Charlotte Perkins Gilman
(3 July 1860 – 17 August 1935)

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BOOKS: *The Labor Movement* (Oakland: Alameda County Federation of Trades, 1893);
*In This Our World and Other Poems* (Oakland: McCombs & Vaughn, 1893);
*Women and Economics: A Study of the Economic Relation between Men and Women as a Factor in Social Evolution* (Boston: Small, Maynard, 1898);
*The Yellow Wallpaper, A Novella* (Boston: Small, Maynard, 1899);
*Concerning Children* (Boston: Small, Maynard, 1900; London: Putnam, 1900);
*The Home: Its Work and Influence* (New York: McClure, Phillips, 1903);
*Human Work* (New York: McClure, Phillips, 1904);
*What Diantha Did* (New York: Charlton, 1910);
*The Crux: A Novel* (New York: Charlton, 1911);
*The Man-Made World; or, Our Androcentric Culture* (New York: Charlton, 1911; London: Unwin, 1911);
*Moving the Mountain* (New York: Charlton, 1911);
*Herland*, introduction by Ann J. Lane (New York: Pantheon, 1979);
*Benigna Machiavelli* (Santa Barbara: Bandanna Books, 1994);
*With Her in Ourland: Sequel to Herland*, edited by Mary Jo Deegan and Michael R. Hill (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1997);


Charlotte Anna Perkins was born on 3 July 1860 in Hartford, Connecticut, to Frederick Beecher Perkins and his distant cousin Mary Fitch Wescott Perkins. She was the youngest of three children born to the couple in their first three years of marriage: the others were Thomas Henry, born on 15 March 1858, who lived only a few weeks, and Thomas Adie, born on 9 May 1859. Gilman was born into a gifted family rooted in social activism: Her father, Frederick, was the grandson of Lyman Beecher, a noted Calvinist clergyman, who, according to Ann J. Lane, "married three times and fathered twelve surviving children, which made him, according to Unitarian clergyman
Theodore Parker, 'the father of more brains than any other man in America.' Her great-aunts include Harriet Beecher Stowe, author of Uncle Tom's Cabin (1852) and arguably largely responsible for changing the nation's consciousness about the issue of slavery. Born at a time of national and familial conflict and to a heritage that embodied social change, Perkins grew up to be a key social activist, and so prolific a writer that she approximated her publications to be the equivalent of twenty-five volumes of writing, an estimate closely substantiated by Gary Scharnhorst's 1985 bibliography of her work.

All of Lyman Beecher's offspring except one made their mark as activists, suffragists, educators, writers, ministers, or lawyers. "The only purely private Beecher," Lyman Beecher Stowe wrote in his Saints, Sinners, and Beechers (1934), "was Charlotte's grandmother Mary, Lyman and [first wife] Roxanna's fourth child." Mary stayed out of the public eye, confining herself to the traditional domestic role. She married Thomas Perkins, and they had four children: Charlotte's father, Frederick; Emily; Charles; and Katherine. Their daughters married well—Emily to the eminent writer and Unitarian clergyman, Edward Everett Hale, best known for his short story "The Man without a Country," first published in the Atlantic Monthly (December 1863). Katherine married William C. Gilman, a prominent attorney. One of their children, George Houghton Gilman, Perkins's first cousin, later became her second husband.

Of Mary Beecher Perkins's four children, the eldest, Frederick, had the most difficult time making his way in life. Lane describes Frederick as "A man of some literary and intellectual gifts, inspired with bursts of passion for justice and reform, a man of courage and substantial physical prowess, he was ultimately unable to put his strengths together into a well-ordered and satisfying life. He was talented but undisciplined, erratic, and unfocused. He had good impulses but not much staying power." Trying to measure up to his Beecher forebears put additional strain on Frederick. Lane goes on to say that "Frederick never quite found himself, and in the process of looking he caused a good deal of unhappiness to many close to him. He grew up in Hartford; he attended but did not graduate from Yale University, because he lost his temper, which he did often, and assaulted one of his professors." He trained for two or three professions: he attended a normal school to become a teacher, taught for a while, but soon became dissatisfied with that occupation; he studied law but did not practice it, unlike his younger brother, Charles, who joined their father in his Hartford law practice. According to Lane, "Frederick ultimately found his vocation in the world of literature and letters. His passion for books led him to read them, write them, edit them, and, as a librarian, classify them." Gilman later wrote that her father was familiar with nine languages. He became assistant director of the Boston Public Library and in 1880 was appointed director of the San Francisco Public Library. He ultimately returned to the East, where he died in 1899.

