Silent Screams from the Shadows: An Interdisciplinary Study of Violence Against Women Portrayed in Contemporary Women's Fiction

Anne C. Hill
University of Redlands

Follow this and additional works at: https://inspire.redlands.edu/proudian

Part of the Domestic and Intimate Partner Violence Commons, Literature in English, North America Commons, and the Women's Studies Commons

Recommended Citation

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 License
This material may be protected by copyright law (Title 17 U.S. Code).
This Open Access is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses, Dissertations, and Honors Projects at InSPIRe @ Redlands. It has been accepted for inclusion in Vahe Proudian Interdisciplinary Honors Program, Senior Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of InSPIRe @ Redlands. For more information, please contact inspire@redlands.edu.
Silent Screams from the Shadows

An Interdisciplinary Study of Violence against Women Portrayed in Contemporary Women's Fiction

submitted for Interdisciplinary Honors in Women's Studies by:

Anne C. Hill

Spring 1990
At the conception of this project, all I knew was that I wanted to write a paper about women and forms of violence. Because I had not identified a central thesis or question, I researched several disciplines and then synthesized a great deal of information. I decided that fiction was going to be the base for my discussion of violence against women. First because it was challenging, as I have had no formal training in literary criticism, for examining types of violence against women, and secondly, fiction provided me with an evocative portrayal of violence that I had not found in my other research. This paper represents my synthesis, while simultaneously becoming the beginning for further research into the effects of violence against women, as expressed through madness, language, classism, sexism and racism.

I begin the paper with the account of Carol Stuart's murder, because it provided me with a blatant example of how deeply inculturated violence against women is in contemporary American society. I developed themes about how women are silenced in certain kinds of historical writing, and in language itself, which is purely male-defined, thus forcing women to inadequately communicate their experiences. Next, I develop themes about how women find a voice against silencing through the reconstruction of those academic field like history and fictional narratives. In fiction, authors may explore madness as an alternative reality to silencing oppression.
Fiction has also allowed me to raise interesting questions with regards to the relationship between the author and her writing, the writing and the reader, and the author and the reader. Furthermore, I have gradually become interested with the idea that fiction is contrived. I am also intrigued with the concept that fictional texts themselves are "silent" until someone provides a voice for the writing by reading the texts.

The four fictional portrayals of violence against women that effectively illustrate my thesis are drawn from 20th century North American women who represent various economic, religious, political and racial backgrounds: Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* and Marge Piercy's *The Woman on the Edge of Time*, exemplify white women's experience as either writers or subject matter; Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, represents a female voice of the Afro-American experience; and finally Paula Gunn Allen's *The Woman Who Owned the Shadows*, is representative of the American Indian female experience.

The novels are similar only in subject matter, because each of the heroines survive their experiences with violent oppression by going "mad." We see this theme of madness occurring often in contemporary women's literature, although generally woven into broader themes concerning the condition of women in the context of sexism. However, what interested me was the manner in which each
author achieved a wholly unique and persuasive illustration of these violent experiences.

The *Yellow Wallpaper* became Gilman's cry against 19th century society, which only validated women as socially isolated servants of white males. In a clinical sense, Gilman illustrates one of the results of forced isolation by the use of little dialogue, one setting, and one theme—that of insanity. Gilman's heroine remains nameless to the reader, and is the sole narrator of the text, thereby symbolizing the lack of individuality expected of women in the late 19th century.

Piercy structures *The Woman on the Edge of Time* around a futuristic society, thereby enabling her to describe the present violence in American society. Her novel is primarily set in a mental hospital in New York City during the 1960's; and in a utopian future, the year 2137 in Mattapoisett, Massachusetts. Piercy uses this fiction to develop the feminist critique of racism and economic inequality. Like many utopias, Mattapoisett is an effective literary device for critiquing contemporary society. It is a scathing investigation about those economic values which violently cripple and destroy the marginal members of this society. However, this criticism is presented through the guise of futuristic fiction.

Toni Morrison explores the societal effects of poverty and racism in 1940's America in her novella *The Bluest Eye*. Morrison integrates the personal and the social dynamics of violence against
women through the key aspects of the novel: its structure, style of narration, and characterization. Each of these textual features contributes to Morrison's portrayal of the individual suffering of Pecola, as well as the larger social pressures that force others to harm her. Clearly, Morrison indicts American racism—not merely male violence—for Pecola's rape and social isolation.

Finally, Paula Gunn Allen's *The Woman Who Owned the Shadows*, is as much a statement about the social victimization, in this case, of Native Americans, as it is about women. Allen weaves the ritual based Native American culture into customs of the West, in order to voice spiritual knowledge that has been forgotten and ignored by most of American society, and many American Indians. As a result of this conscious integration, Allen offers a visionary future that is neither utopian nor escapist. Therefore, Allen voices a strategy against violence that serves as an important alternative presented by the other author. Allen is not prescribing an absolute prescription to end the social isolation of women and minorities, rather she is providing her audience with an alternative to madness.

In conclusion, I have asserted that those forms of violence against women are not necessarily as blatant and isolated as society purports them to be. They have historically occurred in vastly differing socio-economic and racial brackets. In the end, it is not only the causes, but the effects of such oppression which further the experience of dis-memberment for women. I discovered on one hand
that fiction can act as a source of empowerment for women, through
its identification and validation of women's experiences. Women can
find voice in the process of reading fiction via the identification of
the characters' experiences. Thus, the reader acquires an alternative
method to conventional therapy--her imagination.

In the future, I would like to work with the concept of writing
as an alternative to conventional therapy, because as I have
illustrated, in every case, it was conventional psychiatry that
exacerbated madness. Paula Gunn Allen, pre-empts expectations of
narrative and plot. From here I became interested in related forms
of literary criticism. I am also impressed by Ephanie's freedom to
"move"--as she wasn't physically restricted or violated; this mobility
allowing her "member"--her body--to remain consonant with her
mind. This synthesis of her mind and body, enables Allen to
symbolize Ephanie's "life-line" to her heritage. Conversely, the three
other heroines had been physically and emotionally violated and
confined, ergo their confinement. They have no direction in which to
"move," that is mentally "forward." They cannot call on memory and
are discouraged to "re-member" their being as whole. They cannot
call on any past historical resources.
October 23, 1989. Boston, Massachusetts. Charles and Carol Stuart were shot in their car as they were coming home from a prenatal birth class. Carol died the next day in the hospital after her eight week old son Christopher was born. He died two months later. Chuck was released from the hospital six weeks later. He claimed that a black gunman in a jogging suit had broken into the Stuart's car at a busy intersection, and shot them both. The police began the search for the black killer in the racially-mixed lower-class Mission Hill District where the incident had occurred. They found William Bennett.

Bennett insisted that he was innocent, despite the five witnesses who had reason to suspect him as the killer. Stuart had "a strong physical reaction" when he was shown Bennett's mug shot in the hospital. Several weeks later, Stuart identified Bennett in a line up as looking "most like" the killer.

It looked like the Stuart's were victims of a deranged killer--another example of society's demise: the Stuart's--a picture perfect couple, hard working and expecting their first child; and William Bennett--a blue collar black male with a history of petty thefts, apparently an amoral man out to "make right" his frustrations about his position in society.

However, on January 3, 1990, ten weeks after the incident, Stuart's younger brother, Matthew, confessed to the police that it was
Charles who had murdered Carol Stuart. The next day Charles Stuart jumped to his death off of Boston's Tobin Bridge. Matthew's reason for the confession? Matthew did not want an innocent man to be falsely convicted for his brother's crime.¹

William Bennett was framed; he was not believed from the beginning primarily because of his racial and economic background. But what about Carol Stuart? Why did Matthew and his other siblings keep their brother's plans for murdering Carol a secret? Matthew didn't feel the need to warn Carol about her husband's violent intentions when Charles told him of his plans. It seems clear that indeed their conscience was at work in the wake of an innocent man being accused for the crime of another male. But where was their conscience in the wake of an innocent woman being slaughtered by a man? William Bennett and Carol Stuart were both victims, because of their ethnicity, social class or gender. Without minimalizing racist treatment of Bennett and Boston's Black community; it is still possible to conclude that it was easier for the public to contend with atrocities of racism, rather than those of sexism in the Carol Stuart murder case.

Stuart was the victim of domestic violence. She was the victim of a pathological killer's obsession with control, power, and greed. He "was afraid that she might not return to her $41,000 job as a tax

attorney once the baby was born. "2 Charles needed Carol's income because he wanted to buy a restaurant; what better solution then to collect on her life insurance policies after he gunned her down in cold blood? Interestingly enough, when a "shady" black man was the suspect, Carol's murder was the focus of the press. The stereotypes were perfect to sensationalize. However, when Charles, her supportive, charismatic, distraught husband became the killer, the murder was no longer the focal point. Instead, Bennett's false arrest became the focus of the case. What does this say about society and its view of women?

I can only try to explain this violent and deceptive behavior of this man or any, and the society in which it happens. Explication of this fact proves a difficult task without reducing it to a simple statistic, a matter which can be ignored. Simplifications of these types of behaviors, might come across as rationalization, thereby facilitating validation. However, it is important to provide a voice with which women can protest this violence, and one that communicates fear, anger, and strength.

