

FEMINIST APPLEPIEVILLE:
ARCHITECTURE AS SOCIAL REFORM IN
CHARLOTTE PERKINS GILMAN'S FICTION

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CHARLOTTE PERKINS GILMANS FICTION

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Introduction

Charlotte Perkins Gilman was reintroduced to the world in the 1970's with the popularization of her feminist short story "The Yellow Wall-Paper."¹ Though Gilman is now best known for a few fictional writings, it was her essays and political ideas that made her perhaps the most well known female intellectual in the early 20th century. Gilman's principle objective was economic independence for women, which could only happen, she argued, by severing the cultural and practical connections between the woman and the home. Such an allowance would require domestic work to be commercialized so that women would be liberated from their domestic duties and take their work to the world: "Science, art, government, education, industry—the home is the cradle of them all, and their grave, if they stay in it. Only as we live, think, feel, and work outside the home, do we become humanly developed, civilized, socialized" (Gilman, *Women* 222). Gilman attributed women's social inferiority to the physical confinement to the house. She believed that, "relieved of the necessity for spending our whole time taking care of ourselves, we shall deliciously launch forward into the much larger pleasure of taking care of one another.... The mind, no longer penned in its weary treadmill of private affairs, will spread into its legitimate area—public affairs" (Gilman, *Home* 344). Women's economic independence, she argued, would liberate both men and women. Women would no longer have to depend on men to eat and could have their own

¹ For scholarship on Gilman and her work see *Charlotte Perkins Gilman: The Making of a Radical Feminist* by Mary A. Hill, *Charlotte Perkins Gilman: Her Progress Toward Utopia with Selected Writings* by Carol Farley Kessler, *To Herland and Beyond: The Life and Works of Charlotte Perkins Gilman* by Ann J. Lane, *Charlotte Perkins Gilman: The Woman and her Work*, ed. By Cheryl L. Meyering, Jill Rudd's *Charlotte Perkins Gilman: Optimist Reformer* and *Charlotte Perkins Gilman* by Gary Scharnhorst. For work specific to her architectural ideas see *Building Domestic Liberty* by Polly Wynn Allen and part 5, "Charlotte Perkins Gilman and her Influence" in *The Grand Domestic Revolution* by Dolores Hayden.

interests and careers. Men would no longer be solely responsible for earning enough money to feed their wives and children as well as any unwed or widowed women in their extended family. For Gilman this was a matter of social evolution. To retard women was to retard humanity.

I will examine the dependence on the architectural designs that Gilman's aspirations would require. Gilman's proposed social transformation could only happen with an absolute physical reformation of domestic architecture and, in turn, the city and rural community. I will, therefore, reconstruct the various contextual shards of history that fed into Gilman's ambitions, both culturally and biographically. Chiefly, I will examine how Gilman's social proposals manifest architecturally as she plays out her philosophies in her fiction. I have organized the stories into three categories: "Entrepreneurial," "City Dwellings" and "Utopian," as the stories in these groups complement one another, revealing her total revolutionary vision.

Architecture can be created in one of three ways: building, drawing, or writing. The latter is the medium through which Gilman relayed her proposed architecture, with the exception of one or two diagrams. Each form of practice has its advantages and drawbacks. Writing, though it is arguably the least precise form of design, allows the author a way to enliven the building in ways that drawings, for instance, cannot. Since architecture is unavailing without inhabitants, writing life into a building is a way not only to understand a piece of architecture more fully but actually realize it. The details of the characters who live in Gilman's buildings vivify the architecture, which in turn enlightens us to the social history of Gilman's era. Studying the Progressivist period of American history, which placed so much trust in the social-healing potential of

architecture, demands examining the architecture, proposed and built. As architectural historian Dell Upton writes, “architecture is an art of social storytelling, a means for shaping American society and culture and for ‘annotating’ social action by creating appropriate settings for it” (11). The “appropriate settings” for Gilman’s proposed social revolution accumulate in the act of reading her stories, allowing us to glean a full picture of the new culture she hoped to form, as well as the kind of life this new architecture would create.

