

Feminist Charlotte Perkins Gilman's Pursuit of Health and Physical Fitness as a Strategy for Emancipation*

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Everyone who possesses a strong mind in a sane body is heir presumptive to the kingdom of this world.

Margaret Fuller¹

Feminist historians have pointed to the latter decades of the nineteenth century as a time when tensions between the sexes became particularly acute. A growing number of women struggled to further their intellectual capacity and extend the parameters of their physical capabilities within a patriarchal tradition of female confinement and subordination.² Though they encountered controlling ideologies and rigid role prescriptions which had the effect of subduing their initiatives, a number of feminists expressed a growing desire to control their own bodies and reproductive lives by pursuing health and wholeness. They demanded release from the rigid behavioral expectations which large numbers of males and doctors determined as their birthright and sought to escape from the social script that women had both internalized and performed in response to social expectations. Demanding new roles and opportunities, these feminists aspired to become not simply equal to men but "new women."

A prominent (though by no means typical) example of the "new woman" was Charlotte Perkins Gilman. An exceptional woman of considerable talent,

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1. Margaret Fuller. *Life Without and Life Within. or Reviews, Narratives, Essays and Poems* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1874). 116

2. Feminists, of course, had expressed such anxieties consistently throughout the nineteenth century. Margaret Fuller, for example, criticized a society where men were too selfish and vain to allow women to become independent. "Women must realize," she said, that "a house is no home unless it contains food and fire for the mind as well as for the body." *Woman in the Nineteenth Century and Kindred Papers Relating to the Sphere, Condition and Duties of Women* (1845; rep. New York: W. W. Norton, 1971), 35; Fuller's theme was revisited with increasing frequency during the last three decades of the century.

Gilman became a major intellectual force in turn-of-the-century America. As a result of her prolific writing and lecturing on the theory of the evolution of gender relations and women's need to become socially useful in the larger world of production, she became known world-wide as a feminist theorist and iconoclastic social critic.³

Until recently Charlotte Gilman's literary contributions to critical aspects of the "woman question" of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries have remained relatively unexamined. Currently, however, feminist historians and literary critics have begun interpreting her actions and writings as paradigmatic of critical tensions between the sexes at the turn of the century, especially female struggles for creative fulfillment and physical autonomy. The context and substance of her writings, suggests Cottom, are "sites of historical struggles well worthy of investigation and analysis."⁴ Gilman's writings have been interpreted as a parable of female literary confinement, and as a dramatic illustration of the potential sexual violence of both the Victorian familial bedroom and the male doctor's relationship with his female clients. They also reflect her substantial life-long preoccupation with physical fitness and the importance she placed upon good health practices and unrestricted physical mobility as critical components of an emancipated womanhood.

Gilman's life experiences and her prolific writings were inextricably linked. One has only to examine the texts of Charlotte Perkins Gilman in light of her personal history to appreciate the extent to which this is so. Analyses of her feminist writings, fiction, poetry, diaries and autobiography all provide rich historical insight into her strivings for both physical autonomy and intellectual freedom. Though the way Gilman tried to live her life was in some ways deviant (and at least one historian has claimed she was truly neurotic), her notions of mind-body relationships illustrate dominant modes of thought about female health and autonomy in the late nineteenth century.⁵

To understand Charlotte Gilman it is necessary to examine prevailing attitudes of her era toward female health and the mind-body relationship. The attempted emergence of Gilman as a "new woman" can best be understood as her break-away from the accepted medical paradigm based upon the competition of mind and body for a limited endowment of energy, and her forging of a radically new mind-body concept as synergistic. The tragedy of Gilman's life lay in the fact that personally she was never completely able to liberate herself from the grasp of the traditional medical paradigm with its somatic emphasis.

3. B. Berth, "Charlotte Perkins Gilman," in *The New Palgrave. A Dictionary of Economics.* ed. John Eatwell, Murray Milgate and Peter Newman. (London: The MacMillan Press, 1987), 2: 528-9.

4. Daniel Cottom, *Social Figures; George Eliot, Social History and literary Representation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 211.

5. Susan Groag Bell and Karen M. Offen, *Women, the Family and Freedom: The Debate in Documents, 1880-1950* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1983), 2:9; Regina Morantz "The lady and her physician," in *Clio's Consciousness Raised: New Perspectives on the History of Women*, eds. Mary S. Hartman and Lois Banner, (New York: Octagon Books, 1976), 43.

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The role of physical culture in Gilman's lifestyle

Born in 1860, Gilman declared early in life that physical fitness could function as an important strategy for emancipation, since embracing physical culture seemed one clear way to remove the badge of female dependence. "It is apparent," she reflected in her autobiography, "that a careful early training in physical culture lasts a life time [and] in this line of improvement I was highly ambitious . . . and absolutely vain of my physical strength and agility"⁶

Gilman's dedication to physical fitness derived partly from her ongoing feeling, intensified at adolescence, that she needed strength to cope with what she was beginning to perceive as the female burden of economic dependence and a confining domestic role. The seeds of her desire to transcend these restrictions were rooted, one of her biographers suggests, in Gilman's earliest struggles for independence and self-assertion against the repressive discipline of her mother, Mary Perkins, who had been deserted by her father, Frederick Beecher Perkins, and who "unwittingly taught her daughter about the false security and spurious deceit of wife-mother myths."⁷ They were also nourished by her Beecher heritage. Charlotte Gilman was the grandniece of Catharine Beecher, Harriet Beecher Stowe and Henry Ward Beecher, all of whom promoted exalted and energetic images of themselves as self-assertive reformers during her many visits to them as a child. Henry Ward Beecher had an extremely fine physique and was enormously energetic. Catharine Beecher, in particular, had already demonstrated the importance of promoting health and fitness as a means for middle-class women to combat myths about female frailty, improve their functional efficiency and expand their influence in the home and society at large.⁸ She provided a stimulating model of vigorous self-dependence during Gilman's formative years, and Gilman later named her only daughter Katharine after her great-aunt.

The early separation of her own parents had, for Gilman, resulted in an oppressive environment. "Because my childhood had no father," she complained, the family was frequently in debt, and constantly on the move, thwarting any continuity in her education.⁹ Her formal schooling was unusually brief and not particularly memorable. During her time at the Young Ladies School in Providence, only the physical fitness classes sparked her interest, especially the exercise programs run by Dr. John Brooks, gymnastics teacher, physician and Director of the Providence Gymnasium. Encouraged by her great-aunt Catharine Beecher's health treatises, John Brooks' practical coach-

6. Mary A. Hill, *Charlotte Perkins Gilman: The Making of a Radical Feminist, 1860-1896* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980), 117; Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman: An Autobiography* (New York: D. Appleton Century Co., 1935), 67,64.

7. Hill, *Radical Feminist*, 13,22. The break-up of the Perkins marriage, thought Gilman, had much to do with the reproductive difficulties of her mother who, after numerous difficult pregnancies and losing two children, was advised to have no more.

8. Kathryn Kish Sklar, *Catharine Beecher: A Study in American Domesticity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973); Patricia Vertinsky, "Sexual equality and the legacy of Catharine Beecher," *Journal of Sport History*, 6 (Spring 1979): 35-49. Gilman, suggests Nancy Woloch, was the Beechers' last and greatest contribution to American feminism. *Women and the American Experience* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984), 399.

9. Gilman. *Autobiography*, 8.

ing, and a memorable physical culture lecture attended during her adolescent years, she channelled much of her energy towards improving her health through rational dress, fresh air, cold baths and “every kind of attainable physical exercise.”¹⁰

Gilman later described her adolescence as a time of constant conflict between her feminine and masculine elements.¹¹ She resented being hemmed in by her mother’s stern restrictions, drab routine, coldness and unbending discipline and she felt victimized by the demands and difficulties of living in a single parent household. Seeing conventional femininity as symbolised by her mother’s dependence and vulnerability, she viewed her father’s traits of creativity, strength, independence, and worldliness as infinitely more desirable, even though he largely ignored his family.

