

"THE YELLOW WALLPAPER": REPRESENTATION AS STRUGGLE

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Abstract: The article discusses the narrative strategies employed by American writer Charlotte Perkins Gilman which aimed at subverting literary conventions that could have prevented her from representing a woman's inner struggles. The article also aims at discussing how such subversion may be related not only to the literary realm but also to the social restraints with which women were forced to deal during the second half of the nineteenth century in The United States of America.

Keywords: Representation. Realism. Subversion.

"O PAPEL DE PAREDE AMARELO": REPRESENTAÇÃO COMO LUTA

Resumo: O artigo discute as estratégias narrativas usadas pela escritora estadunidense Charlotte Perkins Gilman no intuito de subverter convenções literárias que pudessem a ter impedido de representar os conflitos interiores de uma mulher. O artigo tem igualmente por objetivo discutir como tal subversão pode estar relacionada não só ao campo da literatura, mas, também, às limitações sociais com as quais mulheres foram forçadas a lidar durante a segunda metade do século XIX nos Estados Unidos da América.

Palavras-Chave: Representação. Realismo. Subversão.

The French literary critic Roland Barthes in his *Leçon*, the transcription of the 1977 lecture in inauguration of the

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Chair of Literary Semiology in the Collège de France, quotes the Russian linguist Roman Jakobson and argues that “a speech-system is defined less by what it permits us to say than by what it compels us to say” (BARTHES). According to Barthes, language is fascist, “for fascism does not prevent speech, it compels speech” (BARTHES). He also states that unfortunately there is no possible way of living outside language, of living without language: “human language has no exterior: there is no exit” (BARTHES). Nevertheless, he believes there is a way of cheating language: literature. For Barthes, literature allows us to question and subvert the different set of rules and constraints inherent to language.

American scholar Jenny Weatherford in her article “Approaching the Ineffable: ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’ and Gilman’s Problem with Language” points out that American writer Charlotte Perkins Gilman “did not feel that language was entirely at her command” (WEATHERFORD, 1999, p. 58). According to Weatherford, Gilman doubted “whether language and conventional means of story-telling could ever present an authentic view of a woman’s inner experience” (p. 58).

It is possible to argue that Gilman might have suffered with the constraints and limitations imposed by the fascism inherent to language that Barthes talks about. If it was not possible for her to find a way to represent a faithful view of the inner experiences a woman goes through, then it might be due to the way she was forced to try to mold her writings. Weatherford supports the idea that these limitations led Gilman to try to create a new sort of story: “having found conventional techniques and plots of literature irrelevant to her own and many other women’s experience, Gilman attempted to create [...] a new kind of story — one that would tell what it was like from the inside” (WEATHERFORD, 19, p. 59). The result of this attempt, according to Weatherford, is “The Yellow Wallpaper”.

The present paper aims at discussing the narrative strategies used by Gilman in order to subvert the literary conventions which could have prevented her from truthfully representing a woman's inner struggles. The present paper also aims at discussing how such subversion might be understood as not only related to the realm of literature but also to the social constraints with which women were forced to deal in the second half of the 19th century in the United States of America.

In the last fifty years of the 19th century The United States of America was a country going through profound changes: from being a essentially rural society to a greatly urbanized and industrialized world power. These changes affected women's lives, but they did not drastically alter the way women lived: economically dependent on men, women had almost no autonomy and had to face the limitations imposed by a society where only the maternal and sexual facets of their characters were taken into consideration.

It was in this same society where a literary movement which came to be known as American Realism was taking place. Just like those that produce it, as well as those who were depicted in its stories, American Realism was dealing with many questions. American realist authors very much struggled with how and what to represent in that ever-changing society of theirs. There was a whole debate about what essentially was to faithfully represent reality.

One of the most celebrated American realist authors Henry James once wrote that "the real represents to my perception the things we cannot possibly not know"(BANTA, 2007, p. xxxviii). According to Kaplan, James believed "in the creative power of the mind to shape its own reality within the limits of moral ambiguity rather than field of social relations" (KAPLAN, 1992, p. 4), i.e. James might be taken as an example of a realist author who faced a series of questions on what and how to represent, for representing a character's though-

ts is very much different than portraying social relations, as would be expected of someone who should depict reality 'as it is'.

However, James eventually decides for realist representation as something which depicts reality as being more related to what goes on inside the mind of the characters he created than as a supposedly truthful representation of the social relations, as his most emblematic novel *The Portrait of a Lady* clearly exemplifies.

