Charlotte Perkins Gilman
The International Library of Essays in Classical Sociology
Series Editors: Alan Sica and David Chalcraft

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Series Preface

Twenty years ago the so-called canon wars raged throughout the social sciences in Europe and the anglophone sphere. The argument was then heard in all quarters that deconstruction, globalization, post-colonialism, computerization, queer theory, and other similar forces had rendered 19th century social theory impotent and irrelevant to the analysis of the new cultural environment. Whereas between 1920 and about 1985, serious engagement with Marx, Durkheim, Weber, Simmel, and other members of the classical pantheon were required components of theorizing, the backlash against this tradition threatened to relegate this astonishing body of scholarship to a poorly imagined, unnecessary past. Recognizing that this storm is passing, and that younger scholars are rediscovering just how pertinent to contemporary issues the classics have remained, this new series will put at their disposal a set of volumes which aim to provide handy, expert guidance in the search for useable materials from the classical tradition. Volumes treating Marx, Durkheim, Weber, Gilman, Du Bois, Spencer, Simmel, and Parsons will appear first, to be followed by others covering theorists of similar rank. Each volume will be prepared by a recognized authority, whose task is to locate the best and most useful articles from the scholarly journal literature in English, assemble them in a meaningful pattern which best illuminates a given theorist’s lasting importance, and write an introduction by means of which novices, in particular, can confidently discover for themselves why ‘the classics’ remain vital and necessary to their work. Whereas multi-volume sets with similar intentions appeared some time ago, this series has the virtue of being less cumbersome and more up-to-date, featuring a propitious mix of classic statements in the secondary literature, as well as the newest contributions to the ongoing reappropriation of ‘the canon’. Our goal is to provide serious scholars, from novice to senior, with enough material to become conversant with a classic theorist’s work, all within the covers of a single volume.

ALAN SICA and DAVID CHALCRAFT

Series Editors
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Introduction

This volume, part of the series The International Library of Essays in Classical Sociology edited by Alan Sica and David Chalcraft, provides younger scholars with a survey of key works about classical sociological theorists – in this case, Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860–1935). Where this volume may differ from others in the series is in the fact that Gilman, unlike the classical male theorists, is not yet fully incorporated into sociology’s understanding of its classical thinkers. Gilman’s contested place in the canon of sociology is proof of what Judith Stacey and Barrie Thorne and others have characterized over the years as ‘the “still” missing feminist revolution in sociology’ (Stacey and Thorne, 1985; Alway, 1995; Stacey and Thorne, 1996; Williams, 2006). This essay introduces 29 studies, and an extensive bibliography, selected to present Gilman to the sociological audience she richly deserves.

By giving the current state of play in Gilman scholarship relevant to sociology, this volume presents sociology students with the opportunity to reclaim a classic figure whose social theory illuminates a range of sociological interests – gender, work, culture, economy, religion, family, politics and method – and the process of theory construction itself. For Gilman creates a general system of critical social theory through experiments with a variety of media: the novella *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892), light verse and poetry (collected as *In This Our World* (1899)); the utopian novels *Herland* (1915) and *With Her in Ourland* (1916) as well as eight books of social theory, *Women and Economics* (1898), *Concerning Children* (1900), *The Home* (1903), *Human Work* (1904), *The Man-Made World, or Our Androcentric Culture* (1911), *Social Ethics* (1914–16), *The Dress of Women* (1915) and *His Religion and Hers* (1923).

That this volume presents such an opportunity points to a major issue in the history of sociology: why has a sociologist of Gilman’s stature been so neglected? So neglected that in 1994 when Alan Sica as editor of *Sociological Theory* ran a well-received series on ‘neglected theorists’, Gilman went unstudied. So neglected that *Gender & Society*, the premiere journal in the field that Gilman pioneered, has never run an article focused solely on Gilman – though it has run a review of Mary Jo Deegan and Michael Hill’s edition of *Gilman’s With Her in Ourland* (Hess, 1998) and a study of Lester Ward by Barbara J. Finlay (1999) which notes his influence on Gilman. Gilman has been richly studied by literary critics, philosophers, feminists, economists and historians, but there has been much less sociological work on her. (A JSTOR search of Gilman-linked articles across disciplines yields thousands of titles, but a similar search limited to sociology produces only about a hundred – including reviews.) Journals have been largely unfruitful ground for Gilman scholarship – with her significant treatment concentrated in *Teaching Sociology* (Terry, 1983; Deegan, 1988b; Gotsch-Thomson, 1990; Berg, 1992; Thomas and Kukulan, Chapter 6 in this volume). She has been more frequently covered in books (Deegan, 1991; McDonald 1994; Lengermann and Niebrugge-Brantley, 1998). Further, sociologists have provided introductions for and spearheaded the reissue of many of her works – Kimmel’s reissue of *Concerning Children*, Kimmel and Aronson’s centenary edition of *Women and Economics*, and Hill and Deegan’s numerous
volumes compiling articles Gilman published in instalments in *The Forerunner*, the monthly journal she published between 1909 and 1916.

Sociology’s relation to Gilman forms a curious pattern: she is cited frequently as a sociologist representing First Wave feminism’s gender theory but her thought as a whole is left unexplored; she appears instead as an epigraph or a paragraph on, for instance, gender stratification (Huber, 1986), ‘invisible work’ (Daniels, 1987), household power dynamics and delinquency (Hagan, Simpson and Gillis, 1987), classical sociology and the idea of difference in standpoint (Lemert, 1994), non-academic social science (Seidman, 1996), sociology and social justice (Feagin, 2001), the past and future of public sociology (Burawoy, 2005) and First Wave Feminism’s rejection of subordination (Epstein, 2007).

The discussion that follows organizes Gilman scholarship to focus on her biography, place in the canon of sociology, intellectual roots, general social theory, theory of human work, theory of culture and attempts to address social problems of her day.

**Gilman and the Sociological Imagination**

Gilman’s main methodological strategy for creating social theory enacts C. Wright Mills’s classic definition of the sociological imagination as the ability to ‘grasp history and biography and the relations between the two ... [to recognize] the distinction between personal troubles ... and ... public issues of social structure’ (1959, pp. 6–8). The possessor of the sociological imagination asks the fundamental questions of sociology: ‘What is the structure of this particular society as a whole? ... Where does this society stand in human history? What are the mechanics by which it is changing? ... What varieties of men and women now prevail in this society and in this period?’ (Mills, 1959, pp. 6–7). These are the questions Gilman addresses repeatedly as she confronts her own biography — a confrontation that anticipates the fundamental principle of Second Wave Feminism that ‘the personal is political’ (Hanisch, 1970). Biographical studies of Gilman have a range of autobiographical sources to draw on: her autobiography, *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman* (1935), which she worked on almost literally until her suicide — ‘I have preferred chloroform to cancer’ she wrote in a letter included in its final chapter; *The Diaries of Charlotte Perkins Gilman*, edited by Denise Knight in two volumes (1994); and *The Selected Letters of Charlotte Perkins Gilman*, edited by Knight and Jennifer Turtle (2009). Gary Scharnhorst’s painstaking *Charlotte Perkins Gilman: A Bibliography* (1985), an essential reference, organizes Gilman’s published works, which number over 2,000.

Yet the relationship between her life and work is a complex one, as suggested by two seemingly contradictory observations by biographer Ann Lane: one, that ‘“she took the central struggles of her life as the subject for her life’s work ... she made the ‘private’ life the subject of public investigation”’; and two, that ‘“she did not want to make herself, her personal life, her subject, a trait she shared with many public figures of her generation”’ (in Karpinski, 2000, p. 35). Sociologically understood, Gilman is a participant observer of her own life, moving from microsocial relations to macrosocial theory.

There are now four well-regarded biographical works on Gilman. First chronologically is Mary A. Hill’s three-volume study, *Charlotte Perkins Gilman: The Making of a Radical Feminist, 1860–1896* (1980), *Endure: The Diaries of Charles Walter Stetson* (1985), which traces Gilman’s life through the diaries of her first husband during the years of their marriage,
and A Journey from Within: The Love Letters of Charlotte Perkins Gilman, 1897–1900, which follows Gilman’s courtship and marriage to her second husband, Houghton Gilman (1995). Ann Lane’s To Herland and Beyond: The Life and Work of Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1990) is an interpretive study of Gilman’s whole life built around her many intense personal relationships. Judith A. Allen’s The Feminism of Charlotte Perkins Gilman: Sexualities, Histories, Progressivism (2009) is a sweeping ‘intelectual biography’ that looks less at her life than at the evolution of her thinking in relation to that life, which Allen sees turning on her experiences of ‘sexualities’, by which she means relations of intimacy in all forms. Cynthia J. Davis’s Charlotte Perkins Gilman: A Biography (2010) aims at a ‘comprehensive’ life of Gilman, consciously seeking to give equal coverage to all its parts and to avoid pressing a particular interpretation. Taken together these volumes represent an impressive compiling of information about Gilman but none from the perspective of a sociologist – Hill and Allen are historians; Lane and Davis are English professors.

The essays in Part I of this volume offer three shorter biographical sketches of Gilman, two by sociologists. Mary A. Hill’s ‘Charlotte Perkins Gilman: A Feminist’s Struggle with Womanhood’ (Chapter 1) anticipates the theme she develops in The Making of a Radical Feminist that Gilman’s life was a quest to have as a woman what society (and Freud) seemed only to grant to men – to work and to love. In Chapter 2 sociologists Michael Kimmel and Amy Aronson present Gilman in terms of her public career as a sociologist, using Women and Economics as the lens through which to view her total achievement. Differing from Hill, they place less emphasis on the relation between Women and Economics and Gilman’s personal life and more on her relation to key intellectual and political currents of her time, which she both shaped and was shaped by. Sociologists Patricia Lengermann and Gillian Niebrugge-Brantley offer in Chapter 3 a middle point between Hill and Kimmel and Aronson, seeing Gilman’s life leading her to the theoretical argument that social structure has evolved wrongly, inhibiting men and women from finding fulfilling work and through that, fulfilling lives together.

The implications of six biographical events are particularly debated by scholars: (1) Gilman’s marriage to Walter Stetson – with its difficult outcome that becomes the starting point for much of her analysis of gender relations; (2) her breakdown following the birth of her daughter Katherine and her subsequent treatment by nerve specialist S. Weir Mitchell – the foundational experience for her most discussed work, The Yellow Wallpaper; (3) the difficult relationship between her mother and father – again reflected in her sociology of gender relations; (4) the influential family of her father, the Beechers, who included Harriet Beecher Stowe, Henry Ward Beecher and Catherine Beecher – which may have set the standard for her aspiration to intellectual service; (5) the nature of her intimate relations with other women – which expanded her sense of possibility; and (6) her second marriage to Houghton Gilman, her second cousin, eight years her junior, and by all accounts not her intellectual equal, yet to whom she was devoted – which may have given her a security of self that energized her career.

