

# Charlotte Gilman

## Selected Poems



# Charlotte Perkins Gilman

July 3, 1860 [Hartford, Connecticut] –

1935 [Pasadena, California]

Gilman was a renowned feminist writer, perhaps best known for her autobiographical account of postpartum depression, “The Yellow Wallpaper,” published in 1899 and the utopian novel *Herland* (1915). Gilman was born in Hartford, Connecticut. During her infancy, her father left the family. Her mother was not able to support the family, so Gilman and her brother were often in the company her father’s aunts, notably the suffragist Isabella Beecher Hooker and the author of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Harriet Beecher Stowe. Much of her youth was spent in Providence, Rhode Island. She married artist Charles Walter Stetson in 1884 with whom she bore a daughter, Katherine; she separated from him 1888 at which point she moved to Pasadena, California with her daughter. Her first volume of poetry, *In This Our World* — a series of satiric jabs at the patriarchy — was published in 1893 to much acclaim. Gilman’s mother died in the same year, at which point Gilman moved back east, moving back to Pasadena in 1934 (after her diagnosis of incurable breast cancer) to be nearer to her daughter. An advocate of euthanasia for the terminally ill, Gilman committed suicide on August 17, 1935.

*In This Our World*. Boston: Small, Maynard and Company, 1898.

*The Later Poetry*. Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1966.

# Homes

A Sestina

We are the smiling comfortable homes  
With happy families enthroned therein,  
Where baby souls are brought to meet the world,  
Where women end their duties and desires,  
For which men labor as the goal of life,  
That people worship now instead of God.

Do we not teach the child to worship God?—  
Whose soul's young range is bounded by the homes  
Of those he loves, and where he learns that life  
Is all constrained to serve the wants therein,  
Domestic needs and personal desires,—  
These are the early limits of his world.

And are we not the woman's perfect world,  
Prescribed by nature and ordained of God,  
Beyond which she can have no right desires,  
No need for service other than in homes?  
For doth she not bring up her young therein?  
And is not rearing young the end of life?

And man? What other need hath he in life  
Than to go forth and labor in the world,  
And struggle sore with other men therein?  
Not to serve other men, nor yet his God,  
But to maintain these comfortable homes,—  
The end of all a normal man's desires.

Shall not the soul's most measureless desires  
Learn that the very flower and fruit of life  
Lies all attained in comfortable homes,  
With which life's purpose is to dot the world  
And consummate the utmost will of God,  
By sitting down to eat and drink therein.

Yea, in the processes that work therein—  
Fulfilment of our natural desires—  
Surely man finds the proof that mighty God  
For to maintain and reproduce his life  
Created him and set him in the world;  
And this high end is best attained in homes.

Are we not homes? And is not all therein?  
Wring dry the world to meet our wide desires!  
We crown all life! We are the aim of God!

# The Anti-Suffragists

Fashionable women in luxurious homes,  
With men to feed them, clothe them, pay their bills,  
Bow, doff the hat, and fetch the handkerchief;  
Hostess or guest, and always so supplied  
With graceful deference and courtesy;  
Surrounded by their servants, horses, dogs,—  
These tell us they have all the rights they want.

Successful women who have won their way  
Alone, with strength of their unaided arm,  
Or helped by friends, or softly climbing up  
By the sweet aid of 'woman's influence';  
Successful any way, and caring naught  
For any other woman's unsuccess,—  
These tell us they have all the rights they want.

Religious women of the feebler sort,—  
Not the religion of a righteous world,  
A free, enlightened, upward-reaching world,  
But the religion that considers life  
As something to back out of!—whose ideal  
Is to renounce, submit, and sacrifice,  
Counting on being patted on the head  
And given a high chair when they get to heaven,—  
These tell us they have all the rights they want.

Ignorant women—college-bred sometimes,  
But ignorant of life's realities  
And principles of righteous government,  
And how the privileges they enjoy  
Were won with blood and tears by those before—  
Those they condemn, whose ways they now oppose;  
Saying, 'Why not let well enough alone?  
Our world is very pleasant as it is,'—  
These tell us they have all the rights they want.

And selfish women,—pigs in petticoats,—  
Rich, poor, wise, unwise, top or bottom round,  
But all sublimely innocent of thought,  
And guiltless of ambition, save the one  
Deep, voiceless aspiration—to be fed!  
These have no use for rights or duties more.  
Duties today are more than they can meet,  
And law insures their right to clothes and food,—  
These tell us they have all the rights they want.

And, more's the pity, some good women, too;  
Good conscientious women, with ideas;  
Who think—or think they think—that woman's cause  
Is best advanced by letting it alone;  
That she somehow is not a human thing,  
And not to be helped on by human means,  
Just added to humanity—an “L”—  
A wing, a branch, an extra, not mankind,—  
These tell us they have all the rights they want.

