

Female  
marginalisation  
embodied in the color  
purple and the yellow  
wallpaper



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Female marginalisation is a major theme in *The Color Purple*, with Celie's emancipation from repressive male patriarchy being the culmination of the plot. When discussing the way narrative method and perspective are used within the novel to address these themes, it is useful to make comparisons and contrasts with a different text. Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story *The Yellow Wallpaper* was written almost a century before *The Color Purple* but shares similar themes of female repression by men, the major difference being that whilst Celie overcomes her restrainers, the narrator in *The Yellow Wallpaper* is overwhelmed by them. Both authors tried to express this marginalisation through the form and style of the narrative; not simply through the development of the plot. When looking at narrative method in *The Color Purple*, we are immediately drawn to the fact that it is written in epistolary form. Novels being made up of a series of letters has historically been a popular style with women authors, having been used by some of our earliest women writers including Aphra Behn and Mary Shelley. It offers a female author the chance to express the thoughts and actions of her characters without the medium of an omniscient narrator. This is a very important thing when discussing female marginalisation, as the expected narrative voice of the omniscient narrator (at least before and during the nineteenth century, if not today) would have been expected to represent the prevailing masculine voice of society. By employing the epistolary method of novel writing, the female author is able to freely reject the 'objective' male voice of an omniscient narrator, in favour of the subjective voices of the characters. But the text is still considered mainstream and acceptable because it does not openly reject accepted social mores by subverting the objective masculine narrator, or by claiming the superiority of the female

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narrative voice. Readers expecting the familiar masculine narration do not reject a female narrative when in epistolical form because it works within the expected position of women in society, as especially sensitive to the personal and familiar. But one could say that in *The Color Purple* this convention is used ironically. Walker uses the form traditionally thought of as best suited to female authors and manipulates it in order to portray a character that breaks her bonds to abusive men. Celie starts her letters as an address to a masculine God (although not specifically stated, one assumes the patriarchal biblical god), which shows her total dependence on, and belief in, the superiority of men. The continuation of such a view is evident throughout the beginning and middle of the novel with her refusal to name her husband Albert, instead referring to him as 'Mr\_\_\_\_\_'. It's only after the arrival of Shug Avery and then the discovery of Nettie's letters, that Celie begins to refer to her husband as Albert; this occurs as she switches the object of her letters from the father figure of God to her sister, representing a growing awareness of her part within, and solidarity to, the feminine. One of the most successful ways in which *The Yellow Wallpaper* achieves a true understanding of female marginalisation in late nineteenth century New England is through its use of stream-of-consciousness narration. It isn't through direct omniscient revelation of desire that we learn of her repression, but through the presentation of her consciousness through the medium of her reasoning. These thoughts are still very restrictive and only allude to the male domination that she is being put under; her thoughts being in line with what would be expected of her outward speech: 'I get so unreasonably angry with John sometimes. I'm sure I never used to be so sensitive. I think it is due to this nervous condition.' It is possible that Gilman

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used the stream-of-consciousness method in this way in order to show that the reason why the narrator has totally broken down by the end of the story is that even in their minds many women have no freedom of thought or expression, but are unconsciously subject to a male orientated and dominant view of themselves. The Color Purple arrives at the opposite conclusion. This is because a fully emancipated (open to debate of course, but in comparison to Gilman there is no doubt Walker can be called emancipated) author gives her character Celie far more freedom of thought than might have been the case for a real person in Celie's position, as such a person's thoughts would most likely be far more in accord with those of their social superiors. If Celie did not have this freedom of thought (and expression through her letters) then she may never have gradually freed herself from reliance on men in a healthy manner (as opposed to the freedom born of madness that Gilman's narrator finds). It could be possible to suggest that the voice of Celie within the letters is in fact the voice of Alice Walker within the character of Celie; as such a character would be unlikely to express themselves in the way that is presented to us. It is useful to note the portrayal of the social perspectives of the characters in the two texts. They are both faced with female marginalisation, but they are not both from the same social environment. The narrator in The Yellow Wallpaper is suggested (by the description of her lifestyle and her style of language) to be a white middle-class woman, her thoughts and opinion being held secondary to those of white middle-class men. Beyond this single repression there is very little evidence to suggest any other forms of social marginalisation. The case of Celie in The Color Purple is much more complicated; there are a host of different reasons why she is inferior to those around her. Not only is she a black woman in nineteen

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thirties Georgia (reason enough to feel marginalised), but she was a physically and sexually abused motherless child. Walker presents Celie's social position by using informal colloquial language in Celie's letters, through this we immediately learn in the first letter that she is poorly educated (through this we assume financially poor also) and from a black community in the American deep south (although only those that are familiar with the particular geo-social dialect might be able to glean this from the text): ' But I don't never git used to it. And now I feels sick every time I be the one to cook. My mama she fuss at me an look at me. She happy, cause he good to her now. But too sick to last long.' By using such stylised language in the narrative not only do we come to comprehend Celie's marginalisation through simple understanding of the text, but through the very sound (phonology) and look of it (graphology). Both texts make use of symbols. Obviously, the colour purple is a key symbol in *The Color Purple*, representing the beauty and love of god in a less than perfect world. There are other symbols within the text, like the making of patchwork quilts and Celie's career in trouser making (' people's pants'), which represent the traditional outlets of female creativity. In *The Yellow Wallpaper* we are confronted with a myriad of symbols that could be read in numerous ways; the colour of the wallpaper, the pattern and the illusions that the narrator sees within to name a few. The importance of symbolism within both texts lies in their ability to engage directly with the readers' problem solving skills, which in turn leads to a development of thought concerning the subject of the symbolism. When the symbol is related to female marginalisation the reader is encouraged to view the issue in an abstract fashion (as colour, shape, sound etc), often challenging the assumed opinions of the reader and

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hopefully (for the author) bringing about a reappraisal of their views. As we can see, there are many different methods within prose narration that can be used in order to bring the issue of female marginalisation to the attention of the reader. The important thing that we can see is that the very act of writing itself is heavily influenced by issues of gender; any text can be discussed with gender on the agenda, even if the subject of the text has little or nothing to do with such themes. But both *The Color Purple* and *The Yellow Wallpaper* are explicitly about these gender issues, and both authors have addressed their subjects using innovative and subversive narrative methods, so that the reader becomes aware of the difficulties women have had in expressing themselves and their female perspective when bound to a patriarchal society. Bibliography Goodman, Lizbeth. *Literature and Gender* (1996) The Open University Gilman, Charlotte Perkins. *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892) The Open University Walker, Alice. *The Color Purple* (1983) Penguin Classics