

## **Flora Tristan: Life of a Pariah by Andria Perez**

### **Personal Reflection**

In researching the life of Flora Tristan I had a glimpse into a woman courageous enough to believe in herself with the world against her. Although her alluring beauty may have helped her ambitious political aspirations, her illegitimate childhood, failed marriage, and financial instability gave her the platform to identify with thousands of lower class workers. Tristan as a studied figure in Peruvian history shows how she has transcended national and racial boundaries.

### **Biography**

The social outsider with an exotic beauty managed to overcome personal struggles and become an influential figure in the labor rights movement in 19th century France. Her attractiveness and mystery gave all those who met her a challenge to understand. Two central events shaped Tristan's life, both her unstable childhood and lack of paternal influence. Through her published works she fought for the rights of the lower class. The various experiences she encountered throughout her life in France and her travels abroad have revealed the transformation from a pariah to revered feminist.

Flora Tristan was born in 1803 to Don Mariano Tristan y Moscoso, an elite Peruvian Colonel in the Spanish army, and a French woman, Anne-Pierre Laisnay. She was born in France during the Napoleonic period, and initially a part of the elite class because of her father. At the age of four her world was turned upside down. The comforts of financial stability faded away as her father met his death. She states, *"I was four when I lost my father in Paris. He died suddenly without having put his marital arrangements in order and without having thought to compensate for that by arrangements in his will. My mother had only limited resources to survive on and to raise my young brother and I..."* (Grogan 17).

Flora's youth is somewhat of a mystery to historians because she wrote so little about it. It was presumed that her youth was plagued by poverty because of the debt her father left and her mother's limited work opportunities. Flora's mother was able, though, to begin repayment on the debts and move her family to the countryside. It is stated that she managed her money well and initially saved Flora and her brother from growing up in the slums of Paris. The death of her father and movement from being bourgeois to proletariat laid the groundwork for her future work with utopian socialists.

At the age of 15 Flora moved to Paris with her mother and left behind the isolated countryside once her home. A girl Flora's age was expected to become self-supporting or begin searching for a marriage partner. If her father had been alive and she remained within the elite class, a proper education would have been expected. Tristan expresses little awareness of geography and admitted that her pastoral upbringing affected her poor education. Although Tristan was not professionally educated, her diaries reveal a writing style far from ignorant. In 1821, Flora began taking dance lessons and worked as a porcelain painter in Paris. She was a skilled artist who surpassed the potential of working girls her own age. During this time, although she was a talented artist, her work brought no real income and therefore she needed to find a job. Flora became employed by Andre Chazal, an engraver who owned a workshop in Montmartre. Their work relationship is somewhat unclear. Flora's personal writings suggest she worked primarily at home, but off and on took lessons from him at his workshop. Chazal claimed that she was a regular employee and that he "saved her from poverty and obscurity by marrying her..." Although Flora struggled somewhat throughout her childhood, she rarely wrote about being in the proletariat class and strove to reach the bourgeois status that was once within her reach. (Grogan 14-28)

During the 19th century women's expectations were connected to essentialist ideas on gender and sex roles. Women were viewed as being biologically weak, domestic, and in need of protection (Curtis). During this period women joined the workforce and began working in factories, but were discouraged from joining unions even though they were being exploited (Curtis).

Along with the essentialist ideologies, women were expected to marry. Tristan fulfills this expectation on February 1821 when she exchanges vows with Andre-Francois Chazal at the tender age of 17. Flora's mother was supportive and continued to be an influential figure throughout her life. Author Dominique Desanti examines social expectations by stating, "Seventeen is not an easy age. Everybody expects you to behave like a grown-up but obey as a child. You have your dreams, but they echo your mothers." (3) Almost four years into their tumultuous marriage, Flora walked out pregnant with their third child. Divorce not being a legal option for Tristan, she stepped out of her

marriage into a world that looked upon her with disgrace. Flora described herself as "an unfortunate Pariah". She broke the social behaviors of a nineteenth century woman, and consequently outcaste herself from a world ruled strictly by gender norms. Tristan's entire dealings with Chazal and the courts over the dissolution of their marriage demonstrated a woman not afraid to challenge the patriarchal society oppressing her. During this period of instability, she took a position as a maid, where she observed the poor working conditions and mistreatment of women ( Bause). (Grogan 14-28)

One of the most influential figures in Flora's life was her father. Although his death removed him from her at a young age, author Susan Grogan notes that Tristan's personal writings reveal the deeply complex struggle she felt being an illegitimate child. These experiences shaped the person who was to become an important figure in utopian socialism and the labor rights movement. Tristan used her personal experiences as an illegitimate child and social outcaste to examine the conditions of all women. A milestone in the journey of Flora's life was the release of her book *Peregrinations of a Pariah*, published in 1837. This book narrated her struggle with marriage, her travels to Peru, and the instability she experienced after leaving Chazal. The importance of this book was the implications in which Flora exposed, in particular, comparing marriage slavery. She professes: "*Form a union with a person whom I felt loved me, impossible! An infernal voice repeated to me with a hideous chuckle, 'You are married!' True, he's a despicable creature; but chained to him for the rest of your life, you cannot escape his yoke. Feel the weight of the chain which makes you his slave and see if. .. you can break it!*" (Grogan 33).