Perkins's early life lacked the stability of a permanent home. Soon after she was born, her father left his wife and children, although he continued to provide meager support for them for the next thirteen years. As a result of Frederick's inconsistent financial contributions, Mary Perkins and their children—Charlotte and her older brother, Thomas—were forced to move at least once a year for eighteen years. Even though Frederick made brief appearances in his family's life, Mary finally decided to divorce her husband in 1873. Both mother and daughter were profoundly affected by his neglect. As Gilman explains in her autobiography, her mother, who collected her husband's fingernail clippings and locks of hair as mementoes from his infrequent visits, believed she should "deny the child all expression of affection as far as possible, so that she should not be used to it or long for it." In this way, the children would not be hurt when they were inevitably deserted, as she had been by her husband. Because of her mother's philosophy, Mary and her daughter never shared a particularly close relationship.

When Perkins inherited property in 1874, her mother enrolled the fourteen-year-old in a private school, where she excelled in the subject of elocution and gained an appreciation of physical activity that she maintained the rest of her life. At age sixteen Perkins painted advertising cards and was teaching art, and, at nineteen, she entered the Rhode Island School of Design to study art. When she was twenty-one she met the artist Walter Stetson at a lecture, and two years later, on 2 May 1884, they were married. Their daughter, Katherine Beecher, was born on 23 March 1885. Immediately after Katherine was born, Stetson began suffering from episodes of depression. Mary Perkins moved in with the Stetsons to help care for the infant. On the advice of her doctor, Stetson took a trip to Pasadena, California, to visit her longtime friend, Grace Channing, throughout the winter of 1885. She returned home feeling well enough to accept an offer from Alice Stone Blackwell to contribute to People, a Providence weekly newspaper sponsored by the Knights of Labor of Rhode Island, and to contribute poems to the Woman's Journal, published by the American Woman Suffrage Association. By the winter of 1887 Stetson had already had several articles
and poems accepted by the papers. These early works often reflect Stetson’s strong and enduring belief in the necessity of work, particularly for women.

Eventually, however, she was overpowered by the debilitating effects of her depression. Encouraged by her mother and husband, Stetson sought help from Dr. S. Weir Mitchell, the famous “nervous doctor,” at his sanatorium in Philadelphia. Mitchell diagnosed Stetson with neurasthenia, or nerve exhaustion, a disease whose symptoms bear extensive similarities to clinical depression. He treated her with his “Rest Cure,” a regimen that insisted on complete bed rest in an isolated environment. During the first stage of the treatment the patient was not allowed to read, write, sew, feed herself, or talk to others. After one month of treatment, Mitchell sent Stetson home with directions to “live as domestic a life as possible. Have your child with you all the time. . . . have but two hours’ intellectual life a day. And never touch pen, brush or pencil as long as you live.”

These directions were not conducive to Stetson’s way of living, of course, and as she relates in her autobiography, they caused her to come “perilously close to losing my mind.” In the fall of 1887, after a recognition that both were miserable in their marriage, Charlotte and Walter agreed to separate, and in September 1888 Charlotte and Katherine moved to Pasadena to be close to Channing. Although Walter sought a reconciliation the following year, the couple filed for divorce, which was granted in 1894. During 1890, however, Walter and Grace had developed a romantic relationship, and they later married, with full approval from Charlotte.

During this time of great change in her personal life, Stetson published a story that established her reputation among her contemporaries and within the modern feminist movement. Stetson first gained recognition in April 1890, when she published her poem “Similar Cases” in the Nationalist and received attention from reformers and a letter of praise from William Dean Howells, a respected writer and editor of the Atlantic Monthly. Perhaps the theme of the poem, the necessity of change in an evolving society, prompted her to write her famous story, “The Yellow Wallpaper,” a story not truly recognized for its polemical nature until nearly eighty-five years later. While subsequent readers have tended to view the story as a fictional account of the author’s encounter with S. Weir Mitchell, contemporary readers were more frightened by the narrative than inspired to change the treatment of depression. In fact, the story, originally published in the January 1892 edition of the New England Magazine, was reprinted as a horror story in William Dean Howell’s The Great Modern American Stories in 1920. Not until 1973 did “The Yellow Wallpaper” receive a feminist reading, when the Feminist Press published an edition introduced by Elaine R. Hedges.