Carol Stuart's death becomes another incident among thousands of acts of violence being committed against women daily in American society. But not all acts of violence against women are this blatant. Marilyn Frye, in her book The Politics of Reality speaks of the generalized experience of oppression as follows:

2"Hoax," 20.
The experience of oppressed people is that the living of one's life is confined and shaped by forces and barriers which are not accidental or occasional and hence avoidable, but are systematically related to each other in such a way as to catch one between and among them and restrict or penalize motion in any direction. It is the experience of being caged in: all avenues, in every direction, are blocked or booby trapped.3

Throughout the rise of Western Civilization, violence has been inflicted upon women as a form of oppression. Whether it is in the form of offensive language, degrading symbol systems, abusive physical behavior such as rape or battery, economic dependency or social degradation, the result is the same. A forced existence of silence, self-worthlessness, fear, humiliation and no sense of efficacy. As women have been systematically physically, emotionally, and spiritually violated throughout history, one of the most devastating forms of violence against them has been the act of silencing. This act has taken on several forms beyond an inadequate language—crippling rhetorical styles, and the nonsensical perception that women do not have an "intellectual nature." This is exemplified by the fact that very little has been recorded about women's experience.

Fernand Braudel, a contemporary cultural historian, asserts in his book, The Structures of Everyday Life; Civilization & Capitalism 15th-18th Century, that he will reconstruct everyday life by focusing on the material civilization of the 15th-18th centuries. His

---

theory is based upon the assumption that there is indeed a common experience. This is never clearly stated by Braudel, although he writes in his preface:

This gives the present book a certain unity: it is a long journey backwards from the facilities and habits of present-day life...In the world of ideas, the men of the eighteenth century are our contemporaries: their habits of mind and their feelings are sufficiently close to ours for us not to feel we are in a foreign country. But the patriarch of Perney invited us to stay with him for a few days, the details of his everyday life....So we have to strip ourselves in imagination of all the surroundings of our own lives if we are to swim against the current of time and look for the rules which for so long locked the world into stability which is quite hard to explain if one thinks of the fantastic change which was to follow.4

This notion of a common experience as stated by Braudel, is a dangerous one because he insinuates that men and women only existed harmoniously, which leads him to ignore analysis of the women's position in the household, the community, and the family. As a result of this generalization, we are left to read the male versions of the story--and piece together through assumptions and sketchy evidence, what women's lives looked like throughout history.

But even worse than the exclusion of women, the language available to write about history is male-defined; therefore silencing occurs at even the subtlest levels of communication. Women have been taught to use male-identified language, a bitter irony since that very language is the cause of their silence. A result of being forced to use a language which does not provide a rich form of expression is madness. For without having one's experiences acknowledged as "real", a woman can begin to doubt herself, her emotions, and her thoughts.

However, madness is frequently defined by men as an "abnormal" condition which needs to be corrected and changed. Moreover, it is women who are usually characterized as being mad, particularly hysterical. This point is illustrated in Michel Foucault's *Madness and Civilization*, as he provides a 19th century explanation for women's "madness:" "This is why this disease attacks women more than men because they have a more delicate, less firm constitution, because they lead a softer life, and because they are accustomed to the luxuries and commodities of life and not suffering."5 The qualities portrayed in this example of 19th century women, are still evident today when we are told to raise children because we are too delicate to be out in the work force, to get married because we are incapable of looking after and supporting ourselves, and to not form opinions about social or political issues.

---

because we are too irresponsible to stick by any assertion. It is impossible to think of one's self being autonomous, if one agrees with these qualities.

Women have consistently begun to change these acts that silence their experience through the reconstruction of the narratives that characterize academic disciplines, such as history, religion and sociology. For example, Gerda Lerner writes in *The Creation of Patriarchy*:

Our search, then, becomes a search for the history of the patriarchal system. To give the system a male dominance historicity and to assert that its functions and manifestations change over time is to break sharply with the handed-down tradition. This tradition mystified patriarchy by making it ahistoric, eternal, invisible, and unchanging. But it is precisely due to the changes in the social and educational opportunities available to women that in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries large numbers of women finally became capable of

---

6 I realize that I have made rather broad generalizations. However, when looking at the institution of marriage in America and the attractive economic "rewards" for such an endeavor, or the institution of motherhood and the debilitating results of this venture, we can see similar correlations to the view of women's madness held in the 19th century. For more information on the effects of these institutions, see: Susan Schechter, *Women and Male Violence: The Visions and Struggles of the Battered Women's Movement* (Boston: South End P, 1982). In her analysis, of the battered women's movement, Schechter discusses the legal, social, and economic effects of marriage with regards to battered women who are trying to seek help. See also: Barbara Hilkert Anderson, "A Woman's Work is Never Done: Unpaid Household Labor as a Social Justice Issue," *Women's Consciousness, Women's Conscience*, ed. Anderson, Barbara Hilkert et al. (San Francisco: Harper & Row P, 1985) 3-18. And: Mary D. Pellauer, "Moral Callousness and Moral Sensitivity: Violence Against Women," *Women's Consciousness, Women's Conscience*, ed. Anderson, Barbara Hilkert et al. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985) 33-50. These articles discuss the moral and ethical implications involved with housework, domestic violence, rape, and child sexual abuse. For a thorough examination of the institution of motherhood, see: Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born*, 10th ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1986).
Lerner's observations present a fresh perspective with regards to the system of patriarchy. She asserts the concept of patriarchy has existed for centuries, although in changing forms and behaviors. With this knowledge, women have had the ability to reconstruct their history, by providing a collective experience through which women can express themselves and be heard.

The craft of fiction is one of the related areas in which we find these "...large numbers of women critically evaluating the process," by which patriarchy has silenced women. Fiction, in the conventional view, is not considered true, but rather contrived. It nevertheless provides, for women, a literary "forum" in which to speak important truths. Ironically, fiction is silent because it is unspoken, therefore, a writer's voice is only "heard" when another engages her work. Once the writer has committed to the public document, in this case fiction. She still depends, of course, on the reader to hear her words. Because

---

7Gerda Lerner, The Creation of Patriarchy (New York: Oxford UP, 1986) 36-55. Lerner elaborates upon these views as she continues, "We are only now able to conceptualize women's role in history and thereby to create a consciousness which can emancipate women. This consciousness can also liberate men from the unwanted and undesired consequences of male dominance," (37). Lerner proceeds with one of the most in depth feminist analyses regarding the rise of Western Civilization and its relationship to the perpetual oppression of women. For another approach see: Riane Eisler, The Chalice & the Blade (San Fransisco: Harper & Row, 1988). Her analysis focuses on spirituality and women rather than as a historical analysis. Additionally, her work tends to be reductionist her creation of the Cultural Transformation Theory is both unique and intriguing.
violence against women is one area of social life most shrouded in silence, fictional portrayals of these crimes can prove very effective at empowering both the writers and their readers. It is for these reasons that I have decided to work with fiction as a way in which to explore violence against women.

The four fictional portrayals of violence against women that effectively illustrate my thesis are drawn from twentieth century North American women who represent various economic, religious, political and racial backgrounds. In focusing on the ways in which these authors convey the oppression of women as members of American society, one is able to examine how women's fictive writing may be considered a form of feminism. Women are empowered by other women's experiences. Through this identification, a woman's experience of oppression, may be validated and therefore heard. As more women break out of their silence and find their experiences validated, the possibility for social change becomes stronger.

Because the nature of women's isolation is often forced upon them; I assert that this act is violent. I will be focusing on situations in which "madness" becomes an alternative to living a socially isolated existence, which has been forced upon women in American society. Without a language to voice their pain, to communicate their needs, or to explain their experience, women have few options. One option is to conform to the "norm," which has typically meant accepting a subservient, docile, lifestyle as a housewife and mother.
Some women fight these restrictions, however, without a self-identity, a sense of power, or a language, this fight can be deadly. Therefore madness becomes a desperate alternative, because when "mad," one cannot be harmed by a society to which one is no longer a part.

This literary analysis will therefore focus on these themes common to the following women and their works: Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* and Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* as examples of white women's experience as either writers or subject matter; Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* as a female voice of the Afro-American experience; and finally Paula Gunn Allen's *The Woman Who Owned the Shadows* representing the Native American female experience.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*, was published in 1899. The novella details with the experiences of a wealthy woman who has been confined to her room by her husband and doctor John; on account of a "nervous disorder," which was based on Gilman's own neurasthenic experience. Although the account is told in the first person, the narrator remains nameless, recounting a

---

8I realize that Gilman's piece does not technically meet one of the terms that I outlined in my introduction. I stated that the five authors and their works that I chose, were products of the twentieth century, and Gilman wrote *The Yellow Wallpaper* in the 1870's. However, *The Yellow Wallpaper* has become a central fictive work in the area of Women's Studies. It is for this reason that, along with thematically being a book about a woman's decent into madness, that I decided to include it in my paper.
descent into "madness," that can be interpreted as both the story of a literal experience of neurasthenia as well as a metaphorical exploration of the imposition of invisible social roles on women in Gilman's society.