Henry James is not alone in the American realist canon though. Charlotte Perkins Gilman is also a part of it nowadays. Just like James and many other authors, she faced many questions on what and how to represent. Nevertheless, Gilman might be seen as an American realist author with a whole different set of extra questions to provide answers for: she was a female author, and a very combative one.

Gilman repudiated the assumptions about the social role of women which were current during her lifetime — from 1860 to 1935. According to *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, “Gilman lived her life, for the most part, on the margins of a society whose economic assumptions about and social definitions of women she vigorously repudiated” (BAYM, 2003, p. 656). Still according to the same anthology, “out of this resistance to conventional values and what she later characterized as ‘masculinist’ ideals, Gilman produced the large body of polemical writings and self-consciously feminist fiction that made her the leading feminist theoretician, speaker, and writer of her time” (p. 656).

On July 3, 1860, Charlotte Anna Perkins was born in Hartford, Connecticut from a family with some relevant intellectual figures of the time. Frederic Beecher Perkins, the father, “was a minor literary figure, grandson of the theologian Lyman Beecher, and a nephew of the preacher Henry Ward Beecher and of Harriet Beecher Stowe” (BAYM, 2033, p. 656).

Frederic Beecher Perkins, nevertheless, would leave his newly born daughter soon after her birth to the cares of her mother, Mary A. Fitch. Throughout her life, Gilman would fruitlessly try to establish some kind of closer connection to her father who would merely send her “occasional letters with lists of books she should read” (p. 656).

Due to her father’s deserting the family, which was made of two children and their mother, Mary A. Fitch would take the children and move back to Rhode Island, where her family had lived since the middle of the previous century. It is possible to imagine the kind of hardship this family had to face. Gilman herself described her childhood as “painful and lonely” (p. 656).

Gilman worked in several different places developing various activities, such as teaching arts and designing greeting cards in order to support herself, from early adulthood to getting married to Charles Stetson in 1884 — her last name, Gilman, does not come from this first marriage, but from a second one, this time to her cousin George Houghton Gilman.

During the time she had to work to support herself, Gilman “had increasingly become aware of the injustices inflicted on women, and she had begun to write poems[...] in which she developed her own views on women’s suffrage” (p. 656). In fact, Gilman ended up developing a line of thought in which the growth of mankind as whole as seen as being held back due to female economic dependency on men. Amongst fiction writings, such as *Moving the Mountain* and *Herland*, and nonfiction ones, for instance *Women and Economics*, she wrote about the female condition and how it could be improved throughout her life. However, her most emblematic piece of writing is “The Yellow Wallpaper”.

In “The Yellow Wallpaper” Gilman writes about a woman who is imprisoned in a room in order to recover from

a nervous breakdown possibly brought about by the birth of her child. This imprisonment was carried out by her husband and he is the one responsible for her treatment as well: he is a doctor. As the narrative progresses we the readers follow this nameless woman's struggle against a supposed insanity which evolves to a real one. Like Henry James, Gilman also chose to represent reality as something related to what goes on inside a character's mind. Although the social relations among characters are also present in her story.

Gilman's story was based in a real-life experience she went through. Before writing the story, she had suffered a nervous breakdown similar to the one depicted in "The Yellow Wallpaper". She almost lost her mind due to a treatment similar to the one received by the character in her story, the 'rest cure'.

After eleven months as a married woman, she gave birth to the couple's only child, Katharine. The birth of the child brought about unhappiness and problems that Gilman had already foreseen before getting married, i.e. "the difficulties of reconciling her ambition to be a writer with the demands of being a wife, housekeeper, and mother" (BAYM, 2003, p. 656). It was exactly the situation brought about by Katharine's birth that led Gilman to depression. A condition that should be properly treated, according to

Gilman's husband and mother. Therefore, they thought the best thing to be done was to send Gilman to Philadelphia to be treated by Dr. S. Weir Mitchell, the most renowned neurologist of the day in The United States. Supposedly a specialist in female 'nervous' disorders, Mitchell used to prescribe a 'rest cure' that consisted of "total bed rest for several weeks and limited intellectual activity thereafter" (p. 656).