“The Yellow Wallpaper” is narrated in the form of a diary by an unnamed woman who undergoes a kind of rest cure as prescribed by her physician husband, John. All of the action and suspense of the story arises within the four walls of the narrator’s bedroom, a former nursery and playroom with bars on its window. The narrator, who must write in secrecy since her husband wants her to stay in bed and away from pen and paper, tells her diary about the room’s wallpaper, which, as weeks pass, seems to come to life. She begins to see distorted shapes and figures in the wallpaper’s design, eventually recognizing a woman trying to “shake the pattern” of the discolored wallpaper “as if she wanted to get out.” By the end of the story, much to her husband’s horror, the narrator has locked herself in the room and has taken to peeling off the yellow wallpaper in order to free the imprisoned woman. When John finally enters her room, she is creeping along the walls, and when he faints, she merely steps over him and continues her strange task.
The rest cure apparently worsens the narrator's condition, although it is questionable whether the narrator is more sane in the beginning of the story, when she holds absolute trust in her husband's power to cure her, or at the end of the story, when she subconsciously records the parallel between the women imprisoned behind bars and herself, imprisoned and infantilized in the yellow walls of a barred playroom. Perhaps contemporary readers were horrified not by the figures in the wallpaper but by a woman's proclivity to go insane when confined within the home. The story reflects changing ideas about women's roles in society, from the True Womanhood patriarchal ideology in which the home was a sanctuary for the saintly woman to the New Woman feminist ideology that demanded new opportunities outside the restrictions of the home.

In 1891 Stetson moved to Oakland with her daughter. Oakland and San Francisco were active sites of reform, and she became increasingly involved in reform movements such as the Nationalist Party, which advocated socialism. The party was founded to promote the ideas presented by Edward Bellamy, in his utopian novel *Looking Backward: 2000–1887*, which by 1900 was the most successful novel in American publishing history, with the exception of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Stetson's first lecture, which launched a long career of lecturing tours, was held in front of a Nationalist club. Stetson retained many Nationalist tenets throughout the rest of her career, such as collective action, cooperative living arrangements, and revolution through the improvement of social conditions that determine the degree of evolutionary progress. Along with these ideals, however, Stetson also preserved the Nationalists' problematic tendencies toward nativism and xenophobia in a country increasingly reliant upon immigrant labor.

Stetson remained active in public speaking, giving a series of lectures through the winter of 1892, the subject of which—the relationship between economics and women—was expanded on in her later works. Approximately sixty of her lectures remain extant, yet many more were given; early in her career, she became confident enough to deliver lectures with few or no notes. In September 1892 the Trades and Labor Union of Alameda County awarded her a gold medal for her essay *The Labor Movement*, which was published as a pamphlet by the union in 1893. Stetson then became a member of the Oakland Federal Labor Union Number 5761 of the American Federation of Labor. She was also on the executive board of the Woman's Congress Association of the Pacific Coast. At the association's second annual convention in 1895, she contributed to a panel with Robert Jordan, president of Stanford University, and Susan B. Anthony, a leader in the women's suffrage movement. In 1894 Stetson was appointed co-editor of the *Impress* by the Pacific Coast Women's Press Association and often contributed articles, stories, and editorials to this weekly paper. Stetson's reputation grew with the publication of her first book of poetry in 1893, *In This Our World and Other Poems*.

In the course of this flurry of political and literary activity Stetson's personal life became more and more complicated. In 1891 she met and developed a relationship with Adeline E. Knapp, whom she called Delle, and later, in her autobiography, Dora. Delle was a reporter, and although she traveled a great deal, Stetson and Delle moved into a boarding house together, along with Stetson's mother, who had come to Oakland in the fall of 1891. Stetson had always been a passionate friend to other women, the most notable being Grace, but her relationship with Delle seems to have been more intimate than any preceding friendship. In fact, it is likely that Stetson and Delle were lovers, as is evident in Stetson's letters, journal, and poems such as "To the Conquered." Many years later she wrote a letter to her future husband that warned him about what the newspapers might make of her relationship with Delle: "Mrs. Stetson's Love Affair with a Woman. Is this Friendship!"

Delle and Stetson's relationship became strained, however, when Mary Perkins developed cancer in 1892 and died the following year. Under the stress caused by her mother's death, as well as the ongoing divorce proceeding with Walter, Stetson permanently severed her relationship with Delle in 1893. In 1894 Walter and Charlotte's divorce was granted; yet, from the time the press heard about the unusually friendly triangle of Grace, Walter, and Charlotte, newspapers such as the *Boston Globe*, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, and the *San Francisco Examiner* ran stories capitalizing on the unorthodox relationship. The attention intensified when Stetson, burdened by financial difficulties and recurring depression, sent nine-year-old Katherine to live with Walter and Grace on the east coast.