The main character's anonymity symbolizes the lack of individuality expected of women in the late 19th century; it did not matter who you were, as long as you remained in the feminine social sphere. This type of social isolation left women with their thoughts and each other. Exemplified by the fashion of keeping diaries and writing letters to other women. Such writing was of no interest to men, as it was seen to be trivial. Unfortunately the private sphere, comprised of being an efficient wife and mother, killed.

The narrator is not only isolated from society, but she is further constrained by John demanding that she stop writing. She explains; "...I am forbidden to "work" until I am well again." Her work is her writing, and to be isolated from this process devastates her. She knows that her mind is not ill because she appreciates her mind primarily for the process through which it is able to write. The function of her writing has been to create an alternative to her social isolation. As a result of the narrator's confinement within her "mind", she must struggle to maintain her "true" self--no matter what John or society says. Therefore, when she is with John, she must act according to his perception of her:

I did write for a while in spite of them; but it does exhaust me a good deal--having to be so sly about it,
or else meet with heavy opposition. I sometimes fancy that in my condition if I had less opposition and more society and stimulus--but John says the very worst thing I can do is to think about my condition, and I confess it always makes me feel bad. I get unreasonably angry with John sometimes. I’m sure I never used to be so sensitive. I think it is due to my nervous condition. But John says if I feel so, I shall neglect proper self-control; so I take pains to control myself--before him, at least, and that makes me very tired.9

Without the power to make choices about her own needs, the woman has been emotionally and intellectually violated because she is not seen as possessing any relevant thoughts or emotions. The forced isolation from society leaves her to fight to keep her sense of self to which she has identified. She struggles with her subversive desire to write as well as her confused conviction to conform to docile social standards.

Throughout the book, the narrator is locked in a room, and since no one validates her experiences, the woman is ultimately driven mad by the violence of her circumstances. Her husband sees her as an irrational, immature, and ignorant woman who does not know what is right for her. This opinion is articulated through the woman’s own response to her husband’s diagnosis:

You see he does not believe I am sick! And what can one do? If a physician of high standing, and one’s own husband, assures friends and relatives that there really is nothing the matter with one but temporary nervous depression--a slight hysterical tendency--what is one to do? My brother is also a physician, and also of high standing, and he says the same thing. So I take phosphates or phospites--

9Gilman, 10-11.
whichever it is, and tonics, and journeys, and air, and exercise, and am absolutely forbidden to "work" until I am well again. Personally, I disagree with their ideas. Personally, I believe that congenial work, with excitement and change, would do me good. But what is one to do? 10

The experience of being silenced by her husband and brother leads her to question her own self. Because John does not acknowledge her feelings of physical rather than mental illness, he silences her by denying her feelings as "real." When she exclaims: "You see he does not believe I am sick!" she relates John's role, as the typical 19th century American medical doctor. His diagnosis invalidates the woman's own perception of her experience.

John's decisions about his wife's health, were not necessarily motivated by a hatred for her or women in general. Rather, John was acting out of a genuine concern for his wife, along with what his medical background had taught him. Therefore, in a sense his motives become more insidious, because he has had no conscious intention of "oppressing" her through his diagnosis and treatment. John's affection for his wife is apparent when she recounts his reasons for taking her to the country to rest:

He is very careful and loving, and hardly lets me stir without special direction. I have a schedule prescription for each hour in the day; he takes all care from me, and so I feel ungrateful not to value it more. He said we came here solely on my account, that I was to have perfect rest and all the air I could get. "You're exercise depends on your strength, my

10Gilman, 10.
Despite John's intentions, his obvious ignorance regarding his wife's true condition is frustrates her. She expresses feelings of guilt for not "valuing" John's care because in her mind, rest is not what she desires. Instead, she wants visitors, she wants to write, and she wants to be outdoors. The danger then, lies in John's decisions, as they mirror 19th century society's ignorant perception of women.

The room that she has been confined to was an old nursery located at the top of the house. It has bars on the windows, the furniture is nailed to the floor, and there is a lock on the door. These elements again symbolize the physically constraining social sphere in which women were confined. Here, she conveys her thoughts about the room and her lack of contact with people:

I'm really getting quite fond of the big room, all but the horrid paper....There is a beautiful shaded lane that runs down there away from the house. I always fancy that I see people walking in these numerous paths and arbors, but John has cautioned me not to give way to fancy in the least. 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, and that I ought to check the tendency. So I try....It is so discouraging not to have any advice and companionship about my work...I wish I could get well faster. But I must not think about that.12

It is evident that she is beginning to lose her sense of self because she is no longer skeptical of John's diagnosis: "He says that with my imaginative power and habit of story-making, a nervous weakness

---

11Gilman, 12.
12Gilman, 15-16.
like mine is sure to lead to all manner of excited fancies, and that I
ought to check the tendency. So I try."\textsuperscript{13} She is slowly abandoning
one self which is being violently killed, in favor of a different one,
through which, she can fight to escape her isolation.

The room does not bother the woman except for the yellow
wallpaper which she thinks is animate: "This paper looks to me as if
it knew what a vicious influence it had! There is a recurrent spot
where the pattern lolls like a broken neck and two bulbous eyes
stare at you upside down."\textsuperscript{14} The wallpaper becomes her obsession.
She watches it day and night trying to make sense out of the shapes
that she sees. The form in the wallpaper begins as "a strange,
provoking, formless sort of figure, that seems to skulk about behind
that silly and conspicuous front design," yet gradually solidifies into
"a woman stooping down and creeping about behind that pattern."
Now the wallpaper symbolizes the social isolation which has
victimized all women, not just the "patient" narrator.

The woman she sees in the wallpaper is trapped behind the
overlaid pattern, just as she is trapped behind the bars of the
window. She becomes the woman in the wallpaper; imagining that
the yellow color has rubbed off onto her and her husband's clothes.\textsuperscript{15}

\textsuperscript{13}Gilman, 14
\textsuperscript{14}Gilman, 16.
\textsuperscript{15}Gilman, 27. Hedges comments on this scene: "Given the morbid social
situation that by now the wallpaper has come to symbolize, it is no wonder that
the narrator begins to see it as staining everything it touches," 52.
She has turned all of her energy to the woman in the wallpaper. She is obsessed with the woman in the wallpaper and keeping her presence a secret from John:

Life is very much more exciting now than it used to be. You see I have something more to expect, to look forward to, to watch... John is so pleased to see me improve! He laughed a little the other day, and said I seemed to be flourishing in spite of my wall-paper. I turned it off with a laugh. I had no intention of telling him that it was because of the wall-paper—he would make fun of me. He might even send me away. I don't want to leave now until I have found it out.16

The woman now has an identity. She has been able to break through her isolation by creating an external image of herself, and gradually is attempting to free herself from behind the "bars" of the wallpaper.

If this woman's behavior can be defined as "mad" or "insane," does this make it an illness? Illness is the "condition of being in poor health," or of having a "disease."17 It is not her health that has failed her; no disease has invaded her body. Rather she has been forcefully silenced and therefore isolated from society—with her only device being her mind and thoughts. She knew what she needed to get better, yet nobody listened or empathized with her. Her only confident was the woman behind the wallpaper, because she too could identify with being unseen and incarcerated. Indeed, this

---

mechanism has worked, because she is in the process of abandoning her old self for a new one that exists outside her confined body. It is a form to look at, interact with, project onto, and rescue. This process does not seem to be an illness; instead it is a rational response to finding one's body and mind violated through confinement.

Gilman struggled throughout her life with the confining pretenses associated with role of women in the public and private spheres. She was specifically concerned with the prescribed role of the wife and mother as a kind of moral responsibility. Elaine R. Hedges, in her afterword to The Yellow Wallpaper, discusses Gilman's struggle with the role of women in the public and private spheres:

It would seem that Charlotte Perkins Stetson felt trapped by the role assigned the wife within the conventional nineteenth century marriage. If marriage meant children and too many children meant the incapacity for other work; if she saw her father's abandonment and her mother's coldness as the result of this sexual-marital bind; if she saw herself as victimized by marriage, the woman playing the passive role--then she was simply seeing clearly.18

It is evident that Gilman was angered at the invisibility of women as individual, creative beings. If they attempted to break free of their confined social sphere, they were then known as "crazy" or "irresponsible." In effect, The Yellow Wallpaper is Gilman's cry

18Charlotte Perkins Gilman, The Yellow Wallpaper (1899, Old Westbury, New York: The Feminist Press, 1973). This edition includes an afterword by Elaine R. Hedges. I found this to be informative regarding biographical accounts of Gilman's life and experiences. Additionally, Hedges provides a thorough analysis of this text as an important rediscovery for the feminist movement.
against the society that told women they were "simply seeing clearly," as socially isolated servants of white males.

Moreover, in a clinical sense, Gilman is illustrating one of the results of forced isolation. There is little dialogue, one setting, and one theme—that of insanity. We see this theme of madness occurring often in contemporary women's literature, although generally woven into broader themes concerning the condition of women in the context of sexism. One such author is Marge Piercy whose subject matter comprises women's experience in contemporary American society.

