If These Walls Could Talk: Female Agency and Structural Inhabitants in Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper” and the Paintings of Remedios Varo

In Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper” and several of Remedios Varo’s paintings, walls, if they do not actually “talk,” at least come alive to reveal something once hidden or papered over. The narrator of Gilman’s short story discovers a woman trapped inside the wallpaper on her bedroom walls and peels it off in order to free her. In a number of Varo’s paintings, wall-inhabitants threaten, observe, or (re)present the main figure; her paintings, like “The Yellow Wallpaper” also feature women who physically break through walls. These walls and these women are the focus of this paper.¹¹

To begin, it is important to note the autobiographical nature of both artists’ works. From her autobiography, The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman, we learn that “The Yellow Wallpaper,” written in 1892, is largely based on events in Gilman’s life. The author does not call the narrator a self-portrait, but she does remark in her autobiography that the story is “a description of a case of nervous breakdown beginning something as mine did, and treated as Dr. S. Weir Mitchell treated me with what I considered the inevitable result, progressive insanity” (The Living 118-19). The purpose of the story, she relates, “was to reach . . . Mitchell, and convince him of the error of his ways” (The Living 121). Similarly, many of Varo’s personages physically resemble the artist herself with their almond-shaped eyes, narrow mouth, flowing long hair, and slender figures.² Although Varo claims that she does not wish to talk about herself, saying that “I hold very deeply the belief that what is important is the work, not the person,” prominent Varo scholar Janet
Kaplan suggests that many of her paintings are metaphorically autobiographical ("Remedios Varo" 5-6). Furthermore, several critics have been able to link particular paintings to pivotal moments in Varo’s life. Thus, as Gilman writes to rebel against the rest-cure treatment prescribed to women, more specifically to her own post-partum experience, Varo similarly paints women escaping confinement, isolation, or the male gaze—conditions she may have also experienced in her own life. All this is to say that certainly for Gilman, and quite possibly for Varo, their works are born out of the very real struggles for power and identity experienced in their own lives. Reina Barreto finds of Varo’s paintings that “[t]hey focus on the individual strength of the female in her struggle for independence, self-realization, and creative expression” (8). Quite the same could be said of Gilman’s short story.

A brief summary of “The Yellow Wallpaper” will facilitate this comparison. After giving birth to her first child, the narrator, who remains nameless throughout the story, experiences what her husband, who is also her physician, refers to as “a temporary nervous depression—a slight hysterical tendency” (3). Her brother, also a medical doctor and another “physician of high standing,” comes up with the same diagnosis. As part of her treatment, the narrator and her family spend the summer in a colonial mansion, or “ancestral halls,” outside of town where she is “absolutely forbidden” to ‘work’ until [she] is well again. This prescription relieves her of domestic duties, such as caring for the new baby and seeing to the house. She is also not allowed to visit with friends who are too stimulating (7) or to write, the act of which she refers to as a “great relief of [her] mind” (3). While resting in a room that resembles a nursery, Gilman’s narrator becomes quite obsessed with the yellow wallpaper, seeing and coming to believe that there is a woman behind and within the paper. The narrator works furiously to tear the
wallpaper down with the intent of freeing the woman from this unique form of confinement. In the end, she achieves success.

But what of these animated walls? At first we might note a rather innocent connection between the two artists’ works. While first studying the wallpaper, Gilman’s narrator declares, “I never saw so much expression in an inanimate thing before” (7) and then she notices “a strange, provoking, formless sort of figure, that seems to skulk about behind that silly and conspicuous front design” (8). Later, “it is like a woman stooping down and creeping about behind that pattern” (11). At night she sees that “the faint figure behind seemed to shake the pattern, just as if she wanted to get out.” After careful observation of this woman, she realizes that “she is all the time trying to climb through. But nobody could climb through that pattern—it strangles so; I think that is why it has so many heads. They get through, and the pattern strangles them off and turns them upside down, and makes their eyes white!” (15) Although she is not entirely certain what it is, Gilman’s narrator soon realizes that there is some other presence in the house, more specifically in her room. When her family first arrives at the house, in fact, she states that that she might call it “haunted” or at the very least “queer” (3). After she has the opportunity to spend more time with the wallpaper, she realizes that it is oppressive and, perhaps, impossible to escape. The woman she eventually sees confined within the bars of the paper demonstrates its oppressive nature.