Section 1

Gilman’s Biography and Motivations for World Improvement

Scholars have studied Gilman’s life as much as they have her work—and for good reason. More than just providing an interesting life, the circumstances of her upbringing offer clear motivation for her life-long work to free women from a labor-intensive home. Born into the illustrious Beecher family in 1860 in Hartford, Connecticut, Gilman inherited a legacy of public and social service, especially in writing and preaching. The Beechers shaped much of Gilman’s intellectual life and commitment to “world improvement.” Her great aunts—Harriet Beecher Stowe, the writer and abolitionist; Catharine Beecher, Domestic Scientist; and Isabella Beecher, an ardent suffragist—stood as examples of influential women, teaching Gilman the value of a life dedicated to social good. Though Gilman never adopted a specific denomination, she grew up in the Unitarian church where both her uncle and great-grandfather were preachers. Born as an audience to her uncle’s preaching greatly influenced her own efficacy as a popular

speaker. The familiar environment also allowed her a pulpit, literally, from which she would later preach her own message. Proud of her Beecher heritage, Gilman referenced it often and intended to continue the progressive associations attached to the name.

Gilman grew up in constant contact with her aunts and uncles. Her father abandoned her mother, brother, and herself when she was two and ever after her mother was dependent on the Beecher family for support, living with them on and off through her childhood. The family moved eighteen times in nineteen years, though by the time Gilman was thirteen they remained mostly in Providence, Rhode Island. Life with her mother allowed her to witness the fate of a middle-class divorced mother in mid-nineteenth century society where there were few recourses for a single mother but to depend upon the charity of relatives.

The conditions of Gilman's childhood shaped her political ideas. Her own unhappy experiences as wife and mother at the age of twenty-four provoked her to break with Victorian expectations and lead a professional life as a writer and lecturer—an “optimist reformer,” as she was dubbed. In 1878, at age eighteen, Gilman attended the newly opened Rhode Island School of Design, and for five years afterwards worked as an illustrator, card designer, and teacher. During this time she helped open a gymnasium in Providence, and through that experience, shared close friendships with a number of women. In 1882 she met Walter Stetson, a bohemian painter, to whom she would eventually and regretfully marry. With her many reservations about marriage, an institution which seemed to Gilman to be a prison sentence for the Victorian woman, it required two years of Stetson's persistence for Gilman to agree. She capitulated with the hope that a woman could have both a family life and an influential commitment to

society, a commitment she found critical to a meaningful life. In this case her fears took form. After one week of marriage she “suggested [Stetson] pay her for her housekeeping services” (Kessler 21). After two months of marriage she became pregnant with her daughter Katharine and became severely depressed. She was temporarily “cured” by a long visit to a friend in California, but upon her return to Providence and her domestic life the depression returned. At a loss, Stetson brought Gilman to Philadelphia to see Dr. Weir Mitchell, the foremost authority on nervous disorders at the time, who treated her neurasthenia with a “rest cure.”² Forbidden to pick up a pen or do anything beyond her domestic duties, her depression worsened. Seeing no other solution, she and Stetson divorced, split custody of Katharine, and in 1887 she set out for California with a friend.

Gilman responded to her grief with great productivity. In the years between 1890 and 1895 she began her work as a reform writer, involving herself in numerous women’s groups and publications. She started by co-editing *Impress*, the magazine for the Pacific Coast Women’s Press Association, with her mentor, Helen Campbell, who had helped to found the National Household Economics Association in 1893. She joined six women’s groups, which introduced her to people with similar ideas. Gilman became particularly involved in Nationalism, a movement dedicated to realizing Edward Bellamy’s socialist ideals, and began writing for their publications. Her writings were so successful that in 1895 she set out on a lecture series for a great range of audiences: the general public in such places as Union Square in New York and Hyde Park in London; women’s clubs;

