

Charlotte Perkins Gilman – 1860-1935

Early Life

She was born in Hartford, CT, the third child in her mother's first three years of marriage (Thomas (died), second Thomas, then Charlotte)

Father – Frederick Beecher Perkins, librarian and writer (his aunt was Harriet Beecher Stowe, the novelist.

Mother – Mary Westcott Perkins

Her mother had previously had many suitors when she was younger, but didn't marry until she was 29. She settled for Frederick, and she was also not his first choice.

Charlotte's father left family shortly after her birth. Exactly why is unclear. He only made a few visits over the years. Her mother then relied on family to take them in. He never supported them. Mother and children moved 19 times in 18 years. Charlotte's mother did not know how to support herself or her children. She waited 13 years before formally divorcing Frederick, and when she did, his family berated her.

Charlotte missed her father her entire life. She longed for him, yet was angry at him. She would go on to portray fathers in her writing as explosive, tyrannical, self-centered, suffocating, arrogant and unloving. From Ann J. Lane's *To Herland and Beyond: The Life and Work of Charlotte Perkins Gilman*: "The word Father, in the sense of love, care, one to go to in trouble, means nothing to me...What a sad dark life the poor man led.' But her yearning for him never entirely ended" (34).

Her mother was deeply affected by her failed marriage, and as a result denied any physical affection to her children: "Having suffered so deeply in her own list of early love affairs, and still suffering for lack of a husband's love, she heroically determined that her baby daughter should not so suffer if she could help it. Her method was to deny the child all expression of affection as far as possible, so that she should not be used to it or long for it. Years later Mary Perkins told her adult daughter, 'I used to put away your little hand from my cheek when you were a nursing baby.' She would not allow her daughter to caress her, nor did she caress the child, unless she was asleep. Charlotte, having discovered this secret, did her best to stay awake, even sticking herself with pins to keep from dropping off, so as to 'rapturously' feel her mother's kisses" (39).

Charlotte was never close to her older brother. He teased her mercilessly. Like Wollstonecraft, in adulthood she often supported him and his family because he was never successful. Under her mother's strict rules, Charlotte became very disciplined. She also ended up caring for her mother when she became ill, and never had a social life.

Also like Wollstonecraft, she was very interested in physical education, and even persuaded an acquaintance to open a women's gymnasium. She was never vain about her looks, but physical strength was important to her. She was largely self-educated, although she did study for two years at the Rhode Island School of Design (1878-1880).

When she turned 21, she contemplated whether she wanted marriage or a career. In her mind, she was convinced she couldn't have both. In her late teens-early twenties, she had become close with a female friend, Martha. Like Wollstonecraft, the relationship meant more to Charlotte than Martha. When Martha fell in love, Charlotte fought for her, and tried desperately to talk her out of marrying, then even suggested they all live together.

Adulthood

In 1882 she met Charles Walter Stetson, an artist. She tried to tell him numerous times over the course of their relationship that she couldn't marry. She didn't want to choose between him and a career. Yet when he suffered a rejection by *The Atlantic* for some of his sonnets, she felt sorry for him and said she'd marry him: "When Walter appeared to be powerful and filled with confidence, Charlotte felt small and weak beside him. But when his vulnerability was exposed, when he was devastated by the critical review of his work, Charlotte reversed herself. He rushed to her side, showed her the letter of rejection, and in a broken voice she said she loved him, and he wrote, 'promised or vowed rather to marry me.' She commented in her autobiography: 'After that, in spite of reactions and misgivings, I kept my word, but the period of courtship was by no means a happy one' (89). She then went through a terrible period of regret that lasted through their actual wedding: "As the idea of marriage became increasingly a possibility to Charlotte, Walter noted that she underwent significant and surprising changes. 'She wants to be treated more as a child now than as a woman. I could scarcely have foreseen so complete a subjugation of self—or rather abnegation. She is willing to do anything, go anywhere, so long as I am with her.' When these moments of self-abnegation were followed, as they invariably were, with demands for separation or perhaps severance, Walter became stunned and angry at her unpredictable behavior" (94).