If we examine two Varo paintings, *Visit from the Past* (1957) and *Ancestors* (1956), we find similar situations. *Visit* depicts a woman returning to her old apartment only to find figures of herself still inhabiting the room. Within the wall, the table, and the chair, she encounters ghostly reminders of herself. Kaplan interprets these figures as the “weight of her memories” and the painting as a portrayal of “the
past, like a shadow com[ing] to dominate the present” (*Unexpected* 148). The female figure is faced with these memories when she re-enters this dwelling place. While these ghostly figures are somewhat unnerving—if not haunting—there is nothing particularly threatening about them.

*Ancestors* also features wall inhabitants but of a menacing, perhaps threatening, sort. Originally exhibited as *Fear*, this pencil drawing illustrates a wheeled woman riding through a long ancestral hall (coincidentally, exactly the words Gilman’s narrator uses to describe her mansion.) Human faces similar to her own and phantom figures, presumably from or of her past, peer at her from holes and grab at her through cracks in the plaster. Both of these works by Varo suggest some kind of troubled connection with the past, represented by phantoms of herself and perhaps others. As we will see, Gilman’s narrator becomes quite troubled herself by her wall-inhabitant. All three works additionally suggest some sort of belief in forces beyond the self and the ability of these forces to affect our environments and our psyche, whether by fascination, remembrance, or fear. Especially in Varo’s work, figures represent the presence of our past and another version of the self.

In both Gilman’s story and Varo’s *Harmony* (1956), the protagonist and the wall-inhabitants work together. On the last night, aware that her time at the house is coming to a close, Gilman’s narrator frees the woman in the wallpaper.

As soon as it was moonlight and that poor thing began to crawl and shake the pattern, I got up and ran to help her. I pulled and she shook, I shook and she pulled, and before morning we had pulled off yards of that paper” (17).

Readers become witnesses to a collaborative effort of sorts. At first, the narrator merely observes and attempts to figure out the woman behind the paper; now she actively helps her escape.
In *Harmony*, we observe an androgynous figure, perhaps resembling Varo, who, “with the tools of the alchemist,” composes notes onto a three-dimensional music staff “creating from a chaos of possibilities the order that is music” (*Unexpected* 178). As we can see, the figure is not composing alone, but collaborating with two ghostly wall inhabitants whom Varo describes as “something outside our world, or better said, beyond it” (qtd. in *Unexpected* 179). These beings are unmistakably portrayed as feminine with their delicate facial features and distinctive figures. Unlike those in *Visit from the Past* and *Ancestors*, these inhabitants create their own space through which to reach into the room, as is exhibited by the inward tearing of the wall. They reach through to assist the main figure, not to grab or startle her. One of these inhabitants works with the composer, the other works independently and behind the composer. The idea conveyed is that together all three are creating music.

Despite the similar representations of collaboration in Gilman and Varo’s works, two important distinctions must be drawn. As the narrator of “The Yellow Wallpaper” continues to work, she gets a rope with which to tie the woman in the wallpaper in case she attempts to escape. Soon, of course, we learn that the rope is actually tied around her own waist. She wonders if the women she sees in the gardens “all came out of that wall-paper as [she] did” and thinks that she “shall have to get back behind the pattern when it comes night, and that is hard” (18). Readers come to the eventual realization that the woman in Gilman’s wallpaper is also the narrator, or at least a reflection of her. In this, she is not unlike the wall-inhabitants in the *Visit to the Past* or, perhaps, *Ancestors*. The ghostly inhabitants in *Harmony*, however, are clearly separate from the painting’s human figure, and, as Varo notes, beyond our world (*Unexpected* 179). Additionally, Varo’s figure and wall-
inhabitants work to construct, to compose music, whereas Gilman’s narrator and her wall-inhabitant work together to deconstruct, tearing down the wallpaper.

While these similarities are certainly interesting and illuminating, what seems the most striking and significant connections between Gilman’s story and Varo’s art are exhibited in the last two paintings to be discussed here, *To Be Reborn* (figure 1) and *Emerging Light* (figure 2). To make the connections more visible, we will examine the paintings first.