Piercy's *Woman On the Edge of Time* is primarily set in a mental hospital in New York City during the 1960's; and in a utopian future, the year 2137, in Mattapoisett, Massachusetts. Piercy uses this fiction to develop a feminist critique of racism and economic inequality. Essentially, she takes one of the most horrifying situations: a woman "...committed to a mental hospital, bombarded with drugs, and abused by experimental surgery, and sets it in the good life—options of the future into which the victim periodically escapes into a time trip, as if on a weekend leave from the battle of life." The protagonist, Connie, is a middle aged Latina, who has

---


been confined to a mental institution by Geraldo, her niece Dolly's pimp. Connie, and those around her, experience racial and sexual oppression in the forms of domestic violence, rape, and especially silencing.

Since the mental institution is the predominant setting, the subject of insanity, its "causes" and "treatment", play a central role throughout the novel. Here again we see a woman fighting to keep her identity intact while she is being victimized, this time as a result of her gender, ethnicity, and economic condition. Connie is a poor Latina, which becomes synonymous with worthless. Since she is of no worth, she would be much more valuable as a human guinea pig for psychiatric drugs and operations, that can presumably help save the more affluent white patients. Otherwise, Connie is merely the thief of social resources--jobs, money, housing, food, and support.21

Connie narrates the entire book, although not in chronological order. She shifts between her childhood, her present hospital experience, and her time in Mattapoisett. One would immediately think that Connie was crazy, because everyone knows that it is impossible to travel into the future. However, because Connie is the only narrator, she offers a persuasive portrayal about crossing those boundaries into the future. In actuality, Piercy intentionally blurs


24
such boundaries because it does not matter if Mattapoisett is real or imagined.

Like many utopias, Mattapoisett is an effective literary device for critiquing contemporary society. It is a scathing investigation about those sexual, racial, and economic values which violently cripple and destroy the marginal members of this society. However, this criticism is presented through the guise of futuristic fiction—that which is fantasy. "Unbelievable," and "not real." Piercy's combination of a utopian social critique with futuristic visions makes *Woman On the Edge Of Time* a harrowing example of the violence perpetrated against women in contemporary America.

Like the narrator in Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*, who was also forced into social isolation, Connie chooses "insanity" rather than staying in her present situation. These portrayals of madness help re-enforce the idea logical that insanity is not necessarily an illness, but rather an understandable response to an abnormal society. This is the case for Connie, whose life has been a paradigm of victimization.

Born poor, Connie attempted to lift herself out of the ghetto by going to college. While in college, she had an affair with her professor, was later married, and had a child who died in an accident. Connie became ill and unemployed; and sank back into the poverty she had fought so hard to leave behind. As one critic, Kathryn R. Seidel observes, Connie is a symbol for our times: "The neglect and
abuse that the poor, the Chicana, the women of our time suffer, are all embodied in Connie."22

Now, as Connie is confined to the mental hospital, she gradually becomes more socially isolated than she was as an unemployed Chicana. Therefore, Connie's body is all she has left to rely on, and it has been physically raped and beaten by virtually every man she has had a relationship with--her father, uncle, brother, boyfriends, Dolly's pimp, and now the doctors. Connie's mind, which has been violated by numbing drugs, silenced by having her thoughts continuously trivialized, and invalidated by having her experiences repeatedly ignored, fortunately can still provide the means by which she creates an alternative to her misery.

Connie's knowledge of this forced seclusion is graphically illustrated when Geraldo, Dolly's pimp, admits her to the psychiatric hospital by charging that Connie had abused Dolly and himself. Connie is left unattended for hours:

Each breath she drew stabbed her. How could she get to the hospital to x-ray her for a broken rib? So far no one had heard a word she said, which of course was not unusual...The doctor had not even interviewed her but had talked exclusively to Geraldo....Connie writhed on the bed, pinned down with just enough play to let her wriggle. They had to push her into restraint, shot her up immediately. She had been screaming--okay! Did they think you had to be crazy to protest being locked up? Yes, they did. They said reluctance to be hospitalized was a sign of sickness, assuming you were sick, in one of

---

these no-win circles...If she screamed they might never release her from restraint. They had forgotten her, locked her away in this broom closet to starve. She had pissed on herself. what could she do? Now she lay in her own wet stink. Cold at first, creepy cold, now warm from her body. And stinking.23

In actuality, Geraldo had stormed into Connie's apartment where Dolly was visiting, to make Dolly get an illegal abortion, as she was no good to him pregnant. After Dolly told Geraldo that she did not want an abortion, he became enraged and began to beat her up. Geraldo then turned on Connie, pushing her into her hot stove. It was then, that Connie picked up a wine bottle, smashed it on Geraldo's head, and blacked out as he threw her against the wall. The next thing she knew, she was strapped to a bed in a mental hospital.24

In addition to detailing a physical assault, Piercy's style provides the reader with a raw portrait of the violently horrifying procedures within modern state psychiatric hospitals. Connie's experiences inside the ward parallel her past experiences as a marginal member of society. Effectively, Piercy envisions an intensely confining situation through which to communicate her denunciation of the violent conditions under which women are forced to live.

Connie had repeatedly tried to tell her story and to explain what had really happened that day with Geraldo and Dolly. But nobody would listen to her--much less believe her:

23 Piercy, 16-17.
24 Piercy, summary of 9-16.
She tried to tell the nurse who gave her the injection, the attendants who tied her to the stretcher, that she was innocent, that she had broken a rib, that Geraldo had beaten her. It was as if she spoke another language...They acted as if they couldn't hear you. If you complained, they took it as a sign of sickness.\(^{25}\)

The invalidation of a patient's beliefs is merely a matter of course, and one more situation in which Connie is silenced. She overheard a doctor explain to his resident the proper treatment of the patients in the hospital: "The authority of the physician is undermined if the patient presumes to make a diagnostic statement."\(^{26}\) When Connie realized that she was not going to be heard by anyone in or outside of the hospital, she began to visit Mattapoissett.

Before entering the institution, Connie had been "contacted" by the people of Mattapoissett. The day when Dolly and Geraldo had fought in her apartment, Connie saw a young man, Luciente, calling for her. He explained to her that he was from the future and that he was a "sender," and she was a "receiver." Connie, who had a premonition of Luciente in a dream, now judges him, in the flesh, to be crazy.\(^{27}\)

Significantly, Connie did not see Luciente again until she was in seclusion for fighting a nurse who wanted to give her a sedative. She was losing hope of ever getting out of the hospital:

\(^{25}\)Piercy, 19.
\(^{26}\) Piercy, 19.
\(^{27}\) Piercy, summary of 33-44.
Surely she would die here. Her heart would beat more and more slowly and then stop, like a watch running down. At that thought the heart began to race in her chest. She stared at the room, empty except for the mattress and odd stains, names, dates, words scratched somehow into the wall with blood, fingernails, pencil stubs shit: how did she come to be in such a desperate place?28

Connie seeks "asylum" by using the concept of a psychic mind-link. Connie is transported through time to Mattapoissett because she is inspired by Luciente's description of Mattapoissett's madhouses, which were, "Open to the air and pleasant." They were for those who were; "...tired, unable to cope for a while..." As Luciente comforted her by hugging her, Connie realized that Luciente had breasts; although she physically appeared to be androgynous.

Mattapoissett, Massachusetts, is modeled on small agricultural communities in which families are comprised of compatible people related by affection rather than by blood. By contrast to the society Connie has left, this is a world where individual women are not responsible for conception, birth, or motherhood. Rather, babies are incubated in holding tanks, and are born to three non-gender-specific mothers. As Seidel observes, these "utopian" reproductive relations create new, and for Connie, appealing social practices:

Society incorporates ceremonies and rituals that reinforce communality and signify the values of the group: a birth ceremony, a rite-of-passage ceremony to signify the end of childhood,...a death ceremony. There is no government, no school, and rules are reluctantly made by those who are

28Piercy, 60.
Seidel's description provides us with a concrete portrait of how Piercy's Mattapoisett is structured. Because there are no gender-specific pronouns used by Luciente or her people, Piercy further emphasizes egalitarianism. Instead they say "per" to signify a person.

Luciente is akin to Connie's new self. This assertion is supported by various similarities between Connie and Luciente. Luciente's daughter Dawn, looked exactly like Connie's dead daughter. Both Connie and Luciente were lovers with Jackrabbit. Siedel goes as far as to say that Luciente was Connie's "female medium," and the mode through which Connie traveled to Mattapoisett was her mind.

Interestingly, Seidel concludes her article with one of the most plausible criticisms, one can level at Connie's characterization:

Piercy tries to expose nearly all of society's ills--sexism, racism, poverty, prostitution, mental institutions, suburban materialism, the nuclear family, and so forth all come under one fire. But the fire is scattered, and it is easy to lose a sense of focus. Moreover, Connie, who is a strong, admirable character, is also in many ways an inadequate one. She is meant to be an Every Woman, one with whom the reader can identify or at least represents us all. But her bleak background makes it difficult for most readers to associate with her, and she is made victim to all of society's ills. Would such a person be capable of the insight and sensitivity she is made to have after such a life? Of course, the answer is yes, but in the novel the credulity of the reader is strained by the heavy allegorical significance Connie must bear. Were she less of a victim, or were the societal diseases she suffers reduced, the novel

---

29Seidel, 2489.
would be the statement that Piercy is capable of producing...\textsuperscript{30}

To assert that Connie is less believable because of her "amount" of victimization may reveal Seidel's own class bias. Connie's "bleak background" should not have an effect on her credibility as a victim of classism, sexism, and racism. Furthermore, Seidel does not fully appreciate Piercy's intentional exageration--both of Connie's misery and her utopian alternative. The allegorical intensity of Piercy's symbolism might provoke reflection; it is not intended as a blueprint for social activism.

