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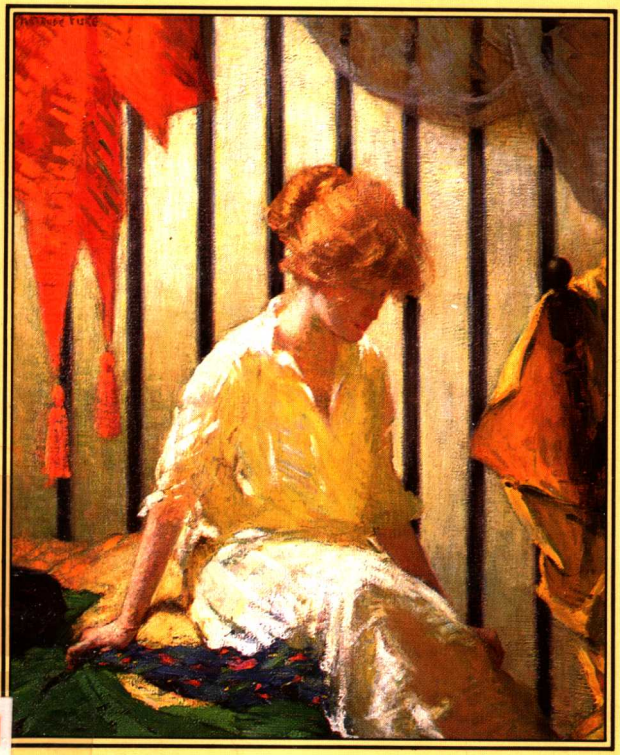
The Yellow Wallpaper and Other Writings by Charlotte Perkins Gilman



With an Introduction by
Lynne Sharon Schwartz

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A Bantam Classic Book / November 1989

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ISBN 0-553-21375-X

Published simultaneously in the United States and Canada

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PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

OPM 18 17 16 15 14

CHARLOTTE PERKINS GILMAN, *feminist, author, critic, and theorist, was born on July 3, 1860, in* Hartford, Connecticut. Although she was a descendant of the famous theologian Lyman Beecher, Charlotte Perkins's early life was characterized by dire poverty and an unstable home: her family moved nineteen times in eighteen years after her father abandoned them. In 1884 she married Charles Walter Stetson, gave birth to a daughter the following year, and was subsequently overcome by bouts of depression, which nearly caused her complete breakdown. Finally she fled to California and created a scandal by obtaining a divorce and granting custody of her daughter to her husband. In 1892 her story "The Yellow Wallpaper" appeared, and she began her writing and social activism in earnest. She became a contributing editor to *The American Fabian* and fought for reforms based on her socialist and feminist ideals. Her most famous book, *Women and Economics* (1898), was translated into seven languages, winning her international recognition. In 1900 she married George Houghton Gilman. For seven years she wrote and edited her own magazine, *The Forerunner,* and she wrote ten more books, including *The Home* (1902), *Human Works* (1904), and *The Man-Made World: Our Androcentric Culture* (1911). Her famous utopian novel, *Herland,* appeared in 1915. She committed sucide in 1935 while dying from breast cancer.

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INTRODUCTION

"Life is a verb," Charlotte Perkins Gilman wrote at the dawn of the twentieth century.[1] From girlhood to old age, she invented new forms of the verb her own living might take. "Here I am," she declares as a teenager, "in the world, conscious, able to do this or that. What is it all about? How does it work? What is my part in it, my job—what ought I to do?"[2] She calls her autobiography, published after her death in 1935, *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman*, and the unexpected rhythm of its title is a deliberate choice, active gerund rather than static noun.

At the close of that book, looking back on almost half a century of writing, lecturing, and traveling, she notes tersely the waning demand for her services. The "market" for lecturers "has declined before the advance of the radio." She had "not unreasonably expected" to be invited to the Connecticut College for Women, near her home in

Norwich. Not unreasonably: her books had gone through numerous editions and been translated into half a dozen languages; she was recognized as a leading thinker in the women's movement, a socialist and supporter of the labor movement. "With so much that was new and strong to say to the coming generation, it seemed to me a natural opportunity. It did not seem so to the college."[3] Perhaps it did not because with the attainment of suffrage the urgency of the women's movement had abated, at least in the public eye. But Gilman's ambitions for women—and men—went far beyond the right to vote. Voting by itself, she might have said, cannot reinvent a society.