In *To Be Reborn* (1960), we see a nude and luminescent woman tearing, almost bursting, through what appears to be a wall. Unlike the women in the previous paintings discussed, this one has gained a sense of agency. Rather than being observed, haunted, or accompanied by the wall-inhabitants, she is actively reaching through the wall. She finds what she presumably seeks, a chalice or grail, filled with a liquid and the reflection of the crescent moon. Kaplan explains this as a “moment of spiritual breakthrough” and describes the figure as “ecstatic,”

her eyes wide with wonder, for she has been allowed a secret wisdom—a glimpse of the Holy Grail, allowed only to the initiated. It is as though the fertile vegetation of the room, the magic of the chalice, and the magnetic power of the moon have pulled her forth, releasing her from her confinement. (*Unexpected* 165-66)

This “magnetic” pull might explain why the figure tears through the wall rather than merely entering the room through the nearby and more convenient doorway.

The narrator of “The Yellow Wallpaper” is also reborn through the tearing of the wall, in this case, the wallpaper. This rebirth is signaled by the last statement she makes to her husband at the end of their stay, “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” (19). At this
moment, the reader understands that the narrator now believes she is the woman previously confined within the wallpaper. In effect, she has achieved the same goal in two ways. As the woman inhabiting the room, she has played the role of midwife by pulling the woman out of the paper. As the woman in the wallpaper, she has freed or birthed herself with this assistance.
Figure 1: To Be Reborn

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During the last day at the house, Gilman's narrator appears both freeing and freed—a result of her own agency. By tearing through the wallpaper, she is freed and reborn into a new version of herself. The declaration that she got out "in spite of you and Jane" supports this reading. Although many critics have argued that "Jane" is the sister of the narrator's husband, others suspect that "Jane" was once the narrator's own name and that she now refuses to associate herself with that identity. In that case, she is figuratively born into a new self.

The associations between the two works do not end with this act of rebirth. The moon functions as a central figure for both pieces as well. It is presented not once, but twice in To Be Reborn—through its literal form in the night sky and also through its reflection in the chalice. This doubling emphasizes the importance and connection of the moon to this essentially female quest as well as identifies the figure with this celestial orb, which illuminates not only the vessel, but also her hands, breasts, face, and hair.

Similarly, the moon, central to the rebirth of the narrator in "The Yellow Wallpaper," becomes the catalyst for this change. Kaplan's interpretation of To Be Reborn applies here as well: "the magnetic power of the moon [has] pulled her forth, releasing her from her confinement" (Unexpected 166). The pattern of the wallpaper transforms its appearance when the light in the room changes. In Plato's "Allegory of the Cave," we remember that to move into the sunlight is to be enlightened, as the sun enables us to see the Truth. Because reason/rationality is considered to be the privileged path, if not the only path to knowledge, the sun, as a means to Truth, comes to stand as a symbol for reason. This "truth," however, does not apply in this specific case. At first, in the daylight, the narrator appears unable to see or to understand the pattern in the wallpaper for what it really is; she exhausts
herself trying to determine its order. She finds that "on a pattern like this, by daylight, there is a lack of sequence, a defiance of law, that is a constant irritant to a normal mind" (12, emphasis mine). "In the daytime, it is tiresome and perplexing" (14). This creates a nice parallel to the exhaustion Gilman's narrator experiences when attempting to comprehend her husband/doctor's diagnosis of—and treatment for—her "illness." These rational explanations make no sense to her, so at last she gives up: "It is so hard to talk with John about my case because he is so wise" (11).^8