Gilman described how she dealt with the disappointments caused by her mother’s intransigence and her father’s indifference by practising rigid forms of self-discipline, especially rigorous physical exercise and spartan habits. She was constantly preoccupied with physical fitness, and followed “Blaikie every night with greatest assiduity.” The 1879 edition of William Blaikie’s highly popular layperson’s guide to health and fitness, *How to Get Strong and How to Stay So*, preached judicious, daily physical exercise for both sexes and all ages but gave special attention to women’s needs. Physical fitness for women, wrote Blaikie, was:

the key to sanity and mental power; to self respect and high purpose; to sound health and vigorous enduring health . . . Let every intelligent girl and woman in this land bear in mind that, from every Point of view, a vigorous and healthy body, kept toned by rational systematic daily exercise, is one of the greatest blessings which can be had in this world.¹²

Claiming Blaikie’s book as “her bedside Bible, her Atalanta guidebook for the coming race,” Gilman practiced his recommendations daily. She lifted weights, practiced gymnastics and ran the seven-minute mile. “Girls should all learn to run,” said Blaikie, so each day, Gilman “ran a mile, not for speed but wind.” “I could vault and jump,” she wrote, “go up a knotted rope, walk on my hands under a ladder, kick as high as my head, and revel in the flying rings. But best of all were the travelling rings, those wide spaced, single ones, stirrup-handled, that dangled in a line the length of the hall.”¹³

In 1881, when Gilman was twenty-one she sought more systematic training in

10. Hill, *Radical Feminist*, 42-43; Gilman, *Autobiography*, 28; Anita C. Fellman and Michael Fellman, *Making Sense of Self Medical Literature in Late Nineteenth-Century America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981), 58.

11. Gilman, *Autobiography*, 29. Hill, *Radical Feminist*, 45, notes that Gilman’s autobiography is misleading to the extent that she remembered herself as a passive victim more than a lively rebel sport, and that her diaries present more accurate information about her youthful activities.

12. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *Diary*, October 27, 1879, Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library, Charlotte Perkins Gilman Collection, Radcliffe College, Cambridge, Massachusetts (hereafter called the AESL collection); William Blaikie, *How to Get Strong and How to Stay So* (New York: Harper and Bros., 1883), 272, 48, 72, 73. Though Blaikie quoted Dr. S. Weir Mitchell’s suggestion that vigorous muscular exercise was the very thing to quiet the excited nerves and brain, Mitchell, in fact, increasingly restricted exercise in his rest cure and substituted passive methods and bed rest.

13. Hill, *Radical Feminist*, 65; Blaikie, *How to Get Strong*, 272; Gilman, *Autobiography*, 66-67.

a gymnasium and persuaded Dr. John Brooks, the local gymnastic teacher, to start a women's gymnasium for herself and a group of friends. The same year she boasted in her diary that "my health was splendid, I never tired . . . [I was] . . . as strong as a horse." "I could easily have been an acrobat," she wrote later, "having good nervous coordination, strength, courage and excellent balancing power."¹⁴ So pleased was she with her experiences at the Providence Ladies Gymnasium that she advertised its merits in the *Provincial Daily Journal*:

For Ladies' Gymnasiums it may be said that the laws of health cover both sexes and that there can be little beauty without harmonious physical development. . . . Our gymnasium is located in a hall that leaves little to be desired, a large, light airy hall 65 x 45 and 25 feet high . It is thoroughly stocked with apparatus selected by Dr. Sargent of Harvard University . Each [lady] is weighed, measured and gauged before beginning, and again at the end of the season; and the increase in strength and beauty has been most encouraging. Special work is given to counteract special deficiencies and it is glorious! to see the backs straighten, shoulders fall into place, narrow chests expand and weak muscles grow firm and round. Women who are weak and ailing can regain strength and for young girls—there is room for hearty enjoyment and acquisition of health and strength that lasts far into the future . . .¹⁵

From health to illness: The price of non-conformity

Gilman's growing desire for personal autonomy pressed her to consider rejecting a conventional future of domesticity. "I have decided I'm not domestic and I don't want to be—I can work now to some purpose, wait with some patience, guard my health and strength with an end in view." The objective, as far as she could articulate it, was to strengthen herself to repress any inclinations to develop "merely as a woman or that useful animal, a wife and mother."¹⁶ "I insist upon a life of comparative freedom and great activity," she wrote in her diary, and in her letters she gloated about her determination and physical strength; "I, the strong and impregnable; I, the budding athlete, and Chief Performer at the Providence Ladies Sanitary Gymnasium; I, the surefooted and steady eyed . . ." ¹⁷

Her determination to resist a conventional future of marriage was soon put to the test, however, by Charles Walter Stetson's marriage proposal.¹⁸ After much vacillation, she accepted his proposal but soon revealed her misgivings in her diary. Realizing she was choosing the duty to submit and endure rather than a duty to rebel, she anticipated, at times, a future of failure and suffering.¹⁹

14. Gilman, *Autobiography*, 71.

15. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, "The Providence Ladies Gymnasium," *Provincial Daily Journal* (23 May, 1883): 8.

16. Hill, *Radical Feminist*, 73-74. See also Charles C. Eldredge, *Charles Walter Stetson: Color and Fantasy* (Kansas: University of Kansas Press, 1982), 25-26.

17. Hill, *Radical Feminist*, 101; Eldredge, *Charles Walter Stetson*, 32.

18. Karen Homey provides one perspective on avoiding adulthood, in "The flight from womanhood: The masculinity complex in women as viewed by men and women," *Psychoanalysis and Women*, ed. Jean Baker Miller (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1973), 5-20.

19. On the notion of woman's duty, George Bernard Shaw was particularly eloquent. "Unless woman repudiates her womanliness, her duty to her husband, to her children, to society, to the law, and to everyone but herself, she cannot emancipate herself. Therefore, woman has to repudiate duty altogether. In that repudiation lies her freedom." George Bernard Shaw, "The Womanly Woman" in *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* (1891; rep. London, 1931), 52.

“Children sickly and unhappy. Husband miserable because of my distress; and I—!” Believing that she might counter such forebodings about her forthcoming confinement in marriage by distracting herself through exercise which also would maintain her strength to resist total entrapment, she redoubled her physical fitness efforts, improved her diet and re-started her gymnasium classes. Greater vigor might dispel, she hoped, the mental gloom descending upon her. She was delighted to find that despite her anxieties, she could still go up the rope and on the rings, “run forty laps, vault six and lift three rings on the ladder!” In her diary she recorded her pleasure at exercising hilariously, cavorting wildly, enjoying the gymnasium intensely and doing more than usual. Yet, despite her pleasure at her increased physical fitness, she felt that she was losing control over other aspects of her life, especially her ability to make the right decisions about the future. In her diary she constantly displayed her indecision:

Can I, who suffer from the wild unrest
Of two strong natures claiming each its due,
And can not tell the greater of the two;²⁰

Ultimately, she did, however, agree to marry Charles Stetson. Soon she became pregnant, and depression followed quickly. Pregnancy and mothering proved bitter experiences. The physical incapacity and loss of the body tone acquired through hours in the women’s gymnasium disturbed her and, Berkin suggests, “no doubt contributed to her sense of unnatural lethargy and of a passivity she held in contempt.”²¹ “Nothing was more utterly bitter than this,” she wrote as her depression intensified, “that even motherhood brought no joy.”

I could not read nor write nor paint nor sew nor talk nor listen to talking nor anything. I lay on the 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.²²

Guilt and shame exacerbated her condition. “That a heretofore markedly vigorous young woman-should collapse in this lamentable manner was inexplicable,” she wrote:

You did it yourself. You had health and strength and hope and glorious work before you—and you threw it all away. No good as a wife, no good as a mother, no good at anything . . . I, the ceaselessly industrious, could do no work of any kind.²³

She blamed herself for her weakness and her husband for pressing her into marriage without understanding her needs. “Men are attracted by women’s femininity and charm,” she wrote, “but care not a whit for their real person-

20. Diary entry for Jan. 1, 1884. AESL Collection; Diary entries for Jan. 30, 11, Feb. 20. March 24, 1884. AESL Collection; Diary entry for April 1, 1883.

21. Carol Ruth Berkin. “Private woman. public woman: The contradictions of Charlotte Perkins Gilman,” in *Women of America; A History*, ed. Carol Ruth Berkin and Mary Beth Norton, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1979), 161.

22. Gilman, *Autobiography*, 89-92, 101.

23. Gilman, *Autobiography*, 91.

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alities and concerns.²⁴ As their relationship deteriorated, she visited California in an attempt to recoup her health and strength. Indeed, away from her family she soon found herself feeling vigorous and youthful again.²⁵

The re-appearance of her depression upon her return to her family confirmed her underlying resentment of her husband, who obviously cherished traditional notions of wife, home and motherhood, and her own feelings about the confining role of housewife and mother. The resentment also colored her early writing. In her poem, *The Answer*, later published in *The Woman's Journal* in 1886 she articulated her feelings about the repressive aspects of marriage:

A maid was asked in marriage. Wise as fair,
She gave her answer with deep thought and prayer,

Expecting in the holy name of wife,
Great work, great pain and greater joy in life.