² Gilman based “The Yellow Wall-Paper” on this miserable experience. Upon reading her story, Dr. Mitchell is said to have stopped prescribing the rest cure, to Gilman’s satisfaction. (Hill, 147-154). For scholarship on “The Yellow Wall-Paper” see Catherinie J. Golden’s *Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s The Yellow Wall-Paper: A Sourcebook and Critical Edition*, and *Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wall-Paper” and the history of its publication and reception: a critical edition and documentary casebook* by Julie Bates Dock, compiler and editor.

socialist groups, and international conferences where she was often the guest speaker. The publication of her book *Women and Economics* in 1898 served as a culmination of her theories on women and social evolution to that point. The message of the book, with its very careful logic and use of evolutionary theory, carried the pith of her life-long argument: for society to evolve, women needed economic independence from men. The book was wildly popular and was the apex of Gilman's career. It was reprinted in seven editions, translated into seven languages and made her internationally famous. Well established as a leading socialist, feminist, and ethicist, among other disciplines, she was able to spend the rest of her life working for herself. Her work led to associations with other leading intellectuals and reformers, including Jane Addams, HG Wells, George Bernard Shaw and William Dean Howells. She published her own monthly, thirty-page journal, *The Forerunner*, from 1909 to 1916 in which she wrote every piece. Each issue contained a story, at least two poems, various essays, book reviews, a piece of non-fiction, and at times a section of a serialized novel. She started the journal once she began producing more than she could place in other publications. Part of the problem, it seemed, was her work was too radical for many publications. Rather than compromise and tone down her call for reform, she created her own platform to disperse her ideas. Gilman funded the publication of her journal largely through the proceeds from her lectures. She stopped publishing *The Forerunner* when she "had printed what she was compelled to say" (Kessler 37). The politics of the oncoming war also seemed to have had an effect on her decision to stop publishing her magazine. Her "outspoken condemnation of Germany" created a schism between her and her admirers who had appreciated her previous calls for unity and human progress (Kessler 37). In all, she

wrote 12 books on various theories of social reform, 186 stories, 490 poems, five plays, and 1,490 articles and essays (Scharnhorst 1-189). She was a frequent contributor to major newspapers and magazines across the country. Her lectures brought her to England, Holland, Germany, Austria, Hungary, and across the US.

Gilman remarried ten years after her divorce from Stetson to her cousin Houghton Gilman and lived in New York for twenty-two years. Gilman stuck to her pledge to never keep house, and with Houghton's full support, concentrated on her work. In 1922 they moved to Connecticut. Gilman continued to lecture but her prolific writing pace slowed. Her last work, an angry murder mystery, *The Crux*, 1929, was never published. By 1930 all of her work was out of print. Houghton died in 1934. The next year Gilman, having been diagnosed with terminal breast cancer, killed herself with chloroform. "I have preferred chloroform to cancer," her note read (Kessler, 38).

An Architecture for an Egalitarian Society

Gilman had very specific ideas about how to realize women's economic independence, several of which involved architecture, and which radically challenged the basis of American society. Like many Progressivists and material feminists, she had great faith in the social power of architecture, the built environment, and believed that by reorganizing our space we would in turn be reorganizing our society.

Thus, one thing was clear to her: the kitchen would need to be removed from the house. Because of this, houses would either need to be clustered around a common, socialized kitchen, or in the case of the city, apartment buildings would be equipped with a kitchen in the basement attached to dumbwaiters or "food elevators" so that

professional cooks could send meals right to one's own apartment. As well, there would be a communal dining room so when people felt social they could eat with others.

Gilman thought the need for family intimacy at mealtimes might slowly fade away with the adaptation of a central eating area: "Meals could of course be served in the house as long as desired but, when people become accustomed to pure, clean homes, where no steaming industry is carried on, they will gradually prefer to go to their food instead of having it brought to them. It is a perfectly natural process, and a healthful one, to go to one's food" (*Women* 244), a prophecy that has proved only partially correct.