As Gilman writes in her "Why I Wrote The Yellow Wallpaper", whose content is an explanation about why she had

written such an unusual story as “The Yellow Wallpaper”, she “obeyed those directions for some three months, and came so near the border line of utter mental ruin” (GILMAN, 2003, p. 669) that she could realize how harmful such treatment really was. Gilman, however, was able to recover from it and decided to write the story in order to prevent other people from suffering as much as she did.

Gilman attempted to structure her most celebrated story in a veritable way, i.e. the reader would have access to a nameless woman’s thoughts through what she writes in a kind of journal, a supposedly faithful representation of her inner thoughts. It is possible to know about her sort of journal due to the recurrent mentions she does to her writing on the first half of the narrative: “this is dead paper and a great relief to my mind” (GILMAN, 2006, p. 184); “I did write for a while in spite of them” (p. 186); “there is nothing to hinder my writing as much as I please” (p. 190), and so on. These writings, however, are done in secrecy and gradually become harder and harder to be accomplished: “I think sometimes if I were only well enough to write a little it would relieve the press of ideas and rest me. But I find I get pretty tired when I try” (GILMAN, 2006, p. 192); “I don’t know why I should write this. I don’t want to. I don’t feel able. [...] the effort is getting to be greater than the relief” (p. 198).

After the passage in which the nameless woman states that “It is getting to be a great effort for me to think straight” (p. 200), the narrative takes a remarkable turn: there is not a single mention to her writings until the end of the story. As her insanity increasingly progresses the reader no longer has access to what she writes in her journal, for she apparently stops doing such thing. The reader, therefore, should not be able to access the supposedly truthful written representations of her inner thoughts and struggles any more. But something extraordinary takes place: the narrator’s thoughts

themselves is what Gilman offers the reader. As Jenny Weatherford points out:

The narrator references to her own act of writing disappear completely. Moreover, the fictional illusion that the narrator continues to produce a journal becomes untenable. [...] The story slips from one form into another — from journal to interior monologue, but without any intervening character or explanation to account for the shift, Gilman provides no justification for how the story can continue to be told if the narrator can no longer write. (WEATHERFORD, 1999, p. 66-67)

Gilman, as Henry James and many of the realist authors who wrote in America in the second half of the 19th century did, had to face a difficult choice when choosing how to represent the increasing insanity of her character in “The Yellow Wallpaper”: should she stick to the literary conventions which were based on a logical representation of life, on verisimilitude or should she subvert them, break free from them in order to better depict the inner thoughts of a woman who is progressively losing her mind? As Weatherford puts it,

Gilman faced an either-or proposition. Either she could maintain the premise that the woman continues to keep her journal and thus, limit her own possibilities for portraying the depth of the woman’s madness, or she could portray the woman’s growing insanity in all its horror, which would destroy the fictional illusion that the woman is still maintaining her journal. (p. 68)

Gilman chooses to subvert the narrative and representational conventions in order to achieve her aim: create a faithful representation of something which could no longer be ignored, something “we cannot possibly not know” (BANTA, 2007, p. xxviii): the sufferings of a woman who is going insane due to society rules and conventions. To use a

Barthes's concept, in "The Yellow Wallpaper" Gilman cheated the fascism of language, she was able to break free from the limitations imposed by the "conventional techniques and plots of literature" (WEATHERFORD, 1999, p. 59) which were current at the second half of the 19th century.

Due to the resolution of the proposition faced by Gilman mentioned by Weatherford, the author of *Women and Economics* might be seen as an example of the kind of writer who produces the Realism Kaplan writes about: "Realism cannot be understood only in relation to the world it represents; it is also a debate [...] with competing modes of representation" (KAPLAN, 1992, p. 13).

Weatherford mentions two competing modes of representation Gilman had to deal with, but throughout the story, many might have been the difficult choices she had to face, for, although, the main focus of "The Yellow Wallpaper" is what goes on inside the nameless woman's mind, it is easily possible to infer many of the characteristics of the society in which Gilman used to live.

An extremely noticeable trait of such society is the way men patronize women, for instance. There are several passages in the story which might serve as samples of such thing, like the one in which John, the woman's husband, refers to her as "a blessed little goose" (GILMAN, 2006, 192). Another example of such behaviour might be seen in the passage in which he calls her "little girl" (p. 202). The very fact she is locked in a nursery is also very emblematic. Everything which encompasses the representations in the story is the result of choices, choices between the conventions and the subversion, even the very representation of the husband-wife relationship.