Connie's "madness," which is a form of extremism, becomes the vehicle through which to imagine an alternative. She has found a way to survive the daily violence being inflicted upon her. Piercy's structuring the novel around a futuristic society, enables her to describe the present violence in American society. Moreover, she has provided us with a setting conducive for discussing some ways women learn to survive in these situations of social isolation.

Similar to Piercy's *The Woman on the Edge of Time* \textsuperscript{31} Toni Morrison explores the societal effects of poverty and racism in 1940's America in her novella *The Bluest Eye*. \textsuperscript{31} Pecola Breedlove is a young black girl who thinks that she is ugly compared to white American standards of beauty, most strongly symbolized by blue

\textsuperscript{30}Seidel, 2490.

eyes. Pecola believes that with blue eyes, she would not be ugly, her mother would love her, her father would stop drinking, and her brother would stop running away.\textsuperscript{32}

In \textit{The Bluest Eye}, Morrison integrates the personal and the social dynamics of violence against women through the key aspects of the novel: its structure, style of narration, and characterization. Each of these textual features contributes to Morrison's portrayal of the individual suffering of Pecola, as well as the larger social pressures that force others to harm her. Clearly, Morrison indicts American racism—not merely male violence—for Pecola's rape and social isolation.

It is possible to see the novel as being structured in two frames, or in "triadic patterns."\textsuperscript{33} When read as two parts, normative social values are described through the school primer, which provides the stereotypical conventions of family life at each chapter head. It is set against the dominant narrative conveyed through the intuitions and reactions of Claudia MacTeer, Pecola's friend.\textsuperscript{34}

Therefore, this reading provides the audience with a lucid sense of

\textsuperscript{32} Morrison, 40.


the forms of violence humans wreck on one another when they can not be validated by the love of partners or family members.35

When read in three parts, as a juxtaposing of white familial prescriptions against black realities, the book begins with a reproduction, three times, of a passage from the primer about Dick and Jane's family life. The first rendition, perfectly spaced and punctuated, is representative of the impeccable white Fisher family. Following the orderly first paragraph, comes another reproduction, although this time there are no punctuation marks. According to Chikewenye Okonjo Ogunyemi's article entitled, "order and Disorder in Toni Morrison's 'The Bluest Eye'," she observes that the absent punctuation marks symbolize a "...disorder in a world which could be orderly; however the world is still recognizable..."36 This somewhat deviant portrait of the family is exemplified by the MacTeers, who are generally a loving family, but nevertheless black and poor. Finally, the third paragraph is another repetition of the first but without punctuation or word division. It is almost unrecognizable as being the same original paragraph, illustrating the chaotic disorder of the Breedlove family. 37 The audience is provided with a clear sense


36 Ogunyemi, p 354.
37 Ogunyemi, "Order," 354. Other triadic patterns outlined by Morrison are connected with the "tragedy of black life" with regards to blacks, whites, and God or on an abstracted level, incorporating themes of sex, racism, and love.
of violence and social isolation, yet at a more complex level, because Morrison's textual layering suggests many multiple origins for the inter-familial violence.

Symbolically, the primer serves as a chilling social exposé of American society. It is an apparently innocuous reading tool, but in Pecola's hands it communicates a model of family relations she cannot have. Additionally, the primer represents the violent voice of the unattainable "Dick and Jane" world, which is a stark contrast to Morrison's articulation of the frustration and desperation suffered by the inhabitants of Lorain's black neighborhoods.

Pecola wanted her mother, Pauline, to notice her the same way that Pauline attended to the family's little girl to whom she worked. In Pauline's eyes, the Fisher girl was a vision of beauty, cleanliness, and grace--unlike her own children that she had long since ignored. These white children gave Pauline an antidote to her grim existence:

She became what is known as an ideal servant, for such a role filled practically all of her needs. When she bathed the Fisher girl, it was in a porcelain tub with silvery taps running infinite quantities of hot, clear water. She dried her in fluffy white towels and put her in cuddly night clothes. Then she brushed the yellow hair, enjoying the roll and slip of it between her fingers...Pauline kept this order, this beauty, for herself, a private world, and never introduced it into her storefront, or to her children. Then she bent towards respectability, and in doing taught them fear: fear of being clumsy, fear of being like their father, fear of not being loved by God, fear of madness like Cholly's mother's. Into her son she beat a loud desire to run away, and into her
daughter she beat a fear of growing up, fear of other people, fear of life.\textsuperscript{38}

Pecola is invisible to her mother, and she is only "seen" by her father Cholly when he rapes her on the kitchen floor. The only ones who do see Pecola for who she is, are the MacTeer sisters and the three hookers The Maginot Line, China, and Poland. However, they do not count as far as society's concerned because they are too naive or dirty and cheap.

Morrison, describes Cholly's background to show a reason for his violent victimization of Pecola. He was abandoned by his mother, at four days old, in a junk pile after his father had left the two of them. His aunt retrieved him and brought him up until her death. At his aunt's funeral, Cholly has his first sexual encounter with a young girl named Darlene. They had been running around with a group of friends in the woods, and ended up separated from them. Cholly was fearful of Darlene not liking him, until she began to kiss him. As they were having sex, a group of white male hunters found them, and made Cholly continue the sexual act. Yet he had become impotent which brought more sneers from the hunters. This humiliating and degrading experience was the initial catalyst for Cholly's demoralized attitude regarding women. Cholly found himself angry not at the hunters, but at Darlene who had originally initiated the incident:

Sullen, irritable, he cultivated his hatred of Darlene. Never did he once consider directing his hatred towards the hunters. Such an emotion would have destroyed him. They ere big, white armed men. He

\textsuperscript{38}Morrison, 100-102.
was small, black, helpless. His subconscious knew what his mind did not guess—that hating them would have consumed him, burned him up like a piece of soft coal...He was, in time, to discover that hatred of white men—but not now. Not in impotence but later, when the hatred could find sweet expression. For now, he hated the one who had created the situation, the one who bore witness to his failure, his impotence. The one who had not been able to protect, to spare, to cover from the round moon glow of the flashlight.39

Apart from the humiliating sexual encounter, Cholly additionally has his first experience with the ideas of power. He realizes that to become enraged with the hunters would result in death, but to transfer that hatred to Darlene is safe and satisfying.

After the funeral, Cholly set out to find his father. But his father didn't care. He was too interested in shooting his craps game. At this point Cholly had been thrown away by his parents, abandoned by his aunt, and humiliated by white men. The only ones who seemed to want him were women, although he despised them on account of his inability to respect and count on them. He was in control of women. He had the power to violate them and because of this power, Cholly felt free:

Cholly was free. Dangerously free. Free to feel whatever he felt—fear, guilt, shame, love, grief, pity. Free to be tender or violent...Free to take a woman's insults, for his body had already conquered hers. Free even to knock her in the head, for he had already cradled that head in his arms...In those days, Cholly was truly free. Abandoned in a junk heap by his mother, rejected for a crap game by his father, there was nothing more to lose. He was alone with

39Morrison, 119.
his own perceptions and appetites, and they alone interested him.\textsuperscript{40}

Therefore, by the time we encounter Cholly raping Pecola, we have already been exposed to his childhood experiences, and their violent effects on everyone with whom he comes in contact in the future—especially women and children.

The kinds of abuse Pauline, as a woman, and Cholly as a male inflict upon Pecola are qualitatively different. Pauline did not feel motivated to validate her daughter's sense of self; she makes Pecola invisible like she had felt throughout most of her life. Morrison characterizes the maternal role of women like Pauline, in order to account for their ability to ignore and demean their families:

Then they had grown. Edging into life from the back door. Becoming. Everybody in the world was in the position to give them orders. White women said, "do this." White children said, "Give me that." White men said, "Come here." Black men said, "Lay down." The only people they not take orders from were black children and each other. But they took all of that and re-created it in their own image... When white men beat their men, they cleaned up up the blood and went home to receive abuse from the victim. They beat their children with one hand and stole from them with the other...They plowed all day and came home to nestle like plums under the limbs of their men. The legs that straddled a mule's back were the same ones that straddled their men's hips. And the difference was all the difference there was.\textsuperscript{41}

If Pauline ignored Pecola to make that part of her life invisible, so that she could survive, Cholly's raping Pecola stemmed from his need

\textsuperscript{40}Morrison, 125-126.
\textsuperscript{41}Morrison, 109-110.
to punish her for his inability to father her. He needed to hate anyone he failed or abandoned. After all he was free.