Decades later a new generation of feminists discovered Gilman and treasured her, not only for her work, though that remained as strong and pertinent as ever, but also for her life. Impelled by principle, it was a more vivid example than any book. What especially touched readers coming of age in the 1960s and 1970s was her delight in spontaneous quest, her passion for intellectual adventure. In childhood her mind and imagination had been hampered; as an adult, she was impatient with stodgy, habitual grooves of thought.

> Education has diligently endeavored to enforce upon each brain precisely that mass and order of impressions considered as beneficial in the past. . . . The tendency of the race towards its own vanguard—the young—has been that of a heavy old gentleman throwing himself solidly down on an active child, and seeking to smother him and pin him to the earth.[4]

Her reputation today rests largely on "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892), the classic and often anthologized story of a trapped woman's mental disintegration. Yet Gilman saw herself primarily as a sociologist, anthropologist, and social philosopher; her books outline radical ideas on the meaning and ramifications of human work, on the

institutions of marriage and the family (distinct and not always mutually supporting, she warns), on motherhood, and on childrearing in particular, which she vehemently believed should be entrusted to trained professionals, not left to the volatilities of "maternal instinct."

Though her ideas were advanced for her time, she was far from an isolated voice. Born in Hartford, Connecticut in 1860, Charlotte Perkins was raised in an atmosphere where independent thinking and social activism were familiar—indeed, familial. Her great-grandfather on her father's side was the religious leader, Lyman Beecher, and his children, Henry Ward Beecher, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Catherine Beecher, and Isabella Beecher Hooker, along with their circle of friends, were, variously, rebels, writers, feminists, and freethinkers. Among these New England intellectuals the transcendental strain was still powerful—Emerson's and Margaret Fuller's idealism, Thoreau's smug purity and political orneriness.

The final decades of the nineteenth century, when Gilman matured and flourished, saw enormous social change and intellectual ferment: industrialization and immigration destabilized social patterns and gave impetus to the labor movement; the conglomeration of the railroads in the West concentrated new wealth in the hands of a few; the suffrage movement stirred up controversy, while the work of Jane Addams at Chicago's Hull House and that of others in what we now term the "private sector" forced attention to the horrors of poverty. Edward Bellamy's fantasy, *Looking Backward,* which projected a world redeemed by science and socialism, had a tremendous vogue; Gilman was among the many influenced by his utopian dream.

In a more deeply unsettling way, the intellectual climate had been altered forever—heated up, swirled into modernity—by the irreverent trio of Marx, Freud, and Darwin. Like every serious thinker, Gilman had to take them into account, develop a stance toward the news they brought. For the most part her stance was aloof, resistant.

While she drew on Darwinian natural selection in discussing marriage and "improving" the species, she regarded "the struggle for existence" and "the survival of the fittest" as unfortunate branches from the male roots of combat and competition. And though her own motif of collective ownership seems a variant of Marxism's "to each according to his needs, from each according to his abilities," she took pains to abjure communism, a "flat and uniform world, of no ambition, no distinction, no privacy, no private property, and therefore no life worth having."[5] As for Freud, no mythology could be more antithetical; her weapons against lifelong bouts with depression were old-fashioned reason and self-discipline—Emersonian self-reliance.

Gilman makes an easy mark for Freudian-style analysis: no educated modern temperament can fail to perceive her guilt, rage, repression, denial—our comforting, if reductive, insignia. A more fertile approach to her life, though, might be along the lines suggested by feminist critic Phyllis Rose:

> Often the most radical perspective you can adopt on a person's experience is his or her own. . . . Each of us, influenced perhaps by one ideology or another, generates our own plot, our own symbolic landscape, a highly individual configuration of significance through which we view our own experience and which I call a personal mythology.[6]

Gilman's personal myth turns on the themes of rational decision and calculated acts, the power of the will in service of a social ideal. That is, she stuck to the challenge she had set herself as a girl—to find her work and do it.