Such work she found as brainless slaves might do,
By day and night, long labor, never through;

Such pain-no language can such pain reveal; It had no limit
but her power to feel;

Such joy-life left in her sad soul's employ,
Neither the hope nor memory of joy.

Helpless she died, with one despairing cry,—“I thought it good;
How could I tell the lie?”

And answered Nature, merciful and stem,
I teach by killing; let the others learn.²⁶

As her marital relationship deteriorated, Gilman tried to overcome her difficulties by reinstating her therapeutic gymnastics program and demonstrating anew her belief that exercise could counterbalance mental depression. “Still feel poorly,” she wrote in her diary, but “depart at six for the gymnasium, speedily make friends, and . . . find myself happy to the verge of idiocy at being there again.”²⁷ She also rowed. Charles Stetson wrote admiringly in his

24. Charlotte Perkins Stetson, “On advertising for marriage,” *Alpha 2* (Sept. 1, 1885): 7.

25. Hill, *Radical Feminist*, 132-3.

26. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, “The answer,” *Woman's Journal* 17 (October 2, 1886): 313; Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, Elaine Showalter and other leading feminist historians suggest that Gilman, and others like her, were attempting to escape from their traditional role of housewife and mother and cope with the stress of real or perceived situational anxieties by adopting depressed or hysterical behavior. Ehrenreich and English support such an explanation by pointing out that Jane Addams, Margaret Sanger, Eleanor Marx, Olive Shreiner, Ellen Swallow and Charlotte Gilman's miseries and their crippling indecisiveness upon entering womanhood were common among tens of thousands of women. It was as if they had come to the brink of adult life and then refused to go on. Some women, like Gilman, they explain, transformed their numbness into anger and became activists in reform movements but many remained permanently depressed, bewildered or sick. Barbara Ehrenreich and Deidre English, *For Her Own Good: 150 Years of the Experts' Advice to Women* (Garden City, New York Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1979), 2-3; see also Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, “The hysterical woman: Sex roles and role conflict in nineteenth century America,” in *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985), 207; Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture* (New York: Penguin Books, 1985); Regina Markell Morantz-Sanchez, *Sympathy and Science: Women Physicians in American Medicine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985); John S. Hailer, Jr., “Neurasthenia: The medical profession and the ‘New Woman’ of the late nineteenth century,” *New York State Journal of Medicine* 71 (Feb. 15, 1971): 475.

27. Hill, *Radical Feminist*, 143.

diary about one expedition up the Seekonk River where his wife rowed over four miles in less than fifty minutes without tiring.²⁸

Gymnastics and other physical activities, however, did not prevent her continued despondency and she soon found herself “back to the edge of insanity again.”²⁹ Her husband wrote despairingly of her “spasms of horror.” “After making herself and me miserable for four or more years [Charlotte] has found her real strength, which is weakness. My patience is about exhausted . . .” In particular, Stetson was tired of his wife’s absorption in the woman question, her feminist meetings and activities. “It is very noble and to an extent proper, but it seems a wee bit unhealthy, feverish . . .”³⁰ In desperation, and with Gilman a willing participant, he enlisted in 1887 the help of Dr. Weir Mitchell whose rest cure it was hoped would return his wife to the normalcy he expected in the marriage relationship.³¹

Despite her initial enthusiasm, Gilman later decided that this eminent physician “was well versed in two kinds of nervous prostration; that of the business man exhausted from too much work, and the society woman exhausted from too much play. The kind I had was evidently beyond him.”³² Dr. Mitchell, however, was confident in his diagnosis of neurasthenia and in his cure for Charlotte Gilman. By now highly specialized in the treatment of female neurasthenics, “those sensitive creatures whose destiny if not handled properly was the shawl and the sofa,” he treated Gilman as an aggressive, dominating and manipulative woman. Such women, he believed were like “vampire(s) sucking the blood of the healthy people of a household,” and, therefore, deserving of little sympathy.³³ In mapping out the cure for Gilman’s nervous depression Dr. Mitchell reflected well the attitudes of a number of leading establishment male physicians of his era toward the “new woman.”

Medicine as an instrument of social control: The doctor and the “new woman”

Late nineteenth century medicine relied heavily upon systems of gender differentiation, and was important in constructing sexual ideology and in illuminating social perceptions of “woman as body.” Fear of female independence and competition, and the movement of nineteenth century medicine toward somaticism inclined mostly male doctors to concentrate upon the close supervision of female patients’ bodies (and hence minds) and the regulation of all aspects of women’s lives. Limited female energy, the doctors proclaimed,

28. Mary Armfield Hill, *Endure: The Diaries of Charles Waker Stetson* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1985), 313; Hill notes that in Gilman’s later fiction there were a number of heroines who not only enjoyed rowing but did so faster and more effectively than men.

29. Diary entry for March 20, 1887. AESL collection.

30. Hill, *Endure*, 333.

31. By the 1880s, Dr. Mitchell had become the most prominent neurologist in America and was widely known on both sides of the Atlantic. Richard D. Walter. S. *Weir Mitchell. M.D. Neurologist, A Medical Biography* (Springfield, Ill: Charles C. Thomas, 1970). 141. He reputedly made \$70,000 in a good year, much of it in consulting fees. Barbara Sicherman, “The uses of a diagnosis: Doctor’s patients and neurasthenia,” *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Science* 32 (January 1977): 33-54.

32. Gilman, *Autobiography*, 95.

33. S. Weir Mitchell, *Wear and Tear: Or Hints for the Overworked* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1871), 28; S. Weir Mitchell, *Doctor and Patient* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1888), 45.

was meant for the altruism of home and posterity, not unsanctioned activity of mind, body and other augmentations of individuality which could only lead to ill-health.

The tension between a medical paradigm which restricted physical mobility and creative endeavor, and the new momentum in women's search for self-development and a creative outlet, was evident in claims of a disturbing increase in female ill-health, especially nervous disorders.³⁴ Confronted with what they perceived to be an epidemic of nervous afflictions, male doctors, especially an articulate group of neurological specialists, pronounced anorexia nervosa, hysteria and neurasthenia the result of the "new woman's" indifference to marriage and motherhood and attempted incursion into the male intellectual and public world. "Woman's efforts, acted out rashly and foolishly," wrote a leading establishment physician in 1890, made her ultimately unfit for active life because of "the perilous injury brought on by the deleterious irritation of the outside world."³⁵ Neurasthenic women, said another doctor, were those who led faulty lives and required for correction a radical change in lifestyle.³⁶ For many female intellectuals in the late nineteenth century, the attempted transition from a domestic to a professional life was characterized by nervous disorders and periodic depression. "New women" and nervous illness seemed to go together, and neurologists readily fashioned treatments which were designed to ease the anxieties of female patients by defusing their ambitions and re-socializing them to their traditional sphere and its familiar obligations.³⁷

The eminent neurologist Dr. Weir Mitchell used his own studies on the physiology of the cerebellum to provide him with a neurological explanation for the apparent breakdown of mind and body that led to female hysteria and neurasthenia. He ascribed female neurasthenia to "reflex irritation" wherein

34. Martha Verbrugge, *Able-Bodied Womanhood: Personal Health and Social Change in Nineteenth Century Boston* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 106; see also Showalter, *The Female Malady*, 131.

35. C. Bennett, *The Modern Malady, or Sufferers from Nerves* (London: E. Arnold, 1890), 168; G.M. Hammond, "Nerves and the American Woman," *Harper's Bazaar* 40 (1906): 591.

36. H.J. Hall, "The systematic use of work as a remedy in neurasthenia and allied conditions," *Boston Medical and Surgical Journal* 152 (1905): 29.

