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Denise D. Knight and Jennifer S. Tuttle, eds. *The Selected Letters of Charlotte Perkins Gilman.* Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2009. 367 pp.

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Charlotte Perkins Gilman had two antithetical personalities. A self-created public side that is clearly seen in her published writings presents the picture of a woman who is in total control of her needs, emotions, decisions and actions. Even her sorrow after she had to give her daughter away, her confusion during her illness, and her mourning after her late husband Houghton's death were all carefully measured. But even though Gilman is an autobiographical writer and created her stories through her own experiences, there are moments in her life that she preferred to keep private and express silently in the confidential space of the epistolary genre.

This silent communication of Gilman's has been painstakingly edited in a volume by Denise D. Knight and Jennifer S. Tuttle—a work aiming to show Gilman scholars that even in silence, confusion, disappointment, and rejection, Gilman has many ideas to present. In one of her letters to Charles Walter Stetson, Gilman claims that her work is her life. A rather general assertion, it serves as a nebulous justification of her choice to see her work as the true heart of her life. With their selection of Gilman's private letters, Knight and Tuttle reveal the true basis of this choice, one that has been only superficially touched upon thus far by scholars.

In a letter to George Houghton Gilman, dated 27 November 1879, a 19-year-old Gilman wrote poetically about a closed-off inner self:

> There was a young girl much inclined,
>
> to leave all her treasures behind,
>
> and the older she grew,
>
> and the more ways she flew,
>
> the less of her things could she find...

Even as a young girl Gilman was inclined to withdraw and leave life behind her. The more she grew up and the more she wrote, the more she turned within. Writing for an audience was a tool for her to forget and forgo the misery that life threw at her. In a letter written to her father, Gilman unintentionally revealed the dominant misery of her childhood: "I know of old that you are too busy to write letters, even if you cared to, but I *should* like to know whether you wish me to write to you, for I am anything but desirous to intrude" (9-10).

As a child Gilman was confronted with the unfairness of life. Her father abandoned his family, leaving her behind as a little girl craving love and companionship. An intimate father and daughter relationship had always been what she most desired, but could never establish. The traumatic desertion by her father followed in the wake of an earlier abandonment: the marriage of Martha Luther, her best friend and the love of Gilman's life:

> Private! I would like to put my hand under your chin, and look way down into your big eyes, ask questions, deposit kisses, recommend a nailbrush or a needle as the case might be, and generally enjoy myself . . . I will keep you while I have you . . . There must be places in each that we don't either of us know about yet—undiscovered countries where we may go together . . . (18-19)

This country is *Herland*, where all women live happily together safe from male threats to female friendship and sisterhood. Martha's husband had taken her away from Gilman; it was a desertion that repeated itself when Gilman's close friend Grace Channing married Walter Stetson: "Do you know I think I suffer more in giving you up than in Walter—for you were all joy to me . . . I know I was gradually getting very near to you, and now that dreadful angel has come and swallowed you and I am nowhere! . . . When Martha married it cracked my heart a good deal—your loss will finish it" (87).

The first four sections of *The Selected Letters of Charlotte Perkins Gilman* present letters reflecting Gilman's gloomy outlook on a life over which she had little or no control. Her letters to her father, to Martha, Walter, Grace and finally to her daughter Katharine are carefully selected by the editors and in general allow readers to better understand Gilman's choice of work over life. She led a life that was unjust, yet she created a new life through her work; it was an accomplishment that gave her the satisfaction of success. Through her work she became the successful and admired person that she longed to be in her youth.

Although Gilman struggled to assume control over the flow of her life with varying degrees of success, the final section of *Selected Letters* contains letters to her friends announcing her imminent departure from the world:

> I am approaching the stepping off place very closely—a matter of a few weeks more or less. I see no reason whatever in prolonging an increasingly uncomfortable existence. As soon as I'm too weak to totter to the bathroom—off I go.
> I know what it means to be "tired to death." And O my dear! What a comfort it will be to go to sleep! Isn't it good to be perfectly confident about God! (303)

With the well-deserved success Gilman earned, she eventually found the power to come to terms with life and to celebrate her victory. In the end, it was suicide that was her final victory over life. This time, adamant not to surrender to life, she decided to take control of it into her own hands.

The pain and misery that were repressed in Gilman's life and writing are released in her letters. It is thus of great importance to read these letters, for it is there that one catches a glimpse of her private self; and that, in turn, allows us to understand her writing more fully. *The Selected Letters of Charlotte Perkins Gilman* provides real insight into Gilman as a writer who, on the one hand, fights against the societal dominance of men and, on the other, fights against the dominance of her own feminine emotions. With this volume many questions regarding Gilman's private self are answered.