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
Thatquite 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 colossal\(^1\) 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 obdurate ill-will —

As well invite the monument
To vacate Bunker Hill!^{4}

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

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,

I approached that awful incubus^{6}
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
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.