37. Men, of course, were also at risk from nervous exhaustion brought on by overwork and the overzealous pursuit of success (though it was thought they had superior nervous stores to women), and many became candidates for a variety of therapies for neurasthenia. George Beard was especially eager to legitimize neurasthenia as a disease for men who had a deficient energy system from worry and overworking. Therapies usually allowed men the opportunity to carry out business activities between resting periods, and the moral aspect of the treatment was lacking. Increasingly, however, male specialists built their practices around the plentiful supply of female neurasthenics whose difficulties from the "revolutions" of menstruation, child bearing and menopause made them prone to serious nervous irritability. Gosling notes that the view that nervous symptoms in women were directly linked to female biology became a tenet of gynecological practice during this period and influenced gynecological thought well into the twentieth century. Francis G. Gosling, "Neurasthenia in Pennsylvania: A perspective on the origins of American psychotherapy, 1870-1910," *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* 40 (Spring, 1985): 193. See also T. Diller, "Some observations on neurasthenia," *Pennsylvania Medical Journal* 5 (1902): 646-650; Silas Weir Mitchell, *Lectures on Diseases of the Nervous System, Especially in Women* (Philadelphia: Henry C. Lea's Son and Co., 1881); Ann Douglas Wood, "The fashionable diseases: Women's complaints and their treatment in nineteenth century America," in *Clio's Consciousness Raised*, eds. Hartman and Banner, 225. To many neurological specialists it seemed that much neurasthenia was simply a result of women becoming sick because they gave too much energy and attention to selfishly bettering their own sex. "Co-education and the Higher Education of Women-A Symposium," by Professors William Goodell, M.D., T. Gaillard Thomas, M.D., James R. Chadwick, M.D., S. Weir Mitchell, M.D., M. Allen Starr, M.D., and J. J. Putnam, M.D., *Medical News* 55 (1889): 667-673.

irritations of the reproductive organs were transmitted electrically via nerve impulses to the brain, causing lesions in the brain cortex.³⁸

Convinced that neurotic phenomena had a somatic base, Mitchell sought to heal the mind by first restoring the body to health.³⁹ The view that one's general well-being depended first and foremost upon the well-being of the body, and that a systematic training of the body assured a robust mind was the popular Victorian interpretation of "mens sana in corpore sane" based more upon Herbert Spencer's interpretation of evolutionary theory than upon Plato's original dictum.⁴⁰ Had neurologists been impressed by Plato's insistence that a healthy body could not in itself produce a healthy mind, they may have placed less store upon the somatic basis of mental problems.⁴¹ As it was, they focussed upon the physical causes of mental depression, and concentrated upon restoring mental health through physical interventions.⁴² "You cure the body," Mitchell said "and somehow the mind is also cured."⁴³

The rest cure

The key to cure, and the basis of Mitchell's famous rest cure, logically lay in regulating individual habits and restoring balance to the patients' daily life. Mitchell's observations caused him to believe in conserving energy through enforced rest followed by the provision of a complete and carefully specified moral and physical re-education.⁴⁴ For a typical female neurasthenic patient such as Gilman, complete rest, seclusion and excessive feeding began once she relinquished total control to her physician.⁴⁵ Dr. Mitchell made use of "every grade of rest. . . from repose on a lounge for some hours up to entire rest in bed for up to eight weeks."⁴⁶ During this time, the patient was only gradually allowed to sit up, use her hands or read. Various passive exercises such as

38. Silas Weir Mitchell, "Researches on the physiology of the cerebellum," *American Journal of Medical Science* 57 (1869), 320-338. Among the studies that have been made of Dr. S. Weir Mitchell's physiological research are W. Bruce Fye, *The Development of American Physiology. Scientific Medicine in the Nineteenth Century* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987); Ernest Earnest, *S. Weir Mitchell, Novelist and Physician* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1950).

39. Mitchell clearly relied upon the explanations of George Beard, who first applied the term Neurasthenia to nervous disorders in the 1860s. Beard, in *American Nervousness. Its Causes and Consequences* (New York, G.P. Putnam's, 1881), 7-9, explained that since nervousness was a physical, not a mental state it could be treated with physical methods. Insanity was a physical ailment as much as a broken leg, he said, and this held true for all nervous disorders. To secure his cause, notes Rosenberg, "he called with impartiality upon physics, neurophysiology and technology, upon Herbert Spencer, Thomas Edison and Hernun V. Helmholtz for the building blocks with which to construct a mechanistic model exploring the pathology of nervous exhaustion." Charles E. Rosenberg, "live place of George M. Beard in nineteenth century psychiatry," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 36 (May-June 1962): 249.

40. Bruce Haley, *The Healthy Body and Victorian Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978), 254.

41. Plato, *The Republic of Plato, trans. and ed. F. M. Cornford*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1945), 312, 97.

42. Earnest, *Mitchell*, 229.

43. Silas Weir Mitchell, "The treatment of rest, seclusion etc., in relation to psychotherapy," *Journal of the American Medical Association* 50 (June, 1908): 2037.

44. Silas Weir Mitchell, *Far and Blood. An Essay on the Treatment of Certain Forms of Neurasthenia and Hysteria*, (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Co., 1907).

45. H. J. Byford, *Manual of Gynecology*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: P. Blakiston, 1897), 180-185.

46. Ellen L. Bassuk, "The rest cure: Repetition or resolution of Victorian women's conflicts." *Poetics Today* 6 (Spring, 1985): 247; Mitchell, *Fat and Blood*. 10th ed., 71.

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massage and electricity were prescribed to offset the deleterious effects of prolonged confinement in bed.⁴⁷ Gentle, carefully controlled but never excessive exercise was allowed only in brief excursions from the bed. "You must get the effect of exercise without its ills," said Mitchell.⁴⁸ The massage treatment, which covered the whole body, could last up to an hour each day.⁴⁹ Tonics such as pints of milk and fattening foods were presented as strengtheners which generated surplus fat to "fight moral or mental strain and fevers."⁵⁰

The enforced rest and feeding took place well away from the patient's home, and relatives and friends were excluded while moral and physical re-education took place. After building up her health, re-education focused primarily upon teaching the patient how to regain and preserve domination over her emotions. This was carried out by a well trained female nurse who was the unquestioning agent "firmly implementing the orders of the more distant and totally authoritative male, the doctor in charge."⁵¹ In this way, the patient was gradually taught not to yield to hysterical behavior but to display order, control and self-restraint. She was expected to become "less hysterical and more obsessional," and perform her female role in a structured manner with dutiful attention to rules and detail.⁵² In short, the rest cure was a behavior modification treatment designed to make nervous, over-active and dissatisfied women more passive, feminine and healthy, and to help them learn that domesticity was the cure, not the cause, of their problems. The female neurasthenic was thus "returned to her menfolk's management, recycled and taught to make the will of the male her own."⁵³

For some women the remedy was an agent of regeneration, and they reported feeling better for the enforced rest and the opportunity to withdraw temporarily from life's demands and sorrows. At least they had gained weight and color, and some felt more relaxed. Yet, by depriving some women patients of those activities which were most important to them, and by suspending their active and intellectual life, the rest cure could also become a potent form of punishment in the process of social control. Deprived of reading or writing, freedom of vigorous activity in the open air, and ready access to understanding friends, the mental and physical incarceration imposed by the rest cure became a devastating medical experience from which some women never recovered.⁵⁴

47. Mitchell, *Lectures on Diseases of the Nervous System*, 217-233.

48. S. Weir Mitchell, "Rest in nervous disease: Its use and abuse." *A Series of American Clinical Lectures*, ed. E. C. Seguin, I(1875): 86.

49. Douglas Wood, "The Fashionable Diseases," 225.

50. Silas Weir Mitchell, *Fat and Blood and How to Make Them*, 8th ed., (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1900), 288; Showalter suggests that the weight gain accompanying the forced feeding was a kind of pseudo-pregnancy. Elaine Showalter, *A Living of Their Own*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), 274.

51. Ben Barker-Benfield, "Sexual surgery in late-nineteenth century America," *International Journal of Health Services* 5 (June 1975): 294.

52. Bassuk, *The Rest Cure*, 250; "You get her to promise to light every desire to cry or twitch, or grow excited," said Mitchell. S. Weir Mitchell, "The true and false palsies of hysteria." *Medical News and Abstract* 38 (Feb. 1880): 71.

53. Barker-Benfield. "Sexual Surgery," 294.

54. Charlotte Gilman and Jane Addams were among Mitchell's most conspicuous failures. G. J. Barker-Benfield, "Mother Emancipator: The meaning of Jane Addams 'sickness and cure,'" *Journal of Family History* 4 (Winter 1979): 395-420.