Besides changing the design of the house, severing women from domestic work would require entrepreneurship and good business. Not only would the work of the kitchen need to be commercialized, but so would baby care, education, laundry, and cleaning. Gilman was clear about this:

the demand for such provision is increasing daily, and must soon be met, not by a boarding-house or a lodging-house, a hotel, a restaurant, or any makeshift patching together of these; but a permanent provision for the needs of women and children, of family privacy with collective advantage. This must be offered on a business basis to prove a substantial business success; and it will so prove, for it is a growing social need. (*Women* 242)

The need for the professionalization of this work furthered the urgency of her vision: being a woman did not necessarily make one a good teacher; there was a difference between the love a mother should give and the teaching she was expected to perform. Having millions of untrained mother-teachers responsible for a generation of children who would be the future of the country was a risky and imprudent move. Well-trained, talented individuals should be put in charge of such a monumental responsibility. Gilman writes in *The Home* (1903), "[the child]... wants the care of a trained highly qualified teacher, and the amateur mama cannot give it to him. Motherhood is a common

possession of every female creature; a joy, a pride, a nobly useful function. Teacherhood is a profession, a specialized social function, no more common to mothers than to fathers, maids, or bachelors” (328). While domestic laundry and cleaning had fewer social detriments than leaving the raising of children to those not trained for it, the professionalization of these jobs would both liberate the woman from her household duties and provide jobs for the appropriately skilled worker: “This is the true line of advance; making a legitimate human business of housework; having it done by experts instead of by amateurs; making it a particular social industry instead of a general feminine function” (Gilman, “Why Cooperative” 245). So long as these chores remained wifely duties rather than a job for a paid professional unassociated with the household, women would remain scullery maids.

These separate businesses would likewise require their own centralized spaces, and would thus necessitate a rethinking of the general organization and formation of a community. For the suburbs all services, like the kitchen, the launderette, child services, and common spaces, would need to be clustered in a hub, not unlike Ebenezer Howard’s *Garden City*³ [Fig. 1]. She wrote, “in suburban homes [efficiency] could be accomplished much better by a grouping of adjacent houses, each distinct and having its own yard, but all kitchenless, and connected by covered ways with the eating-house” (*Women* 243).

³ Ebenezer Howard’s *Garden City* (1898) was the prototype of a new kind of suburb, one that allowed access to the city but also a living space in clean, green country. While separation from the city was not Gilman’s interest, she clearly borrows the form of the widely publicized plan, which allows for centralized services.

they were 40 (thus requiring a farmer to collect three wives to make it through his life). Gilman figured that if this design could not decrease the work, it could at least decrease the waste of individual farms scattered across the land, and allow for some companionship amongst the lonely farm wives. She says of the farms,

Each one is forced to be a self supporting unit like an island.... It must have a wood-lot, to furnish fuel; a pasture for the cattle, enough meadow land to give hay for winter feed, and enough to raise whatever the farmer sells to buy the other necessities of life. Any efficiency expert, applying the rudiments of this science to this economic problem, would utterly condemn it. (394)

Using the farmer as an example of the inefficiency of domestic industry, Gilman could put the problem of the individual household's work into relief. Since her audience was primarily the urban middle-class, the illustration of the farm would allow an abstracted version of the same problem facing all households, albeit an exaggerated one. In her plans, Gilman always considered the social space. Along with the church, the school, municipal buildings, and stores, Gilman made room for playgrounds, a pool, and most importantly (and centrally) a bandstand for entertainment and a platform for lecturers like herself.

However, Gilman's main concern, and primary intent, was a transformation of the city along lines that would improve the lives of women. Because of the density in both population and buildings, professional domestic services could perform widespread business, make a profit, reduce redundant work and machines, and liberate many more women from domestic work. Creating such services in a city would affect the greatest number of people, and therefore make both the businesses viable and the lifestyle normal, eventually. The content of the city block, the apartment building, and the idea of home would all change.