She gave birth to a daughter, Katherine, in 1885, and suffered severe post-partum depression (again, something that was not identified as such at the time). She would go away and "recover," only to return home to be overcome with depression. Her marriage greatly suffered from her depression. In 1887 she was asked to manage a woman's suffrage column in the Providence paper, *The People*, a weekly newspaper. She could escape her depression while she was working, but not while at home.

She sought treatment from Dr. Weir Mitchell in Philadelphia. He prescribed The Rest Cure, and she was confined to bed. She was only allowed to use her hands to brush her teeth, and was fed by a nurse. She was instructed to "live as domestic a life as possible. Have your child with you all the time....Lie down an hour after each meal. Have but two hours' intellectual life a day. And

never touch pen, brush or pencil as long as you live” (121). The result? “I went home, followed those directions rigidly for months, and came perilously near to losing my mind” (121).

Afterwards, she wrote “The Yellow Wallpaper,” and later explained why she decided to pen the short story: “For many years I suffered from a severe and continuous nervous breakdown tending to melancholia—and beyond....After suffering for about three years, she consulted ‘in devout faith and some faint stir of hope’ a noted specialist in nervous diseases. His advice, which she followed for three months after returning home, brought her ‘so near the borderline of utter mental ruin that I could see over.’ Casting aside his orders...she resumed work, the normal life of every human being” (124).

She finally found strength to leave her marriage in 1887. In her later work we see that her fictional women must attain autonomy before they marry. An important question to ask here is why did she become so dependent? What in her upbringing would have caused this reaction? Do you know of women who are dependent upon romantic relationships in an unhealthy way?

Later life

She once wrote to her close friend Grace (who later married Walter) that she was a man trapped in the wrong body—she had a difficult time conforming to the gender roles of the time. When she left her marriage she went to California and lived with Grace for a time. Walter made a trip there to try to reconcile, and he and Grace ended up falling in love. Charlotte kept Katherine (Kate) for a time, but when she was 8 or 9, sent her to live with Grace and Walter. She was widely criticized for ‘giving up’ her daughter, but Grace and Walter wanted Kate, and likely paid her more attention. In her autobiography, Charlotte states: “Since her second mother was fully as good as the first, better in some ways perhaps; since the father longed for his child...and since the child had a right to know and love her father—I did not mean her to suffer the losses of my youth—this seemed the right thing to do. No one suffered from it but myself” (178). On this last count she may be wrong—her daughter did feel a sense of rejection by her mother.

By 1897 Charlotte had moved from CA back east. She went to visit her cousin George Gilman for legal advice, and married him three years later. She was seven years older than he was. This was an untraditional marriage, in which she took on a more masculine role: “It was the male role she saw herself as filling, not a maleness about her person” (213).

Her writing life thrived after this point. She wrote *Women and Economics*, three Utopian novels, the most successful of which was *Herland*, and many other lesser known works: “In *Herland*, women create a far more radical utopia without men at all. In this wonderful romp, three American men stumble on a community of women, initially convinced that such a superior society presupposed men, who they presume must be hiding....Here, Gilman creates a world that values genuine privacy and genuine community by eliminating the family as a mediating agency. There are no men, no families, only individuals and community, and children are raised by a community of women. It is Gilman’s radical, alternative vision of collective motherhood” (292-

293). She remained married to George for 34 years, until he died of a cerebral hemorrhage. She eventually discovered she had advanced breast cancer. She was living with her daughter and her family by then. When the pain became intolerable, she told her daughter she was going to commit suicide using chloroform: “On August 17, 1935, Charlotte took the chloroform she had long been accumulating, placed it in a washbasin, put a lampshade in the basin, placed her head on the opening of the lampshade, covered her head with a towel, released the chloroform, and died quickly and painlessly” (359-360).

At the time of her death, she was relatively unknown, but a few remembered her impact, including Clara Stillman, who wrote, “Thirty years ago Charlotte Perkins Gilman was a beacon light to girls and women struggling to find a place for themselves in a changing world in which all the taboos were pulling them back while all the necessities were forcing them forward. Since Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication* no book had spoken to women—and to men, on women’s problems—so clearly, so authoritatively, with such revolutionary fervor and common sense as her famous *Women and Economics*. She as an unforgettable figure” (362).