
**Dual Silences: Patriarchal Control and Feminist Resistance in
*The Yellow Wallpaper***

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Abstract:

This paper examines silence as a thematic and structural device in Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*. It argues that silence functions as both a patriarchal imposition and a site of resistance, reflecting broader cultural practices of silencing women. By situating the text within feminist literary criticism and patriarchal control, the paper highlights how silence becomes a metaphor for erasure, confinement, and eventual subversion.

Silence, as both a rhetorical and cultural construct, has long been associated with the suppression of marginalized voices. In feminist literary criticism, silence is not merely the absence of speech but a manifestation of power relations that dictate who may speak and who must remain unheard. Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892) provides a striking exploration of this dynamics, portraying a woman subjected to the "rest cure" that demands passivity, muteness, and isolation. The narrator's enforced silence becomes emblematic of the broader silencing of women within patriarchal medical and domestic structures. As Cheryl Glenn (2004) observes in *Unspoken: A Rhetoric of Silence*, silence can be "a strategy of control as well as a site of resistance," a paradox that Gilman dramatises through her protagonist's descent into madness.

This paper argues that silence in *The Yellow Wallpaper* functions simultaneously as a tool of oppression and a potential mode of subversion. By examining the intersections of medical discourse, domestic confinement, and narrative form, the study situates Gilman's text within a larger feminist critique of silencing practices. Drawing on Adam Jaworski's (1997) interdisciplinary perspectives on silence and Elaine Showalter's analysis of the female malady, the paper highlights how Gilman exposes the destructive consequences of enforced muteness while paradoxically allowing madness to become a voice that resists erasure. Furthermore, the analysis extends to cross-cultural contexts, where silence in literature such as Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain* or Japanese poetic traditions reveal similar tensions between suppression and resistance. In doing so, the paper underscores the universality of silence as a literary and cultural trope, while foregrounding Gilman's text as a seminal critique of patriarchal silencing.

Keywords: Dual Silence, Patriarchy, The yellow Wall paper, Feminist Resistance

Introduction

Silence, often dismissed as mere absence of speech, has emerged as a critical category in literary studies and pedagogy. Far from being a void, silence functions as a semiotic signifier, rhetorical strategy, and archetypal symbol that shapes interpretive practices in the English classroom. As Adam Jaworski (1993) argues in *The Power of Silence: Social and Pragmatic Perspectives*, silence is not simply the negation of language but a communicative act with pragmatic and cultural dimensions, capable of expressing resistance, reflection, or presence beyond words.

In literary pedagogy, silence operates as a rhetorical device that structures discourse and interpretation. Cheryl Glenn, in her work on the rhetoric of silence, emphasises that silence can be as persuasive as speech, functioning as a mode of power, exclusion, or subversion within textual and classroom contexts. This rhetorical framing situates silence as a deliberate strategy rather than passive absence, allowing students and teachers to negotiate meaning through pauses, withholding, or reflective quietude. From a semiotic perspective, Roland Barthes' notion of the "grain of the voice" and his broader semiological framework suggest that silence, like language, is a sign system that conveys meaning through absence and interruption. Silence in the classroom thus becomes a textual marker, signaling interpretive hesitation, ambiguity, or the unspeakable dimensions of literature. Archetypal criticism further deepens this inquiry. Drawing on Jungian thought, silence can be read as an archetype of the void, the ineffable, or the sacred; pause a kind of symbolic presence that resonates with the mythic structures and collective unconscious. In literary pedagogy, such archetypal silence invites students to engage with texts at a symbolic level, where absence itself becomes a site of meaning-making.

Silence as Narrative Force

Silence often functions as a structural device in fiction, poetry, and drama. Postcolonial writers such as Salman Rushdie and Arundhati Roy deploy silence to represent trauma, memory, and the politics of marginality. Narrative gaps, ellipses, and omissions invite readers to participate actively in meaning-making, transforming silence into a site of resistance and identity formation. In this sense, silence becomes a political act, foregrounding the voices of the marginalized by emphasizing what remains unsaid. From a rhetorical perspective, silence is not passive but strategic. Cheryl Glenn's (2004) work on the rhetoric of silence demonstrates that silence can persuade, resist, and subvert dominant discourses. Similarly, Adam Jaworski (1997) frames silence as a communicative act with pragmatic and cultural dimensions, capable of expressing solidarity, defiance, or reflection. In poetry,

silence often acquires a voice of its own, functioning as rhythm, pause, or symbolic presence. Roland Barthes (1985) extends this semiotic view, suggesting that silence, like language, is a sign system that conveys meaning through absence and interruption. Critical discourse analysis of modernist texts, particularly of Virginia Woolf's novels, reveals silence as a vital discourse element. In *To the Lighthouse* (1927) and *Between the Acts* (1941), silence operates as both presence and absence, shaping narrative rhythm and thematic ambiguity. Scholars argue that silence in Woolf's work functions as a floating signifier, simultaneously rhetorical, symbolic, and thematic. This duality underscores silence's interpretive richness, allowing it to destabilize meaning while fostering deeper engagement.