Feeling oppressed by the public scrutiny, Stetson accepted Jane Addams's invitation to stay at her settlement house, Hull House, in Chicago, where she lived for several months and was surrounded by various reform activities. From 1895 to 1900 she was continuously traveling and lecturing around the country, while frequently contributing to the *American Fabian*, a journal advocating the development of an American form of Fabian Socialism. In 1898 she wrote her most influential book, which brought her to the highest point of fame in her career—*Women and Economics: A
Study of the Economic Relation between Men and Women as a Factor in Social Evolution.

Women and Economics is an amalgam of the variety of ideologies she had ingested thus far, along with a radical thesis: women’s position in society is directly related to economic factors, factors most often dominated by men. Stetson’s main objective in Women and Economics is to make clear that the male determines the economic status of all humans, and because of this factor, women are dependent on men for their existence. She terms this economic dependence or independence based on one’s sex, the “sexuo-economic relationship.” She maintains that economic independence comes from getting something in return for what you give. Women have relied on men for food, while not contributing an economic product in exchange for what they consume. Stetson agrees that women do participate in “house service” but argues that those activities are still distinct from economic activity since women are not paid for their services.

Stetson outlines several consequences of the restriction of women to domestic service. First, men have gone on to do the important work in the world—they have been the innovators in industry, art, commerce, science, manufacture, government, and reli-

gion. Second, since women’s environment has been restricted to the home, “her ideas, her information, her thought-processes and power of judgment” are all limited, and especially troublesome is “the denial of freedom to act.” Furthermore, since women have become excessively identified with the home, they have become “over-sexed,” a term invented by Stetson to mean “to manifest in excess any of the distinctions of sex.” Finally, the dominance of men in the public sphere has forced our language to associate human activities with being male, not human. Thus “. . . we have grown to consider most human attributes as masculine attributes, for the same reason that they were allowed to men and forbidden to women.” Stetson points to women writers of the past such as Harriet Martineau, who had to hide her writing under her sewing when visitors came, “because ‘to sew’ was a feminine verb, and ‘to write’ a masculine one.” Even with children, Stetson contends, sex distinctions are perpetuated by language. To say about a girl “she is a perfect little mother already,” is to impose a maternal instinct on her. If a boy does not have paternal instincts, Stetson asks, why must a girl have maternal instincts? She believes that the women’s movement has provided more equality for women, especially since more women are being educated. The crux of the entire issue, however, is the economic relation between men and women, and until more women enter the public workforce and/or are paid for their domestic services, that relation will remain unbalanced and women will suffer.

Women and Economics reflected many of the ideas of the time, particularly the English philosopher John Stuart Mill’s well-known work, On the Subjection of Women, published in 1869. Mill claimed that the nature of women was an eminently artificial thing—“the result of forced repression in some directions, unnatural stimulation in others.” Additionally, the nature of woman cannot be defined as long as women are denied access to social institutions. Stetson’s position is similar. In the preface to Women and Economics, she states one of her purposes for writing the book: “To show how some of the worst evils under which we suffer, evils long supposed to be inherent and ineradicable in our natures, are but the result of certain arbitrary conditions of our own adoption.” Yet, she takes Mill’s position a step further by locating economic dependence as the root of the subjection of women. Even though she would agree with Mill that the nature of woman as it was defined then was artificial, she nevertheless believed there existed essential male and female gender traits, like strength and ferocity in males and “the facility in union, the power to make and to save” in females.
Women and Economics earned Stetson a considerable reputation, for it was reviewed favorably by a variety of influential journals and magazines, including the Nation, the Woman’s Journal, The New York Times Saturday Review of Books, the Boston Advertiser, the Denver Post, and the Political Science Quarterly. The book went through many printings, and for the 1920 edition Stetson wrote a new introduction. The topics she raised in the book made repeated appearances thereafter in many of her future books, essays, poems, and short stories. After 1920, Women and Economics all but disappeared until the historian Carl Degler introduced a reprint in 1966.

