

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860-1935)

Love and Marriage and The Breakdown

Rediscovered in the 1970's and '80s by the women's movement, Charlotte Perkins Gilman is now widely known, especially for the autobiographical short story "The Yellow Wallpaper" and the utopian novel *Herland*. But from the mid-1890's to World War I she was famous as a feminist and socialist, a popular lecturer, and the author of *Women and Economics* (1898) and many other books. After World War I, however, her progressive economic and political views went out of fashion, and she turned to writing her autobiography, completing all but the last chapter of it by 1925.

"Love and Marriage" and "The Breakdown" are chapters 7 and 8 of *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman: An Autobiography*. They appear near the end of the first third and constitute the crisis of the book...and of the life, as here told.

In the opening of *The Living*, Gilman proudly tells of her New England ancestors (including Lyman Beecher, father of Harriet Beecher Stowe, who was her father's grandfather) and their traditions of self-discipline, intellectual achievement, and service to others. Less enviable is the story of how, when her father learned that her mother could bear no more children, he left her and went to California. Mrs. Perkins, Charlotte, and an older brother Thomas were so poor they had to move nineteen times in eighteen years, mostly living with relatives. Stung by her husband's rejection, Mrs. Perkins determined to harden her daughter against a similar fate and so gave Charlotte no expressions of affection. From these combined inspirations and deprivations the adolescent daughter became a paragon of self-denial, hard work, physical health, and dedication to service. She also studied at the Rhode Island School for Design, and in May, 1884, married another artist, the handsome Charles Walter Stetson.

The experiences described below are first described in "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892), and the two accounts make a fascinating comparison between "fiction" and the "factual fiction" that is autobiography. For additional interest, they can be compared to Gilman's "Why I wrote "The Yellow Wallpaper"" (1913).

Neither the "fictional" version nor the account of its writing mention her divorce from Stetson, which was the solution chosen in "The Breakdown." For where "The Yellow Wallpaper" is a story of descent into insanity, of a woman driven mad by perverse kindness, "The Breakdown" is the story of her clinging to her sanity and independence and bravely disobeying her doctor (the famous S. Weir Mitchell). The reasons for these different versions—and the different kinds of truth they possess—could be discussed at length. Clearly, Charlotte Stetson in 1891-92 and Charlotte Gilman in the 1920's were very different women, who, conceived of themselves in very different ways. Another factor behind the different versions involves attitudes towards divorce, for fictional characters rarely had recourse to it. But a divorce like the Stetsons', with "no quarrel, no blame...never an unkind word between us, unbroken mutual affection," would have been unthinkable in both art and life. This rationally chosen, unconventional, and humane choice in a way epitomizes the progressive temper.

In April, 1894, the divorce was finally granted. (It was difficult to obtain because there were bi acceptable grounds for divorce as it was legally defined.) Within a year, Mr. Stetson married Grace Channing, Charlottes' life-long friend, and the three remained close friends, raising their daughter (Grace's stepdaughter) Katherine Beecher Stetson together. In 1900, Charlotte married George Houghton Gilman, her first cousin, and the close relationship continued; with the two couples sometimes living in the brief final chapter of *The Living* tells that in 1932 Mrs. Gilman learned that she had breast cancer. But ,not wanting to suffer a long period of mortal pain, uselessness to society, and trouble and expense to friends and family, she prepared to take her own life, which she did, an editorial note explains, on August 17, 1935. Rationalists and progressive, independent crusader against debilitating social

conventions, she had thus come as close as any autobiographer can come to including in her story her own death.

This selection is taken from *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman: An Autobiography* (New York: Appleton-Century Co., 1935; reprint, Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1990). For additional reading, see Ann J Lane, *Herland and Beyond: The Life and Work of Charlotte Perkins Gilman* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1990). For background on neurasthenia, see Tom Lutz, *American Nervousness, 1903: An Anecdotal History* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1991).

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