

The Pen is Mightier than the Penis: Writing as a Means of Narrative Victory for Women in Pain

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Hysteria is a medical term that's used for a wide range of symptoms: anxiety, emotional excess, seizures, and bizarre movements. The word comes from the Greek word for uterus. Classical greek medical and philosophical theories of hysteria were informed by notions of a migrator uterus, linked to an unsatisfactory sexual life. Once Christian civilization came around, hysteria was tightly linked with the female reproductive system and sexual experiences. Freud only analyzed and diagnosed women with hysteria, claiming they were more governed by their feelings than men and that hysteria had a basis in childhood incest. Despite hysteria diagnoses weaning as recently as the 1950s, the ingrained sexism within the system runs deep and bleeds into new disorders like Borderline Personality Disorder, almost exclusively diagnosed in women. Women continue to be quieted and spoken over regarding their stories, their pain, and their autonomy. In *The Yellow Wallpaper*, Charlotte Gilman takes the power back in her semi-autobiographical narrative. Arthur Frank's *The Wounded Storyteller* recounts the experiences of patients and argues the importance of writing a narrative when ill. Leslie Jamison's *Grand Unified Theory of Female Pain* details the long history and foreseeable future of the paradox of women's pain. There's a simultaneous desire for and revolution against female pain. Writing and sharing their narratives is essential to destigmatize being an ill woman and dismantle patriarchal views of womanhood.

Arthur Frank's *The Wounded Storyteller* delivers the dire need to create a narrative when ill. From being ill, patients lives become a 'narrative wreck', like a shipwreck: losing your map and destination from illness. Arthur Frank pushed the "restitution narrative" in healthcare: "attempts to restore an order that the interruption fragmented, but it must also tell the truth that interruptions will continue...the tidy ends are no longer appropriate to be a story." (Frank, 1997) Reshaping your narrative after an unfortunate event or a diagnosis is essential to

overcoming it, at least emotionally. Reshaping your narrative after an unfortunate event or a diagnosis is essential to overcoming it, at least emotionally. “Stories are a way of redrawing maps and finding new destinations.” Storytelling relies heavily on a sense of temporality: a change in the story from the beginning, middle, and end. When in the thick of illness, there is no end in sight. For Frank, storytelling is essential for the patient to start reforming themselves. But what happens when someone, as close to you as your husband, re-writes your narrative or worse, doesn’t allow you to write it at all?

*The Yellow Wallpaper*, 1892, is an exceptionally fine example of how a woman, neglected, belittled, and dismissed, descends into insanity. The narrator, a young woman suffering from undiagnosed post-partum depression/psychosis, is kept under an emotional house arrest because she’s “ill”. Though her husband who’s also her doctor insists that she’s not that ill, he rents a colonial summer mansion for the summer so she can ‘rest’. The colonial mansion also represents the power dynamic between husband and wife, colonizer and colonized. He puts her in the nursery room with ugly yellow wallpaper and a bed that looks like it's been chewed on and tells her not to worry or think about anything. He infantilizes her not only by putting her in the nursery but by telling her what she ought to think instead of listening to what she has to say. She insists that she’s not feeling well- it's more than “a slight hysterical tendency”. But she recounts her dilemma, “If a physician of high standing, and one’s own husband, assures friends and relatives that there is really nothing the matter with one but temporary nervous depression—a slight hysterical tendency—what is one to do? . . .” (Gilman, 1892)

Despite feeling she needs care other than complete rest, like pleasant and exciting work, she does and thinks what he says. She idolizes and trusts him deeply- more than herself. “John is extremely practical...John says the worst thing I can do is to think about my mental state, and I

admit it always makes me feel bad.” He encourages her to think about the house; So she does as such. She criticizes the yellow wallpaper. After more time passes and doing nothing she gets out of bed when her husband says “What is it, sweet girl? Don’t go around like that- you’ll get a cold”. He continues to infantilize and ignore her by calling her more pet names which at first come off as sweet, then become a means as to control. “Bless her little heart,’ he said with a big hug,” she’ll be as sick as she wants.” Despite his insistence that she is not ill, that she’s actually getting better, he still keeps her there, grounding her to her room like a child. She expresses she does not feel better mentally and that the wallpaper comes alive and he shuts her down with a shift in demeanor..” Sweetheart I beg you, for my sake and for our child’s sake, as well as for your own, that you will never for one second let that idea into your head. There’s nothing as dangerous, as fascinating, to a personality like yours. It’s a false and foolish fantasy. Can’t you trust me as a doctor when I say so?”. It's after this blatant dismissal that her paranoia worsens, but she begins to define her own truth.

She watches the wallpaper at night and begins to see a woman in it, then many women, shaking the wallpaper. She goes from adoring her husband and being scared of the wallpaper’s creeping women to being scared of her husband and wanting to be with the women in the walls. “He asked me all sorts of questions, too, and pretended to be very loving and kind. As if I couldn’t see through him.” She helps the woman free from the wall, “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 peeled off yards of that wallpaper.” (Gilman, 1892) In her attempt to ‘astonish’ John, she moves the bed with her teeth and rips off a piece of it, revealing how she’s following in the ‘hysterical’ storyline of all the women kept in this room before.

