Charlotte Perkins Gilman Biography

Synopsis


Early Life

Writer and social reformer Charlotte Perkins Gilman was born on July 3, 1860, in Hartford, Connecticut. Gilman was a writer and social activist during the late 1800s and early 1900s. She had a difficult childhood. Her father, Frederick Beecher Perkins was a relative of well-known and influential Beecher family, including the writer Harriet Beecher Stowe. But he abandoned the family, leaving Charlotte's mother to raise two children on her own. Gilman moved around a lot as a result and her education suffered greatly for it.

Marriage and Inspiration

Gilman married artist Charles Stetson in 1884. The couple had a daughter named Katherine. Sometime during her decade-long marriage to Stetson, Gilman experienced a severe depression and underwent a series of unusual treatments for it. This experience is believed to have inspired her best-known short story "The Yellow Wall-Paper" (1892).

The Rest Cure:

In 1887 after the birth of her daughter, Gilman became severely depressed and sought treatment for nervous exhaustion by psychiatrist Silas Weir Mitchell. Mitchell’s rest cure consisted of bed rest, isolation, overfeeding, and massage/electricity on her muscles. When Gilman realized that Mitchell’s treatment worsened her depression, she left both her husband and doctor. Several years later, Gilman wrote “The Yellow Wallpaper” as a reaction to her physician Mitchell’s prescribed rest cure. In her essay “Why I Wrote The Yellow Wallpaper?” Gilman wrote, “Being naturally moved to rejoicing by this narrow escape, I wrote *The Yellow Wallpaper* with its embellishments and additions to carry out the ideal (I never had hallucinations or objections to my mural decorations) and sent a copy to the physician who so nearly drove me mad. He never acknowledged it” (Charlotte Perkins Gilman).

Women's Rights Activism

While she is best known for her fiction, Gilman was also a successful lecturer and intellectual. One of her greatest works of nonfiction, *Women and Economics*, was published in 1898. A feminist, she called for women to gain economic independence, and the work helped cement her standing as a social theorist. It was even used as a textbook at one time. Other important nonfiction works followed, such as *The Home: Its Work and Influence* (1903) and *Does a Man Support His Wife?* (1915).

Along with writing books, Charlotte Perkins Gilman established *The Forerunner*, a magazine that allowed her to express her ideas on women’s issues and on social reform. It was published from 1909 to 1916 and included essays, opinion pieces, fiction, poetry and excerpts from novels.

In her work, Gilman dedicated herself to raising the standard of life for women of her time by deconstructing institutions such as the home and the economy through her non-fiction and by creating new worlds for women in her fiction. Lane describes Gilman’s goal as this, “to draw upon anthropology, biology, history, sociology, ethics and philosophy to comprehend the contours of human evolution and human society in order to create a humane social order” (Lane, 1990, p. 230). Her true understanding of the underlying structures of society comes out bitingly in her work making it valuable to the social sciences despite her lack of formal training in the area.
In short, Gilman was advocating a revolution of sorts similar to that urged earlier by Marx to workers, but Gilman’s focus was on women. She recognized the inequalities inherent in the structure of the working world which excluded women from most jobs, relegating them to the world of the home where they worked from sunrise to sunset, their only compensation being the roof over their heads. They had no income over which they had complete control, a situation she wanted them to remedy and as such, made a primary endeavor. Lane says of this,

**Death**

In 1900, Gilman had married for the second time. She wed her cousin George Gilman, and the two stayed together until his death in 1934. The next year she discovered that she had inoperable breast cancer. Charlotte Perkins Gilman died on August 17, 1935.