In 1900, the year Stetson married George Houghton Gilman, she published Concerning Children. She dedicated the book to her daughter, Katherine, who, as Gilman writes in the dedication, “has taught me much of what is written here.” For the most part, Gilman concerns herself with the discipline and education of children. She is against corporal punishment, arguing that it has no educational value for the child. If you hit a child for doing a forbidden act, the child will later commit that act in secret, thereby learning that the forbidden is acceptable as long as it is not undetected. More important, perhaps, for its nearly revolutionary implications, Gilman questions the wisdom of keeping babies in the home with their mother at all times. She claims that babies need to be socialized with other babies and that mothers are not trained to provide the necessary social education. As a solution, she proposes public nurseries, or “babygardens,” as a counterpart to the kindergarten that was growing in popularity at the time. Thus, Gilman was considering the child’s welfare as well as the mother’s; with the child at a babygarden, the mother was free to go out into the public sphere and work, a goal she stressed in Women and Economics. The only other option is educating mothers to be educators, rather than assuming they have the natural ability to educate their children simply because they are mothers. Thus Gilman sought to challenge the stereotype that women are inherently maternal.

Concerning Children was not as popular as Women and Economics but was positively reviewed in the Saturday Review of Books and excerpted in Ladies’ Home Journal. Her next book, however, The Home: Its Work and Influence (1903), was most derivative of Women and Economics, and perhaps for that reason, was more popular than Concerning Children. Doubtless, its popularity rested also on its witty commentary on the incongruities between the myths and realities of domestic life.

The Home: Its Work and Influence approaches a variety of myths about domestic life, and one by one, deconstructs them. For example, Gilman questions the logic behind associating the sanctity of the home with maternity. Maternity has nothing to do with the improvement of the race, only the reproduction. She questions the tendency to worship the mother of great men while conveniently forgetting the mothers of people such as John Wilkes Booth or Benedict Arnold. Unlike the popular myth of the home as a place of comfort and pleasure, homes are actually poorly ventilated, a burden on the woman who is subservient to her husband, who, in turn, is burdened by the financial responsibilities of maintaining a household. The child grows up to learn that being a woman means domestic servitude, and if that child is a girl and must stay at home, she will be “cut off from life.” Part of the solution relies on better technology within the home, and part lies in giving women the option to gain employment outside of the home. If society would simply recognize the myths they have built around and within the home, the home could become a place of advancement instead of regression. The book was widely reviewed, even in major newspapers such as the Boston Herald, the Chicago Tribune, the Detroit Free Press, the New York Tribune, and the San Francisco Examiner. Aside from some conventional opinions in the book, such as Gilman’s belief in the desirability of marriage for women and her disparaging opinion of
women's aesthetic tastes, Gilman's book is an unconventional and almost heretical rendition of a sacred social institution.

Gilman's next book was four years in the making, an uncharacteristically long time for her to work on a single piece of writing. Gilman believed Human Work (1904) to be her most important book. It is built on the idea that human work is not and should not be perceived as the means to an individual's ends. Instead, work "is an expenditure of energy by Society in the fulfillment of its organic functions. It is performed by highly specialised individuals under press of social energy, and it is to them an end in itself, a condition of their existence and their highest joy and duty." She theorizes that social instinct or "race-preservation" is more developed than self-preservation, and so the labor of others serves communal rather than individual needs. Work is not something from which to acquire individual wealth, but fulfills a larger purpose. Gilman argues that human work is a social and civic function, not an individual one, and that the social machine is fed by workers and their machines. She wants workers to have a social consciousness that recognizes the higher purpose of work.

Whether or not Gilman's solution is viable, what is central to this book is her passionate belief in one's individual social responsibilities. Gilman's entire body of writings, from her poems to her fiction and essays, are all built on a hope for change, for progress, and for integrating private responsibilities, such as domestic service, with public life. Although Gilman was proud of Human Work, it was never reprinted and was less widely reviewed than either Women and Economics or The Home: Its Work and Influence.

In 1909 Gilman started The Forerunner, a monthly magazine that dealt with social issues. She was the editor and sole contributor, writing the entirety of the thirty-two-page magazine for seven years, from November 1909 to December 1916. Her format for the magazine was consistent. Each issue begins with an epigraph, such as "It is good to do what is right. It is bad to do what is wrong. It is worse to do nothing." The sketch on the cover of the magazine conveyed her concern not just for women but also for men and children around the world. At the end of each issue, she tells her readers that the magazine is not a woman's magazine, because it deals with human existence and is designed to stimulate thought and to offer practical solutions for that existence. The magazine consisted of short stories, poems, essays, sketches, short plays, and fiction and nonfiction works that were often serialized throughout the year. For about a year Gilman wrote a column called "Personal Problems," in which anonymous women (perhaps created by Gilman) ask what Gilman considers to be relevant and practical questions. Most often, the questions raise a political issue, such as when "College Girl" asks how she can get her date to allow her to pay for half when they go out to dinner or the theater, since they have nearly equal incomes.