As a final huzzah and ode to John's infantilization, she says in the 'gentlest voice' "John, sweetie". Some readers think the story ends with her killing herself because she has a rope and John faints after he sees her. But regardless of the ending, John's refusal and forbiddance for her writing kept her down so she couldn't restore her narrative. By forbidding her to do so, he keeps her from thinking and reflecting on his actions. After both their deaths, her writings will be the thing that survives and what solidifies her narrative. By preventing this, he controls the narrative. Similarly, Virginia Woolf's husband though known for being a diligent caretaker for Virginia meticulously edited out unfavorable narratives when publishing her diaries after her suicide. He removed personal and emotional feelings (arguable the most important part of a diary) and kept in details about her day, and her writings. Leonard patronized her for wanting kids and said she was too ill to take care of them. His control over her is mimed in the publication history of how he edited out her feelings, and her narrative.

Leslie Jamison's *Grand Unified Theory of Female Pain* critiques literature, and society at large, using women's pain to drain them of themselves, rendering their pain opaque- always there, normal, and adorned. She urges us to answer the question "How do we represent female pain without producing a culture in which this pain has been fetishized to the point of fantasy or imperative?" (Jamison, 2014) Jamison rejects romanticizing female pain and instead urges readers to advocate for and admonish women's pain: "keep bleeding, but love."

Jamison accounts the misogynistic stories of girls and women whose sadness is more than just created by men, but by themselves. The stories detail cutting, abortion, menstruation, eating disorders, rape, and heartbreak. "Sylvia Plath's agony delivers her to a private Holocaust: *An engine, an engine / Chuffing me off like a Jew*. And her father's ghost plays train conductor: *Every woman adores a Fascist? The boot in the face, the brute / Brute hear of a brute like you...*

Blanche DuBois wears a dirty ball gown and depends on the kindness of strangers. *The bride within the bridal dress had withered like the dress*. Men have raped her and gone gay on her and died on her. One of her final stage directions turns her luminescent: ‘She has a tragic radiance in her red satin robe following the sculptural lines of her body.’ Her tragedy is radiant; it makes her body something sculpted.” (Jamison, 2014)

After her own breakup, she wanted to write a story about a girl with similar tropes. But a renowned female professor of hers hated hearing about Sylvia Plath. “Please,’ this brilliant and powerful woman said as if herself in pain. ‘I’m just so tired of Sylvia Plath.’ I had this terrible feeling that every woman who knew anything about anything was tired of Sylvia Plath, tired of the level of narcissistic self-pity required to compare her father to Hitler.” She felt she wasn’t supposed to read the girls who cried pain. This professor and other women with those sentiments would’ve rejected *The Yellow Wallpaper*’s sentiments. They are what Jamison calls the apathetic “post-wounded woman”. It’s a shift away from wounded affect. These types of women are aware that “woundedness” is overdone and overrated. “They are wary of melodrama, so they stay numb or clever instead. Post-wounded women make jokes about being wounded or get impatient with women who hurt too much.” (Jamison, 2014) She doesn’t cry too loud, she doesn’t play the victim, doesn’t ask for pain meds if she doesn’t need them. They don’t allow themselves to be hurt over being fucked over by men, because then they must recognize that they are endlessly hurting.

Jamison felt intense shame about wanting to write a girl with such sadness directed from men, so tumultuous. Despite feeling like writing about a drunken heartbreak was the lamest thing to write about she did it anyway because it was lame. It didn’t matter that her pain was a trite pain, it was *her* trite pain. That in and of itself makes it worthy of writing. Then she realized she

wasn't particularly hurt because of this one guy, he perpetuated a sadness she'd had all along. Her self-destruction is due to the fact of patriarchy in and of itself. "Each of its self-destructive manifestations felt half-chosen, half-cursed." Jamison recognizes that her self-destructive behaviors form from a misogynistic cultural self-fulfilling prophecy.

The story ended up being read by men who wrote to her saying they now understood more about how women work. Writing this story helped her "weave the breakup into my sense of self in a way that ultimately felt outward, directed toward the lives and pain of others". Jamison utilized her narrative to destigmatize what it means to be a woman in pain, and to heal herself.

Gilman taught us that being in charge of your own narrative as a woman in pain can be isolating, invigorating, and unsettling. Jamison taught us that the narratives we think are ours, seemingly truly feminist, may actually be tarnished with covert mysogony. Whether the pain is induced by a man first hand, or second hand from the patriarchal culture, the importance of literally writing your own narrative, your truth, facilitates self-healing and moves the needle towards gender equality. To one day, make the saying "behind every crazy woman is a man who made her that way" obsolete.

References

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