

Discourses on Dress Reform and Beyond —Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “Dress of Women” and Its Critical Implication

Rachel Hui-chi Hsu

Department of History, Tunghai University
E-mail: rachel928@yahoo.com

Abstract

This article explores the critical discourse of Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860-1935), drawing on her essay, “The Dress of Women,” serialized in the periodical, *The Forerunner: A Monthly Magazine* (1909-1916), published and written exclusively by her. In “The Dress of Women,” Gilman elaborated on the subject of women’s dresses to put forth her critical analysis of social, economic and gender relationship in modern American society.

Despite the fact that “The Dress of Women” discussed and called for the reform of women’s dresses, this article argues that, its purpose went beyond the appeal of dress reform and to critique patriarchal manipulation of women in the society. In other words, Gilman’s ultimate concern was not only the reform of women’s dresses or the liberation of women’s bodies, but also their subjectivity and agency in social activities. Gilman explicated the evolution of women’s fashionable dresses and the mainstream gender ideology in modern American society, as well as evaluated the appeals and achievements of what she called “dress reformers.” This article will show that Gilman’s critical discourse might be too idealistic to put into practice, but what she proposed through her discourse on women’s dress, at least to a certain extent, had lifted the discourse on dress reform to a more comprehensive level, and thus motivate more reflection upon this subject.

Key Words: women’s dress, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, “The Dress of Women”, fashion, dress reform