The emphasis on Gilman’s biography runs through much of the scholarship on Gilman. In a way one does not find with studies of Jane Addams or Emile Durkheim, though perhaps with Max Weber, Gilman scholars often develop a deep identity with their subject: Lane speaks of her as ‘my Charlotte’, Davis links Gilman and Houghton’s practice of doing jigsaw puzzles with her own family history, Karpinski draws parallels between ‘her [Gilman’s] situation at the end of the nineteenth century and my own at the end of the twentieth’:
When I finished the manuscript of Critical Essays on Charlotte Perkins Gilman (New York: G.K. Hall, 1991), I dedicated it to my husband who, I said, “got it” more than Walter [Stetson] ever did.’ Two years later he departed to marry a woman who made him laugh, a woman he did not have to treat as a partner, a woman with whom he did not have to negotiate. (2000, p. 35)

Gilman and the Sociological Canon

Part II focuses on Gilman’s contested place in the classical sociological canon – why that argument matters, the substance of the opposition to the inclusion of women like Gilman, and the scholarship claiming her and other women as sociologists.

The history sociologists tell themselves matters because it reaffirms for the teller and the audience a sense of identity: who sociologists are, what sociologists do, which aspects of social life sociologists look at (Halbwachs, 1992). The history of sociology has typically been told as a history of its major theorists, remembered as white males drawn from the educated middle class. Two reasons have been advanced for not including women and others. One is the argument that sociologists must face the fact that discriminatory practices barred ‘factory workers, peasants, women and non-whites … from participating in the formation of classical sociological theory’ (Ashley and Orenstein, 1998, p. 30). The second is the argument that women did not produce ‘the theoretical schemes [which] tend to be more permanent, since they are more easily passed along to subsequent generations through intellectual networks’ (Collins and Makowsky, 1998, p. 297).

Feminist sociologists have challenged these arguments over the last three decades by establishing that women and minorities both participated in the formation of sociology and produced transmittable ‘theoretical schemes’ in the century of sociology’s creation, 1830–1930.¹

This feminist scholarship proves Charlotte Bunch’s aphorism ‘you can’t just add women and stir’, as it calls for a revision of the history of sociology, beginning with the understanding that sociology did not start in its present home, the academy. Sociology in its formative years (1865–1916) in the United States was practised out of three main sites – citizen organizations, like the American Social Science Association; the social settlements and charitable agencies; and the academy (Lengermann and Niebrugge, 2007). Women were especially active in the social settlements and civic organizations but were marginal in the academy, which became for male sociologists the primary site of employment, as they sought professional authority, social status and job and salary security.

Yet, women and men interacted as sociologists – in the pages of the American Journal of Sociology, where Gilman published some nine times; at meetings of sociological societies, like the newly formed American Sociological Society, whose meetings Gilman attended and of which she was a charter member; at settlements like Hull House, where Gilman stayed for

three months in 1895; and as intellectual colleagues — Gilman was in communication with Lester Ward, E.A. Ross, Charles Henderson and Charles Zueblin.

But the women and men increasingly came to operate out of different norms for the practice of sociology. For the men, securing and expanding the university work site meant that they had to conform to the norms for academic legitimacy, norms reflecting the fact that the university, whether public or private, depended on the economic support of powerful corporate and governmental groups aligned with the status quo and typically suspicious of the politics of trouble-making. These norms required of any aspiring academic field that it have a subject matter distinct from that of other disciplines, a value-neutral expertise, a rhetoric consistent with academic decorum, a routinized way for credentialling new members, an established body of literature, a tradition — a canon — through which new members were socialized, and a respect for academic rank and professional publication (Furner, 1975; Stinchcombe, 1982; Smith, 1987, 1990; Minnich, 1990; Levine, 1995).

The women, on the other hand, worked and wrote in a direct relationship to general publics, largely unrestrained by academic norms of discourse. They had a freedom to experiment with strategies for creating theory and doing sociology that later institutionalized practices made indiscernible or unacceptable as sociology to the male academic culture, which increasingly controlled the definition of sociology and would set the terms of its canon. Gilman stands both in her exclusion from sociology's canon and in her achievement as a sociological theorist as an example of all these trends: writing from outside the academy, with an audience larger and more diverse than that of academics and with a limited formally structured education, she felt free to draw on her own experience — in a method Michael R. Hill (2005) suggestively labels 'thought experiments' — to speak about that experience in concrete universal terms, to do so in the tone of a reformer rather than a dispassionate observer. Yet, if as Dorothy E. Smith writes, 'a sociology is a systematically developed knowledge of society and social relations' (Smith, 1987, p.2), then Charlotte Perkins Gilman ranks with the major male social theorists of the classical canon.

The essays included in Part II explain the many facets of the problem posed by Gilman's problematic location in sociology's theoretical canon.

The first essay in this section is Mary Jo Deegan's 'Introduction' to the 1997 edition of Gilman's 1916 With Her in Ourland, edited by Michael R. Hill and Deegan (Chapter 4). Deegan begins by addressing the criticism frequently levelled in opposition to the inclusion in the canon of what feminist scholars (McDonald, 1994; Lengermann and Niebrugge, 1998) have named 'the women founders' — the argument that they were 'not really sociologists'. She reprises her earlier use of Dirk Käsler's five criteria for determining that someone was a sociologist and applies these criteria to Gilman: employment as a sociologist; membership in a national sociological association; publication framed by an explicit concern with sociological principles; self-identification as a 'sociologist'; and recognition by contemporaries as a sociologist (Käsler, 1981; Deegan, 1991). With the same command of empirical detail she showed in her classic Jane Addams and the Men of the Chicago School (1988), Deegan establishes Gilman's connections to the sociological community of her own day, tracing her relations with Lester Ward, Edward A. Ross and Jane Addams, and thus gives us another biographical portrait of Gilman.

The next two essays, by James Terry, and Jan Thomas and Annis Kukulan, from the journal Teaching Sociology, assess the pedagogical importance of including Gilman in
the canon. Chapter 5, Terry’s oft-cited ‘Bringing Women ... In’, focuses on the careers of Harriet Martineau and Gilman, placing them side by side with Comte, in Martineau’s case, and Spencer and Sumner in Gilman’s. Terry gives a brief but solid introduction to Gilman’s theory and then explains how he incorporates her into his sociology course. In this same journal, but not included here, Mary Jo Deegan (1988b) calls, like Terry five years earlier, for ‘Transcending a Patriarchal Past’, and gives an overview of women sociologists who cannot be ignored or dismissed, including Gilman. Six years later, in 2004, Jan Thomas and Annis Kukulan, in “‘Why Don’t We Know About These Women?”’ (Chapter 6), look at syllabi in graduate social theory courses, finding that the traditional canon of male thinkers overwhelmingly still dominates instruction. The span of time between Terry and Thomas and Kukulan – over twenty years – highlights the difficulty in a social science, as opposed to an aesthetic discipline, of recovering a major contributor. Full recovery requires that scholars take the ideas of the theorist seriously enough to use them as an informing theory for empirical investigation.

Chapter 7, Robert Dimand’s ‘Nineteenth-Century American Feminist Economics’ – which appeared in the American Economic Review – contrasts with the sociology essays by its assumption that Gilman is recognized as an important early economist and yet notes that that may create another misperception – ‘Because it stands out so strongly as a major contribution Women and Economics has been perceived as an isolated work ... This paper, however, views Women and Economics as the culmination of four decades of American feminist economic thought’ (p. 123). Dimand goes on to review the work of Caroline Ball, Virginia Penny and Helen Campbell. Essays by other economists in Part V ‘Women and Work’ reinforce the fact that economics has been more effective than sociology in incorporating Gilman.

A Multi-Paradigm Social Theorist

Drawing on George Ritzer’s Kuhnian description of sociology as ‘a multi-paradigm science’ (1975), Part III surveys the intellectual paradigms shaping the American mind by the last decade of the nineteenth century and informing Gilman’s production of social theory and sociology: reform social Darwinism, socialism, feminism and pragmatism. Gilman’s social theory is always a theory of change. Reform social Darwinism gave Gilman an explanation of how change occurs; socialism provided an analysis of the structure of society; feminism showed a direction in which change should occur; and pragmatism was an attitude of mind that made her optimistic about the chances for reform.

Gilman in her day was embraced by the burgeoning women’s movement as its most important intellectual spokesperson. Today she is known, when nothing else is known about her, as a feminist – a label used by the scientific community in sociology to disqualify her as sociologist. Yet these essays, including those on feminism, make clear that feminism was less an influence on Gilman than social Darwinism and socialism. As Maureen Egan writes in Chapter 8, ‘It would be difficult to overestimate the effects of Darwin’s principle of evolution by natural selection upon virtually all areas of human endeavor’ (p. 133). On the other hand, anticipating much of his argument about Gilman in American Socialist Triptych (2012), Mark Van Wienen, in Chapter 9, emphasizes that for the ten years preceding the publication of Women and Economics (1898), Gilman’s successes came from work as a lecturer on the Nationalist club circuit, an outgrowth of Nationalism, a particularly popular form of socialism
in the US in the 1890s. It was in an 1890 Nationalist journal that Gilman published the poem that made her close to a household name – ‘Similar Cases’. The similar cases are moments in evolutionary history when conservatives would say change is impossible, yet some rebellious, wilful species changes anyway:

There was once a little animal,
No bigger than a fox,
And on five toes he scampered
Over Tertiary rocks.
They called him Eohippus,
And they called him very small,
And they thought him of no value –
When they thought of him at all;
...
Said the little Eohippus,
‘I am going to be a horse!
And on my middle-finger-nails
To run my earthly course!’
...
The Coryphodon was horrified,
The Dinoceras was shocked;
...
‘Why! You’d have to change your nature!’
...
This was the way they argued
In ‘the early Eocene’.

The poem continues in this vein until a prehistoric man appears with ideas for change and is told by ‘his Neolithic neighbors’, ‘Before such things can come,/You idiotic child,/You must alter human nature!/... It was a clinching argument/To the Neolithic Mind!’ (Gilman, 1890/1974, pp. 95–100). This was the work that drew Gilman to the attention of Lester Ward, a noted reform social Darwinist and the first president of the American Sociological Society.

Egan offers a detailed account of Gilman’s relation with reform social Darwinism from which she took ideas about the similarities humans have with other species, the significance for social life of sexual differentiation as the mechanism of reproduction, the claim that a changing environment would effect changes in human character and behaviour, and the assumption that change was stage-like and progressive in direction. After giving background on Darwin and Spencer, Egan turns to Ward, identifying two lines of argument in his theory that especially influenced Gilman – his views on human consciousness and his ‘Gynaecocentric Theory’ (p. 142). Ward argued that unlike all other species, the human species had acquired the intellectual capacity for planful purposive action, both as individuals and as a collectivity. Where all other species evolved naturally through ‘survival of the fittest’, humans evolved through the interaction between this natural process and reflective collective consciousness. This interaction transforms natural evolution into human social progress.