As Flora became more engrossed with her 'pariah' persona she further separated herself from the image of a proper woman. The rejection of social expectations set Tristan apart from woman in her time, and became reminiscent of future radical women dissenters. Some of her most influential experiences were her travels abroad. In her first two published works she writes extensively of her travels in Peru and England. Of her all her travels, her journey throughout France inspired the leader in her to begin writing on the working conditions in France. Grogan discusses the transformation of this emerging figure stating, "*Tristan shared the contrary view that emphasized the social function of literature, and its role in expressing a moral and political message. In the hands of a social reformer and political radical, such as Tristan had become in the mid-1830s*" (79).

The emergence of socialism in during the 1830s and 1840s greatly influenced Tristan's own political ideologies and she states, "*They are unaware that in '89 our fathers died for these three words: Liberty, Equality, Fraternity or death! They are unaware that we Socialists, continuing the great work of our fathers, will die to see these three words become a reality*" (Grogan 97). Tristan's philosophies were greatly influenced by prominent Utopian Socialists, whose ideas she uses in her lecture tour of France (Curtis). She wanted to organize a universal workers union where all were represented equally and not exploited by the bourgeois. The goal of her travels were to organize committees within each location she visited that would continue her work (Curtis). One of her most influential pieces was the essay entitled "The Workers Union" in which she pleads the king and Catholic clergy for finances, and fantasizes about worker palaces. She began a speaking tour throughout France to promote the ideas in 'Workers Union' (Dicaprio). An excerpt from the piece states that, "*The person is question is a working man or woman must be verified in order to put their name in the book... we mean individuals who work with his or her hands in any fashion. Thus, servants, potters, laborers...*" (Tristan). Further, she speaks adamantly against 'lazy' and unproductive individuals (Tristan). (Grogan 33- 98).

Flora's travels to Peru were guided by her desire to connect with her father's family and to get her father's inheritance. During these travels she learned both about herself and the struggles other women were facing. Although her return to France left her no richer or closer to her father's family, she did have the inspiration to write a book and become a symbol for Peruvian women's rights. One Peruvian feminist, Magda Portal, praised Tristan as the pioneer of Latin American feminism, specifically because she wrote openly about inadequate labor conditions and women's repression (Bause). Tristan became a widely known figure within Peruvian feminist movements, fashioning a center titled *Centro de la Mujer Peruana Flora Tristan* (Bause). Peruvian feminist used Tristan as a symbol for women's agency within the public sphere to reclaim a voice previously silenced. One Peruvian feminist stated, "*Tristan was an illegitimate daughter, a wife in distress and a mother without rights. But at the same time, and despite her situation, she was audacious, she was autonomous, she was an indefatigable combatant for the workers and for the women. For this reason, we consider her a socialist and well as a feminist*" (Bause).

The life of Flora Tristan is a complex tale. She was born into the strict world of gender roles and class and race status as an illegitimate child of mixed blood. She defied society by choosing to leave an unhappy marriage. Her published works give insight into the person who saw great things for the working class people of France. Her charming looks and persuasive speeches gave her access to a

movement deeply affected by her work. Whether or not she is defined or labeled as a feminist or socialist, she was an important figure for the women's voice through the 19th century.

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### **Timeline**

- 1803- Born, Flora Celestine Therese Henriette Tristan, to a Peruvian Colonel and a French woman.
- 1807- Father suddenly died, leaving family heavily in debt. His death marks a shift from the elite to proletariat class.
- 1818-1820- Moved with mother to Paris. Began painting.
- 1821- Two months before her 18th birthday she marries an artisan, Andre-Francois Chazal.
- 1825- Leaves husband, with 2 children and pregnant with the third Works as a maid, which becomes a precursor for her interest in workers' rights
- 1829- Makes contact with uncle in Peru.

1830- Revolution in Paris, Tristan is present at the time.

1833-1835- Continuous travel through Central and South America.

1836- Writings in the Gazette des Femmes.

1837- Published her first works, a book on her experience of marriage titled "Peregrinations of a Pariah."

1838- Is shoot and wounded by Andre Chazal who has been stalking her. He is sentenced to twenty years of hard labor.

1840- Publishes "Promenades of London," dedicated to the working class.

1843- Publishes "The Workers Union."

1844- Begins her speaking tour of France. Dies after collapsing during her arrival in Bordeaux.