Archetypal and Symbolic Dimensions

Archetypal criticism, drawing on Carl Jung, situates silence as a symbolic archetype of the void, the ineffable, or the sacred pause. Silence resonates with mythic structures and collective unconscious, functioning as a symbolic presence that transcends language. In literary pedagogy, such archetypal silence invites students to engage with texts at a symbolic level, where absence itself becomes a site of meaning-making. Across these perspectives, silence emerges as a critical interpretive strategy in literary studies. It is simultaneously narrative, rhetorical, semiotic, and archetypal, shaping how texts are read and how classrooms engage with literature. For pedagogy, silence offers a reflective space that encourages students to grapple with ambiguity, negotiate meaning, and recognize the power of the unsaid.

Elaine Showalter's (1987) *The Female Malady* situates Gilman's work within the broader discourse of women's mental health in the nineteenth century, emphasizing how silence was imposed through medical treatments like the "rest cure." Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's (1979) *The Madwoman in the Attic* further interpret silence as a metaphor for women's exclusion from literary and cultural authority. In Gilman's text, the narrator's muteness reflects the systemic erasure of female voices, aligning with feminist critiques of patriarchal silencing. Adam Jaworski's *Silence: Interdisciplinary Perspectives* and Cheryl Glenn's *Unspoken: A Rhetoric of Silence* provide frameworks for understanding silence as both absence and presence. Glenn argues that silence can be a rhetorical strategy, while Jaworski highlights its communicative potential. Applied to Gilman's narrative, these theories reveal how silence is not merely imposed but also becomes a paradoxical form of expression. The narrator's journal entries embody a muted voice that resists erasure. Historical accounts of the "rest cure" (Weir Mitchell's treatment 1870) demonstrate how medical authority enforced silence by restricting women's intellectual and creative activities. Gilman herself critiqued this practice in her essay "Why I Wrote The Yellow Wallpaper, (1913)" underscoring how silence was weaponized as a therapeutic measure. Scholars such

as Ann J. Lane (1990) have noted that the medical silencing of women reflected broader cultural anxieties about female autonomy.

Silence as a literary trope extends beyond Gilman's work. In Anita Desai's (1977) *Fire on the Mountain*, silence symbolizes female withdrawal and resistance against patriarchal intrusion. Similarly, Japanese haiku traditions often employ silence as a contemplative space, contrasting with Gilman's destructive muteness. These comparative texts highlight the universality of silence as a marker of both oppression and resistance across cultures.

While existing scholarship has examined silence as oppression, fewer studies emphasize its paradoxical role as resistance. This paper seeks to bridge that gap by analysing how Gilman's narrator transforms silence into a fractured but potent form of self-expression, thereby complicating the binary of muteness versus voice.

Textual Analysis

This study employs close reading of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*, focusing on narrative voice, journal entries, and moments of enforced muteness. Particular attention is given to the narrator's fragmented discourse, the silence imposed by her husband's medical authority, and the symbolic function of the wallpaper as a silent witness. The analysis is grounded in feminist literary criticism, drawing on Elaine Showalter's work on women's mental health and Cheryl Glenn's rhetoric of silence. Adam Jaworski's interdisciplinary framework is used to interpret silence as both communicative absence and presence. Archetypal criticism is also applied, treating silence as a shadow motif that reveals suppressed aspects of identity.

The study is limited to textual and theoretical analysis rather than empirical data. While comparative texts are included, the primary focus remains on Gilman's narrative. The paper does not attempt to generalise silence across all feminist literature but rather uses selected examples to enrich the analysis.