Ward’s gynaecocentric theory looks at the stages of this progress, seeing the first stage as one in which, as Egan explains, it is women’s maternal energy that is transformed into productive energy while male energy was a ‘scattering force’ fighting for food and opposing
enemies. At this stage, women selected the strongest and healthiest men to be mates. But in the next stage, males usurped the right of mate selection by subjugating women and becoming the source of productive energy in society. This theory gives Gilman a justification for the belief that women are by nature the productive and life-affirming sex and focuses her on the present state of gender relations as a stage, patriarchy, which can be challenged and replaced by a future of greater gender equity and a more humane culture. Ward’s theses of the importance of human consciousness to human social organization and of the place of male usurpation in human evolution helps shape Gilman’s ideas about the key role ideas and ideology play in patterning gender relations, developed most elaborately in her *Man-Made World, or Our Androcentric Culture* (1911), which she dedicates to Ward.

In Chapter 9 Mark Van Wienen makes a persuasive argument for how much Gilman learnt in her years on the socialist lecture circuit which in the US had several strands in the 1890s:

Nationalism, a movement for national ownership of industry catalyzed by Edward Bellamy’s novel *Looking Backward, 2000–1887*; Populism, which proposed government control of railroads, banking and communication while creating farmers’ cooperatives as a buffer to the ‘free’ capitalist market; and Fabianism, a slender American offshoot of the English society working for socialism through education and political influence. (pp. 149–50)

Gilman drew from this experience the axiom that it is industry or the economy or labour that is the vital, bedrock institution of any society, as she wrote in a Nationalist pamphlet: ‘We have our religious life. We have our political life. We have our industrial life. In the first two we have made ourselves free, but because we are slaves in the last we are helpless in all’ (quoted in Chapter 9, p. 160). At the heart of her theory she puts work and the idea of economic independence rooted in the exchange of productive labour, which she defines, following an outgrowth of socialism called ‘Producerism’, as ‘any task contributing to “the permanent improvement of the habitable globe”’ (p. 157). This emphasis on the economy shapes Gilman’s attitude towards women’s suffrage, which as Van Wienen shows, follows Nationalist doctrine: suffrage is desirable but not as essential as economic independence.

The next two essays in this section show the complexity of Gilman’s relation to feminism, which is rooted in her demand that women, like men, be given access to economic independence and the fulfilment it produces. As a critical social theorist, she focused on social institutions like the gender division of labour in marriage, which denied women both independence and fulfillment. And yet, as Rosalind Sydie and Bert Adams’s comparison of Gilman to another woman founder, Beatrice Webb, shows (Chapter 10), Gilman, like the childless Webb, believed in the social value of motherhood. Resolving the possible contradiction between the economically independent woman and the good mother is one of the major problems in much of Gilman’s theory. Chapter 11, Mary A. Hill’s introduction to a reissue of *Man-Made World*, points to an important anomaly in Gilman’s scholarly achievement – her failure to acknowledge her indebtedness to a large tradition of feminist writing, while she focused her readers on her location in a male academic literature, notably that of Lester Ward. Hill suggests that this was Gilman’s two-part strategy for claiming a place in the man-made world of sociology.

The fourth part of Gilman’s intellectual framework is shown in Charlene Haddock Seigfried’s study of Gilman as a pragmatist (Chapter 12). Seigfried argues that Gilman would have absorbed pragmatist philosophy through her contacts with Jane Addams, who was
closely connected with leading philosophers like John Dewey, William James and George Herbert Mead. Seigfried sees three principles of pragmatism as especially important to Gilman’s work: one, human nature does not have an essential quality but is evolving; two, that evolution needs freedom to succeed; and three, that humans are social and that evolution is tending towards cooperation. She sees Gilman manifesting the pragmatist attitude of mind when she, Gilman, writes: 'the more we see the possible joy of human living, the more painful become present conditions – if unchangeable. But they are changeable' (quoted in Chapter 12, p. 211).

The General Theory

Gilman offers a tightly constructed general theory of society – complicated primarily by modifications in her thought over time – for example the emphases of *Women and Economics* are not the same as those of *Herland*. This presents the challenge of deciding the best entry point for explication, which we see as her thesis that the defining feature of human beings is a capacity for cooperative work.

Like Marx, Gilman sees the species nature of human beings to be fulfilment in work – independence, self-expression and the joy of creativity. Human work is distinguished by its degree of sociality and task specialization. And the experience of work shapes individual personality. Over evolutionary history, this specialization and interdependence have evolved into a complex economy, ideally an organic unity of mutual service and mutual exchange. Participation in an interdependent economic relation gives economic independence – the assurance of a fair and predictable livelihood in return for one’s work and an essential social good.

The great barrier to humans finding fulfilment in work is the *sexuo-economic relation* which produces an *androcentric culture*, societal dysfunction and human unhappiness for men, women and children. The *sexuo-economic relation* is a condition, existing only among human beings, in which one sex, the female, is economically dependent on the other sex, the male, who, in turn becomes economically responsible for the female: ‘We are the only animal species in which the female depends on the male for food, the only animal species in which the sex-relation is also an economic relation’ (Gilman, 1898, p. 5).

The *sexuo-economic relation* turns on ‘gender’ – or what Gilman calls *excessive sex distinction*, the practice of assigning behaviours to people on the basis of (perceived) biological sex. This assignment is ‘excessive’ because it prescribes a range of behaviour unrelated to reproductive functions. True sex specific behaviours comprise a small list. Beyond these behaviours evolution’s direction was to produce people who were fully human, not men or women. Humans, through the consciousness Ward identified, had interfered with this course in the development of excessive sex distinction which held back evolution by relegating the human female to virtual servitude under the *sexuo-economic relation*. Excessive sex distinction results in the woman securing a husband through ultra-femininity, developing a particular body type, pursuing her ends by feminine wiles rather than direct action, being rewarded for incompetence in the affairs of the world. Similarly, excessive sex distinction determines that the man secures a wife, and the services that go with her, by being ultra-masculine, which has come to mean being tough and aggressive.
Oilman sees gender as a class or caste system which permanently divides people into two groups: one destined for work in the world and the other for a life as the personal servant of this worker and the mother of his children. As the work one does shapes one’s personality, the two parties in a marriage come to have little in common.

‘Excessive sex distinction’ leads to the androcentric culture – a society’s configuration of ideas and patterns for behaviour that takes male experience as its standard and excludes female experience from the understandings of what it means to be human. Systems of ideas are central to Gilman’s theoretical model: ‘a concept is stronger than a fact’ (1923b, p. 4).

People’s ideas about the nature of men and women shape their actions, especially their socialization of children. Under the androcentric culture, people judge themselves and behave not in terms of human standards but rather in terms of what is expected of a man or a woman.

Together the sexuo-economic relation, excessive sex distinction and androcentric culture produce human unhappiness and societal dysfunction. Men, under the pressure of supporting a family, are trapped in jobs they hate or are unsuited to; in return for this responsibility and pain they are allowed to act as tyrants at home. The married house-bound woman lacks economic autonomy because there is no connection between the work she does and her economic return. If her husband is poor, no matter how hard she works, she remains poor. If her husband is wealthy, she may do practically nothing and still live comfortably. His labour not hers determines their and her fate. Women, confined to the home doing housework and childcare they may be unsuited to, are forced by economic dependence to become manipulative. Children, male or female, grow up learning the anti-social lesson that all that matters is taking care of one’s family and that male tyranny and female subordination are the way the world is. At the societal level, men are forced to participate in corrupt work practices because they alone must support family. Women as isolated consumers cannot protest corrupt corporate practices. Children are not socialized for cooperation or civic engagement. Society operates on only half the labour and creative power it might have.

Oilman argues that humanity will move beyond this patriarchal stage only when women win economic equality – doing work they choose to do and being paid fairly, which will liberate men from the burden of supporting the other half of the race. For this to happen, the home and family must change. She offers plans for reorganizing the home both as a physical space and as a work site, foreseeing a future in which there are trained, respected, well-paid professionals who enjoy making their living caring for homes and children – while other people (women) do other work of their choice.

Oilman develops this general theory in her work between 1892 and about 1911. In later work, most visibly in *Herland* (*Forerunner* 1915) and *His Religion and Hers* (1923), she shifts increasingly to a definition of the great work of humanity as public parenting, in which both men and women share equally. *Herland* is a study of an all-female society whose members reproduce through pathogenesis and in which even women who do not have children understand their highest duty to be the socialization of the next generation.

Part IV contains five important overviews of Gilman’s general theory. In the first of these, Chapter 13, Carl Degler offers a broad survey of Gilman’s social theory. Comparing her to the feminist theorists of the modern period – such as Simone de Beauvoir and Margaret Mead – he locates her explanation of woman’s subordination to an interplay of material factors, most notably women’s confinement to the work of the home, and ideology, notably the complex of patriarchal beliefs Gilman names as ‘androcentric culture’. Degler’s avowed project was
to recover Gilman for social science thinking. In 1966, as American feminism began its long
Second Wave, he oversaw the reissue of *Women and Economics*, writing the introductory
ey essay which we include here.

Bernice Hausman (Chapter 14), drawing on *Herland*, approaches Gilman through one
the central puzzles of feminism and the sociology of gender: how to ‘conceptualize sexual
differences’. She suggests four options – make sex and gender a composite unity, privilege
gender as a central concept, privilege sex as the central concept or find new terms. This question
is important to Gilman because as one looks at the sexuo-economic relation and makes the
argument that it rests on ‘excessive sex distinction’, the issue emerges as to which comes first
– the sexuo-economic relation or excessive sex distinction? Contrary to our interpretation of
Gilman’s theory (above), Hausman argues, persuasively, that Gilman ‘distinguished within
sex’ not between sex and gender (p. 242), and develops the implications of this position for
Gilman’s social theory.

In Chapter 15 Ann Palmieri situates Gilman in reform social Darwinism and connects
that tradition with Gilman’s feminism. Palmieri defends Gilman’s work against the charge
that it is disqualified as social science because of its advocacy for women – a hallmark of
feminist social science – exploring the appropriateness of moral reasoning in the construction
of social science theory. Gilman’s programme to sever the economic and sexual relationship
– that is, to remove the economic relation from marriage – would make ‘marriage what
it truly is – a sexual relation not an economic one’ (p. 275). Palmieri identifies Gilman’s
great contribution to feminist theory as her use of the evolutionary paradigm to argue for
the economic emancipation of women, who, as human beings, share in the species trait that
requires participation in economic production.

Chapter 16, by Naomi Zauderer, uses a comparison with Marx to uncover a profound theme
in Gilman’s social theory – her equal weighing of production, consumption and reproduction,
giving the latter two ‘the same careful attention normally reserved for the production process
alone’ (p. 285). Gilman challenges Marx and Engels’s thesis that humans make themselves
through their labour by focusing on humans’ ‘prolonged period of dependency in childhood’
(p. 285) to show that they are first made by the labour of others. Recognizing this indebtedness
to those first caregivers, Gilman, in her theory of human work, substitutes for Marx’s ‘labour
power’ her concept of ‘social energy’, the natural desire to work to discharge the original social
energy that has shaped childhood and which flows through all people without being owned by
them. This lays the basis for a cooperative and collective economy as the foundation of society.

