

Primary Source Reading 15-2 ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

## Role Reversal

### ✦ About the Selection

The middle class grew as the cities grew. With this development, women became more aware of the gap between the domestic sphere assigned to them and the public world men moved in. Charlotte Perkins Gilman was a pioneering feminist and social critic who labored to reveal and change the harmful consequences of making women second-class citizens. She wrote many feminist works, such as *The Man-Made World*, and was active in many causes. For example, she joined with Jane Addams

### Reader's Dictionary



**physiology:** anatomy, physical features

in founding the Woman's Peace Party. Gilman often presented her ideas through literature, such as the short story "If I Were a Man" (1914), excerpted below.

### GUIDED READING

As you read, note how life changes for Mollie, a middle-class, white woman when she becomes her husband for a day.

Mollie was "true to type." She was a beautiful instance of what is reverentially called "a true woman." Little, of course—no true woman may be big. Pretty, of course—no true woman could possibly be plain. Whimsical, capricious, charming, changeable, devoted to pretty clothes and always "wearing them well" . . .

She was also a loving wife and a devoted mother possessed of "the social gift" . . .

If ever there was a true woman it was Mollie Mathewson, yet she was wishing heart and soul she was a man.

And all of a sudden she was! . . .

A man! Really a man—with only enough subconscious memory of herself remaining to make her recognize the differences.

Everything fitted now. Her back snugly against the seat-back, her feet comfortably on the floor. . . . Never before, since her early school days, had she felt such freedom and comfort as to feet—they were firm and solid on the ground when she walked; quick, springy, safe—as when, moved by an unrecognizable impulse, she had run after, caught, and swung aboard the car.

Another impulse fished in a convenient pocket for change—instantly, automatically, bringing forth a nickel for the conductor and a penny for the newsboy. . . .

Behind her newspaper she let her consciousness, that odd mingled consciousness, rove from pocket to pocket, realizing the armored assurance of having all those things at hand, instantly get-at-able, ready to meet emergencies . . . the keys, pencils, letters, documents, notebook, checkbook, bill-folder—all at once, with a deep rushing sense of power and pride, she felt

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what she had never felt before in all her life—the possession of money, of her own earned money—hers to give or to withhold, not to beg for, tease for, wheedle for—hers. . . .

Now came the feeling of open-eyes acquaintance, of knowing men, as they were.

The world opened before her. Not the world she had been reared in—where Home had covered all the map, almost, and the rest had been “foreign,” or “unexplored country,” but the world as it was—man’s world, as made, lived in, and seen, by men. . . .

“The real danger,” began the Rev. Alfred Smythe . . . “is that they [women] will overstep the limits of their God-appointed sphere.”

“Their natural limits ought to hold ‘em, I think,” said cheerful Dr. Jones. “You can’t get around physiology.”

From *The Charlotte Perkins Reader*. Reprinted by permission of Random House, Inc.

READER RESPONSE

**Directions:** Answer the following questions on the lines below.

- 1. According to Gilman, what are the physical characteristics of the “true woman”?

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- 2. How does Gilman express the idea that women are limited to the domestic sphere?

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- 3. What is the chief source of pride and power for Mollie when she becomes a man?

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- 4. How does Dr. Jones support his argument that women are more limited than men?

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- 5. **Critical Thinking** What actions of Mollie’s experience as a man are now true for women?

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