Gilman also included a "Comment and Review" section, which she used as a forum to comment on traditional notions and to review books or articles. For example, in December 1909, Gilman mocks the myth of Santa Claus, calling him "a bulbous benevolent goblin, red-nosed and gross, doing impossible tricks with reindeers and chimneys." Children should not be worrying about what they get from this imaginary man; instead, they should be giving something to their community. Children, especially young girls, should not be listening to other fairy tales as well, such as Sleeping Beauty. Gilman wants to know what the purpose is of a story in which the girl "is to remain starkly unconscious, using absolutely no discretion; and cheerfully marry the first man that kisses her."

The Man-Made World or, Our Androcentric Culture, serialized in The Forerunner in 1909, was published in book form in 1911. In the preface, Gilman dedicates her book to Lester F. Ward, who provided her with the premise of her book in the fourteenth chapter of his Pure Sociology (1903). In Ward's book, his Androcentric Theory and Gynaecocentric Theory is outlined, and Ward's Gynaecocentric Theory prompted the writing of The Man-Made World. Gilman explains that the theory is based upon the belief "that the female is the race type, and the male, originally but a sex type, reaching a later equality with the female, and, in the human race, becoming her master for a considerable historic period." Her book proposes to study the theory's effect on human development.

Because men and women live in an Androcentric culture, she begins, a culture where men have come to dominate, our culture's history has been written by men. It has become nearly impossible to differentiate between human accomplishment and male accomplishment, a point repeated from Women and Economics. Masculine values have overtaken such areas as literature, religion, and education. Gilman claims that most literature, particularly adventure stories and love stories, is geared specifically toward a male ideology. Adventure stories contain "predatory excitement . . . the sole province of men," and all love stories appeal to the male because the stories end when the women get married. The stories end at that point because the important part of a man's life, the pursuit, has already been told, while a woman's story is just beginning with her marriage. Religious precepts are masculine as well, since they highlight what she calls "the great
devil theory.” This theory asserts that learned truths and social customs as well as individual traits are rendered in terms of combat. Finally, although the origin of education is defined as maternal, Gilman contends that since the Androcentric culture never allowed girls the same education as boys; educated women are considered “unsexed”; and if the woman is a teacher, she “effeminizes her pupils; if the pupil, she effeminizes her teachers.”

Gilman’s second book-length piece, “Our Brains and What Ails Them,” was serialized in The Forerunner in 1912. Its premise is that the human brain is like any other organ and therefore needs stimulation and exercise, or “mental mechanics.” Mental mechanics are necessary so the brain can learn how to see things on a collective rather than an individual level. She stresses that women do not have different or inferior brains than those of men, it only seems that way since they have not been permitted to exercise them as men have.

Gilman repeats and expands on her past work in several other serialized pieces, such as “Humanness” (1913), “Social Ethics” (1914), “The Dress of Women” (1915), and “Growth and Combat” (1916). “Humanness” once again emphasizes the need to recognize the social value of work, while “Social Ethics” stresses an ethical system that maintains a collective existence. “Growth and Combat” repeats Gilman’s belief that struggle and combat are masculine traits, and as long as these traits dominate, society cannot grow or progress. “The Dress of Women” reintroduces and expands on an issue she had touched on several times in earlier works. Gilman had always been indignant about uncomfortable women’s clothing; she herself refused to wear corsets or tight-fitting clothing. In “The Dress of Women,” Gilman highlights both the danger and absurdity of some forms of dress and the tendency of clothing to overemphasize a woman’s gender. In chapter 2, for example, Gilman explains how impractical long, cotton house dresses are for the average, hardworking housewife, and proposes trousers in their place.

Some articles of clothing are particularly absurd and improper. Gilman calls the skirts of bathing suits a “hoary Emblem of the Sex,” which serve no practical purpose other than for “Sex-Attraction and Display of Purchasing Power.” A woman’s sexuality and economic status are displayed by her dress. Furthermore, women’s clothing causes others to see “the woman labeling herself with a huge ‘W’; crying aloud to all ‘I am female and I wish to please.’” Gilman urges her readers to recognize that clothing is part of social life and is therefore subject to evolutionary laws. As long as women continue to wear impractical and overtly female clothing, their progression toward equality will be retarded.