Gilman and the rest cure

When Charlotte Perkins Gilman came, in 1887, to Dr. Weir Mitchell's practice on 1524 Walnut Street in Philadelphia she was confident that the rest cure would alleviate the severe nervous depression which had ensued in the aftermath of her marriage.⁵⁵ Unable to cope with life's circumstances, Gilman saw the rest cure as a last resort in her belief that medical therapy was necessary to cure the brain fever which was "her form of neurasthenia."⁵⁶ Viewing the Doctor as a necessary link to the outside world of health and activity, Gilman was acknowledging that her own attempts to maintain a mind-body balance through years of attention to physical culture and systems of self-development had failed.⁵⁷

Absorbing the popular medical belief that physical health would engender mental stability, Gilman believed that the depressions which plagued her would be eased should she strive for a high level of physical fitness. She saw her own life as one where the physical must overcompensate for the mental during her frequent bouts of anxiety. What she learned from her disastrous experience with Mitchell's rest cure was that a strong and healthy body was a necessary but not sufficient condition for mental health. Mental and physical health, she conjectured, were so intimately connected that true growth could only occur when both aspects were allowed to develop. Whereas many medical specialists advocated fixed amounts of energy being apportioned to tasks and activities stipulated by social prescription, Gilman eventually realised (as did many other feminists in the 1890s and early years of the twentieth century) that mind and body could continue to grow in strength and harmony were they both put to use in a productive enterprise.⁵⁸ Seen in this light, health became "more an experiment than a blueprint," a search in which unrestricted physical energy was an important key to personal autonomy and a useful support in escaping from the private to the public sphere.⁵⁹ Feminists thus saw that the use of physical exertion to strive against and overcome obstacles could bring with it a sense of conquest out of which the identity of the "new woman" could emerge. This, however, was just a starting point because the new identity could become concrete only if the mind was also ready to jettison traditional encumbrances to welcome new challenges and creative growth.

When Dr. Mitchell, in his cure for neurasthenia, restricted physical and mental avenues of growth through enforced rest, Gilman almost lost her sanity. In the rest cure, the complete suspension of physical activity, intellectual work

55. Gilman, *Autobiography*, 93-95.

56. Gilman, *Autobiography*, 95.

57. Elizabeth Stuart Phelps was yet another example, who, as her health broke down, and she began to lose faith in her ability for vigorous independence, began to define sickness as needing the male/doctor. Christine Stansell, "Elizabeth Stuart Phelps: A study in female rebellion," in *Woman: An Issue*, ed. Lee Edwards, Mary Heath and Lisa Baskin, (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1972). 239-259.

58. Jane Addams, for example, said that to be put to bed and fed milk was not what a frustrated woman required. "What she needs is simple health-giving activity, which, involving the use of all her faculties, shall be a response to all the claims which she so keenly feels." Jane Addams, *Democracy and Social Ethics* (New York: Macmillan, 1902). 87.

59. Verbrugge, *Able-Bodied Womanhood*, 195.

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and social contacts deprived her of all that she held most important. The therapy brought neither health nor serenity, and seemed to dampen all hopes for a meaningful future. While rest and solicitous attention may have proved useful to the overworked and exhausted late nineteenth century neurasthenic man or woman, it became a form of punishment and an imprisonment to “new women” like Gilman struggling to overcome the difficulties of breaking away from a meaningless existence.

Mitchell’s final prescription for Gilman was to concentrate upon living as domestic a life as possible. “Have your child with you all the time. . . . Lie down an hour after each meal. Have but two hours intellectual life a day. And never touch pen, brush or pencil for as long as you live.”⁶⁰ Nothing could have had a more disastrous effect. She went home, followed those directions rigidly for months, and believed she came perilously near to losing her mind.⁶¹ As her depressions worsened she decided that it was better for her “to leave a husband sane than to stay with him insane.”⁶² The final breakdown, proposed Schopp-Schilling, helped Gilman both escape her marriage and find in her work an excuse for possible failure.⁶³ It also inspired “The Yellow Wallpaper,” a Poe-esque short story in which Gilman recalled her bitter experience with Dr. Weir Mitchell’s rest cure.⁶⁴ Initially, the story was rejected by *The Atlantic* editor who wrote that he could not forgive himself if he made others as miserable as he had made himself by reading it.⁶⁵ In 1892, however, it was published in *The New England Magazine*.⁶⁶

Though “The Yellow Wallpaper” is now considered the best of Gilman’s fiction it was originally read as a chilling horror story rather than as an examination of the social roots of mental illness and an exploration of male-female relationships in the late nineteenth century.⁶⁷ In the story, the narrator, a writer, finds herself increasingly depressed and nervously ill. Her loving and well-meaning husband, also a “censorious and paternalistic physician,” believes that she needs complete rest and a cessation of her work if she is to recover. He takes her to a house in the country and lovingly consigns her to enforced idleness in an upstairs room, a former nursery with faded yellow-patterned wallpaper, bars on the windows and a large bed nailed to the floor. The setting thus becomes both a forced retreat into childhood and a prison, cutting her off from the regular processes needed to shape women’s lives.⁶⁸ She

60. Gilman, *Autobiography*. 96.

61. Eldredge, *Charles Walter Stetson*, 45.

62. Hill, *Radical Feminist*, 152; Marriage, Gilman decided, was incompatible with freedom. In one of her stories, she poignantly declared that “a woman could have love-and lose life, or she could have life and lose love, but never could she have them both. That was the woman’s problem.” Charlotte Perkins Gilman. “Three women,” *The Forerunner* 2 (May 11, 1910): 134.

63. Beate Schopp-Schilling, “The yellow wallpaper: A rediscovered realistic story,” *American Literary Realism* 8 (Summer 1975): 286.

64. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, “The yellow wallpaper,” in *The Charlotte Perkins Gilman Reader*, ed. Ann J. Lane (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980). 3-21.

65. Vivian Gornick, “Twice told tales,” *The Nation* 227 (September 23, 1978): 278.

66. Charlotte Perkins Stetson, “The Yellow Wallpaper,” *The New England Magazine* 5 (Jan, 1892): 647-659.

67. Lane, *The Charlotte Perkins Gilman Reader*, xvi.

68. Gilman vividly saw the connection between independent space and women’s creative work, as did Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One’s Own*, (1929; rep. New York: Harbinger books, 1957); for an extended

is constantly told to rest and sleep, use her will-power to overcome her depression and avoid "silly fancies." With nothing left to occupy her mind, the yellow wallpaper eventually becomes the only aspect of interest in the narrator's life which she wants to control.⁶⁹ Behind the pattern of the wallpaper she begins to visualize a trapped woman stooping down and creeping about:

Sometimes I think there are a great many women behind, and sometimes only one, and she crawls around fast, and her crawling shakes it all over. Then in the very bright spots she keeps still, and in the very shady spots she just takes hold of the bars and shakes them hard. And she is all the time trying to climb through. But nobody would climb through that pattern-it strangles so; I think that is why it has so many heads. They get through, and then the pattern strangles them off and turns them upside down, and makes their eyes white!⁷⁰

Her obsession becomes the rescue of that shadow woman from the paper-pattern that bars her own self-realization. One night she finally sets about freeing the trapped woman and hence herself. "I pulled and she shook, I shook and she pulled, and before morning we had peeled off yards of that paper." In her final descent into madness, the narrator begins to creep and crawl about the room. With the climax of the story her husband breaks down the door and faints as she triumphantly crawls over his body exclaiming, "I've got out at last . . . in spite of you and Jane. And I've pulled off most of the paper, so you can't put me back."⁷¹ Thus, the heroine's triumph over the rest cure, husband and doctor comes at the expense of her mind.

Gilman later wrote that her protest against Mitchell's rest cure through "The Yellow Wallpaper" was designed to convince the Doctor of the errors of his ways.⁷² It was also an effort to portray "a nightmare vision of sick women dependent on male doctors who used their professional superiority . . . to prolong their patients' sickness, and consequently the supremacy of their own sex."⁷³ In "The Yellow Wallpaper," Gilman presented insanity as an ultimate form of rebellion, where madness was the only creative act available to one doomed to submit to society's standards.⁷⁴

Freedom or not: The flowering of Gilman's literary career

Perhaps one way to define madness is to say that it is the affliction of those who take the basic premises of the society they live in too literally and pursue the

discussion see also, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979).

69. Lorelee MacPike, "Environment as psychological symbolism in 'The yellow wallpaper,'" *American Literary Realism* 8 (Summer 1975), 288.