* * *

Frederick Beecher Perkins, a literary man and later librarian of the San Francisco Public Library, left his

family when Charlotte and her brother were small children. In her autobiography, she primly attributes the break to her mother's physical weakness—bearing more children would kill her—but surely there were more subtle tensions and dissatisfactions. Although Charlotte kept in touch (she wrote to her father often, asking advice about her studies), she always resented his defection, a resentment mixed awkwardly with admiration. She treats the men in her fiction in likewise ambivalent fashion: sometimes as irresponsible, downright dense creatures, occasionally as victims of spiritual asphyxiation.

With scant aid from her husband, Mary Westcott Perkins raised her children in one Rhode Island lodging after another, often living with relatives, a peripatetic, moneyless way of life Charlotte would continue. The childhood sketched in her autobiography is cold—strictly supervised, emotionally meager. Some poignant, if not perspicacious, lines tell volumes about her mother:

> 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. "I used to put away your little hand from my cheek when you were a nursing baby," she told me in later years; "I did not want you to suffer as I had suffered." She would not let me caress her, and would not caress me, unless I was asleep. This I discovered at last, and then did my best to keep awake till she came to bed, even using pins to prevent dropping off, and sometimes succeeding. Then how carefully I pretended to be sound asleep, and how rapturously I enjoyed being gathered into her arms, held close and kissed.[7]

Charlotte lived an intense fantasy life, until she decided her bedtime visions were somehow "wrong" and set about rationing them: strange and lovely things one night a week, "wonders" once a month. "This program was soon for-

gotten, but it shows conscience wrestling with fantasy at an early age."[8] They were to wrestle all her life, with conscience, predictably, the usual victor. If granted the proverbial three wishes, this prudent child's first would be, " 'I wish that everything I wish may be Right!' To be right was the main thing in life."[9] So it remained. The compulsion to be right inevitably congeals into righteousness, a tone acutely late Victorian and never entirely absent from Gilman's work.

Through lack of money and Mary Perkins's close surveillance, Charlotte was largely self-educated. Then at eighteen, overcoming her mother's objections, she went to the Rhode Island School of Design to study art and painting, which gave her a livelihood, doing commercial illustrations. She was enthusiastic about gymnastics and running; she taught Sunday school, she tutored children; most of all she read to prepare for her life's work, whatever that might be. Finally: "Twenty-one. My own mistress at last. No one on earth had a right to ask obedience of me. I was self-supporting of course, a necessary base for freedom which the young revolters of today often overlook."[10] Relief bounces audibly through the phrases.

Just one year later, in 1882, she met Walter Stetson, a young painter who pursued her with tenacity. After two years of agonizing, analyzing, and vacillating, she married him. Puzzling, yes, that a young woman so avid for freedom should take the conventional path. In light of the social pressures brought to bear, however, along with Stetson's flattering eagerness, not quite so puzzling. (Years later she would stringently dissect such pressures.)

Her doubts were well founded. Before marrying she was reading literature, philosophy, and feminist journals, learning French and German, writing stories and poetry. Immediately afterward, lassitude, fretfulness, and fits of weeping overtook her, and upon the birth of her daughter, Katharine, in 1885, she sank into a severe depression,

hardly able to read or do domestic work, not to mention care for a child.

Her journal entries for that period are a pathetic record of collapse and guilt: "teary," "tremulous," "downcast," a string of dreary days spent lying on the sofa with forbearing Walter bringing cups of tea. She tried travel, visiting her brother in Utah and her friend Grace Channing in California, and her spirits lifted. But as soon as she returned to husband, home, and child the depression tugged her back down.

In the end she saved herself. She left Walter, taking their daughter out West to a California uncannily like the state we know today, "peculiarly addicted to swift enthusiasms, . . . a seed-bed of all manner of cults and theories, taken up, and dropped, with equal speed."[11] There she supported herself (barely) by lecturing, writing for small magazines, and running a boardinghouse (something a number of her fictional heroines do too, as it was one of the few acceptable paths then open to single women). A few years later the Stetsons divorced, and Gilman, already a public figure, sent her daughter to live with Walter and his new wife, Grace Channing (still Gilman's close friend). For this decision she was, to her lasting chagrin, excoriated by the press as an "unnatural mother."