Each issue of The Forerunner usually began with a short story. The themes of the stories hark back to Gilman’s complaint in The Man-Made World that fiction does not give a true picture of woman’s life, and focuses disproportionately on man’s life. Thus, Gilman called for more fiction to be written about young women who prefer a career to marriage, or middle-aged women who came to recognize their discontent as social starvation, or the interrelation of women. Topics such as these are precisely the themes Gilman addresses in many of her short stories. In “According to Solomon” a woman learns to weave and maintains her own income from the sales of her products, much to the surprise and pleasure of her husband. In “What Diantha Did” Gilman provides a positive scenario for the woman about to be married. Instead of waiting until her fiancé earns enough money to marry her, Diantha opens up a multipurpose business that succeeds as a boarding house and catering service. In “The Cottage” Malda and her older friend, Lois,
stay in a cottage until Malda meets Ford Matthews and falls in love. Lois insists that Malda cook for him, while Ford insists she give all her attention to her artistic talent of needlework. Yet, a woman can make an admirable living as a housewife, as Gilman suggests in “My Astonishing Dodo,” in which Dodo’s life is portrayed positively because she is doing something she has always wanted to do, and because she has trained herself through formal home economic courses. “The Widow’s Might” tells of a widow who was economically self-sufficient at her husband’s death and has plans to sustain herself for the remainder of her life, much to the surprise of her children who were gloomily looking ahead to their filial duty to house and care for their mother.

Additionally, Gilman approached in her fiction three rather taboo scenarios: male physical assault, venereal disease, and extramarital affairs that produce illegitimate children. In “Benigna Machiavelli” Gilman offers explicit advice for effective self-defense from the abuse of men in the workplace. Benigna Machiavelli is a woman in the workforce who samples various careers to find the one best suited to her abilities and needs. In going into a variety of jobs, however, she runs into men who attempt to harass her. Benigna states clearly what a girl should do in that situation: “if he comes too close—kick, kick hard and accurately. This is ‘unladylike,’ but not so regrettable as being mishandled.”

In “The Crux,” which originally appeared in the second issue in 1910 but was published separately in 1911, Dr. Jane Bellair returns to New England after having gone to Colorado to practice medicine. She convinces a group of women to start a new life with her in the West. One of the women, Vivien Lane, goes along because her lover had gone west, and they are reunited there. Dr. Bellair discovers, however, that Vivien’s lover has a venereal disease—the crux of the story. She advises Vivien not to marry her lover, since the doctor herself is incapable of having children because her former husband gave her gonorrhea.

Gilman approaches a third taboo topic in “Turned,” a story that opens with two women in separate rooms crying miserably. It is eventually revealed that one is a servant, Gerta, who has become pregnant by a married man, Mr. Marroner. Mrs. Marroner is the other hurt woman. She decides that her husband is the one at fault and leaves him, taking Gerta and her baby with her. Mrs. Marroner, who has a Ph.D., makes her own way by returning to teaching and taking in boarders.

Gilman’s stories never address a lower class or ethnic audience. Gerta, the servant girl, is docile, confiding, and helpless, and the rest of the women in the stories are rarely burdened with stigmas of class or race in the start of their new lives. As a former Nationalist, Gilman often positioned those of the lower classes, especially immigrants, on a low rung of the evolutionary ladder. Gilman concentrated on providing options for those women she knew best, often middle-class, Anglo-American women who were caught within embarrassing circumstances that were rarely publicly acknowledged. Gilman wanted to make venereal disease and abusive and unfaithful husbands and lovers subjects for public discussion, dissolving a secrecy that for too long maintained a status quo that mostly benefited men. In the process, however, she excluded the experiences of classes and ethnicities she found to be different from her own.