70. Gilman, "The yellow wallpaper," 30.

71. Stetson, "The yellow wallpaper," 647, 656.

72. Gilman, *Autobiography*, 121.

73. Wood, "The fashionable diseases," 230; Regina Morantz rightly insists upon caution in viewing the existence of Victorian women solely from the perspective of male domination, especially medical men. "It is true that Mitchell was very much the Victorian patrician but can Wood honestly overlook the fact of Gilman's neurosis and its role in structuring her response to Mitchell must our heroines be utterly free from blemishes . . . ? Should one not pay more attention to the dysfunctional aspects of female socialization in this period?" Morantz "The lady and her physician," 42-44.

74. In this sense, says MacPike. Gilman anticipated R. D. Laing's notion that in an insane world, only the mad are sane. MacPike, "Environment," 288.

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logical consequences of that society's underlying assumptions with too single-minded a determination. ⁷⁵

Feminist interpretations of Gilman's writings and life until her breakdown view her near descent into madness (as described in "The Yellow Wallpaper") as a subtle form of growth—a way to health and a rejection of and escape from an insane society. ⁷⁶ By interpreting madness as a higher form of sanity, one could read Gilman's story as a quest for her own identity. In her mad sane way, they suggest, she saw her own situation and that of all women for what it really was, and madness became her only freedom and her ultimate road to health. ⁷⁷ By identifying with the woman behind the wallpaper and helping her to escape, Gilman is seen to effect her own liberation from disease and find that she, too, has entered "the open space of her own authority."⁷⁸

Gilman's breakdown and the failure of Dr. Weir Mitchell's rest cure helped facilitate her escape from the traditional domestic role so objectionable to her. Though emotionally painful, her refusal to be returned "cured" to her confined sphere by a loving family and a leading physician encouraged a measure of personal growth and a new ability to identify and deal with rather than avoiding conflict. ⁷⁹ Gilman finally realised that she could never be truly "healthy" in the traditional female role. Abandoning the role that had caused her such pain and disclaiming a prevalent male medical model that had tried to re-fit her for that role, she began a new search for self-definition and wholeness as a female writer. Confident that self-assertion and personal growth through reading, writing, exercising and meeting and talking with other women provided a better chance than medical intervention of improving her health she left her husband and moved to California in 1888. ⁸⁰ Forced to become self-dependent, she developed a base for her "professional living," a writing and public speaking career.

As Gilman became increasingly popular among feminist reformers in California, she and Stetson initiated divorce proceedings. Intimating her lack of womanliness, newspapers covering the divorce emphasized that among the husband's complaints was her overzealous pursuit of physical fitness, to the point that "she became very muscular!"⁸¹ Stetson clearly associated her frequent visits to the gymnasium with those suffrage meetings that had, in his opinion, exacerbated her resentment of the domestic sphere. Following the

75. Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity. Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-deSiècle Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 221.

76. Jean E. Kennard, "Convention coverage or how to read your own life," *New Literary History* 13 (Autumn 1981): 77.

77. Elaine Hedges, "Afterword," Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper*, ed. Elaine Hedges, (New York: Feminist Press, Old Westbury, 1973), 39.

78. Janice Haney-Perez, "Monumental feminism and literature's ancestral house: Another look at "The Yellow Wallpaper." *Women's Studies* 12 (February 1986): 121.

79. Bassuk, "The Rest Cure," 256.

80. Mary A. Hill, "Charlotte Perkins Gilman: A feminist's struggle with womanhood," *The Massachusetts Review* 21 (Fall 1980): 514.

81. A newspaper report said that Stetson had complained that "she had picked up her dress reform duds, her Bellamy writings, and her muscular development and put off for California." *San Francisco Examiner* (December 19, 1892).

divorce, Gilman's former husband decided to marry her life-long friend Grace Channing and Gilman allowed her daughter Katharine to live with them.

No longer tied to husband and daughter Gilman grasped the freedom she believed she needed for health and self-fulfillment. Yet the family break-up left her with a life-long guilt and sadness often exposed in her stories.⁸² As Filene notes, when such women tried to bring theory to life, practicing it in their daily lives, they inevitably experienced frustration, confusion and existential pain.⁸³ "These were years," Gilman wrote, "that I could never see a mother and child together without crying."⁸⁴ The social disapproval which accompanied her freedom depressed her, and during the period of adjustment she believed her lot must for ever be emancipation without joy. Later she wrote that she must be unfit to live with since she was so busy and so engrossed in "being me."

Her divorce and separation from her child left her, she noted, with a "lasting loss of power . . . the necessity for a laboriously acquired laziness foreign to both temperament and conviction, a crippled life."⁸⁵ Yet, despite her debilitating exhaustion, she increasingly found the strength to rededicate herself to self-development and write about suffrage issues. She aligned herself to two movements in particular, non-Marxian socialism as espoused by Edward Bellamy, and the social purity concerns of the women's movement. Socialism, she believed, was the most practical form of human development, while the equality of the sexes was the most essential condition of that development. It was an evil, she lectured, to conceal the facts of sex and allow the rigid conventions of society to restrict one's daily life.⁸⁶

The influence of Bellamy's *Looking Backward* (1888), especially his consideration of women's place in a future egalitarian order, was particularly apparent in Gilman's first major study and her most important work, *Women and Economics*.⁸⁷ Bellamy's Utopian novel had drawn a world in the year 2000 where cooperation was the norm, women had political and economic equality, and childbearing and domestic matters were supported by the state. Public kitchens, dining rooms and nurseries released women for other activities. In the educational system, particular prominence was accorded physical culture, and proficiency in athletic feats and games was given equal importance to scholarship. In the novel, a leading character, Dr. Leete explained to Julian West, Bellamy's visitor from the nineteenth century that:

[the] magnificent health which distinguishes our women from those of your day who seem to have been so generally sickly, is owing largely to the fact that all alike are furnished with healthful and inspiring occupation It is in giving full play

82. See, for example, Charlotte Perkins Gilman. "The unnatural mother," *The Forerunner* 7 (November 1916): 281. "No mother that was a mother," said Mis' Briggs, "would desert her own child for anything on earth."

83. Peter G. Filene, *Him/Her/Self: Sex Roles in Modern America* 2nd. ed. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986). 64.

84. Hill, *Radical Feminist*, 231.

85. Gilman, *Autobiography*, 100.

86. Carl N. Degler, Introduction, *Women and Economics*, ed. Charlotte Perkins Gilman (New York: Harper & Row, 1966). xii; Hill, *Radical Feminist*, 4-5.

87. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *Women and Economics: A Study of the Economic Relation Between Men and Women as a Factor in Social Evolution*, (1898; rep. New York: Harper and Row, 1966).

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to the differences of sex rather than in seeking to obliterate them, as was apparently the effort of some reformers in your day, that the enjoyment of each by itself-are alike enhanced. . . . We have given [women] a world of their own with its emulations, ambitions and careers, and I assure you they are very happy in it. It seems to us that women were, more than any other class, the victims of your civilization. . . [with]. . . their ennuied, undeveloped lives, stunted at marriage, their narrow horizon, bounded so often physically by the four walls of home and morally by a petty circle of personal interests. Such an existence would have softened men's brains or driven them mad.⁸⁸

This delineation of the economic basis of women's freedom was precisely the message that Gilman framed so forcefully in *Women and Economics*.⁸⁹ Contrasting women's current oppression with Bellamy's Utopian notions, she demanded economic reorganization to allow women full participation in society's affairs. Her thesis was in many ways an elaboration of her great-aunt Catharine Beecher's argument thirty years earlier that women should unite to establish their economic independence to demand dignity and respect for their domestic labor.⁹⁰ Society confused women's sexual and economic roles, Gilman posited, by denying women access to wage-earning jobs and forcing them to use sex to earn their keep.⁹¹ The family perpetuated female enslavement and degradation, wasted women's energies in the mundane tasks of cooking, cleaning and personal service, and made women psychologically and physically dependent upon men's demands. Forced to emphasize sexuality at the expense of humanity, woman had to prove her capacity for submission to the dominant male.⁹²

Gilman's radical 1898 assault on the inequalities of marriage and the patriarchal restrictions on women's intellectual and physical development attracted immediate and wide attention on both sides of the Atlantic and made her the leading intellectual in the women's movement.⁹³ *Women and Economics* was widely acclaimed as a brilliant theoretical attack upon conservative interpretations of political economy.⁹⁴ It was, said *The Nation*, "the most significant utterance on the subject of women since Mill's *The Subjection of Women*."⁹⁵

Gilman's social vision

Though Gilman rebelled against the constraints of an oppressive patriarchal system, she was no revolutionary. Like many of her contemporary feminists, her life was confused and contradictory. She remained, in many ways, loyal to

88. Edward Bellamy, *Looking Backward, 2000-1887* (Boston: Ticknor, 1888), 248-250.

89. Mari Jo Buhle, *Women and American Socialism, 1870-1920* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1981), 76-11.