And out of these has come a monstrous thing,  
A strange, down-sucking whirlpool of disgrace,  
Women uniting against womanhood,  
And using that great name to hide their sin!  
Vain are their words as that old king's command  
Who set his will against the rising tide.  
But who shall measure the historic shame  
Of these poor traitors—traitors are they all—  
To great Democracy and Womanhood!

## Similar Cases

There was once a little animal,  
    No bigger than a fox,  
And on five toes he scampered  
    Over Tertiary rocks.  
They called him Eohippus,  
    And they called him very small,  
And they thought him of no value—  
    When they thought of him at all;  
For the lumpish old Dinoceras  
    And Coryphodon so slow  
Were the heavy aristocracy  
    In days of long ago.

Said the little Eohippus,  
    “I am going to be a horse!  
And on my middle finger-nails  
    To run my earthly course!  
I’m going to have a flowing tail!  
    I’m going to have a mane!  
I’m going to stand fourteen hands high  
    On the psychozoic plain!”

The Coryphodon was horrified,  
    The Dinoceras was shocked;  
And they chased young Eohippus,  
    But he skipped away and mocked.  
Then they laughed enormous laughter,  
    And they groaned enormous groans.  
And they bade young Eohippus  
    Go view his father’s bones.  
Said they, “You always were as small  
    And mean as now we see,  
And that’s conclusive evidence  
    That you’re always going to be.  
What! Be a great, tall, handsome beast,  
    With hoofs to gallop on?

Why! You'd have to change your nature!  
Said the Loxolophodon.  
They considered him disposed of,  
And retired with gait serene;  
That was the way they argued  
In "the early Eocene".  
There was once an Anthropoidal Ape,  
Far smarter than the rest,  
And everything that they could do  
He always did the best;  
So they naturally disliked him  
And they gave him shoulders cool,  
And when they had to mention him  
They said he was a fool.

Cried this pretentious Ape one day,  
"I'm going to be a man!  
And stand upright, and hunt, and fight,  
And conquer all I can!  
I'm going to cut down forest trees,  
To make my houses higher!  
I'm going to kill the Mastodon!  
I'm going to make a fire!"  
Loud screamed the Anthropoidal Apes  
With laughter wild and gay;  
They tried to catch that boastful one,  
But he always got away.  
So they yelled at him in chorus,  
Which he minded not a whit;  
And they pelted him with cocoanuts,  
Which didn't seem to hit.  
And then they gave him reasons  
Which they thought of much avail,  
To prove how his preposterous  
Attempt was sure to fail.  
Said the sages, "In the first place,  
The thing cannot be done!  
And, second, if it could be,

It would not be any fun!  
And, third, and most conclusive,  
And admitting no reply,  
You would have to change your nature!  
We should like to see you try!”  
They chuckled then triumphantly,  
These lean and hairy shapes,  
For these things passed as arguments  
With the Anthropoidal Apes.

There was once a Neolithic Man,  
An enterprising wight,  
Who made his chopping implements  
Unusually bright.  
Unusually clever he,  
Unusually brave,  
And he drew delightful Mammoths  
On the borders of his cave.  
To his Neolithic neighbours,  
Who were startled and surprised,  
Said he, “My friends, in course of time,  
We shall be civilized!  
We are going to live in cities!  
We are going to fight in wars!  
We are going to eat three times a day  
Without the natural cause!  
We are going to turn life upside down  
About a thing called gold!  
We are going to want the earth, and take  
As much as we can hold!  
We are going to wear great piles of stuff  
Outside our proper skins!  
We are going to have Diseases!  
And Accomplishments!! And Sins!!!”

Then they all rose up in fury  
Against their boastful friend,  
For prehistoric patience

Cometh quickly to an end.  
Said one, "This is chimerical!  
Utopian! Absurd!"  
Said another, "What a stupid life!  
Too dull, upon my word!"  
Cried all, Before such things can come,  
You idiotic child,  
You must alter Human Nature!"  
And they all sat back and smiled.  
Thought they, "An answer to that last  
It will be hard to find!"  
It was a clinching argument  
To the Neolithic Mind!

# To the Young Wife

Are you content, you pretty three-years' wife?  
Are you content and satisfied to live  
On what your loving husband loves to give,  
And give to him your life?

Are you content with work,—to toil alone,  
To clean things dirty and to soil things clean;  
To be a kitchen-maid, be called a queen,—  
Queen of a cook-stove throne?

Are you content to reign in that small space—  
A wooden palace and a yard-fenced land—  
With other queens abundant on each hand,  
Each fastened in her place?