Margaret Lewis and David Sebberson, in Chapter 17, ostensibly look at Gilman’s theory,
and that of Thorstein Veblen, in terms of rhetorical style, but they move this discussion to the
theory itself, by defining the hallmark of that style as describing both economic theory and
practice as social action. They cast what Gilman and Veblen do as the practice of ‘critical
rhetoric’: ‘By drawing out the critical impulse of rhetoric that urges us to judge anew ingrained
schemata and traditions and coupling this with the process of self-reflection, the rhetorician
engages colloquial language to lay open and articulate elements of force and power that may
distort deliberation and judgment necessary for human action’ (p. 314). This rhetorical style
is constituted by a movement between the language of the everyday world and the language
of scientific generalization. *Women and Economics* is replete with Gilman’s use of colloquial
language to make her argument, as when she contends that women’s domestic duties do not
make them participants in the economy:
But the salient fact in this discussion is that, whatever the economic value of the domestic industry of women is, they do not get it. The women who do the most work get the least money, and the women who have the most money do the least work. Their labor is neither given nor taken as a factor in economic exchange. It is held to be their duty as women to do this work; and their economic status bears no relation to their domestic labors, unless an inverse one. (1898, pp. 14–15)

The brief phrase ‘they do not get it’ sums up in the language of everyday life the complex edifice of economic argument that Gilman is developing.

**Women and Work**

Gilman’s general theory turns in part on the puzzle economist Mary Ann Dimand identifies as the question of ‘the conventionally housebound and unpaid woman’s role in the economy’ (1998, p. 128). While seeking a theoretical answer to this question, Gilman also explored it practically, discussing the worth of women’s private sphere work and redesigning the home to liberate women for work of their own choosing.

In Chapter 18, the first essay in Part V, legal scholar Reva B. Siegel analyses Gilman’s critical stance towards the prevalent idea of marriage as an economic partnership, showing how that critique is both ‘empowering’ and ‘disabling’ and describing its rejection by a popular audience in a debate between Gilman and suffrage leader Anna Howard Shaw. The vast majority of women depended on and lived the experience of marriage as an economic partnership, regardless of Gilman’s logic.

In the next two essays economists weigh whether Gilman’s focus is on bettering the economic position of individual women, as Margaret O’Donnell argues in Chapter 19, or rather, as Falguni Sheth and Robert Prasch claim in Chapter 20, on ‘the social necessity of women’s labor’ (p. 349), a necessity requiring mothers to be educated and happy. While both essays draw on *Women and Economics*, Sheth and Prasch make significant use of *Herland* (1915), in which, as noted above, Gilman shifts from a focus on women’s economic independence to an argument that social progress depends on public parenting in which men and women both play a part.

The next three essays address Gilman’s very concrete concerns with how the work of the home is to be done if women are to achieve economic independence. The excerpt from Polly Wynn Allen’s classic study *Building Domestic Liberty: Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s Architectural Feminism* (Chapter 21) outlines the four main reasons for Gilman’s call for a redesigned home. First, the home is out of step with the general progress of society towards specialization, remaining an undifferentiated and disorganized workshop. Second, the home is ‘unfair to women’, forcing woman as wife to become “‘a private servant, cook, cleaner, mender of rents, a valet, janitor, and chambermaid’” (p. 365). Third, the home as currently designed is hard on individual members – an economic burden on the father, a barrier to members’ relaxation because of its constant work demands and so centred around the needs of the adult male as to make him feel that selfishness is his right. Finally, the home works against the development of social morality by physically embodying the idea that the only allegiance one owes is to the people who live within its walls.

Charlotte Rich (Chapter 22) in her introduction to Gilman’s first novel, *What Diantha Did* (1910), shows how Gilman makes her argument for women’s economic independence
through fiction. Rich analyses how Gilman plots the novel so as to test her repeated assertion that the home should be changed by establishing professionally paid, respected and skilled labour specialized in its different tasks – cleaning, childcare, nutrition, etc. *What Diantha Did* explores how such services might come into being, providing economic independence for the provider as well as for those served through the work of the title character who builds a career as a domestic service agent.

Finally, in Chapter 23, Patricia Lengermann and Gillian Niebrugge use Gilman’s theory to critique *The Time Bind*, Arlie Hochschild’s 1998 evaluation of the effectiveness of ‘family friendly’ work arrangements like flextime.

**Androcentric Culture**

While there is a significant body of scholarship on Gilman’s theories of women and work, the literature is thinner on her equally important thesis about the male-centred or androcentric culture that constitutes the symbolic environment. The first use of the word ‘androcentric’ is attributed to Ward’s *Pure Sociology* (1903) (Oxford English Dictionary); popular online sources like Wikipedia credit Gilman for the analytic concept of *androcentric culture* (http://stuorgs.uidaho.edu/~flame/Androcentrism.html). Her critique of androcentric culture is a theme through much of her work as she shows how it affects people – men and women – who live in it, and communicate, coordinate action and reflect on themselves through it. (Charles Lemert [2007] extends Gilman’s idea of androcentric culture beyond, as he acknowledges, Gilman’s own thesis, labelling her a forerunner of feminist standpoint theory – an enticing argument but one that requires ignoring large themes fundamental to Gilman’s social theory.)

In Chapter 24 Martha J. Cutter focuses, as does Gilman, on language as one of the main vehicles of androcentric culture. Cutter takes selections from Gilman’s short fiction that function as ‘metatexts’, a text that, according to Umberto Eco, as Cutter relates, ‘tells stories about the way stories are built up’ (pp. 416–17). Cutter shows how Gilman creates plots and scenes in which ‘women are encouraged to comprehend the constructedness of the linguistic categories used to define them, and to break from these categories’ (p. 419) – patriarchy is defeated through the subversion of androcentric language. The reverse possibility is explored by Lou Ann Matossian in Chapter 25, a study of how the ‘woman-made’ language of *Herland* changes the perceptions of the three male visitors. Matossian puts Gilman’s interest in language in the larger perspective of Gilman’s concerns with ‘social behaviour’; Gilman sees language, she writes, ‘as the collective self-expression of an evolving people’ (p. 435) and as one of the ways men control the world and women. The extent of this control becomes clear in a subversive reading of *Herland* by Kathleen Lant (Chapter 26) which sees the fictional element of ‘plot’ as part of androcentric culture and Gilman as guilty of succumbing to patriarchy in the plot line; most particularly ‘by centering the narrative on the issue of Terry and Alima’s uncertain sexual union and by generating suspense through exploiting the potential violence of that union – Gilman compromises the integrity of her own text’ (p. 442).

Part VI concludes with Frank G. Kirkpatrick’s examination of Gilman’s 1923 critique of androcentric religion (Chapter 27) which begins by noting that Gilman did not engage key theological issues like the nature of God or the problem of evil. Instead her main objection to androcentric religion – ‘his’ religion – is its obsession with death, whereas a maternal religion
‘hers’ – is concerned with birth, the needs of the child, service to others and the possibilities of the future rather than the mistakes or achievements of the past.

Problems and Utopias

Gilman’s personal sense of her work – the thing that she felt defined her – included the duty to work out solutions to the important reform issues of her day. A significant portion of her writing deals, on the one hand, with social problems and, on the other hand, with the presentation of solutions achieved in fictional utopian societies. Two of the problems she addressed the most have already been discussed – the need to redesign the home (Part V ‘Women’s Work’) and the need to end the androcentric domination of language (Part VI). But she also addressed issues seen today as ‘social problems’ and in Herland created a detailed vision of a utopian society.

Gilman’s analyses of social problems are today frequently criticized as elitist, marred by racial, ethnic and class biases. The chief debate here is not over whether Gilman held – as Mary Jo Deegan acknowledges – views that were ‘bigoted and ethnocentric at times’, but rather how much can be ‘contextualized’ (Deegan, 1997, p. 46). Alys Weinbaum, in ‘Writing Feminist Genealogy’, charges that much feminist scholarship pursuing the project of recovering Gilman has actively sought to cover over how much her ‘feminism is built’ on ‘her ideas about race and nation’ (2001, p. 296) and that feminists are so anxious to claim her, they are not willing to look objectively at her prejudice. Lisa Ganobscik-Williams (1999), among others, tries to place these biases in the context of Gilman’s evolutionary theory and the general attitudes in intellectual circles at that time.

On one level, Gilman argued against an innate hierarchy of races/nations: ‘Almost any race is superior to others in some particular’, she admitted (1923a, p. 1998). On a deeper plain, however, she rationalized her underlying ethnic and racial elitism into an evolutionary story through which white Americans had progressed to the highest standard – or at least possessed the best potential for achieving this standard (Ganobscik-Williams, 1999, pp. 23–24).

One support for the argument that Gilman’s views must be seen in context (see Deegan, Chapter 4 in this volume; Lane, 1981) can be found in the publication venue of Gilman’s ‘Suggestion on the Negro Problem’, an article frequently discussed in debates about her racial attitudes. It appeared in the American Journal of Sociology in 1908 and was judged by a scholar outside debates about Gilman as ‘sympathetic to blacks’ but ‘far outnumbered by contributions that were genuinely racist’ (Phelan, 1989, p. 80).

In Part VII, the contradictions in Gilman’s work are represented in two essays – Dana Seiter’s ‘Unnatural Selection: Mothers, Eugenic Feminism, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s Regeneration Narratives’ (Chapter 28) and Jeanne M. Connell’s ‘Revisiting the Concept of Community: An Examination of Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s Utopian Vision’ (Chapter 29).

Seiter uses Gilman’s fiction about issues of eugenics as they enter into decisions about courtship and marriage, most especially in the novel The Crux, to explore questions about feminism as a social movement and Gilman’s motives in her call for what Seiter sees as ‘the necessity of women, as mothers, to regenerate “the race”’ (p. 479):
'Is the race weak? She [the mother] can make it strong. Is it stupid? She can make it intelligent. Is it foul with disease? She can make it clean ... We should have conventions of young women gathered to study what is most needed in their race and how they may soonest develop it.' (Gilman quoted in Chapter 28, p. 479)

For Seitler, the key question here is how Gilman combines ‘the feminist rhetoric of this argument and its eugenic impulses’ (p. 479) She sees Gilman developing in these ‘regeneration narratives … a paradigm of white, middle-class motherhood as a model of social progress’ (p. 482) with women as revitalizers of the (Anglo-Saxon) race and carriers of US imperial expansion.

Balancing Seitler’s portrait of a darker side of Gilman is Connell’s description of Gilman’s abiding interest in ‘community’, as a value and a structure. Connell argues that Gilman ‘regarded herself more as a humanist than a feminist’ (p. 506), one whose duty was to promote as universal values, values traditionally assigned to women such as ‘caring and cooperation’ (p. 506). Drawing primarily on Herland, Connell outlines the specific qualities Gilman presents as essential for community: economic cooperation, working to repay the debt one owes for the care the community has provided in one’s childhood (rather than working for one’s own aggrandizement), achieving privacy through a small space of one’s own but not a home (the language of Herland has no word analogous to our word ‘home’) and making private sphere values of respect, concern for and cooperation with others replace the current American public value of competition.