Domestic Silence

The narrator's confinement in the nursery exemplifies domestic silence as a form of erasure. Her voice is muted within the household, where John's authority dictates her daily routine. The nursery, ironically a space associated with childhood and growth becomes a prison of silence, symbolizing how domestic spaces can enforce muteness rather than nurture identity. The narrator's confinement in the nursery exemplifies how domestic spaces enforce silence. She notes:

It is a big, airy room, the windows are barred for little children, and there are rings and things in the walls. (pg.2)

The description of the nursery evokes imprisonment rather than comfort, transforming silence into a condition of captivity. Domestic silence is not voluntary but imposed, reflecting how women's voices were muted within the household. The narrator's longing for "society and stimulus" underscores the destructive isolation that silences her identity. John's silence within the domestic sphere is strategic. He rarely engages in dialogue with his wife, preferring to dismiss her concerns with paternal authority. For example, when she expresses unease, he responds with silence or trivialization rather than conversation. This lack of verbal exchange reinforces her isolation, showing how silence can be an active form of domination. His refusal to listen is itself a silencing act.

Medical Silence

John's role as both husband and physician intensifies the silencing effect. His prescription of the "rest cure" demands passivity, forbidding intellectual or creative activity. This medical silence reflects patriarchal control over women's bodies and minds, reducing the narrator to a patient whose voice carries no authority. Gilman critiques this silencing by dramatizing its destructive psychological consequences. John's medical authority silences her intellectual and creative impulses. He insists:

He says that with my imaginative power and habit of story-making, a nervous weakness like mine is sure to lead to all manner of excited fancies. (pg. 7)

By pathologizing her creativity, John enforces medical silence, framing her voice as dangerous. The narrator herself internalises this silencing:

I get unreasonably angry with John sometimes. . I'm sure I never used to be so sensitive. I think it is due to this nervous condition (pg. 2)

This reveals how patriarchal medicine not only silences women externally but also conditions them to accept muteness as care. Gilman critiques this dynamic by showing its devastating psychological consequences. As physician, John's silence is cloaked in authority. He does not debate or explain his prescriptions; instead, he imposes them. The narrator notes: John is a physician, and perhaps... that is one reason I do not get well faster. You see he does not believe I am sick. (pg.1)

His silence here is denial as he refuses to acknowledge her suffering, thereby erasing her voice. Medical silence becomes a refusal to validate female experience, reducing her condition to hysteria or imagination

Narrative Silence

The journal format embodies a paradox: while the narrator is silenced in her external life, her private writing becomes a muted form of resistance. The fragmented entries, often interrupted by self-censorship, highlight the tension between expression and suppression. Narrative silence thus functions as both a symptom of oppression and a subtle act of defiance,

allowing her to articulate what cannot be spoken aloud. The journal format embodies paradoxical silence. The narrator confesses:

I must put this away, —he hates to have me write a word.” (pg.3)

Writing becomes a clandestine act of resistance, a muted voice that survives despite prohibition. The fragmented entries, often interrupted by self-censorship, dramatize the tension between expression and suppression. Her whispered rebellion

There are things in that paper that nobody knows but me, or ever will. (pg 7)

This illustrates how narrative silence functions as both oppression and defiance. The journal is simultaneously a record of silencing and a fragile assertion of voice.

The wallpaper itself operates as a silent witness to her suffering. Its patterns, which she obsessively interprets, symbolize the unspoken realities of female confinement. When she finally tears it down, her madness becomes a paradoxical voice, breaking the silence imposed upon her. In this sense, silence transforms into a fractured but potent form of self-expression, destabilizing patriarchal authority. The wallpaper itself operates as a silent witness to her suffering. She observes:

The faint figure behind seemed to shake the pattern, just as if she wanted to get out.(pg.8)

This silent, trapped figure mirrors her own confinement. The wallpaper’s muteness becomes a metaphor for suppressed female voices. When she finally tears it down, declaring I’ve got out at last... in spite of you and Jane, And I’ve pulled off most of the paper, so you can’t put me back!" (pg.14)

Her madness paradoxically restores voice. Gilman dramatises how silence transforms into fractured but potent self-expression, destabilizing patriarchal authority. At the climax, John’s silence becomes symbolic. When he faints upon seeing her creeping around the room, he is rendered speechless:

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. (pg 14)

His silence here signifies the collapse of patriarchal authority. The man who silenced her throughout the narrative is finally silenced himself, reduced to a mute body blocking her path. Gilman reverses the power dynamic—his silence becomes the ultimate symbol of patriarchal failure.

Gilman’s portrayal of silence resonates with other literary traditions. In Anita Desai’s *Fire on the Mountain*, silence signifies withdrawal and resistance, while in Japanese haiku, silence embodies contemplative presence. These parallels underscore the universality of silence as a literary trope, though Gilman’s text uniquely dramatizes its destructive potential under patriarchal control. Gilman’s portrayal of silence resonates with other literary traditions. In Anita Desai’s *Fire on the Mountain*, silence signifies withdrawal and resistance

against patriarchal intrusion, while in Japanese haiku, silence embodies contemplative presence. Gilman's text, however, uniquely dramatises silence as destructive under patriarchal control, making her critique both culturally specific and universally relevant. This comparative lens underscores silence as a trope that transcends boundaries, though its meanings shift across contexts.

