\*Essay #1: Explore any writer from the text and discuss how their writing & life served as a catalyst for social/political/religious reform. Use direct quotes/ specific examples from your text as supporting evidence of your claims. 4 pages minimum. MLA style.

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Charlotte Perkins Gilman: Mental Health, Feminism, and Social Change

Charlotte Perkins Gilman was born on July 3rd, 1860 in Hartford, Connecticut. During her seventy-five year life, she greatly advanced the feminist cause. More specifically, her work called for the advancement of the view and treatment of women with regard to mental health. “The Yellow Wallpaper,” by far Gilman’s most famous work, both shocked and inspired its readers. Some, such as a Boston physician thought that “it was enough to drive anyone mad who read it.” Another physician claimed that the story “was the best description of incipient insanity he had ever seen” (Gilman 804). Although the exact medical merits of the story were hotly contested at the time, the story, along with Gilman’s other work, called for widespread change with regard to treatment of women.

Specifically, Charlotte Perkins Gilman called for social change regarding mental health practices on women. Gilman’s significant use of autobiographical experiences made a deep impact on readers. In fact, the “rest cure” Gilman discusses in the story was an actual technique used to treat her depression. Gilman, in her response as to why she wrote the story, states “This wise man… applied the rest cure… and sent me home with solemn advice to "live as domestic a life as far as possible," to "have but two hours' intellectual life a day” (804). In her story, she illustrates how this treatment frustrated the main character, Jane. Jane talks about writing in her journal, stating “I don't know why I should write this. And I know John would think it absurd. But I MUST say what I feel and think in some way—it is such a relief!” ( 797). In this quote, Perkins implies that the only thing keeping Jane stable was writing in her diary. This creative expression was the very thing that John in the story and Gilman’s doctor in reality wanted to restrict. In her explanation, Gilman suggests that doctors should take exactly the opposite approach. According to Gilman, creative expression was in fact responsible for keeping her sane and pulling her out of her depression. Ironically, Gilman sent a copy of “The Yellow Wallpaper” to the very doctor who prescribed her the “rest cure.” Although he eventually ended up changing his methods, no one can say for sure whether or not Gilman’s story was responsible.

Moreover, Gilman makes a much larger point about the views towards women in general. In “the Yellow Wallpaper”, Gilman illustrates how a man’s opinions, no matter how out of touch, dominated those of their female counterpart. For instance, in the story, Jane states “[John] says no one but myself can help me out of it, that I must use my will and self-control and not let any silly fancies run away with me” (799). No matter how unsubstantiated John’s recommendations may be, Jane always follows them. Gilman uses this theme throughout the story to describe the society of the late 1800’s.

In addition to her opinions on mental health, Gilman had very strong views on feminism as well. Gilman, a Darwinist, is often described as a “utopian” writer, meaning she attempted as a feminist to describe an optimal world for women. Anne Lane explains "She used her energies and her gifts in an effort to understand the world and her place in it and to extend that knowledge and those insights to others. Furthermore, she saw the submergence of women as a critical handicap retarding the best development of society" (794). In her book, *Women and Economics*, Gilman describes the evolutionary disparity between women and men over time. She argues that women “work longer and harder than most men, and not solely in maternal duties” (*7*20). In her opinion, sexual distinctions left men to claim credit for all of the accomplishments of society. Although Gilman considered herself a suffragist, she did not believe simply allowing women to vote would solve all of the issues facing women. She believed that progress was not measured simply by voting rights, but “in the changes legal, social, mental and physical, which mark the advance of the mother of the world toward her full place” (798). *Women and Economics* made a huge contribution to the suffragist movement, which had just begun to gain momentum at the turn of the century. For such a progressive work, the book was surprisingly well received. Jane Addams, one of the most famous women of the suffragist movement, called the work a “masterpiece.” A reviewer from *The Independent* begrudgingly wrote, “While the ideas of this author may not appeal to us, we must admit that there is some force in her criticisms, and some reason in her suggestions” (802).

In *Women and Economics*, Gilman makes many proposals that seemed radical at the time. She proposed the professionalization of child raising and housework. She also opposed corporal punishment and believed in open discussion about sex. These ideas, although commonplace today, were extremely profound during the early 1900’s. In fact, many claim that this book became the basis for the feminist movement. Although Gilman has been acclaimed as “the most original feminist the United States has ever produced,” she rejected the term “feminist,” mostly because of her discomfort with its connotation of “sexual liberation.” In any case, Women and Economics made a significant impact on the feminist cause, as well as society in general.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s Personal life also had a profound impact on her work. In 1884, Gilman married Charles Stetson, and gave birth to a daughter, Katharine. Soon after, she became severely depressed. Her physician, Dr. S. Weir Mitchell, prescribed a “rest cure” in which she was not to do anything creative or in any way stimulating to the brain. If anything, this treatment exacerbated the depression, eventually becoming the inspiration for “The Yellow Wallpaper.” Eventually, once she began to spend time with her daughter and continue her passions, her depression lifted. She moved to Pasadena, California in 1934. There, she was diagnosed with inoperable breast cancer, and committed suicide in 1935.

The social effects of Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s work can be seen long after her death. “The Yellow Wall-Paper” ushered in a new era of mental health practices. Her shocking and somewhat autobiographical account of the experiences of mental health practices showed how flawed and unsubstantiated they really were. This led to many physicians avoiding “rest cures” and other unproven methods of mental health. She also had a significant impact on the Feminist movement, establishing some of the basic principles in *Women and Economics*. The reforms suggested, although far ahead of the time that she wrote them, are now principles that we as a modern society see as normal. Although some of her ideas seem radical even to this day, there is no doubt that Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s ideas and even personal experiences have had a significant impact on society.

# Work Cited

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