Reading Seitler and Connell together captures the intensity of Gilman’s sometimes contradictory positions.

Conclusions

Our opening claimed that this volume would lay out the case for a recovery of the sociology of Charlotte Perkins Gilman. We conclude by thinking about what such a ‘recovery’ would be like. It first must move Gilman beyond her current status in sociology as an archetype of early feminist social thought – duly noted but not seriously engaged. Serious engagement requires looking at both Gilman’s model of society and the concepts she created to name specific points in that model. To recover her, today’s generation of scholars must explicate that model of gender stratification as the essential explanation of social inequality both macrosocial and microsocial.

Some of that engagement may involve using Gilman to challenge or interrogate key sociological concepts today. For instance, do we have a better definition of ‘gender’ than Gilman’s conception of ‘excessive sex distinction’? At what point does such distinction become ‘excessive’? How does such an understanding relate to the contemporary issue of transgendered persons?

Some of that engagement may involve taking seriously Gilman’s most radical proposals. For instance, Gilman argues that the central business of society is the rearing of children and that that central business not only can but must be detached from the cultural fetish of ‘the home’. How does this argument play out in current debates over childcare and women’s double day?
Gender scholars in particular must begin to assess and use Gilman's ideas to frame their research — in choice of problem, in method of data collection, in conceptual schema for interpretation. Gilman does not need to be 'made relevant' — she is profoundly relevant — but she does need to be used.
Bibliography

Gilman’s Major Sociological Statements

Gilman published over 2,000 separate works; this section lists in chronological order of original publication consciously sociological works. See Scharnhorst under ‘Key Biographical Sources’ for a full listing of Gilman’s publications.

*Concerning Children*, Boston: Small and Maynard, 1900.

Key Biographical Sources

Works Referenced


**Other Significant Commentary**


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Part I
Gilman and the
Sociological Imagination
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Charlotte Perkins Gilman
A FEMINIST'S STRUGGLE WITH WOMANHOOD

Mary A. Hill

IN A LETTER written from Belmont, New Hampshire, September 2, 1897, Charlotte Perkins Stetson exclaimed, "Thirty-five hundred words I wrote this morning, in three hours!" A book's chapter in one sitting; a successive six-week dizzy pace of morning writing; elaborate consultations with her closest critic, Houghton Gilman, soon to be her second husband; and thus was Women and Economics dashed into print. Jane Addams, already emerging as one of America's foremost social reformers, expressed her gratitude to Charlotte, her "pleasure and satisfaction," her "greatest admiration" for the "Masterpiece." Florence Kelly, another pioneer of social settlement reform viewed it as "the first real, substantial contribution made by a woman to the science of economics." According to The Nation, "Since John Stuart Mill's essays on The Subjection of Women, there has been no book dealing with the whole position of women to approach it in originality of conception and brilliancy of exposition." ¹

Charlotte Gilman quite naturally felt increasingly elated as positive reviews rolled in, despite the societal distortions her book both reflected and described. A flamboyant speaker, a writer with a penetrating wit, she was rapidly emerging as a major theorist and popularizer for the woman's movement in turn-of-the-century America. Publicly she attempted to analyze and expose the ubiquitous effects of sex-based inequalities and the sources of female strength; and privately she acknowledged that many of her perceptions emerged as well from agonizing

¹Quotations from private letters are made with the permission of The Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America, Radcliffe College, Cambridge, Massachusetts. Letters from Charlotte Stetson to Houghton Gilman, September 2, 1897; letter from Jane Addams to Charlotte Stetson, July 19, 1898; letter from Florence Kelley to Charlotte Stetson, July 26, 1898; The Nation, June 8, 1899.
conflicts of her life. "We ourselves," she publicly and sweepingly asserted, "have preserved in our own character the confusion and contradiction which is our greatest difficulty in life." ² And privately she acknowledged the war between contending factions in herself. To Houghton Gilman she described a major challenge of her life: "To prove that a woman can love and work too. To resist this dragging weight of the old swollen woman-heart, and force it into place—the world's Life first—my own life next. Work first—love next. Perhaps this is simply the burden of our common womanhood which is weighing on me so." ³

The seeds of Charlotte's radical feminism were rooted in an early struggle for independence, self-assertion, and self-respect. Raised primarily within a female kinship network necessitated by her father's absence, and deprived from early infancy of the motherly affection for which she yearned, Charlotte nonetheless disclosed in her diaries and notebooks a growing strength of character, a playful, lively, independent personality. Rebellious against the model of repressive discipline her unhappy mother, Mary Perkins, attempted to impose, she was active in physical fitness programs, lecture clubs, and language classes. Armed with books and reading lists provided by her librarian father, Frederick Perkins, Charlotte was well-read in contemporary philosophical, historical, and anthropological thought. She delighted in her physical as well as in her mental agility; her effort to control her body was maintained within her larger program to control her life. By the age of 21 she was self-supporting, busy from 6 AM to 10 PM, and thriving in the process.

Despite the limitations imposed by her mother’s prudish discipline, Charlotte constantly had calls, visitors, and stimulating friendships with males as well as females. She enjoyed hiking, sleighing, rowing, playing whist, and was exhilarated in her triumphs at the chess board. She enjoyed inspiring evening talks with Ada Blake and Augusta Gladding, and many long walks with Grace Channing, who became her lifelong friend. Also, she developed an intimate relationship with Martha Luther, a relationship of mutual trust and shared interests. They delighted in each other’s company. “With Martha I knew perfect happiness,” she later wrote, “Four years of satisfying happiness with Martha, then she married and moved away.”

Charlotte’s friendship with Martha provided the kind of support, encouragement, and mutual affection historians currently believe was central to the experience of most nineteenth-century women. The reality of Charlotte’s love was quite apparent, her grief at the impending separation was intense and disruptive. In 1881, Charlotte noted that “some swain” was threatening her relationship with Martha, that because of marriage she might lose her “most intimate friend.” On November 5th she wrote: “Pleasant, to ring at the door where you’ve always been greeted with gladness; to be met by the smile that you value all others above—to see that smile flicker and vanish and change into sadness because she was met by your presence instead of her love.” On November 16th she noted, “Walk in the dark streets for an hour or so in dumb misery.” In December, she summarized: “A year of steady work. A quiet year, and a hard one. . . . A year in which I knew the sweetness of perfect friendship, and have lost it forever.”


See particularly diary entries for October 12, October 30, November 5, November 16, December 16, 1881. Charlotte had many very close relationships with women during her lifetime, with Grace Channing, Adeline Knapp, Martha Luther, and Helen Campbell, for example. The data richly supports Carroll Smith-Rosenberg’s suggestion that “women’s sphere had an essential integrity and dignity that grew out of women’s shared experiences and mutual affection.” Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, “The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations Between Women in Nineteenth-Century America,” *Signs* 1, no. 1 (Autumn, 1975), 9–10. As historians increasingly appreciate the significance of female networks of support and companionship, we need also to consider the often painful feeling of rejection close female friends experienced with one another. Among Charlotte’s most difficult emotional crises were the departure of Martha Luther and the disruption of the relationship with Adeline Knapp (“Dora” in *Living*, pp. 133, 141–144). See diary entries, 1892–93.
After a typical self-scourging, she became more stoic, striving to submerge her grief by helping others. But the vacuum left by Martha’s absence heightened Charlotte’s longings for affection, and may have paved the way for her acceptance of the comforting protection of a man.

On January 12, 1882, Charlotte met an aspiring artist, Walter Stetson. Within seventeen days of their first meeting he proposed. Her diary entry reads: “I have this day been asked the one great question in a womans [sic] life and have refused.” Two days later she wrote:

Now that my head is cool and clear, now before I give myself in any sense to another; let me write down my Reasons for living single.

In the first place, I am fonder of freedom than anything else— . . .

I like to be able and free to help any and everyone, as I never could be if my time and thoughts were taken up by that extended self—a family. . . .

I am cool, fearless, and strong . . . .

For reasons many and good, reasons of slow growth and careful consideration, more reasons that I now can remember; I decide to Live—Alone.

God help me!

For a time at least, Charlotte remained committed to her rationale for spinsterhood: “if I were to try the path you open to me I could never try my own,” she wrote. “I knew of course that the time would come when I must choose between two lives, but never did I dream that it would come so soon, and that the struggle would be so terrible.” It was, as she put it directly to Walter, “a trial which in very truth does try me like fire.”

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7 Letters from Charlotte Perkins to Walter Stetson, February 20 and 21, 1882. According to the pre-1881 reading lists which Charlotte kept in her diaries, she was apparently unfamiliar with the rich feminist literature she might have drawn on. Moreover, it is striking that she did not mention her two successful great-aunts, Catharine Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe, as she described to Walter the seemingly irreconcilable conflict between marriage and career:

I am beset by my childhood’s conscientiousness . . . the voice of all the ages sounds in my ears, saying that this [marriage] is noble, natural, and right; that no woman yet has ever attempted to stand alone as I intend but that she had to submit or else. . . .
Despite her misgivings, Charlotte began to express increasing affection for Walter—"I am beginning to wonder how I ever lived through this winter, before you—; . . . You want to give me something! You are giving me back myself." By 1883, she was engaged to Walter and began to accept his sympathy, his comforting, his advice, even when it was constricting. For example, when a close friend gave her a new copy of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* she noted, "I am obliged to decline, as I had promised Walter I would not read it." She now resolved, first and foremost, to be "Absolutely unselfish . . . To find my happiness in the pleasurable sensations of others rather than in my own. To consider others, think of others, think first 'will he or she like it?' rather than shall I." 8

As Charlotte's expressions of affection and self-sacrifice intensified, so also did her gloom. She experienced a loss of strength, discipline, and courage which she had worked so consciously to acquire. In December, 1883 she wrote: "Let me not forget to be grateful for what I have. Some strength, some purpose, some design, some progress, some esteem, respect—and affection. And some Love. Which I can neither feel, see, nor believe in when the darkness comes." She continued: "I mean this year to try hard for somewhat of my former poise and courage. As I remember it was got by practice." Nonetheless, a severe depression began to take its toll:

I would more gladly die than ever yet; saving for the bitter agony I should leave in the heart of him who loves me. And mother's pain.
But O! God knows I am tired, tired, tired of life!
If I could only know that I was doing right.9

Charlotte’s expressed attitudes toward marriage and motherhood were fiercely ambivalent. Rationally aware of possible conflicts between self-

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8 Letter to Walter Stetson, March 6, 1882; Diary, April 5, 1883; "Thoughts and Fingerings," November 3, 1883. Charlotte’s acceptance in 1883 of Walter’s authority contrasts strikingly with her self-confident assertions of February 13, 1882: “You are the first man I have met whom I recognize as an equal; and that is saying a good deal for me. I would call you grandly superior, but that I am fighting just now against a heart-touched woman’s passion of abnegation.” Letter to Walter Stetson, February 13, 1882.
9 Diary, December 31, 1883.
development and love, she was largely unprepared to meet the complex unconscious as well as deliberate patterns of socialization which forced most women to accept self-sacrificing love as natural, inevitable, and right. Drawing from conflicting signals of her mother, Mary Perkins, Charlotte knew that women could achieve a modicum of independence, but always at a price. Mary Perkins was a divorced and eventually self-supporting woman, nourished and sustained by a female network of friends and relatives; her nonconformity strengthened Charlotte’s capacity for independence. But suffering from the stigma of divorce, from economic hardship, from the guilt and emotional insecurity her single life-style caused her, Mary quickened Charlotte’s fear of spinsterhood. Both parents had also unwittingly encouraged Charlotte’s independence by withholding their affection. Mary Perkins had denied caresses to her daughter: “I used to put away your little hand from my cheek when you were a nursing baby,” Mary told Charlotte in her later years. “I did not want you to suffer as I had suffered.” Likewise her librarian father, Frederick Perkins, kept his distance: “the word Father, in the sense of love, care, one to go to in trouble, means nothing to me,” Charlotte wrote, “save indeed in advice about books and the care of them—which seems more the librarian than the father.”