However, explains the narrator, "There is one marked peculiarity about the paper, a thing nobody seems to notice but myself, and that is that it changes as the light changes" (12). She proceeds to describe these alterations: "At night in any kind of light, in twilight, candlelight, lamplight, and worst of all by moonlight, it becomes bars! The outside pattern I mean, and the woman behind it is as plain as can be. . . . By daylight she is subdued, quiet. I fancy it is the pattern that keeps her so still. It is so puzzling" (13). In the absence of daylight and most especially in the moonlight, she does not recognize it as the same paper. Moonlight, not sunlight, gives the narrator her clearest view; by moonlight, the wallpaper reveals its true pattern—bars. When she views the wallpaper in the moonlight, she is able to see the pattern which confines and holds the woman back. In the light of the sun, the woman in the paper is subdued. Even in "the very bright spots she keeps still, and in the very shady spots she just takes hold of the bars and shakes them hard" (15). Only away from the sun can the woman in the wallpaper become active in her escape. Although the paper remains the same physically, it can be viewed and comprehended differently in different "lights." Both Gilman and Varo reinforce the connection of women to the power of the moon. In fact, in these texts, that connection
is privileged, as it is what they seek or ultimately use to reinterpret their situations.

Yet another strong connection between these two works is the apparent vaginal or sexual imagery. Gilman’s narrator notices that the wallpaper has a smell that “creeps all over the house” and “gets in [her] hair” (14). She spends hours trying to “analyze” what she describes as “not bad at first, and very gentle, but quite the subtlest and most enduring odor I ever met” (15). She finds it “hovering in the dining-room, skulking in the parlor, lying in wait for me at the stairs” (14). According to Lisa Kasmer, the description of the smell clearly connects it to female sexuality: the smell not only intrigues the narrator but also becomes “an enduring and pervasive force within the household” (10). In To Be Reborn, the figure makes her entrance through what looks to be a vaginal opening or labial folds. Similarly, Zamora argues that because the woman in Reborn enters the room “from a wall that opens in symbolically female form, [this suggests] the figure’s rebirth by means of and through her gender” (130). Both the invasive smell of Gilman’s wallpaper and the woman tearing through Varo’s wall suggest female agency in the act of rebirth and change. Symbolically, both women are reborn out of the female body.

The last painting introduced here, Varo’s Emerging Light (1962), is a work which Estella Lauter calls “one of the most compelling visions of female wisdom ever rendered” (94), reinforcing this connection of rebirth through the figure’s and the narrator’s own, female-gendered means. Again we view a woman actively tearing through a wall; however, unlike the figure in Reborn who seeks the reflection of the moonlight, this woman holds, or possesses, the lamp of knowledge, which she carries in front of her to illuminate her path. As Kaplan describes it, she is “ripping layers of wallpaper like labial fold . . . she is
born as a seeker of truth, carrying a flaming lamp" (*Unexpected* 166). In contrast to the animated facial expression of the woman in *Reborn*, this woman’s face exhibits serenity or composure. Instead of eagerly ripping through the wall, she seems to realize that the wall will make way for her.

The presumably male figure peeping out from the hole in the floorboards makes a nice parallel to the narrator’s husband, who at the end of the story, faints from the shock of what his wife has accomplished with the paper. In the last short paragraph of the story, the narrator confesses, “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!” (19). In this instance, the stereotypical gender roles have been reversed: the husband becomes the weak or ill one, his body giving way to his emotions—in this case, the shock of his wife’s strange project. He lies prone and passive to the actions of his spouse; she notices him, but makes no fuss over his condition. In *Emerging Light*, the male figure appears quite pale in comparison to the color surrounding the woman. As the woman’s light burns, the oil from her lamp rapidly drips onto his head as if she does not realize—or, perhaps, simply does not care—that he lies below the floorboards, much as Gilman narrator continues her work around the room in spite of her husband’s prone position.

In the fiction of Gilman and the paintings of Varo, we find the common theme of wall-inhabitants playing some role in the female figures’ lives. More importantly, though both artists artistically depict the idea that women can—and perhaps need to—save themselves, at least symbolically, through their own bodies, their own labor, their own doing. Their rebirth is not facilitated through images of male power or knowledge. In fact, in the case of “The Yellow Wallpaper,” that knowledge is rendered useless. Instead, the rebirth occurs, at least
symbolically, through the women's own selves. As the narrator succeeds in tearing down the yellow wallpaper, she forces the reader to realize the possibility of the protagonist's defying of her husband/doctor, thereby dismantling the prevailing traditions which seek to control both the woman's body and her mind. The ending of "The Yellow Wallpaper" may be read as powerful because the narrator challenges patriarchy head on, even forcing its representative to pass out. Unfortunately, this may be a temporary victory as Gilman's protagonist, still bound by her own rope and the madness—perceived or real—may subject herself to further and more strident treatment. Her husband's condition seems less than serious; presumably, his unconscious state, only temporary, will not hinder his eventual recovery.
While it appears that Varo intended her work to be “private and spiritual,” Zamora argues that many individuals have found in it a “public or political” message (134-35):

