis was fulfilling within the terms of my own self-narrativity: like the narrator of “The Yellow Wallpaper” and Marlow I am discursively constituting a new identity which deviates from past identifications with a ‘sick self’. A few years back, about 1994, my doctor mentioned that he had given a paper on me at a conference.¹ From memory, my response was little more than “Oh”, but I do recall feeling a little proud that my condition was of enough interest for him to present his findings to his colleagues. I didn’t think much more about it and have never asked him what he said about me. I am hesitant to note the anecdote here – as if I am trying to suggest that I am ‘special’ in some perverse way; however, what I am leading up to is, that while reading a Freudian case study for this thesis, I realised that the subject of the study could be me. Of course, literally it

could not be me, but somewhere, 'out there' in the medical world, information about me circulates; I do not know what it says, and although of me, it does not belong to me.

Both the narrator of "The Yellow Wallpaper" and Marlow are talked about and behaviour noted upon in reports, which startles Marlow in particular; the narrator of "The Yellow Wallpaper" is so used to being absent from discussions about her health, she merely mentions it in passing. But it *is* disconcerting. Being a 'case' is objectifying; the patient's authority to divulge personal information is not required, nor is their input. So when I was reminded of my doctor's passing comment after six or so years, I felt very sad for the frustrated and sick young woman who had experienced some measure of meaning and pleasure in being of interest to a small portion of the medical world.

I then felt irritated that a version of me is in the public domain which I took no part in and especially that it is no longer current. There is a static piece of medical discourse out there which still defines and constitutes a 'pseudonymous me' as debilitated. In the intervening years I have, like the narrator of "The Yellow Wallpaper" and Marlow, become a new person, no longer primarily identifying with my 'sick self'. Part of this process has stemmed from undertaking academic study. Not just the writing of this thesis, but also each year of study has helped reshape my identity.

My own story therefore operates as a metatext to this thesis. Diane Price Herndl remarks that Gilman was able to bring about her recovery from debilitating nervousness through the 'writing cure': "[i]n *writing* the story of the invalid, [Gilman was] able to avoid *living* it" (124, italics in original). Thus, 'disciplining' myself into the field of English Literature has enabled me to create a new life narrative: within the terms of this thesis I have been able to write about sick characters rather than enact that position. The objectifying distance

affected by writing about the sick 'other' is indeed therapeutic; as Showalter writes, "the act of telling one's story may be therapeutic even when it is fictional" (Hystories 205).

And so I suggest that this thesis is my own public record of who I am at present, serving the same purpose as the narrator's journal or Marlow's revised novel. As such, the thesis counters earlier medical discourse. The pen has been passed to this patient and the ensuing possibilities exhilarate and challenge because 'when I don't know what to write, my pen waits for me'.²

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