A contemporary psychologist, Alexandra Symonds, discusses symptoms in her recent patients quite similar to those that Charlotte was beginning to exhibit. The women Symonds treated were active, vital, and self-assured before their marriages. Yet they were also often women who had to “grow up in a hurry.” Denied experiences of warmth in childhood, they were encouraged to control their feelings and give the impression of strength and self-sufficiency. Symonds suggests a frequent pattern: “They repressed their healthy needs to be taken care of and repressed the child in them as well.” Perhaps Charlotte’s difficulties were rooted in the discipline and loneliness of youth, the loss of her friend Martha Luther serving only to exacerbate her thirst for love. Perhaps, as Symonds puts it, she desired “to put down a tremendous burden which she had been carrying all her life, and be the dependent little girl she had never been before.”

10 Living, pp. 10, 5.
11 “Phobias” emerge, according to the Symonds thesis, from a denial of self-expression that women often felt must be the price of love. “Marriage then becomes their ‘declaration of dependence’... [T]hey tend to become the paragons of Victorian femininity—helpless, housebound, and ineffectual.” See Alexandra Symonds, M.D., “Phobias after Marriage: Women’s Declara-
Charlotte Perkins Gilman

On May 2, 1884 Charles Walter Stetson and Charlotte Anna Perkins were married in Providence, Rhode Island. “O my God! I thank thee for this heavenly happiness!” she wrote in her diary the evening of the wedding.\(^{12}\)

There were commonly expected roles of men and women in marriage that both Charlotte and Walter accepted. As a man, Walter was expected to provide for his family. He did not have to choose between marriage and his work. In fact, marriage lent further purpose to his artistic growth and creative efforts. Charlotte, by contrast, felt a momentous change occurring in her life. Formerly self-supporting, independent, and career-oriented, she found herself involved with time-consuming domestic chores which conflicted with the work she loved—painting and writing. Within a week, some spontaneous rebellion seemed to be occurring. She wrote in her diary, “I suggest he [Walter] pay me for my services; and he much dislikes the idea. I am grieved at offending him; mutual misery. Bed and cry.” She was beginning to experience firsthand what later she would depict so trenchantly: “the home which is so far from beautiful, so wearing to the nerves and dulling to the heart, the home life that means care and labour and disappointment, the quiet, unnoticed whirlpool that sucks down youth and beauty and enthusiasm, man’s long labour and woman’s longer love.”\(^{18}\)

Although the personal dynamics of Charlotte’s relationship with Walter must remain elusive, sexual experiences may have contributed to her growing discontent. At times Charlotte viewed sexuality with traditional Victorian prudery: “Purity,” she wrote in 1883, “is that state in which no evil impulse, no base thought can come in; or if forced in dies of shame in the white light. Purity may be gained by persistent and long continued refusal to entertain low ideas.” Yet it is also clear that she was by no means always cold or unapproachable in early marriage. On June 15, 1884 she noted: “Am sad: last night and this morning. Because I find myself too—affectionately expressive. I must keep more to myself and be asked—not borne with.” And on June 25 the same year she wrote, “Get miserable over my old woe—conviction of Dependence,” in *Psychoanalysis and Women*, edited by Jean Baker Miller, M.D. (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1973), pp. 288–303.

\(^{12}\) Diary, May 2, 1884.

of being too outwardly expressive of affection."  

Soon Charlotte was pregnant, a condition which lessened her physical and emotional stamina. Even after the birth of Katharine Stetson in 1885, Charlotte wrote in her diary, "Every morning the same hopeless waking . . . same weary drag." She appreciated her home, her healthy baby, the services of her mother and a competent domestic servant, yet was helpless and despondent: "and I lay all day on the lounge and cried." A failure in her own eyes, she looked to Walter for protective love, and increasingly for pity. She was assuming what Carroll Smith-Rosenberg has referred to as those "character traits assigned women in Victorian society and the characteristic symptoms of the nineteenth-century hyster: dependency, fragility, emotionality, narcissism." Charlotte did not as yet attack the religion of maternity, the assumption that all mothers are "saintly givers." Instead, she resigned herself to misery. She wrote, Walter "would do everything in the world for me; but he cannot see how irrevocably bound I am, for life, for life. No, unless he die and the baby die, or he change or I change, there is no way out." She described her "hysteria" as follows:

I could not read nor write nor paint nor sew nor talk nor listen to talking, nor anything. I lay on that lounge and wept all day. The tears ran down into my ears on either side. I went to bed crying, woke in the night crying, sat on the edge of the bed in the morning and cried—from sheer continuous pain. . . .

I made a rag baby, hung it on a doorknob and played with it. I would crawl into remote closets and under beds—to hide from the grinding pressure of that profound distress. . . .

In writing her autobiography, Charlotte described her "mental illness" as a disease beyond her understanding, an accidental misfortune. Suffering from recurrent depressions, she continued to believe that causes for her suffering lay not in the personal or political conflicts of her life, but in idiosyncratic weaknesses within herself. The price she paid for

14 "Thoughts and Fingerings," November 3, 1883; Diary, June 15, June 25, 1884.
15 Diary, August 30, 1885; Living, p. 89.
17 Diary, August 30, 1885; Living, pp. 91, 96.
nonconformity was guilt, despite the fact that almost all of her feminist writings were inextricably related to her life, and despite the fact as well that her short story, “The Yellow Wall-paper” was itself a feminist-oriented autobiographical portrayal of insanity.

In “The Yellow Wall-paper,” an “hysterical woman,” overprotected by a loving husband, is taken to a summer home to recover from nervousness, and told to rest and sleep and try to use her “will and self-control” to overcome her miseries. The room her husband John assigns to her is covered with a yellow-patterned wallpaper. “The color is repellent, almost revolting; a smouldering unclean yellow, strangely faded by the slow-turning sunlight.” Although the woman is quite ill, her husband, a physician, tells her that there is “no reason” for her suffering; she must dismiss those “silly fantasies.” Of course, “it is only nervousness,” she decides. But “it does weigh on me so not to do my duty in any way! . . . [and] such a dear baby! And yet I cannot be with him, it makes me so nervous.” She tries to rest and do as she is told, but suffers doubly since her husband will not believe that she is ill. He “does not know how much I really suffer. He knows there is no reason to suffer, and that satisfies him.” She thinks she should appreciate the protective love he offers. “He takes all care from me, and I feel so basely ungrateful not to value it more. . . . He took me in his arms and called me a blessed little goose.” And yet it is impossible to talk to him “because he is so wise, and because he loves me so.” Efforts to discuss the matter only bring a “stern reproachful look” and send her back to bed in shame.

John offers tender love, but enforces the inactivity which deepens her despair. “I am absolutely forbidden to ‘work’ until I am well again.” Here he comes, “I must put this away,—he hates to have me write a word.” Rest is what her physician husband says is right, so “he started the habit by making me lie down for an hour after each meal.”

The first stage of the breakdown is one of self-blame. The woman follows the doctor’s orders and tries to stop the fantasies that people tell her are unreal. When a physician of “high standing” assures “friends and relatives that there is really nothing the matter with one but temporary nervous depression—a slight hysterical tendency—what is one to do?” Gradually, however, the woman starts to believe in her fantasies. “There are things in that [wall-]paper that nobody knows but me, or ever will. Behind that outside pattern the dim shapes get clearer every day. . . . I didn’t realize for a long time what the thing was that showed behind that dim sub-pattern, but now I am quite sure it is a
woman.” Dramatically she trusts her perceptions and acts wildly but assertively.

I wasn't alone a bit! As soon as it was moonlight and that poor thing began to crawl and shake the pattern, I got up and ran to help her. I pulled and she shook, I shook and she pulled, and before morning we had peeled off yards of that paper.

The protagonist begins to creep and crawl within her madness. She separates herself from the perception of others, and when in a climactic scene her husband faints, she crawls over his body and says, “I've got out at last... in spite of you!”  

“The Yellow Wall-paper” stands in dramatic contrast to Charlotte’s autobiography, The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman. There, the separation from Walter Stetson is portrayed as resulting from her individual weaknesses, or equally simplistically, from a mismatched marriage. She was not inclined publicly or explicitly to indict loved ones in her life. Yet in “The Yellow Wall-paper,” she presented insanity as a form of rebellion, a crucial turning point toward independence. Only in a fictional version of her illness would she publicly express her anger: “I've got out at last... in spite of you.” Anger is also apparent in her diary. On April 18, 1887, she wrote:

I am very sick with nervous prostration, and I think some brain disease as well. No one can ever know what I have suffered in these last five years. Pain pain pain, til my mind has given way... You found me—you remember what I leave you—O remember what, and learn to doubt your judgment before it seeks to mould another life as it has mine.

I asked you a few days only before our marriage if you would take the responsibility entirely on yourself. You said yes. Bear it then.  