The conflicts triggering her breakdown were never resolved, and spells of morbid depression continued to plague her. In her autobiography Gilman dwells on her illness, understandably, since at the time it was neither acknowledged as such nor accorded much sympathy. She was seldom able to read for more than an hour or so at a stretch; her nerves were "wilted," her mind "like a piece of boiled spinach."[12]

> To see, to hear, to think, to remember, to do anything, is incredible effort, as if trying to rise and walk under a prostrate circus tent, or wade in glue. It brings a heavy darkness, every idea presenting itself as a

misfortune; an irritable unease which finds no rest, and an incapacity of decision which is fairly laughable.

For all the years in which I have had to pack a suitcase and start on a trip, that packing is dreaded; and often finds me at midnight, after several hours' attempt, holding up some article and looking at it in despair, utterly unable to make up my mind whether to take it or not. In one of the worst times, in 1896, I stood on a street corner for fifteen minutes, trying in vain to decide whether or not to take the car home.[13]

Besides navigating this wretched tightrope, she lived in perpetual debt, "as propertyless and as desireless as a Buddhist priest, almost, though needing something more than a yellow robe and begging bowl."[14] With such handicaps, the sheer quantity of her writings and activities is prodigious: *Women and Economics: A Study of the Economic Relation Between Men and Women* (1898), which *The Nation* called "the most significant utterance on the subject since Mill's *Subjection of Women*";[15] *Concerning Children* (1900); *The Home: Its Work and Influence* (1902); *Human Work* (1904); *The Man-Made World: Our Androcentric Culture* (1911); numerous lectures and essays; and several volumes of poetry. In 1909 she started *The Forerunner,* a monthly magazine she wrote and published singlehandedly for seven years—poems, topical pieces, humor, stories, and serialized novels, among them the utopian *Herland.*

Today Gilman's breakdown does not seem baffling but rather archetypal, with the pattern and inevitability of fiction. It did in fact become fiction—"The Yellow Wallpaper," her only story that gives literary shape to private torment and ranks among American classics. She drew on her treatment at the hands of the Philadelphia neurologist, S. Weir Mitchell, whose "rest cure" had been widely used on women with nervous disorders; one shudders to imagine the undocumented cases. The cure consisted of

the patient's doing nothing, certainly no more than an hour's daily reading or writing or stimulating talk. It drove Gilman nearly mad; the fictional patient does not have the resources to save herself.

In naively ironic fashion, the narrator of "The Yellow Wallpaper" simultaneously chronicles and reflects her voyage to insanity. A virtual prisoner of her husband, a supposedly well-meaning physician, she queries innocently, "*perhaps* that is one reason I do not get well faster." With her environment restricted to her room, she grows mesmerized by its patterned wallpaper, at first merely sinister, then gradually an emblem of confinement. In the end, reality and symbol hurtle into each other. As an account of the dynamics of delusion, the story is more than superbly shocking; it is physically painful to read, and was so when first published, in 1892, in *The New England Magazine*. "Such a story ought not to be written," one reader wrote. "It was enough to drive anyone mad to read it." In 1920 William Dean Howells included it in his *Great Modern American Stories* as a horror story. Reissuing it in *The Forerunner* in 1913, Gilman added a personal statement answering her many appalled readers, doctors among them:

> Using the remnants of intelligence that remained, . . . I cast the noted specialist's advice to the winds and went to work again—work, the normal life of every human being; work, in which is joy and growth and service, without which one is a pauper and a parasite—ultimately recovering some measure of power. . . . It was not intended to drive people crazy, but to save people from being driven crazy, and it worked.[16]

Whatever her intentions, Gilman offered something more than a remedy: a masterpiece. Just as the crucial themes of her life—autonomy, marriage, work, the struggle of enlightenment against restriction—converged in her breakdown, they converge, transformed, in a perfectly

balanced, emotionally charged narrative structure. None of her other fiction approaches "The Yellow Wallpaper"; nowhere else did she venture to that inner space where the boundaries dividing imagination, feeling, and conviction fall away.