Silence as Dismissal

John's silence often takes the form of a patronising dismissal. When she attempts to articulate her feelings, he responds with laughter or silence rather than dialogue:

John laughs at me, of course, but one expects that in marriage. (pg. 1)

Laughter here is a silencing gesture, replacing conversation with ridicule. His silence is not passive but actively undermines her attempts at self-expression.

Comparative of the Narrator's and John's Silence

Silence in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* operates as a dual force, shaping both the narrator's oppression and John's authority. The narrator's silence is imposed through confinement, medical prescriptions, and the suppression of her creative impulses. Her silence is destructive, eroding her identity, yet paradoxically becomes a site of resistance through her secret journaling and eventual breakdown. In contrast, John's silence functions as a strategy of control. He rarely engages in dialogue, dismisses her concerns with paternal authority, and refuses to acknowledge her suffering, as seen when she notes, John does not know how much I really suffer. He knows there is no REASON to suffer, and that satisfies him. (pg.3)

His silence is denial, a refusal to validate her lived experience, and a reinforcement of patriarchal dominance.

At the narrative's climax, however, John's silence collapses. When he faints upon seeing her creeping around the room, he is rendered speechless:

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. (pg 14)

This moment reverses the power dynamics, his silence, once a weapon of control, becomes a symbol of patriarchal failure. The narrator's madness, though fractured, becomes a voice that resists erasure, while John's silence signifies the collapse of authority. Thus, Gilman dramatizes silence as relational: for the narrator, it is oppression transformed into resistance; for John, it is control that ultimately dissolves into impotence.

Conclusion

Silence in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* emerges as a complex and relational force, shaping both the narrator's oppression and John's authority. For the narrator, silence is imposed through confinement, medical prescriptions, and suppression of creativity. Yet, her clandestine journaling and eventual descent into madness transform silence into fractured resistance, a paradoxical voice that resists erasure. For John, silence

functions as denial and dismissal, reinforcing patriarchal dominance by refusing dialogue and invalidating her lived experience. However, his final speechlessness and his fainting at the climax symbolises the collapse of patriarchal control, reversing the power dynamic and exposing the fragility of authority built on silencing others.

Gilman's narrative thus dramatizes silence as both destructive and transformative. It is a weapon of oppression, a strategy of control, and ultimately a site of resistance that destabilizes patriarchal structures. By juxtaposing the narrator's enforced muteness with John's strategic silence, the text reveals silence not as passive absence but as an active, contested terrain of power.

Silence in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* is not a singular motif but a relational dynamic that defines the struggle between the narrator and John. For the narrator, silence is imposed through confinement, medical prescriptions, and suppression of creativity. Her muteness is destructive, eroding her identity, yet paradoxically becomes a site of resistance through clandestine journaling and her eventual breakdown. For John, silence is strategic—he denies her illness, dismisses her voice, and refuses dialogue, thereby reinforcing patriarchal authority. His silence is not passive but an active weapon of control. Yet, at the climax, his speechlessness and his fainting symbolise the collapse of that authority, dramatizing how patriarchal silence ultimately fails when confronted with the persistence of suppressed voices.

Gilman's narrative thus exposes silence as both oppression and reversal. It is a force that erases women's voices, but also one that destabilizes patriarchal structures when its authority falters. By juxtaposing the narrator's enforced muteness with John's strategic silence, Gilman reveals silence as contested terrain: one side suffers under it, the other wields it, and both are undone by its paradoxical power.

Beyond the text, this dual perspective underscores silence as a universal trope in literature and culture. In feminist contexts, silence often marks the erasure of women's lived experiences, while in postcolonial and indigenous narratives, silence can signify endurance, resilience, or resistance. Gilman's work anticipates these broader discourses, showing how silence is never neutral—it is always embedded in power relations.

Future research might extend this analysis to comparative studies of silence in global feminist texts, such as Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain*, Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Mahashweta Devi's *Mother of 1084* or indigenous oral traditions where silence functions as both survival and protest. In pedagogy, silence can also be examined as a classroom dynamic whether as marginalisation of student voices or as a reflective space for critical thought. In

all these contexts, Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* remains a seminal text, reminding us that silence is not absence but a powerful, contested presence in literature and life.

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