90. Sklar, *Catharine Beeches*, 267; for a discussion of her plans to socialize domestic work, see Dolores Hayden, "Two Utopian feminists and their campaigns for kitchenless houses," *Signs* 4 (Summer 1978): 274-290.

51. Gilman, *Women and Economics*, 110-126.

92. Catherine Clinton, *The Other Civil War: American Women in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1984), 192.

93. Alice Rossi, ed., *The Feminist Papers: From Adams to De Beauvoir* (New York: Bantam, 1971), 566-572; Jean E. Friedman and William S. G. Shade, eds., *Our American Sisters: Women in American Life and Thought* (Lexington: D. C. Heath & Co., 1982), 322.

94. Clinton, *The Other Civil War*, 191.

95. *The Nation*. 68 (June 8, 1899): 443.

the old order, suffering from an inability to reconcile her conformist tendencies toward the traditional, domestic role of the Victorian middle-class woman with her desire to transcend the limitations of female experience. Indeed, the characterization of Charlotte Gilman as a “militant madonna” by an auditor at one of her lectures was astute. While promoting radical changes to the female condition in her writings and experimenting with alternative domestic arrangements in her own life, she never denied the differences between the sexes or denigrated the importance of wifehood and motherhood.⁹⁶ Rather, she tried “to reverse traditionally-negative connotations of femininity by emphasizing the virtues of womanhood. . . . Woman’s uniqueness was her strength and glory, her mother-love a countervailing force within the baneful androcentric culture.”⁹⁷

Sociologist Lester Frank Ward provided appropriate ammunition for these beliefs through his gynaeocentric theory.⁹⁸ Gilman claimed that Ward’s gynaeocentric theory was “the greatest single contribution to the world’s thought since evolution.”⁹⁹ In “Our Better Halves,” published in 1888, Ward argued that from an evolutionary perspective the female sex was always primary and the male secondary.¹⁰⁰ Evolutionary study showed that the first male function was simply to enable the female to produce and that the female, the primary source of life, was of superior importance. Though environmental and hereditary forces had combined to temporarily enfeeble the naturally productive inclinations of women, this did not mean that they could not or should not resume their natural role in progress to the future. On the contrary, since women were, by instinct, altruistic, nurturant and cooperative, they were clearly better fitted than males for certain types of leadership in society, because males were inherently aggressive, competitive and destructive. Thus, “fundamental to the evolutionary process was woman’s inherent responsibility (and unique talent) for the preservation of the race, the selection of a mate, and the nurturance of children.”¹⁰¹ Indeed, said Ward, “true science teaches that the elevation of

96. Degler, Introduction. *Women and Economics*, pp. xvii, xxiv; In *The Man-Made World of Our Androcentric Culture*, (New York: Charlton Co., 1911). 114, Gilman attempted to draw a line between the real distinctions of sex and those artificially imposed by society. Games of skill, for example, were inherently masculine—“from the snapped marble of infancy to the flying missile of the bat—the basic masculine impulse to scatter, to disseminate, to destroy, is shown.” “Certain sports,” she continued, “that involve the throwing of a ball will never appeal to women because they are only masculine—not human.”

97. Hill, “Charlotte Perkins Gilman,” 523; Maternalist theory. notes Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 26-28, is built upon the acceptance of biological sex differences as a given and stems from J. J. Bachofen’s highly influential work, *Das Mutterrecht: Eine Untersuchung Über die Gynaikokratie der alten welt nach ihrer religiosen und recht lichen Natur* (Stuttgart, 1861). Bachofen’s work on evolutionism and Darwinian thought strongly influenced Gilman though she assigned a higher significance to the maternal function.

98. William Doyle claims that Gilman’s approach to the woman question was derived essentially from Lester Ward. “Charlotte Perkins Gilman and the Cycle of Feminist Reform” (Ph.D. Diss., University of California, Berkeley 1960), 175,161. Hill believes that the intellectual as well as the experiential bases of Gilman’s views were so rich and varied that Ward should be viewed as only one important influence among them. Hill, *Radical Feminist*, 270.

99. Gilman, *Autobiography*. 187.

100. Lester Frank Ward, “Our better halves,” *Forum* 6 (November, 1888): 266-275.

101. Hill, “Charlotte Perkins Gilman,” 524; see also, Gilman, *The Man-Made World*, for a discussion of women’s place in the evolutionary process.

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woman is the only sure road to the evolution of men.”¹⁰²

In a cornucopia of poetry, fiction and reform tracts,¹⁰³ Gilman developed her general social vision upon Ward’s gynaeocentric theory, and drafted a social blueprint in which the emerging “new woman” would play a leading role. The prototype of this “new woman” was outlined initially in *Women and Economics*. She was “honest, braver, stronger, more healthful and skillful and able and free, more human in all ways.”¹⁰⁴ No less female than the old woman she was wholesome, healthy and physically emancipated, a companion to men rather than a dependent. She remained dedicated, however, to the highest ideals of duty to family, womanhood and social betterment.

In keeping with these beliefs about womanhood and her own personal passion for physical culture, female health, strength, and independence were constantly revisited themes in Gilman’s writings. She believed that central to the promotion of meaningful work for women was their right to pursue health and maintain physical fitness for both their own benefit and the common good. “As human beings they will want human bodies . . . and human bodies need human exercise to develop them.” “Improving the physical condition,” she wrote repeatedly, and “building up a clean and noble body,” were vital factors in social advancement.¹⁰⁵ In “Primal Power,” for example, she urged women to become “full-grown mothers, brave and free” with “splendid bodies, trained and strong.”¹⁰⁶ Then, she noted, they would be able to “gradually rear a new race of men, with minds large enough to see in human beings something besides males and females”¹⁰⁷

Gilman was particularly successful in dramatizing these ideas in her feminist Utopia, *Herland*, first serialized in *The Forerunner* in 1915.¹⁰⁸ The history of *Herland* revealed an evolutionary process where all males were gradually killed off and a female community began to flourish through parthenogenesis (a virgin

102. Ward, “Our Better Halves,” 275.

103. Carl Degler calculates that Gilman published six nonfiction books, a full-length Utopian novel, a volume of poetry, two volumes of fiction, seven volumes of a monthly magazine, *The Forerunner*, the contents of which she wrote entirely by herself; scores of articles, poems and short stories in the popular and scholarly periodicals, and an autobiography published posthumously in 1935. C. N. Degler, “Charlotte Perkins Gilman on the theory and practice of feminism,” *American Quarterly* 8 (Spring 1956): 22, fn. 6; Lane, Introduction to *Herland*, x.

104. In *Women and Economics*, 148-9, Gilman pointed to the popular Gibson girl of the 1890s as her prototype of the new woman; yet as Lois Banner points out, the Gibson girl was only partly a reform figure. She was rarely portrayed in any feminist or reform activity and in many ways her independence did not go much beyond playing sports, wearing natural clothing and looking self-reliant. Possessing a wholesome athletic air that did not smack too much of athletics, she was more a happy combination of the old and new than the personification of the “new woman.” Lois Banner, *American Beauty* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1983), 156-7.

105. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, “Homework and athletics,” *Women’s Journal*, 36 (March 5, 1906): 75; Charlotte Perkins Gilman. “Mending morals by making muscles,” *Saturday Evening Post* (May 19, 1900): 1078; Gilman, *The Man-Made World*.

106. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, “The Primal Power,” *His Religion and Hers* (New York: The Century Co., 1923), 96-91.

107. Gilman, quoted in Glenda Riley, *Inventing the American Woman. A Perspective OR Women’s History 1865 to the Present*, vol. 2 (Arlington Heights, Ill: Harlan Davidson, Inc., 1986). 154.