Once Gilman's life is firmly centered in work and she is something of a celebrity (around the 1890s), the tone of her autobiography loses its timbre. Introspection and passion are replaced, disappointingly, by an itinerary of trips, lectures, and oddly stiff encounters with friends and colleagues, many of them famous names of the period. Even her marriage, in 1900, to her cousin, G. Houghton Gilman, is mentioned perfunctorily, although by all accounts they spent thirty years in a companionable union of equals, her own utopian model for marriage. The self-portrait shows a well-functioning finished product, no longer porous but lacquered, immune to the trafficking between world and self, the reshaping and recombinations that make the succulent heart of adult life.

The obverse of that image appears in Gilman's voluminous diaries and in the letters written to her second husband before their marriage; these are pulsing with intimate revelations. From them, some scholars have imagined a different woman entirely, emotionally fluid, even turbulent, engaged in many passionate friendships—possibly love affairs—with those lifeless figures in her autobiography. Critics disagree, as well, over her attitude about sex—whether she enjoyed it freely, if secretly, or was puritanically repressed or simply uninterested; whether her close women friends were also lovers. Gilman would certainly have scorned such intriguing speculation. Publicly she maintained that the sexual instinct was overdeveloped, with romantic love occupying far too prominent a place in private fantasies and social arrangements.

Her personal myth, in any event, was not about romance but salvation—through work—from imprisoning dogma. Freed by her own initiative, the myth's heroine,

naturally always right, undertakes to lead society to freedom. Reason and discipline triumph over the murky, unreliable impulses of emotion and tradition. Between the lines we may—we are obliged to—see conflict and perplexity. For one thing, the woman who extolled motherhood chose not to raise her own child: not an unnatural mother, but perhaps an ordinary ambivalent one. And why did she say so little of her second marriage if it illustrated her ideals? Contradictions are rampant, as in any valorous life. Yet in the larger sense, her myth was accurate. She did battle successfully with fate, and given her aspirations, her work *was* eminently right.

* * *

Any coherent feminist theory must study and span the social pillars of economics and sexuality—Freud's subjective "love and work" gone public. Unlike many feminists today, Gilman stresses the economics and downplays the sex: economic independence is her first and indispensable requirement for personal freedom. But more fundamental than either is a vision of history and society to account for the present and to project the future. *The Man-Made World,* her most original and farsighted book (though critics give top billing to *Women and Economics*), traces that vision.

Its premise is that historically, the notion of human characteristics has been mistakenly and disastrously restricted to what are actually male qualities. Small wonder, since in our "androcentric" culture, history has been "made and written" by men; also no wonder that its themes have been desire and combat, the propelling male instincts. Once men succeeded in "monopolizing" human activities, naming them man's work, women effectively dropped out of history, out of production, out of everything except a service role. So *The Man-Made World* seeks, slightly disingenuously, to isolate specifically male qualities from the more fundamental traits common to all. To defend this

undertaking, Gilman acidly cites the many treatises seeking to define women, some even debating whether they are persons at all or merely females.

From this half tongue-in-cheek opening develops a witty and pointed analysis of social institutions: the family, originally evolved for the nurture of children, has become "the vehicle of his comfort, power and pride"; history and literature, notably popular fiction, rooted in love and adventure (desire and combat again), are oblivious of the real adventures of more than half the race. Even women's love for men, as shown in fiction, "is largely a reflex; it is the way he wants her to feel, expects her to feel. Not a fair representation of how she does feel." Law and government are cumbersome, authoritarian, and competitive; the lust for combat exalts warfare, making "each man-managed nation an actual or potential fighting organization."

These sweeping judgments focus less on particular manifestations than on the spirit that informs society and conceives and achieves its destiny. That this spirit can be more fully human, more humane, has always been a revolutionary idea. Gilman does not suggest it is found exclusively in women—quite the contrary—simply that it has been undervalued if not ignored. "The female is the race-type—the man the variant" may sound high-handed but, under the circumstances, is an effort to right the balance. She was influenced, too, by the work of Lester Ward, the pioneering American sociologist who claimed that woman "is the unchanging trunk of the great genealogical tree upon which the male is simply grafted."[17]

Women and Economics was Gilman's most widely read book, going through seven American editions, translated into seven languages, and bringing her renown in Western European feminist circles. Its version of marriage no doubt appalled many readers: after demonstrating that wives are neither paid servants nor equal partners nor professional mothers, she coolly likens their services to those of prostitutes. In brief, "the female of the genus