Though Gilman never actually drew architectural plans, (schematic designs such as the one for Applegateville were the most specific she offered in drawing) she outlined the particulars of her buildings and towns in her writing and her lectures. Gilman's visions usually included the same elements: a city block as one complex containing approximately four buildings (or one large one) with a center court. For housing, there were eight to twelve stories of private family apartments (without kitchens), apartments for single women, ("two rooms and a bath," she declared were all that was necessary, unless you were a writer or a painter and needed a studio, in which case you would have a third room ["Two" 76]), and single rooms like a boarding house. All food was prepared in the central kitchen in the basement and served either in the great dining hall or sent up in food elevators. Nursery school, pre-school and primary school were all housed in the complex, normally on the top levels and connected to the roof where there was a baby garden. There was much entertainment and recreation space: a gymnasium in the basement, often a pool or bowling alley, walkways on which to promenade (bridges connected the separate buildings' roofs). On the main floor were card rooms, reading rooms, lounging rooms, lecture halls and dancing rooms. The building was equipped with the highest standards in technology and hygiene⁴, with central heating, electric lighting and a launderette in the basement. Such facilities could serve functions beyond the building; until every building had its own communal commercialized services, these kitchens and laundrettes could take external orders and make a profit. Gilman's

⁴ With the acceptance of germ theory by 1890, communities issued a widespread public health campaign to educate the masses. The Victorian style had to be overturned. Out went the carpets, the drapery, the cornices, and anything else upon which dust could collect. The architectural improvements included better ventilation and foundations, simplified moldings, larger and a great number of windows, sleeping porches, and most importantly, bathrooms—white—surfaced in porcelain so as to be easily washed (Wright, *Moralism*, 118-120).

apartment fantasy was thus able to address a multitude of concerns: public common space for socializing; private apartments for each family to allow for solitude; a range of apartment sizes to accommodate women in different stages of life (such a building would allow a woman to be something other than a wife or daughter). Further, the central kitchen relieved every person from the time required to plan and make meals; the spaces dedicated to educating children freed the women from living as teachers should they have other interests, and benefited the children by giving them the best of educations; the gymnasium, pool, bowling alley, and dance room addressed the societal concern with good fitness; and lecture halls and reading rooms fostered the active mind. In Gilman's apartment all human needs were addressed.

To be clear, the notion of rearranging living space to affect social change was not an idea original to Gilman. Numerous Progressivists considered architecture an approachable subject, particularly the Material Feminists. In *Building the Dream* Gwendolyn Wright explains: "In the early twentieth century, many different groups were campaigning for what they called a progressive approach to house design and upkeep... a broadly based popular interest in domestic architecture was, in large part, responsible for the sudden transformation in residential environments for middle-class Americans" (161). And indeed with all the changes in the home in the 19th century—the transformation from space shared with work to a space staged for the "Cult of Domesticity"⁵—domestic

⁵ A far-reaching effect of the industrial revolution was to pull the work from the home where it had been shared between the husband and wife, though still gendered, (see Ruth Schwartz Cowan's *More Work for Mother* for a breakdown by gender of the tasks) to a place outside the home, usually in the city. The suburban home was thus designed (proscribed, even, with a great deal of propaganda) as an antidote to all that the city represented: chiefly, the masculine public world, filth, and chaos. See Gwendolyn Wright's "Victorian Suburbs and the Cult of Domesticity" in *Building the Dream* and chapter 2 of *The Columbia Guide to American Women in the 19th Century*, "Economy, Households, and Labor" edited by Catherine Clinton and

architecture seemed quite malleable. The design of architecture became an approachable subject; one need not be an architect to conceive of and employ a change of space. With the influence of the domestic scientists “women were encouraged to learn to draw floor plans and to judge the quality of plumbing systems so that they would be able to choose well for their own families and influence the course of residential architecture” (Wright 161). Gilman adopted the idea of the kitchenless houses from Bellamy’s 1888 *Looking Backward*, the story of an enlightened socialist civilization in the future. Gilman’s distinct contribution, however, was to link kitchenless homes to economic independence for women.