Are you content to rear your children so?  
Untaught yourself, untrained, perplexed, distressed,  
Are you so sure your way is always best?  
That you can always know?

Have you forgotten how you used to long  
In days of ardent girlhood, to be great,  
To help the groaning world, to serve the state,  
To be so wise—so strong?

And are you quite convinced this is the way,  
The only way a woman's duty lies—  
Knowing all women so have shut their eyes?  
Seeing the world to-day?

Having no dream of life in fuller store?  
Of growing to be more than that you are?  
Doing the things you know do better far,  
Yet doing others—more?

Losing no love, but finding as you grew

That as you entered upon nobler life  
You so became a richer, sweeter wife,  
A wiser mother too?

What holds you? Ah, my dear, it is your throne,  
Your paltry queenship in that narrow place,  
Your antique labours, your restricted space,  
Your working all alone!

Be not deceived! 'Tis not your wifely bond  
That holds you, nor the mother's royal power,  
But selfish, slavish service hour by hour—  
A life with no beyond!

# Christian Virtues

Oh, dear!  
The Christian virtues will disappear!  
Nowhere on land or sea  
Will be room for charity!  
Nowhere, in field or city,  
A person to help or pity!  
Better for them, no doubt,  
Not to need helping out  
Of their old miry ditch.  
But, alas for us, the rich!  
For we shall lose, you see,  
Our boasted charity!—  
Lose all the pride and joy  
Of giving the poor employ,  
And money, and food, and love  
(And making stock thereof!).  
Our Christian virtues are gone,  
With nothing to practise on!

It don't hurt them a bit,  
For they can't practise it;  
But it's our great joy and pride—  
What virtue have we beside?  
We believe, as sure as we live,  
That it is more blessed to give  
Than to want, and waste, and grieve,  
And occasionally receive!  
And here are the people pressing  
To rob us of our pet blessing!  
No chance to endow or bedizen  
A hospital, school or prison,  
And leave our own proud name  
To Gratitude and Fame!  
No chance to do one good deed,  
To give what we do not need,  
To leave what we cannot use

To those whom we deign to choose!  
When none want broken meat,  
How shall our cake be sweet?  
When none want flannels and coals,  
How shall we save our souls?  
Oh, dear! Oh, dear!  
The Christian virtues will disappear!

The poor have their virtues rude,—  
Meekness and gratitude,  
Endurance, and respect  
For us, the world's elect;  
Economy, self-denial,  
Patience in every trial,  
Self-sacrifice, self-restraint,—  
Virtues enough for a saint!  
Virtues enough to bear  
All this life's sorrow and care!  
Virtues by which to rise  
To a front seat in the skies!  
How can they turn from this  
To common earthly bliss,—  
Mere clothes, and food, and drink,  
And leisure to read and think,  
And art, and beauty, and ease,—  
There is no crown for these!  
True, if their gratitude  
Were not for fire and food,  
They might still learn to bless  
The Lord for their happiness!  
And, instead of respect for wealth,  
Might learn from beauty, and health,  
And freedom in power and pelf,  
Each man to respect himself!  
And, instead of scraping and saving,  
Might learn from using and having  
That man's life should be spent  
In a grand development!

But this is petty and small;  
These are not virtues at all;  
They do not look as they should;  
They don't do us any good!  
Oh, dear! Oh, dear! Oh, dear!  
The Christian virtues will disappear!

# The Mother's Charge

She raised her head. With hot and glittering eye,  
'I know,' she said, 'that I am going to die.  
Come here, my daughter, while my mind is clear.  
Let me make plain to you your duty here;  
My duty once—I never failed to try—  
But for some reason I am going to die.'  
She raised her head, and, while her eyes rolled wild,  
Poured these instructions on the gasping child:

'Begin at once—don't iron sitting down—  
Wash your potatoes when the fat is brown—  
Monday, unless it rains—it always pays  
To get fall sewing done on the right days—  
A carpet-sweeper and a little broom—  
Save dishes—wash the summer dining-room  
With soda—keep the children out of doors—  
The starch is out—beeswax on all the floors—  
If girls are treated like your friends they stay—  
They stay, and treat you like their friends—the way  
To make home happy is to keep a jar—  
And save the prettiest pieces for the star  
In the middle—blue's too dark—all silk is best—  
And don't forget the corners—when they're dressed  
Put them on ice—and always wash the chest  
Three times a day, the windows every week—  
We need more flour—the bedroom ceilings leak—  
It's better than onion—keep the boys at home—  
Gardening is good—a load, three loads of loam—  
They bloom in spring—and smile, smile always, dear—  
Be brave, keep on—I hope I've made it clear.'

She died, as all her mothers died before.  
Her daughter died in turn, and made one more.







































































































































