When Gilman subverts the conventions of representation at the same time that she tries to depict the society in which both her and her characters live, she is not only sub-

verting literary conventions, she is also exposing constraints inherent to the American society of the second half of the 19th century which were as restraining as or even more restraining than those related to story-writing.

If we take into consideration what Susan Sniader Lanser states in her *The Narrative Act — Point of View in Prose Fiction* about the relationship of a writer to the act of writing a literary work, it is even easier to understand Gilman's subversion as not only literary, but as a much more wide-ranging one: "Such a relationship is essentially ideological as well as aesthetic, for the act of writing [...] is defined, constrained and conventionalized according to a system of values, norms, and perceptions of the world" (LANSER, 1981, p. 64).

Gilman subverted conventions in order to portray the sufferings caused by insanity because there were no previous models to be followed, or as Weatherford puts it "a woman's experience of mental torment as she lives it within herself and tries unsuccessfully to articulate it cannot be portrayed within the confines of any consistent, traditional literary form [...] No narrative form could contain what Gilman wanted to do" (WEATHERFORD, 1999, p. 68).

Jenny Weatherford precisely notices that "the narrator's first mention of the woman in the wallpaper occurs simultaneously with the disappearance of her references to her writing" (p. 67). What Gilman really wanted to represent was the evolving madness her character suffers from, but there were no models available for such representations. Gilman had not only to let go of conventions related to verisimilitude, but also to create a new way of story-telling which could encompass what she wanted to depict, i.e. the veritable writing of the nameless woman's thoughts are replaced by her own thoughts about what she sees in the wallpaper, a female figure apparently jailed behind bars created from its pattern:

The front pattern does move — and no wonder! The woman behind shakes it! Sometimes I think there are a great many women behind, and sometimes only one [...] she just takes hold of the bars and shakes them hard. And she is all the time trying to climb through. But nobody could climb through that pattern — it strangles so (GILMAN, 2006, p. 210)

It is interesting to notice that the narrator sees sometimes one woman and sometimes more than one. Ultimately, the reader is led to know that the woman she saw behind the wallpaper was in fact herself. However, the many women that are seen by her might be a representation of an awareness of how spread such treatment and conditions were among the women who lived in that society.

When the narrator comes to identify with the figure behind the bars, even the language assumes a sort of mirrored tone in a remarkable passage from the story: “I pulled and she shook, I shook and she pulled” (GILMAN, 2006, p. 212). By the end of the story she no longer refers to the figure behind the wallpaper bars, but to herself as the one who was behind them on the first place: “I suppose I shall have to get back behind the pattern when it comes night” (p. 216).

According to Weatherford, “what the narrator sees in the wallpaper is something that she never could have written in her journal, not just because writing has been forbidden her, but also because she lacks the language to do so” (WEATHERFORD, 1999, p. 71). Therefore, we may infer that Gilman’s biography influenced the creation of the story not only when it comes to the treatment, but also to the lack of language to express herself. She had to subvert literary conventions to depict what she wanted people to know about, her character, on the other hand, had to go beyond reason to visualize, to have an image of her social condition. As Weatherford states

She perceives subliminally her confinement within constructs of femininity and diagnosis [...] but she lacks full consciousness of it and therefore cannot articulate it except as a hallucinated image. [...] It is a realization for which there are no words. Because language is first forbidden and second incapable of describing her condition anyway, she ingeniously creates a picture of her dilemma in the wallpaper. She hallucinates — visualizes — that which she cannot express verbally. (p. 71)

Both Gilman and her character had to face limitations to their expressions. Gilman brilliantly managed to cheat the fascism of language and give voice to someone who according to the social and literary conventions would never be heard. She knew of the need such character had of being heard for she had gone through a very similar process herself. However, there were no available models to be followed, no available convention which could encompass what she needs to represent, so she was forced to create them. By doing so, Gilman might have subverted society in a way that maybe not even her was aware of, for she never wrote anything similar to “The Yellow Wallpaper” throughout her literary carrier.

Ezra Pound, one of the greatest American poets, stated that there is a kind of writer who he calls ‘the inventors’. The inventors are those “discoverers of a particular or of more than one mode and process” (POUND) of writing. Charlotte Perkins Gilman might be considered an inventor for she created a new mode of story-telling. This creation was due to her genius, but also to the suffocating social conditions in which she lived throughout her live. “The Yellow Wallpaper” is not only a masterpiece for its inventiveness, but also a revolutionary statement which undermines a series of constraints at once, be them linguistic, literary or social.

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