In Morrison's novel, black adults are never merely victims. Cholly and Pauline are both victims of racism. They have both been abused because of their color, and they direct their frustrations at their children. However, Morrison suggests that children of any race, economic background or gender are victims. They are in the process of being socialized; they are learning what it means to be a member of society. Of course, the potential for victimization can be affected by their race, economic background or gender as was the case with Pecola.

We see the difference between children's and adults' understanding of violence through Morrison's choice of Claudia MacTeer, for the main narrator and Pecola for the central character. Pecola was innocent, and ignorant of knowing how to protect herself from the violence which she experienced. Society had no resources for her to turn to when she became pregnant and then miscarried her father's child. Instead she became the scapegoat for social failures. Therefore, the only person Pecola could rely on was herself.

Like the woman in *The Yellow Wallpaper*, and Connie in *The Woman on the Edge of Time*, Pecola found madness an alternative reality. In her madness she had her blue eyes, a new voice to talk with, and safety from violation. As Claudia relates, Pecola had, "...stepped over into madness, a madness which protected her from"
us simply because it bored us in the end."\textsuperscript{42} Morrison also provides a social context for Pecola's state of madness—just as she provided some motives for Pecola's parents. Morrison uses Claudia's voice to name those responsible for Pecola's mortality:

The birdlike gestures are worn away to a mere picking and plucking her way between the tire rims and the sunflowers, between the Coke bottles and milkweed, among all the waste and the beauty of the world—which is what she herself was. All of our waste which we dumped on her and which she absorbed. And all of our beauty, which was hers first and which she gave to us. All of us—all who knew her—felt so wholesome after we cleaned ourselves on her. We were so beautiful when we stood astride her ugliness. Her simplicity decorated us, her guilt sanctified us, her pain made us glow with health, her awkwardness made us think we had a sense of humor. Her inarticulateness made us believe we were eloquent. Her poverty kept us generous. Even her waking dreams we used—to silence our own nightmares. And she let us, and thereby deserved our contempt. We honed our egos on her, padded our characters with her frailty, and vawned in the fantasy of our strength.\textsuperscript{43}

Pecola has been rejected by her community and thrown away to the outskirts of town. Only Claudia realizes the extent of the community's complicity in Pecola's madness: "All of us—all of us who knew her—felt so wholesome after we cleaned ourselves on her. We were so beautiful when we stood astride her ugliness...." For Pecola, picking through garbage was possibly more gratifying than being thrown

\textsuperscript{42}Morrison, 159.
\textsuperscript{43}Morrison, 159.
away by your mother, your brother, your father, your peers, and
your society. At least "garbage" can't rape or beat you.

Additionally, Pecola received the blue eyes that she had prayed
for her entire life because she had finally been noticed--by Cholly.
After she had been raped, Pecola went to visit Elihue Whitcomb
known as "Soaphead Church." He was known in Lorain, to be a kind
of supernatural prophet to whom one went in their most desolate
state. Pecola went to ask Soaphead Church for blue eyes.\textsuperscript{44} He
realized that it was a request for beauty, something he could give to
her by acknowledging her presence. Soaphead Church believed in her
request and without physically or emotionally violating her, he saw
her beauty thereby giving her the blue eyes. Pecola was now
beautiful and free in her madness. She had survived.

It is at this point that Pecola narrates a portion of the book.
This dialogue occurs towards the end of the book, after she has "gone
insane." Pecola now has a voice, and therefore can be heard if not by
the rest of society, then by her own self:

\begin{quote}
And you don't have to be afraid of Cholly coming at you
anymore.
No.
That was horrible wasn't it?
Yes.
The second time too?
Yes.
Really? The second time too?
Leave me alone! You better leave me alone.
Can't you take a joke? I was only funning.
I don't like to talk about dirty things.
Me neither. Let's talk about something else.
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{44}Morrison, 130-140.
What? What will we talk about?
Why, your eyes.....
....Please. If there is somebody with bluer eyes then mine, then maybe there is somebody with the bluest eyes. The bluest eyes in the whole world.
That's just too bad isn't it?
Please help me look.
No.
But suppose my eyes aren't blue enough?
Blue enough for what?
Blue enough for...I don't know. Blue enough for something. Blue enough...for you!
I'm not going to play with you anymore.
Oh. Don't leave me.
Yes, I am.
Why, are you mad at me?
Yes.
Because my eyes aren't blue enough? Because I don't have the blues eyes?
No. Because your acting silly.
Don't go. Don't leave me. Will you come back if I get them?
Get what?
The bluest eyes. Will you come back then?
Of course I will. I'm just going away for a little while.
You promise?
Sure I'll be back. Right before your very eyes. 45

Pecola had her blue eyes, like Connie had Mattapoisett and Luciente, like the woman had the wallpaper. These heroines survived; but at what cost? It appears that an alternative reality--madness--is the safest environment to be in for these fictional women, who have no other alternatives presented to them.

Similar to the other authors discussed, Paula Gunn Allen's *The Woman Who Owned the Shadows*, is as much a statement about the social victimization, in this case, of Native Americans, as it is about women. The story of Ephanie Antecio who in the midst of a nervous

45Morrison, 156-158.
breakdown, takes her children, and moves to San Francisco, is the first book in the last fifty years that has been written by a Native American woman about a Native American woman. Allen weaves the ritual based Native American culture into customs of the West, in order to voice spiritual knowledge that has been forgotten and ignored by most of American society, and many American Indians.

Ephanie is victimized by several kinds of violence as a result of her ethnicity, working class background, sexual preference, gender, and her status as a mother. To an outsider, her response would appear to be yet another example of madness, but the "other worlds" Ephanie explores symbolize a strengthening resource. Allen indicts

---


47 Paula Gunn Allen, *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Traditions* (Boston: Beacon P, 1986) discusses the differences between American Indian literature and western fiction in her book. She asserts that ritual-based cultures are, "...founded on the primary perceive economic, social, or political elements as central; rather they organize their lives around a sacred, metaphysical principle...Thus ritual--organized activity that strives to manipulate or direct non-material energies toward some larger goal--forms the foundation of tribal culture...Literature, which includes ceremony, myth, tale, and song, is the primary mode of ritual tradition. The tribal rituals necessarily include a verbal element, and contemporary novelists draw from that verbal aspect in their work." (p. 80) Allen further defines those elements innate to western fiction: "Western fiction, in contrast, is based on nonsacred aesthetic and intellectual precepts such as the importance of the unities of time, place, and action, and it is structured to create the illusion of change in the characters occurring over a period of time as a result of conflict and crisis. Myth criticism to the contrary, western novels are not ritual-based; that is, although they might incorporate elements drawn from ritual-based cultures...those borrowings are intellectual, aesthetic, or allusive....Postmodern and experimental fiction writers often appear to disregard classic Western literary conventions, but they implicitly recognize them all the same. Native Americans reared in the oral tradition, however, are not ignoring or "experimenting" with accepted conventions when they do not follow western structural conventions." (p. 81).
Western colonialism for destroying ritualistic harmony, specifically identifying certain social problems American Indians face, such as alcoholism, poverty, and domestic violence. However, she also offers a visionary future that is neither utopian or escapist. It is for this reason, that Allen's text provides us with another approach to consider in the study of violence against women in American society.

Structurally, the book is separated into four sections mirroring the four directions--east, west, north and south--prevalent in Indian folklore and traditions. The book begins with a summary of New Mexican colonial history, which was what forced the American Indians onto reservations--Ephanie's heritage. The second part comprises her intercultural family life, beginning with a cleansing ritual--the Rite of Exorcism, finishing with Ephanie's signed divorce papers. The third section concerns tribal tradition, with a prologue evoking two goddesses, Iyatiku the Corn Woman, and Naotse her sister. It is a myth about life and death, family, and life challenges. This section ends with Ephanie cutting the noose off from around her neck, while a symbolic spider--a grandmother watches, so that she will not succeed in her suicide attempt. Finally, we are provided with her emotions and perceptions--beginning with a brief summary of

48 Allen, "Sacred" 91. "The amount of violence against women, alcoholism, and violence, abuse, and neglect by women against their children and their aged relatives have all increased. These social ills were virtually unheard of among most tribes fifty years ago, popular American opinion to the contrary."
the Spider--a powerful feminine symbol in Indian folk-lore. It is the voice of the grandmother--the elder. 50

Because Ephanie comes from a ritual-based culture, her story is related as a spiritual journey. Therefore, she meanders through events which have happened in her past, in a dream or vision, or that have not directly happened to her, but that might affect her circumstances. One of the literary devices Allen uses to effectively illustrate this culture, is "achronology" which she defines as a "...time sense of tribal people (resulting) from tribal beliefs about nature of reality, beliefs based on ceremonial understandings rather than on industrial, theological, or agricultural orderings."51 By structuring the book achronologically, the focus is removed from differentiating the myth from Ephanie's experience because in a ritual-based culture

50 Allen, "Sacred," 99. These four directions are also a central theme to Native American traditions and folklore. Allen talks of the integration of woman lore with Ephanie's experiences: "My novel centers on woman lore and the relationships it bears to the events in the life of an individual. It is concerned with the journey of the half-breed protagonist Ephanie Antencio toward psychic balance and describes how the parallels between her life and the lives of the god-woman (as they are preserved in the oral tradition) aid her finding that balance." Therefore, Allen focuses on how ancient woman lore has affected Ephanie's experiences, which in turn, exemplifies an alternative symbol system and language through which Native American's or other marginal peoples can communicate with and be heard.
26 Allen, "Sacred," 147-154. Additionally, Allen elaborates on the inability to necessarily decipher the real from the imagined--"In this book, (The Woman Who Owned the Shadows), dream, "actual" event, myth, tale, history, and internal dialogue are run together, making it evident that divisions do not lead to comprehension. The structure reflects the point that particles move in moving time and space and that individuals move in a moving field."(p. 153).
these distinctions are non-existent. They are all a part of time and reality.