[Varo’s] represented world is populated by sensuous, aggressive, intelligent, mystical women who exist outside the visual
conventions of female portraiture, and outside the usual cultural
collections of female activity as well. In short, the female
space imagined and depicted by Varo resists a number of
powerful cultural categories and conditions. (114)

More specifically, Kaplan argues that Varo “dropped the father” of
Surrealist authority by creating an alternative vision and version of
Surrealism that includes an inherent critique . . . of surrealist theory and
practice” ("Subversive Strategies" 116). Varo’s criticism of Surrealism,
most specifically concerned with the depiction of women as passive
objects, demonstrates that she still found room to use Surrealist
techniques, but began to alter them for her own purposes. Thus, as Varo
applies her own versions of Surrealist techniques to the canvas, her
women exit their roles as passive objects and enter into their own
knowledge, power, and authority. For these reasons, many of Varo’s
paintings, especially To Be Reborn and Emerging Light, may be
interpreted as positive solutions to gender issues within the Surrealist
movement. Gilman’s narrator certainly shakes down the patterns of
patriarchy, but she may not leave readers with a sense of relief. Over
sixty years after Gilman’s publication, Varo paints figures who find the
source of their own strength without ultimately sacrificing themselves.

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1 I do not mean to suggest here that Varo read any of Gilman’s work or even was
familiar with it. Indeed, I have not found such evidence, and, in fact, it seems
unlikely to exist. Gilman, an American, wrote "The Yellow Wallpaper" in 1892:
Varo, Spanish born and exiled to Mexico, painted the works discussed here
between 1956 and 1962. What I do mean to suggest is that both women draw on
interesting and significant imagery to come to similar conclusions concerning
women’s independence, knowledge, and power. In my research I have been
surprised to discover how often comments on Varo’s work apply to "The
Yellow Wallpaper."

2 Zamora points out the contrast, however, between Varo’s figures and Frieda
Kahlo’s. While Kahlo’s are “more detailed and realistic in their iconic self-
representation,” Varo’s are not as distinctive, and are, therefore more “suggestively symbolic of female principles generally” (121). This is a significant distinction. Varo, perhaps, meant her figures to resemble her, but not be her, allowing for a wider interpretation. Of course, this compromise would be similar to Gilman’s comment that her story is similar to her own experience, although not exactly the same.

3 Lauter reads selected Varo paintings as a progression toward “the female quest.” I intend to illustrate a similar progression in which the female figure moves from the more passive role of being observed, grabbed, and assisted by wall-inhabitants to the more active role of discovering and using her own strength and agency to tear through the walls herself.

4 She remains nameless except for her husband’s calling her “blessed little goose” (6), “little girl” (11) and “darling” (11).

5 Kaplan describes the hall as “a succession of archways leading back into deep space suggest[ing] the past out of which she comes—a corridor of memory from which she seeks to flee, menaced by the wraithlike ‘ancestors’ lurking on either side” (Unexpected 149, 151).

6 In Women as Mythmakers: Poetry and Visual Art by Twentieth-Century Women, Lauter has translated Nacer de Nuevo as Born Again.

7 Still others, however, suspect that Jane is a character simply not mentioned thus far in the narrative.

8 John additionally bases his diagnosis of her illness on rational, measurable evidence, telling her, “You really are better, dear, whether you can see it or not. I am a doctor, dear, and I know. You are gaining flesh and color, your appetite is better” (11). When the narrator counters this, suggesting that she is better in body, perhaps, but not necessarily in mind, her husband begs her to dismiss this “false and foolish fantasy” (12). He not only overlooks the less “rational” evidence of his wife’s well being, but even denies her authority over her own body: “Can you not trust me as a physician when I tell you so?” he says (12).

9 Zamora and Lauter both point out the significance of this imagery, which will become even more obvious with the next painting.

Works Cited


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