108. The first truly feminist work in the American Utopian tradition—*Herland* was serialized in the *Forerunner* in 1915 and did not appear in book form until 1979; See Lucy M. Freibert, “World views in Utopian novels by women.” *Journal of Popular Culture* 17 (Summer 1983): 49-60; Charlotte Perkins Gilman. *Herland: A Lost Feminist Utopian Novel* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1979).

birth process which produced only female children). Dedicated to growth through life-giving and nurture, the women of *Herland* concentrated on preserving and improving the quality of life through eugenics and family limitation (one child per mother). "Thus, defects of mind and body are bred out and the family becomes stronger and increasingly more intelligent, innovative, imaginative and physically beautiful."¹⁰⁹

Challenging the assumption that women were weak and in need of male protection, Gilman focussed upon the way female agility could defeat the temptations and advances of masculine exploitation.¹¹⁰ In *Herland*, "each [woman] was in the full bloom of rosy health, erect, serene, standing sure-footed and light as any pugilist . . . athletic, light and powerful." "Fishwives and market women might show similar strength," wrote Gilman, "but it was coarse and heavy."¹¹¹ By contrast, Gilman's Utopian women maintained their strength and agility through lifelong acrobatics and athletic dancing, living that life of freedom and activity for which the author herself had always yearned. In their gymnasias, "there were no spectacular acrobatics, such as only the young can perform, but for all-around development they had a most excellent system." Furthermore, such exercises were only a small part of their physical culture methods. They ran like marathon winners and leaped like deer, raced and played games, climbed trees, swung on ropes. Children were taught to use and control their own bodies. They could swim before they walked and were sure-footed, steady-handed and clear-headed. This stalwart race of tall, strong and healthy women personified human motherhood in full working use, mother-love raised to its highest power. Life to the mothers of *Herland* was growth. Everything was beauty, order, perfect cleanness and the pleasantest sense of home over it all.¹¹²

Here, then, was Gilman's view of the fruition of Lester Frank Ward's gynaeocentric theory of evolutionary progress, a world of women experiencing the meaningful work, economic independence and equal human love that Gilman believed was so necessary to full health. "We had expected hysteria," said the three male visitors to *Herland*, and instead "found a standard of health and vigor [and] a calmness of temper. . . ."¹¹³

Since literary Utopias depict the state-of-mind or ideals desired by their authors, reading them helps obtain a sense of history-as-experienced that statistics or political documents cannot provide.¹¹⁴ Gilman's feminist Utopian novel *Herland* was less a social blueprint than the demonstration of a set of

109. Friebert, "World Views in Utopian Novels," 51.

110. Christopher P. Wilson, "Charlotte Perkins Gilman's steady burghers: the terrain of Herland," *Women's Studies*, 12 (Fall 1986): 271.

111. Theoretically, notes Hill, Gilman was an egalitarian, though in fact she was typically middle-class; condescending, elitist and often racist, viewing immigrants as coarse and culturally and racially inferior. Hill, *Radical Feminist*, 172-3.

112. Gilman, *Herland*, 19, 22, 30, 32, 66, 107, 128.

113. Gilman, *Herland*, 114.

114. Frank E. Manuel and Fritzie P. Manuel, *Utopian Thought in the Western World* (Cambridge: Belknap/Harvard, 1982), 23-24. See also Carol Farley Kessler, ed., *Daring to Dream: Utopian Stories by United States Women, 1836-1919* (Boston: Pandora Press, 1984).

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values and experiences which she considered superior to those allowed in a patriarchal society. The female citizens of *Herland* were not restricted physically or mentally. They transcended the traditional female limitations and were in full control of their lives. They were “free from the rape of their minds as well as their bodies,” and their female only society was engaged in a continual growth.¹¹⁵ Herlanders were healthy women in a healthy society.

For Gilman, the calm healthfulness of the feminist Utopia *Herland*, with “the best kind of people . . . [kept] . . . at their best and growing better,” stood in sharp contrast to her earlier description of enforced passivity and female mental disintegration in “The Yellow Wallpaper.”¹¹⁶ Her feminist Utopia offered turn-of-the-century women an alternative model of female puberty and growth which directed the girl into a full and free adulthood, not the constraining world of “The Yellow Wallpaper” which maintained the woman in a child-like state.¹¹⁷

During the decades which separated her writing of these vastly different portrayals of female real and potential experience Gilman, by frequently confronting her life through resolutions achieved in her work, attempted to experience her own sense of personal transformation and growth.¹¹⁸ The emphasis upon physical mobility in all of Gilman’s fiction was a direct comment on the barriers blocking women from physical mobility in the real world. “Whosoever lives always in a small dark place,” she warned, and “is always guarded, directed and restrained, will become inevitably narrowed and weakened by it.”¹¹⁹ Thus, the desire to transcend these limitations of female experience was as evident in her lifestyle as in her writings, and her interest in physical fitness as a means to gain personal autonomy remained with her throughout her life.

Gilman’s inspiration came largely from her efforts to transform personal contradictions and difficulties into legitimate insights on social problems (and the institutions and ideologies that caused them). Bridging the gap from personal experience to social understanding, her experiences of health, illness, physical fitness and perceived confinement found lucid expression in her writings.¹²⁰ An analysis of these writings helps the social historian assess the impact of behavioral expectations on nineteenth century women more successfully than examining role prescriptions in isolation.¹²¹

Gilman never regained the vigorous health of her early adult years, however, and despite her persistence in trying to maintain a well-trained physique through sport and exercise, she experienced “grey fogs”—bouts of uncontroll-

115. Carol Pearson, “Coming home: Four feminist Utopians and patriarchal experience,” *Future Females: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Marlene S. Barr (Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1981), 64.

116. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, “With Her in Ourland,” Serialized in *The Forerunner* 7 (1916): 297.

117. Joanna Russ, “Recent Feminist Utopias,” *Future Females*, 80.

118. After her marriage to her cousin George Houghton Gilman. Gilman pursued what Lane calls “that ideal of desirable quality that personified her life and work.” Lane, Introduction to *Herland*, xxii.

119. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Home, Its Work and Influences* (New York: Charlton Co., 1910), 3.

120. Berkin, *Private Women. Public Women*, 152, 165; Banner, *American Beauty*, 206.

121. Norton, “The Paradox of Women’s Sphere,” in Berkin and Norton, *Women of America*, 147; Mary Ellis Gibson, Review of *Charlotte Perkins Gilman: The Making of a Radical Feminist, 1860–1896*, by Mary A. Hill, in *Signs* 6 (Summer 1981): 753–757.

able mental depression-for the rest of her life.¹²² “You must understand,” she told an acquaintance who once commented upon her healthy appearance, that “what ails me is a weak mind in a strong body.” But, said Gilman, her acquaintance did not understand. “They never do,” she added.¹²³ One is left to speculate whether Gilman’s inability to achieve complete wellness was indicative of her difficulties in accepting the views she propounded publicly on women’s emancipation. Gilman’s ambivalence about her own abilities as a mother, for example, pressed her to imagine a Utopian world of socialist mothers where one could learn to be a mother as she had never been taught, and where one could experience giving and receiving the mother-love that she had never experienced or felt competent to give. If, as she so often wrote, female fulfillment came from “human motherhood in full working use,” then she had failed to achieve it. Despite maintaining the physical fitness she believed necessary for an emancipated life, she had not achieved the holistic state of health she considered necessary for true growth.¹²⁴ In her quest for self-possession, she had not become the “new woman” sound in mind and body, but remained in a transitional zone split within herself and torn between the old and the new world.¹²⁵ Physical culture had helped her to survive, to feel happier, more vigorous and in greater control of her body.¹²⁶ It had not, however, been the key to sanity and mental power that William Blaikie had promised his many nineteenth century female readers. Not possessing a strong mind in her healthy body she could never personally inherit Margaret Fuller’s kingdom. Through her literary contributions to feminism, however, she suggested to future generations of women that an integrated self was attainable.

122. Degler, Introduction, *Women and Economics*.

123. Gilman. *Autobiography*, 104.

124. Gilman. *Herland*, 66; “Growth,” she re-iterated in *The Man-Made World*. “is the eternal law,” 258.

125. Sarah Slavin Schramm, *Plow Women Rather than Reapers: An Intellectual History of Feminism in the United States* (Metuchen, N.J.: The Scarecrow Press, 1979), 42. For a discussion of how women represent themselves as fragmented and lacking a sense of true autonomy see Emily Martin, *The Woman in the Body. A Cultural Analysis of Reproduction* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987), 194.

126. The heroines in Gilman’s fiction all believed their first line of survival lay in maintaining their health and strength, exercising, studying nutrition and getting fresh air; Lane, *Charlotte Perkins Gilman Reader*. xxxii.