Ephanie does not "go mad" like the three women previously examined. Rather she draws from the spiritual traditions of her heritage to validate her present experiences, resulting in Ephanie always feeling connected to her "foremothers" past. This process is illustrated when Ephanie decides not to commit suicide:

Got up on the stool. High enough off of the floor. To hang herself. She was certain it would do....She could kick the stool across the length of the closet, out of the way....She lowered the loop over her head, drew it snugly around her neck. Kicked the stool out from under herself with her moccasined toe. Felt the jarring jolt, the knot cutting off her breath. Oh, god. What have I done. Tried to hold onto the rope with her hands. Brain clearing, the red, the fog, moving suddenly away....Tried to wedge herself between the narrow walls, but they were too wide for that....Tried to reach the pipe, but it was out of reach. Saw out of the corner of her eye a large spider lodged in the far corner of the closet. That seemed to be watching her...Reached in her backpocket, drawing it carefully out...Clenching her teeth against the pain. In her mind swearing. Cursing. Those who wanted her dead. Herself for listening to them. I won't die, damn you. I won't die. I will live....The second slice severed the rope....I did it, she thought. With luck and determination. With intelligence. I almost did it for good. Maybe in a way I did. She turned finally on her back, letting her arms and legs stretch out, and as she looked up she saw the spider, sitting unconcerned like spiders do. It seemed to be approving of her. To be nodding, maybe even smiling. She smiled up at it and said in her husky voice, her first words since she'd fallen from her near death, "Thanks, Grandmother. I think I'm going to be all right."52

---

52 Allen, "Woman" 163-164.
Even at her encounter with death, Ephanie finds the answer in the spider. She is Grandmother Spider, an ancient earth mother. Her web floats between the earth and sky, it is the link between the past and the future, the real and the imagined. They are all her creation, therefore, all experiences mythical or otherwise, are valid and true.\(^5\)

This is not the case for Connie, as she has no deity to identify with in her social isolation. Rather Piercy creates a mind-link to represent what for Allen, is already there. There is no concept of madness for Allen, because there is nothing "abnormal" about being in contact with "other worlds." She finds in pre-colonial traditions that valued women. This process is healthy and empowering. It is the process which saves Ephanie from being forced to abandon her identity, like Pecola and the woman in *The Yellow Wallpaper*.

Allen dismantles the stereotypical image of the American Indian thereby demystifying Indian culture. This is portrayed when

\(^5\)Susan J. Scarberry "Grandmother Spider's Lifeline," *Studies in American Indian Literature: Critical Essays and Course Designs*, ed., Paula Gunn Allen (????: Modern Language Association of America, 1987) 100-107. "Threading her way through space, Grandmother Spider spins her thoughts into existence. According to many origin stories, she first made creatures appear on earth and light appear in the sky, and even now she is looking after her children and their well-being is threatened. In old and new stories of American Indians, Grandmother Spider's web is an expression of her love for the people, binding various life forms together. Her web is a woven structure suspended between earth and sky, at once real and symbolic of the coherence of all experience....For Grandmother Spider, thought and action are one. All her thoughts are realized, affirming the creative power of the world. Being maternal and responsible, she never abandons her creations; usually she saves those in distress," (p. 100).
Ephanie and her friend Theresa, spend the night while traveling with some of Theresa's friends:

They spoke glowingly about the famous medicine man who had spoken so powerfully, so movingly at the survival gathering. She told them how this same medicine man had lashed out at some women she knew. He was angry and contemptuous because they were lesbians. How he had told them he ought to rape them. How hurt, puzzled they had been. How afraid. They told her about the Navajo woman they had spoken to who had been so eloquent about being moved from her homelands to the other side of the reservation because the whiteman wanted her land to drill on. "We have to help these people," they said. "They are being moved off their own land. Again. Why doesn't the government leave them alone?..." they said....She told them that the disputed land was Hopi land, and that the relocation of the Navajos was a result of a decision made by the U.S. Government at the request of the Hopis who did not get along with the Navajos since time immemorial....They told her about how Indians were dying of booze and lousy working conditions and ignorance and squalor. She told them about the Vista worker who had come to Guadalupe and wanted to teach her mother how to keep a house properly. About the government people who wanted to make sure everyone had indoor plumbing, so they got toilets installed for everyone. But some people had to put the toilets in their kitchen, and it disgusted them....She found herself getting mad. Madder...To be understood. To understand. And all they knew was what they read. In some weird magazine....In their red, white and blue handbook of Western culture. She thought. Anger pulling at her eyes. 54

Here, Allen like Morrison, names the oppressors; whether they are women friends of Theresa's, the government, service organizations, or Indians themselves. Many are to blame for the violence against

54 Allen, "Woman," 138-139.
the Indians expressed through ignorance of Native American traditions and silencing of their point of view. Like The Bluest Eye, people of color may express their anger generated by racist social relations through violent acts against family and friends. Additionally, American Indians can be victims as well as victimizers. Indians can rape, abuse their wives and children, and be homophobic. Like Cholly and Pauline, the American Indian is a victim of racism, and often of sexism too. Again, it becomes evident that without validation and support from member's of society, the oppressed deem themselves worthless and invisible, and may lash out at the more easily victimized.

The knowledge of the elements inherent to ritual-based cultures, become necessary when examining Allen's The Woman Who Owned the Shadows. Traditional stories are foregrounded in Ephanie's personal story. In The Sacred Hoop, Allen explains the reason for this structure of The Woman Who Owned the Shadows:

> In my novel, I told a number of stories, some from the Keres oral tradition, some from Keres and Navajo history, some from contemporary happenings around Indian country, some from the life of the protagonist, Ephanie Antecio, and some from her grandmother's life. I selected the "heritage and lore" sections for their direct bearing on the events Ephanie herself experiences, so that each kind of story relates to and illuminates the rest. The plotting is as near to a conversation with Indians as I could make it, and the style is "legendary" to further the reader's sense of the underlying structure. 55

---

It is for these reasons, that Allen's text provides us with a unique treatment with which to talk about violence being inflicted upon women in American society.

Allen discusses the major problems her audience have had with *The Woman Who Owned the Shadows*, being their "...inability to locate the particle (protagonist) on a background grid (setting). They wanted the the hero to be foregrounded and the events, understandings, and other characters to be clearly delineated backdrops. While they wanted the the protagonist to have a heritage, replete with lore, she or he must have a "personal story" that places these other elements in their proper background relationship to the main action." If Allen accommodated these readers' expectations she'd violate the way the oral traditions enable stories to blur the division between dreams, "true" events, myth, history and internal dialogue, and how this continuity affects one's understanding of his or her temporality and chronology.\(^\text{56}\) Moreover, the individual experience of a socially isolated woman is made more general as a result of Allen's literary style. This generalization enables women to identify with Ephanie's experiences on a collective level, because it is no longer the story of a woman becoming socially isolated like in *The Yellow Wallpaper*. Instead, Allen's audience is introduced to a ritual based culture, and how such a culture affects one's life experiences.

\(^{56}\) Allen, "Sacred," 147-154. Surmised from the chapter entitled "The Ceremonial Motion of Indian Time."
Therefore, the emphasis is on women and cultural traditions verses the individual process of a psyche.

This unique style can be extended to include the other literature discussed here like *The Yellow Wallpaper*, *Woman On the Edge of Time*, and *The Bluest Eye*, because the "...perceptual modes that women, even those of us who are literate, industrialized, and reared within masculinist academic traditions, habitually engage in more closely resemble inclusive-field perception than excluding foreground-background perceptions." Therefore, Ephanie's story is illustrated through bits of real, imaginary, and mythical experiences which may or may not directly affect her present situation. Instead, these experiences affect the bigger picture; Ephanie's life journey. For example, Ephanie learned about Grandmother Spider as a young girl on the reservation. This mythical character did not affect her until years later when she was contemplating suicide in San Francisco.