Although Charlotte often faced uncontrollable depressions during the bleak years of 1884–1887, fortunately a determination to trust her own

18 Charlotte Perkins Gilman, “The Yellow Wall-paper,” New England Magazine 5 (January, 1892), 647–656. I am taking the liberty of using “The Yellow Wall-paper” quite literally as autobiographical material. The names are different, the fantasies symbolic; but when asked to what extent “The Yellow Wall-paper” was based on fact, Charlotte replied, “I had been as far as one could go and get back.” Living, p. 121.
19 Diary, April 18, 1887.
abilities remained. In part, she benefited from a visit in California with Grace Channing and her family in the winter of 1885—86. In this supportive atmosphere she regained a measure of her former self-confidence. She felt more well, of gayer disposition, when she was separated from her family, a primary source of her guilt-induced anxiety. Moreover, the diaries indicate an emerging feminist consciousness during these same years; her reading, lecturing, and writing on women's issues predated and possibly contributed to her separation from Walter in 1888. For example, in 1883 she argued with a close friend, Jim Simmons, "till 11:45 nearly talking about Woman's Rights." He was a "man far from broad," she noted. In 1884 she read John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Women* (she also read it to her mother), and then began to lecture and to write on women's issues. She attended her first Woman's Suffrage Convention in 1886. In January, 1887, she read Margaret Fuller's *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* and "started a course of reading about women," although as she noted in her diary she stopped it temporarily to "oblige" Walter. By February she had accepted an offer from Alice Stone Blackwell to manage a suffrage column for a Providence weekly newspaper, *The People.*

Many days Charlotte complained of weakness and exhaustion from domestic obligations yet found strength when she worked on articles or verse. Incensed by the situation of other women, she was depressed when she reflected on her own. On February 20, 1887 she had a "good talk" with a neighbor, Mrs. Smythe, who was "another victim" with a "sickly child" and an ignorant husband who was "using his marital rights at her vital expense." And a month later: "Getting back to the edge of insanity again . . . feel desperate. Write my 'column' though." She also returned to her physical fitness program. For example, on February 7, after getting "discouraged by Walter," she delighted in her "jolly time at the gym in the evening. I seem to slip into my old position of inspirer very easily. And the girls like it."  

What is most striking about Charlotte's life, particularly from 1884—1887, is that she had the energy to pursue any of the activities she found most satisfying. She was "ill," yet stubbornly ignored the admonitions of her family, refused their well-intentioned offers of "security," and proceeded to develop an independent plan of action. She rejected the

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20 See diary entries November 16, 1883; February 24, October 6, 1886; January 5, January 19, February 5, 1887.

21 Diary entries, February 20, March 20, February 7, 1887.
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advice of a nerve specialist, Dr. S. Weir Mitchell: "Live as domestic a life as possible. Have your child with you all the time. . . . And never touch pen, brush or pencil as long as you live." Instead, she decided to try new alternatives. She believed that self-assertion, in her case the need to read, write, exercise, and enjoy the companionship of other women was crucial to her mental health. Lacking the support, or even the understanding of friends and relatives in Providence, Rhode Island, and with no income or well-defined plans for work, she determined to move herself and child to California in the fall of 1888. There, in Pasadena, the Channing family provided a brief respite of economic and emotional security.

Gradually, Charlotte began to meet other women like herself who were alone, without means of satisfying work, or without adequate income. Still personally distraught, she nonetheless moved toward a tactical involvement in the burgeoning feminist movement, began more seriously to analyze common problems women faced, and encouraged organizational and individual attacks on what she saw as pervasive social ills. Well-read in contemporary intellectual theory, and most particularly influenced by the writings of Lester Ward and Edward Bellamy, she became active in the lecture-writing circuit of the then highly politicized and often radical reform movements of the 1890's. Her expanding reputation brought her into close contact with socialist, nationalist, and Fabian thought. As a social theorist, she was eclectic rather than original. But in her partial adoption of socialist theory and in her continuing identification with oppressed groups, she was able to expand her feminist analysis beyond that of many of her contemporaries and to ground it in a broadly-based political perspective.

Turning now to the feminist analysis itself, I suggest that there were four major forces which Charlotte Gilman isolated as having created and perpetuated female inequality, or the "artificial" feminine personality. The underlying premise of her environmentalist analysis was the innate similarity of human potentials of males and females. As she put it:

That is masculine which belongs to the male sex as such; to any and all males without regard to species . . . That is feminine which belongs to the female sex, as such, without regard to

22 Living, p. 96.
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species... That is human which belongs to the human species, as such, without regard to sex... Every step of social development, every art, craft, and science... these have to do with humanity, as such, and have nothing to do with sex.28

The first of the major factors impinging on the lives of women, she perceived, was their economic dependence on men. Women had become in effect property of men. Women's work, she argued, had a use value but not an exchange value. She wrote, "whatever the economic value of the domestic industry of women is, they do not get it. The women who do the most work get the least money, and the women who have the most money do the least work." She insisted that economic dependence, wherever it occurred, necessarily resulted in a loss of integrity and self-respect. Encouraging women to view the political dimensions of their situation, she declared, "We have not as a class awakened to the fact that we have no money of our own." 24

Charlotte Gilman's economic struggles as a separated and subsequently divorced woman, and earlier the child of a divorced woman, made her especially sensitive to woman's economic plight. She knew from experience that economic security in the home was a mirage, that if deprived of the support of a male protector, women would invariably confront extremely limited work opportunities, and often tragic impoverishment. Yet she recognized that it was the family itself, as a social and economic institution, which perpetuated female enslavement and denied women opportunity for economic independence. Consequently, she differed from many feminists who believed that no "fundamental economic change would be necessary in home relationships for women to achieve equality." 25 For Charlotte Gilman, women's most essential goal was the building of an economic power base.

The second significant factor leading to "artificial" femininity, Gilman believed, was non-voluntary alienating domestic servitude. She argued that inequality of women resulted from a division of labor along sex lines, further evidence of a causative relationship between the insti-

24 The Home, p. 22; Women and Economics, pp. 14–15; Gilman, "Her Own Money: Is a Wife Entitled to the Money She Earns?" Mother's Magazine, 7 (February, 1912), 7.
tution of the family and women's low level of achievement. Cooking, sewing, nursing, washing, caring for children—"not only do we undertake to have all these labors performed in one house, but by one person." Just consider, she wrote, "what any human business would be in which there was no faintest possibility of choice, of exceptional ability, of division of labor." She decried the fact that domestic industry had become a "sex function, . . . supposed to pertain to women by nature." 26

Third, Gilman examined the effects of women's psychological dependence on men. An eclectic popularizer as well as a theorist, she reiterated and reshaped the theoretical arguments of her predecessors, Mary Wollstonecraft and John Stuart Mill, for example; but in the process she also anticipated the direction of some of the most recent and perceptive feminist theorists: the concentration on the politics of the family, for example, the recognition that the personal is political, the understanding that only by examining the daily lives of women, and their experiences of submission to the demands of family life could an explanation of female "difference" ultimately be found.27 Viewing women's powerlessness and dependence on men as both psychological and political phenomena, she argued that the female personality had become a slave personality. She wrote, "The position of women, after their long degradation, is in many ways analogous to that of the freed slave. He is refused justice on account of his inferiority. To reply that inferiority is largely due to previous injustice does not alter the fact." 28 The female personality was likewise conditioned to submission:

Of women especially have been required the convenient virtues of a subject class: obedience, patience, endurance, contentment,


Charlotte Perkins Gilman believed there existed a common institutional experience—the home—which affected women whether rich or poor. The politics of the family crossed class lines.

Fourth, finally, and least persuasively, Gilman ventured beyond many of her socialist contemporaries in exploring the unique effects of sexual oppression on women. She believed that the sexual relationship had become an economic relationship, marriage very often itself being merely a legally enshrined version of prostitution. Forced to emphasize sexuality at the expense of humanity, woman had necessarily to give the impression of weakness, frailty, timidity, and passivity—in short to prove her capacity for submission, the male’s for dominance and control. Gilman wrote:

We have been told so long that

“Love is of man’s life a thing apart,
Tis woman’s whole existence”

That we have believed it. . . . [O]ur whole existence was carefully limited to this field; we were dressed and educated to grace it; we were bloomed out into a brief and glorious career while under inspection and selection before our final surrender, and then we pursued the rest of our lives with varying devotion and satisfaction in this one department of life.

She advocated the distribution of information on birth control and sex-related matters, the development of physical fitness programs for women, and an end to man-made fashion dictates. She called for human fulfillment, for women’s full control of their bodies as well as their lives.

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81 Charlotte Gilman’s support of Margaret Sanger’s work in the birth control movement began roughly in 1915. Adopting the racist and ethnocentric attitudes all too common to her generation, however, Charlotte viewed birth
However, Gilman's understanding of the causes for sexual oppression was far more impressive than her theoretical projections. In short, she could attack the "feminine" woman, but not envision an alternative of equal womanhood. Her life and writings were always inextricably related. Where she had achieved certain of her feminist goals—economic independence, physical fitness, and considerable psychological strength as well, she believed in woman's capacity for excellence. But because she could not interpret the conflicting loyalties which seemed to occur, both within herself and other independent women when they entered love relationships with men (and wavering herself between both strength and deference, self-righteousness and self-sacrifice), Charlotte perhaps understandably concluded that certain stereotypes of "femininity" must somehow be innate.

The personal roots of Charlotte's theoretical contradictions are apparent in her early living, in her struggles with guilt as she faced her separation and divorce from Walter Stetson, and in her love relationship with Houghton Gilman, whom she married in 1900. She wrote letters of passionate intensity to Houghton Gilman, but she seemed to fear him as a threat to her marginally-established independence. A sensuous woman, she was also a well-trained warrior in the feminist campaign. Unintentionally and tragically, she created sexual and psychological barriers against an intimate male-female relationship.

Charlotte had known Houghton as a child, as an affectionate first cousin eight years her junior, whose companionship she very much enjoyed. After a hiatus of some seventeen years, Charlotte visited Houghton in his law office to obtain legal advice concerning royalties on a publication. Erroneously, she assumed the relationship was "safe" from "complications" because of kinship, though she expressed her preference for even safer grounds than that: "I only wish I was your grandma or great aunt or I have it! an invalid sister that you simply had to have control as an issue not only of personal importance for women; she also maintained that it could be used as a protection against the pressures of population expansion, particularly of the "unfit." See Gilman, "Birth Control, Religion, and the Unfit," Nation, 134 (January 27, 1932), 109; Gilman, "Birth Control," The Forerunner, 6 (July, 1915), 177–180.

This discussion is limited to Charlotte's attitudes toward Houghton Gilman between 1897 and 1900 and is not intended as an interpretation of their marriage relationship from 1900 to 1934.

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around you all the time!!” She was delighted with his friendship: “You seem very near somehow—a background to most of my thinking when I’m not at work.” Or again, “It’s astonishing how many times a day I incline to write to you.” And write she did—twenty- or thirty-page letters, two or more times a week.

Nonetheless, expressions of increasing fondness for Houghton were interspersed with apologetic declarations of resistance:

To most people . . . I can behave nicely . . . But as soon as any one comes near me and takes hold, I wobble awfully. Now as you may have seen I am getting exceedingly fond of you . . . And I don’t like it. It makes me unreasonable. It makes me feel—where I don’t want to feel; and think—where I don’t want to think. It sort of wakes me up where I’m dead, or where, if I’m not dead I ought to be.

Now I can’t afford to be fond of anybody in that sort of way—man, woman, or child. I can’t afford to want things . . . But [your] being here . . . and being, to your sorrow—my “entire family”—why it brings out all that is worst and weakest in me, instead of what is strongest and best. It makes me unreasonable—sensitive—disagreeable—absurd. It makes me want to be petted and cared for—me! And then all this makes me very mad; and I say “go to! I’ll get out of this in short order!”