Besides “The Yellow Wallpaper,” Gilman’s other well-known story among American feminists today is “Herland,” first serialized in The Forerunner from January 1915 through December 1915, and published separately for the first time by Pantheon Books in 1979. Herland is a utopian novel constructed around the impressions of three males who enter a land uninhabited by men, and peopled with women. Van, the narrator, Terry, and Jeff come across Herland while on an expedition and are eventually captured by the Herlander. The three men are taught the Herlander language and teach their own to their curious tutors. Through conversations with their tutors Somel, Zava, and Moadine, the men learn that the Herlander society is one where men are not necessary to procreate, a scenario reminiscent of Ward’s Gynaeocentric Theory. A woman becomes pregnant by allowing her impulse to mother to overtake her body. “Mother-love” is the Herlander religion, a kind of reverence and respect for mothering all children, not just one’s own, and women allow others to take care of their children, while they work each day as gardeners, inventors, engineers, and weavers, for example. Herland is a clean and nicely landscaped country whose citizens lead a contented existence in simple clothing and simple ways of living. Throughout Herland, Gilman returns time and again to many of her ideas about women and society, using Herlanders as models and Van as the inquiring observer/reader of the text of the landscape/novel. Gilman creates a dialogue between the two cultures that exposes the frivolity of most Victorian women’s existence as well as the Androcentric influences that made them so. Gilman serialized a sequel to this utopian novel in the last volume of The Forerunner in 1916 titled With Her in Ourland (1997). At the end of Herland, Van and the Herlander Ellador marry; in the sequel both travel throughout Van’s world. Ellador sees and comments on the destruction of war and the low position of women in
American society. Many of the same themes are repeated from Herland, and, as in the previous novel, the incongruities of modern society are revealed through persistent dialogue between Ellador and Van.

In addition to the stories, Gilman’s essays in The Forerunner often echoed earlier themes. Women’s dress, religion, ethics and morality, women’s suffrage, and motherhood were all recurring topics. In the later issues of the journal, Gilman focused many of her essays on women’s roles in World War I. In “War-Maids and War-Widows” for instance, Gilman urges unmarried women and widows to gain a “sense of collectivity” by taking advantage of their large numbers to demand political and economic power.

Burdened with the financial responsibility of a journal with only 1,200 subscribers, Gilman discontinued The Forerunner in December 1916. During her seven years as editor and writer of the magazine, she published an immense amount of writing. Her last book besides her autobiography was His Religion and Hers: A Study of the Faith of Our Fathers and the Work of Our Mothers, published in 1923. It echoes the theme of
Man-Made World in that religion has been limited by relying solely on men’s ideas. Again, she ridiculed people’s preoccupation with the reward of heaven. She calls this impulse selfish, arguing that people should care about the world they leave to their children rather than the world they enter after death. She contends that Christianity teaches its followers to be obedient, which leads to the sense of helplessness that is responsible for the exaggerated anticipation of heaven and the apathy toward what occurs here on earth. Christianity overemphasizes “a most injurious doctrine” by insisting on the essential unworthiness of individuals. Religion, says Gilman, should never be closed to intelligent inquiry. Gilman’s own inquiry brings her to a proposal for a “birth-based religion” that will promote growth during life instead of hope for an afterlife. A birth-based religion emphasizes a new motherhood whose guiding principle is to maintain and improve the human race. Although His Religion and Hers was not popular, Gilman was proposing a reformed ethical and religious paradigm, one that looked forward to a less masculinized culture where the cultivation and growth of living superseded the desire for rewards beyond life in death.

In His Religion and Hers, Gilman wrote: “Life is action. We should not say ‘life’ as a noun but ‘living’ as an active verb. The process of living is a continuously active one.” Perhaps her faith in this axiom was her reasoning behind the title of her autobiography, The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman. Begun in 1929, the memoir was not published until 1935. In January 1932 she was diagnosed with breast cancer. She was dealt another blow when her husband died in May 1934. Shortly before her own death, Gilman was approached by an editor unknown to her who asked if she would write an essay stating her position on the issue of euthanasia. The article it was published in the November 1935 issue of Forum, a monthly magazine dedicated to social issues. Concerning suicide, Gilman wrote that there are times when “surrender is justifiable. If persons are beyond usefulness, of no service or comfort to anyone, they have a right to leave.” On 17 August 1935, wracked with pain and knowing the end was near, Gilman committed suicide by inhaling a large dose of chloroform.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman is a key figure in the feminist movement. Surely she fulfills many of the definitions of modern feminism; Gilman herself stated that she wrote and spoke for men, women, and children, and that a reconceptualized role of women was essential to altering patriarchal paradigms that oppressed all people, regardless of age or gender. Although her vision of humankind was most often limited to Anglo-American, middle-class women and men, Gilman nevertheless insisted her voice—a female voice—be heard even where it was not welcome, and in the process she contributed to a social revolution that continues to this day.

Bibliography:

Reference:

Papers:
Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s papers are housed at the Schlesinger Library at Radcliffe College.