Additionally, women's perceptions tends to be dependent upon non-linear, achronological, and harmonious relationships; which is contrary to the traditional thought process of western culture. Similarly, Allen voices a strategy against violence that serves as an important alternative to those presented by the other authors. This results from her accentuating the traditions of the American Indian

---

which can empower a woman's experiences. Allen is not prescribing an absolute prescription to end the social isolation of women and minorities, rather she is providing her audience with an alternative to "madness." Such an alternative may be impossible for those who have not been raised in a ritual-based culture like the American Indian traditions; however, there might be those rituals and myths which have remained invisible which may enhance the female experience.59

* * *

The term "violence" has been primarily associated with harmful physical behavior unjustly inflicted upon someone. However, violence against women does not stop at those physical acts of violence such as rape or battery. Instead, violence against women includes emotionally subversive acts, like degradation, patronizing, and silencing. Silencing is a more difficult behavior to assess, because unlike the act of rape, there is not a single offender to fight back

59 Starhawk, *Dreaming the Dark: Magic, Sex, & Politics* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1982). discusses this idea of re-claiming those traditions and symbols which are central to female experience: "The Old Religion--call it Witchcraft, Wicca, the Craft, or with a slightly broader definition, Paganism or New Paganism--is both old and newly invented. Its roots go back to the pre-Judeo-Christian tribal religions of the West, and it is akin in spirit, form, and practice to Native American and African religions. Its myths and symbols draw from the woman-valuing, matristic, Goddess-centered cultures that underly the beginnings of civilization....The history of patriarchal civilization could be read as a cumulative effort to break that bond, to drive a wedge between spirit and flesh, culture and nature, man and woman...That rupture underlies the entwined oppressions of race, sex, class, and ecological destruction." (pp xii-xiii).
against. Women have been silenced through language, social relationships, laws and "medical" practices—all institutions deeply embedded in American culture. The topic of silencing is clearly exemplified in *The Yellow Wallpaper*, first through the limited language available to the main character, and secondly through John's inadequate diagnosis and treatment of her "condition" as his patient and wife. The woman never experienced any physical violence by her husband or any other man, however the various forms of silencing resulted in her becoming socially isolated and eventually mad. Therefore, a woman may never experience rape or battery, but all women, at one time in their life, experience the pain and humiliation surrounding the awareness of being "invisible."

Frustration about invisibility can lead women to act "mad." According to Phyllis Chesler, significantly more women than men are diagnosed with the symptoms of "madness" and are thereby confined to asylums, or become debilitate because of the effects of powerful drugs.60 Similar dynamics apply to various other forms of violence such as rape, battery, and economic dependency. For example, rape is an act of power, control, and violation. If women attempt to fight back against crimes such as rape, they can be met with labels such as a "liar," a "manipulative bitch," or as simply "mad." After Pecola was raped by Cholly, Pauline ignored the incident, Cholly sexually assaulted her another time, and the people of Lorain outcast her by

not speaking to and supporting her. She was in fact called "mad," and as Claudia MacTeer realized, Pecola was indeed the pawn used to rationalize all of the anger and frustration in the town of Lorain. This process of labeling re-enforces a woman's experience as a piece of property. She is nothing more than a pawn used to rationalize male greed, anger and power.

Susan Brownmiller comments on the differing perspectives of women and men on rape, as she observes that, the female view of rape historically has been ignored.61 Furthermore, the reasons behind rape becoming a social concern, lay not with a women's emotional and physical violation, but rather with a man's property damage. The history and views regarding the treatment of rape, is yet another example of women's oppression. First, by raping her, and secondly, by invalidating her experience in the form of silencing. Therefore, the act of oppression is violent by virtue of its definition and content.

61 Susan Brownmiller. Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape (Toronto: Bantam Books, 1975) 422. To a woman the definition of rape is fairly simple. A sexual invasion of the body by force, an incursion into the private, personal inner space without consent--in short, an internal assault from one of several avenues and by one of several methods--constitutes a deliberate violation of emotional, physical and rational integrity and is a hostile, degrading act of violence that deserves the name of rape. Yet by tracing man's concept of rape as he defined it in his earliest laws, we now know with certainty that the criminal act he viewed with horror, and the deadly punishments he saw fit to apply, had little to do with an act of sexual violence that a woman's body might sustain. True, the law has come some distance since its beginnings when rape meant simply and conclusively the theft of a father's daughter's virginity, a specialized crime that damaged valuable goods before they could reach the matrimonial market, but modern legal perceptions of rape are rooted still in ancient male concepts of property.
In essence, the relationship between women and madness parallels the relationship of women to Western Civilization, in this case American society. Because women are considered to be irrational and powerless and men are considered to be the intellectuals and protectors; if a woman threatens patriarchal power by questioning her social position, the easiest way to deal with her is to label her "insane." Moreover, if insanity is an unfavorable condition, placing women in asylums, enshrouded in mystery, in turn scares other women from further questioning of their social reality. This becomes evident when examining Connie's incarceration. She tried to fight Geraldo in order to protect Dolly, resulting in her being committed to an asylum. The doctors believed Geraldo's story without hearing Connie's explanation. After all, why would a nice looking man lie about his being assaulted by this obviously crazed Latina woman? Chesler observes these relationships:

For them ("mad" women), madness and confinement were both an expression of female powerlessness and an unsuccessful attempt to reject and overcome this state. Madness and asylums generally function as mirror images of the female experience, and as penalties for being "female," as well as for desiring and daring not to be. If the dare is enacted deeply or dramatically enough, death (through slow or fast suicide) ensues...Madness is shut away from sight, shamed, brutalized, denied, and feared. Contemporary men, politics, science--the rational mode itself--does not consult or is not in touch with the irrational, i.e., with the events of the unconscious, or with the meaning of collective history.62

62Chesler, 16 and 26.
The state of madness has therefore been manipulated by patriarchal society to dehumanize women. Unfortunately, there is no word to accurately describe madness as a "fulfilling" reality. Moreover, women rarely control those medical and psychiatric practices that judge women insane. What women have the power to do is to challenge the meaning of labels such as "madness." Therefore madness for women is a reality to which they are forced into, because often the only other alternative is death. Madness does not necessarily have to be defined as a fearful, mysterious ailment, because it can be an empowering state of awareness.

Ephanie had an empowering state of awareness, despite the oppressive identity she had been labeled with by society. The American Indian tradition to which Connie draws, is an alternative view providing her with images of strong, magical women. Such a tradition enables Ephanie to become empowered enough to successfully fight the violent oppression she daily experiences. As women--like Ephanie--have gradually been giving voices to the silent violence inflicted on women, women have begun to reclaim their personal and collective history and get angry. This anger has become yet another alternative to the otherwise grim choices of madness, silence or death. After all, women's experience with anger has historically resulted in women becoming further subordinated and terrorized by society. Ironically, it is acceptable for a woman to
get angry and defend someone, especially her own children, however
she is not "allowed" to become angry at her own mistreatment. Frye
discusses the differences regarding the acceptability of anger
between the sexes:

To get angry is to claim implicitly that one is a
certain sort of being, a being which can (and in this
case does) stand in a certain relation and position a
propos the being one is angry at. One claims that
one is in certain ways and dimensions respectable.
One makes claims upon respect. For any woman to
presuppose any such thing of herself is at best
potentially problematic and at worst
incomprehensible in the world of male-supremacy
where women are Women and men are Men. A man's
concept of Woman and of Man, and his
understanding of what sorts of of relations and
connections are possible between beings of these
sorts, to a great extent determine the range of his
capacity to comprehend these claims, and hence of
his capacity to give uptake to women's anger.63

According to Frye's definition, to have one's anger validated and
believed, one must first be respected. Since women are not respected
by men, they have gradually turned to other women for validation
and respect. Through this process of validation, women have used
their anger to speak out and organize against violence against women
and other related issues.

It is this anger that motivated Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Marge
Piercy, Toni Morrison, and Paula Gunn Allen to write. By writing,
these four women provided many others with a voice through which
to speak about violence against women. For when a woman reads one

63Frye, 90.
of these novels, she is able to have her own experiences validated and heard. Additionally, the reader is able to identify with the characters and draw parallels with their own lives. Because reading is theoretically a non-threatening activity, fiction becomes a "safe environment" in which to articulate angry ideas and feelings.

Ironically, the relationship that a reader can have with fictional characters, is similar to the relationship Gilman's heroine had with the woman in the wallpaper, Connie had with Luciente, Pecola had with her blue eyes, and Ephanie had with the spirit world. They are all relationships rooted in the need to be validated and emotionally or physically seen by someone outside of yourself. If fiction does indeed parallel real experiences of women diagnosed as mentally ill, then these novels can help us re-examine conceptual and structural aspects of madness. To "go mad" suddenly loses its power and fearful stigma because it is no longer a personal and privatized affliction. Madness can no longer be used to trap women in socially isolated environments.

In effect, there are many forms of violence against women, all of which can enforce a slow and painful "dis-memberment" of a woman's physical, emotional and spiritual being. Fiction is one way in which this violent process can be "re-membered" and heard, and in some cases novels can motivate social change, as well as providing women with empowering ideas.


Seidel, Kathryn, L. "Woman On the Edge of Time/Marge Piercy."
Survey of Science Fiction Literature. Vol. 5. Frank N. Magill, ed.

The Guardian. Vol. 120, No. 22, May 27, 1979. rpt. in Contemporary
Literary Criticism, vol. 22. Sharon Gunton, ed. Detroit: Gale Research

Spretnak, Charlene. The Politics of Women's Spirituality. Garden City,

Starhawk. Dreaming the Dark: Magic, Sex & Politics. Boston: Beacon