Charlotte seemed to vacillate wildly between feelings of strength and insecurity. She was “rich in the tricks and shifts of an old campaigner weather-beaten and coarsened by long exposure.” But also, she felt “bitterly depressed, often defeated, lonely, imprisoned, scared and wounded beyond recognition but not crippled past all usefulness. . . .” She seemed to need to ask for pity. She felt a “compelling desire . . . to complain and explain, to whimper . . . and seek for sympathy which don’t do me any good if I get it.” She extended her growing trust in Houghton with a “childish femininity.”

I temporarily cuddle down and clutch you remorselessly. Later on I shall flop and wobble again. Later still soar off no doubt.

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83 Letter from Charlotte Stetson to Houghton Gilman, September 11, September 2, September 5, 1897.
84 Ibid., October 3, 1897.
85 Ibid., October 1, October 3, 1897; undated letter, October, 1897.
But just for a little time—and with excellent reason that I can't help—behold me as it were a sleepy Newfoundland puppy in your overcoat pocket.\

Thus did a public advocate of woman's full equality privately reveal the anguish of her personal ambivalence. She wrote:

I wish I could make a picture of the thing [herself] as I see it—sulky, frightened, discouraged, "rattled" to a degree; one foot forward and the other back; ready to rush forward in tumultuous devotion one minute, and run away shrieking the next—fingers in ears.

However tentatively and indecisively, Charlotte began to break the barriers of her self-imposed lonely isolation. Insecurities sometimes re-emerged in the form of uncontrollable depressions, the "grey fog" she had faced since 1884. But increasingly she felt a passionate happy love for Houghton which, characterizedly, she had to formulate in writing. She left, therefore, abundant documentation of her sensuous yearnings, as well as of her apprehensions:

. . . I went to sleep with a smile on my lips and woke only to think again of the dear comfort that you are to me—of your unfailing loving kindness, your quiet strength, your patience and wisdom—and your tenderness. O it does feel so good! To have some one care for me enough to—well—to kiss me.

She continued in December: "Everything is so different. I have a home now—in your heart." In February, 1898 she wrote: "Surely you can read it in my eyes—hear it in my voice, feel it in my arms about your neck—taste it on my lips that lean to you. You make me happy—so happy my darling. I love you—love you—love you!" And even more passionately for a supposedly "Victorian" lady, she wrote to him in May: "Sweetheart! You shall kiss me anywhere you want to and all you want to as soon as ever there is a chance. I will wait till you are exhausted and then begin operations on my own account."
Despite such passionate declarations, Charlotte also delighted in the image of herself as cared-for child: "And it will be the wholesomest thing in the world to... settle down to the definite and particular feeling of being your little girl." 40 Continuously she seemed to need protective reassurance; and when Houghton did not sufficiently comply, she responded angrily. So vulnerable did she feel, so intense was her level of hurt, that on one occasion in 1899, she threatened to break off the relationship entirely. She wrote: "When I think of what manner of letters I have written to you—of course I want to call them all back and burn them... and never think of love again lest I die of shame." 41 She insisted that Houghton be strong and more assertive, and that she, as woman, should wait more passively:

If you don’t love me more than to make dutiful responses to my advances it won’t do to marry on...
It is a woman’s business to wait, not a man’s.
It is for a woman to be patient and still—not a man.
If you are truly lover and husband—show it. If not—God bless you and good bye.*

Charlotte’s outbursts were frequent but short-lived, her contests with self-hatred a recurring pattern of her life. She recovered from her anger, only to be tormented once again by uncontrollable anxiety. Back and

that she might be unable, she expressed delight: "Happy thought—take no precautions—take no treatment—all runs smoothly and nothing happens!!! There’s an easy way out of the difficulty!!!" Sex without the fears of pregnancy seemed a grand relief. Letter from Charlotte Stetson to Houghton Gilman, May 16, 1900.

CarlDegler argues that many nineteenth-century women may not have been so fearful of or opposed to the sexual experience as was formerly assumed. Historians have too frequently relied on prescriptive data, he maintains, thus distorting the actual attitudes and experiences of women themselves. See Carl Degler, “What Ought to be and What Was: Women’s Sexuality in the Nineteenth Century,” American Historical Review, 79 (December, 1974), 1467-1490. See also Charles E. Rosenberg, "Sexuality, Class, and Role in Nineteenth Century America," American Quarterly, 25 (May, 1973), 131-153.

40 Letter from Charlotte Stetson to Houghton Gilman, January 9, 1898. Also referring to a letter he had written, she responded, "This is the letter that says I’m your darling little girl, which remark I have kissed many times." Ibid., November 14, 1899.
41 Ibid., January 22, 1899.
42 Ibid., January 25, 1899.
forth she went: "I don't wholly like to be held—and yet I do!" She wanted protective love, yet despised herself for needing it. "Makes me kind of angry too," she later wrote. "Seems a weakness. To be so tangled up in another person." Torn between her feminist convictions and her feelings, she expressed discontent with what she thought she had become—a non-womanly woman:

Don’t you see dear how much at a disadvantage I am beside you? Try and feel like a woman for a moment—put yourself in their place. You know what a woman wants to bring a man—a boundless whole-souled love, absolutely and primarily his own—all his own.

I haven’t that . . . I can only give you a divided love—I love God—the world—my work as I love you. I have so little to offer—so pathetically little. . . .

O my dear—do you not see what poignant grief and shame it is to a woman to have no woman’s gifts to give! Charlotte apologized for having achieved many of her goals: "I’m sorry," she wrote to Houghton, "that I can’t add my life to yours—woman fashion . . . the usual style of immersion of the wife in the husband." Theoretically and practically she insisted on the right to satisfying work; emotionally she felt she should give it up to him. Come to my lectures, she had pleaded with Houghton in 1899. "Then you’d know—know me, know why I have felt as I do about marrying and all that. Why I so seriously fear lest the housekeeping part of it [marriage] should prove an injury to my health and a hindrance to my work." But hardly consistently for a radical feminist, she continued, "You see I am so afraid of my own long . . . instincts getting the better of me—and that, in my love for you and natural wish to make you comfortable I shall ‘settle’ too firmly."

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Ambiguities expressed in Charlotte’s letters to Houghton were also apparent in her public writings. An advocate of women’s full equality, she inconsistently, ironically, contrasted masculine work-instincts with “feminine” instincts of nurturance and service, male adult-like strength and courage with female child-like insecurity and fear. Thus this “militant madonna” portrayed woman’s “natural” yearning for a male’s protective love.

If to a degree the “instincts” argument served to undermine Gilman’s environmentalist analysis of the origins of sexual inequality, it also provided crucial leverage in her fight for female self-respect. Perhaps defensively, Gilman attempted to reverse traditionally-negative connotations of “femininity” by emphasizing the virtues of womanhood instead. Like most of her feminist contemporaries, proudly she proclaimed the primacy of womanhood: Woman’s archetypal innocence was concomitant to her moral virtue; gentle kindness was a means of power, an antidote to assertive male combativeness. Woman’s uniqueness was thus her strength and glory, her mother-love a countervailing force within the baneful androcentric culture.

The most explicit statement of Gilman’s admiration and love for women was expressed in the novel *Herland* (1915). Utopia, she told her readers, was a land inhabited only by women and girl children, procreation occurring through parthenogenesis. Faithfully worshipping the “Goddess of mother love,” and interacting cooperatively, respectfully, and affectionately, women demonstrated their capacity to build Utopia. Because they were not confined within the isolation of the private selfish home, women could use their nurturant capacities for social and community service. Trusting child care only to the “highest artists,” they developed the true “womanly” virtues: “Beauty, Health, Strength, Intellect, Goodness. . . .” In *Herland*, the “essential distinction of motherhood was the dominant note of their whole culture.” Motherhood was the “great, tender, limitless uplifting force.”

Theoretically as well as fictionally, Gilman asserted the natural superiority of the female sex. Enthusiastically endorsing the “scientifically based” Gynaecocentric Theory of the sociologist Lester Ward, she elaborated extensively on the civilizing capacities of women, the destructive combativeness of men. She wrote:

> The innate underlying difference [between the sexes] is one of principle. On the one hand, the principle of struggle, conflict,

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and competition. . . . On the other, the principle of growth, of culture, of applying services and nourishment in order to produce improvement.  

Woman did not want to fight, to take, to oppress. Instead she exhibited "the growing altruism of work, founded in mother love, in the anti-selfish instinct of reproduction." Fundamental to the evolutionary process was woman's inherent responsibility for the preservation of the race, the selection of a mate, and the nurturance of children.

CHARLOTTE GILMAN presents us with a paradox. Having developed a multi-dimensional feminist theory based on the idea of the natural equality of the sexes, having challenged patriarchal norms dividing males and females into their respective public-private spheres, she also enthusiastically maintained that women were the saintly givers, men the war-
Charlotte Perkins Gilman

ring beasts. When she glorified female “instincts” of love and service, her radical theory of feminism dissolved into a sometimes sentimental worship of the status quo. Compromising her environmentalist analysis, she alternately emphasized not female powerlessness, but woman’s natural passivity; not artificially-imposed dependence, but an innate desire to love and serve; not cowardice, but peacefulness and cooperation; not the oppressive restrictions of motherhood roles, but the glories of mother love. By proclaiming women’s natural differences, Charlotte Gilman, like many of her contemporaries, “put to a test the entire ideology upon which arguments for the liberation of women had been based in the United States.”

Yet while claims to female nurturant superiority were ultimately dysfunctional, they were nonetheless, historically, a viable response to women’s need for expanded decision-making power. A vital struggle for political autonomy lay beneath the mother-worship proclamations. Moreover, “the suffragists were not blushing Victorians but seasoned politicians who had learned how to beat the male at his own game.” Charlotte Gilman refused to treat women purely as the victims—incompetents within the world of men. Instead, she urged women to develop self-respect on their own terms, not those exclusively defined by men. Thus, when she emphasized woman’s role as “the moral redeemer and culture bearer,” she was acclaiming a philosophy which “actually permitted women to enhance their self-image as individuals and as a group and, ultimately to organize for action.” Whether tactically or ideologically, she seems to have understood that women might necessarily, if temporarily, expand their power by celebrating differences.

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50 Mary Ryan, Womanhood in America, p. 246.

While Charlotte’s dichotomous theories were in part an outgrowth of the intellectual and socio-economic forces of her era, my purpose here has been to illustrate instead some private sources for her feminist perspectives. The existence of contradiction in her theories, her fiction, and her living by no means lessens the significance of her historical contribution. Her theoretical analyses were themselves impressive, but so also was her constant testing of those theories in the experimental laboratory of her life. Since she kept voluminous accounts of her private struggles, she unintentionally preserved in the panorama of her eccentricity and genius, a wealth of historical data which will enrich our understanding of the underlying dynamics of feminist theory and practice at the turn of the century.
Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860□□□935)□□□ Gender and Social Structure

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