

Name: _____ Class: _____

An Obstacle

By Charlotte Perkins Gilman
1884

Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860-1935) was a writer and lecturer for social reform. Gilman was a feminist during a time when it was not socially acceptable to be one. As you read "An Obstacle," consider the context of the poem and what it was like to live as a woman with in the late 19th century. Take notes on the figurative language and personification used in the poem, and how they contribute to the poem's message.

- [1] I was climbing up a mountain-path
With many things to do,
Important business of my own,
And other people's too,
[5] When I ran against a Prejudice
That quite cut off the view.

My work was such as could not wait,
My path quite clearly showed,
My strength and time were limited,

- [10] I carried quite a load;
And there that hulking Prejudice
Sat all across the road.

So I spoke to him politely,
For he was huge and high,

- [15] And begged that he would move a bit
And let me travel by.
He smiled, but as for moving! —
He didn't even try.

And then I reasoned quietly

- [20] With that colossal¹ mule:
My time was short — no other path —
The mountain winds were cool.
I argued like a Solomon;²
He sat there like a fool.

- [25] Then I flew into a passion,
and I danced and howled and swore.

I pelted and belabored him
Till I was stiff and sore;
He got as mad as I did —

- [30] But he sat there as before.



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1. **Colossal** (*adjective*): extremely large

2. A wise person

And then I begged him on my knees;
I might be kneeling still
If so I hoped to move that mass
Of obdurate³ ill-will —

[35] As well invite the monument
To vacate Bunker Hill!⁴

So I sat before him helpless,
In an ecstasy⁵ of woe —
The mountain mists were rising fast,

[40] The sun was sinking slow —
When a sudden inspiration came,
As sudden winds do blow.

I took my hat, I took my stick,
My load I settled fair,

[45] I approached that awful incubus⁶
With an absent-minded air —
And I walked directly through him,
As if he wasn't there!

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3. **Obdurate** (*adjective*): stubborn

4. The Bunker Hill Monument was built to commemorate the Battle of Bunker Hill, one of the first major battles in the American Revolutionary War. The monument is a towering, granite obelisk.

5. **Ecstasy** (*noun*): an overwhelming state of emotion, usually joy or rapture

6. A male demon known for attacking women

Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. How does the setting of the poem contribute to its central theme?
 - A. The winding path implies that the speaker is lost, literally and figuratively, emphasizing the theme of identity.
 - B. The speaker climbs a mountain path, which suggests an upward struggle; thus, the setting underscores the central theme of resilience in the face of adversity.
 - C. The misty forest setting (as well as Prejudice's strange appearance) suggests some sort of supernatural element, contributing to the theme of fear.
 - D. The poem takes place over the course of a day and ends as the sun begins to set; thus the linear setting (a day coming to a close) contributes to the theme of death.

2. Summarize how the speaker responds to Prejudice over the course of the poem. Be sure to include any figurative interpretations or meaning of these reactions.

3. PART A: Which of the following statements best explains the reference to the monument of Bunker Hill in lines 35-36?
 - A. The reference to the monument of Bunker Hill is an indication that the poem takes place in the Bunker Hill region (i.e. Massachusetts).
 - B. The reference to the monument of Bunker Hill foreshadows the speaker's eventual defeat of the looming enemy (i.e. Prejudice).
 - C. The speaker compares Prejudice to the monument of Bunker Hill to describe Prejudice's physical size.
 - D. The speaker compares Prejudice to the monument of Bunker Hill to describe Prejudice's level of stubbornness; like the massive monument, he cannot be moved.
4. PART B: Which of the following phrases best supports the answer to Part A?
 - A. "that hulking Prejudice / Sat all across the road" (Lines 11-12)
 - B. "I might be kneeling still / If so I hoped to move that mass / Of obdurate ill-will--" (Lines 32-34)
 - C. "The mountain mists were rising fast, / The sun was sinking slow--" (Lines 39-40)
 - D. "And I walked directly through him, / As if he wasn't there!" (Lines 47-48)

5. How does the final stanza contribute to the speaker's developing point of view?
- A. The final stanza reveals that Prejudice was only in her head.
 - B. The final stanza reveals the speaker's own stubborn nature, contributing to the poet's characterization of her.
 - C. The final stanza shows the speaker overcoming Prejudice by how she views him (i.e. by electing to ignore him).
 - D. The final stanza develops the speaker's point of view because she can suddenly handle carrying the heavy load she bears.

Discussion Questions

Directions: *Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.*

1. Consider the context of this work. What does this poem teach us about women and men in the late nineteenth century? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.
2. What does the author imply about the nature of prejudice in this poem? How does the author suggest one should react to prejudice?
3. Have you ever faced prejudice in your life? What, in your opinion, is an effective way to deal with prejudice?
4. In the context of this poem, how does a person overcome adversity? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.