The most difficult work for Gilman was to persuade society of the acceptability and ethical necessity of her plan; for Gilman, this change in the home was moral, profitable, and natural. However, Gilman’s suggestions were directed at the change in women’s roles, a role that had allowed society to work as it did. The changes she was suggesting were nothing less than the eradication of the Christian and economic family unit.

Reactionaries and the Home

Gilman was up against an effect of the Industrial Revolution: the division of home and work. For the middle-class, Gilman’s focus, the husband left the house for work while the wife stayed home and managed the household and the children. Fifty years of this separation of the home and work had not only exacerbated the division of tasks by

Christine A. Lunardini. Dell Upton suggests that the idea of the free-standing woman’s sphere home for middle and upper middle-class white protestants has been over-emphasized, and believes the following texts round out the picture of the era: *The Christian Home in Victorian America 1840-1900* by Colleen McDannell and Elizabeth Blackmar’s *Manhattan for Rent, 1785-1850*.

gender, but established the home as the women's sphere. For men, it was a place of respite, the place to come home to after work. For women the home was a perpetual work site.

The domestic science movement, spearheaded by Gilman's own aunts Harriet Beecher Stowe and Catharine Beecher, established the concept of home as women's space. The publication of the Beecher's book *The American Women's Home*⁶ made its way into most good Christian women's homes, instructing them how to master their domestic and Christian duty. The Domestic Science Movement sought to dignify housework by employing industrial efficiency to the work of the home; the work would be as seriously respected as the man's work outside the home, offering an equal counterpart. Thus the kitchen became a laboratory or a factory, and the wife its manager. Because of this expertise (and women's "better capacity for self sacrifice," which, Catharine Beecher argued, "earned" that authority), the home became the woman's domain: the man ruled outside of the home, the woman ruled within it. It was with all of her pride and happiness (along with the sweat and boredom) that she would govern this space. It was her wifely duty and, most especially, her Christian calling. By turning servant labor into a Christian duty, women could feel they were accomplishing more than just drudgery; in fact, they were creating a heaven on earth. This was a "Protestant system" based on the "heaven-devised plan of the family state" (Beecher, "How to" 710). Housekeeping could be God's work.

So while Gilman built upon her aunts' emphasis on efficiency—there seemed nothing more wasteful to her than isolated women doing the same chores inside each

⁶ *The American Women's Home* was published in 1869, but Catharine Beecher alone wrote an earlier and less complete version in 1841, *Treatise on Domestic Economy*.

separate house—she had much work to undo the well-rooted belief that the house was a woman’s sphere, that women had no business working outside of the home, and even more ingrained, according to Leslie Kanés Weisman, a belief in “some long-suspected ‘truths’ that man builds and woman inhabits; that man is outside and woman is inside; that man is public and woman is private; that nature, in both its kindest and its cruelest aspects, is female and culture, the ultimate triumph over nature, is male” (5). This work was a matter of undermining the very conception of women. As with all of her campaigns Gilman persuaded with calmness and logic:

Many fear this movement, and vainly strive to check it. There is no cause for alarm. We are not going to lose our homes nor our families, nor any of the sweetness and happiness that go with them. But we are going to lose our kitchens, as we have lost our laundries and bakeries. The cook-stove will follow the loom and wheel, the wool-carder and shears. (*Women* 267)

Gilman’s tone implies that this change is natural and inevitable, not radical. Such chores—spinning and weaving—used to be women’s work in the home, but as a logical part of capitalism, they were to be specialized and professionalized. She presents her ideas of the home as if it were only a matter of time before “woman” was no longer synonymous with “home.” Without this change in concept, she believed, women would never have the freedom to leave the house and follow their own interests and be productive members of society. But to change the home was to change the woman (and vice versa), and to her changing the home seemed a more tangible and perceptible transformation to make. For Gilman, it was this move, not the suffrage, which was crucial for women’s equality.

By arguing for her theories’ moral attributes, Gilman attempted to reverse the alarmed public reaction to the idea of liberating women and essentially breaking apart

what was considered the Christian home. The promotion of a community-centered life, she argued, was a moral duty, and benefited all women, and thus everyone. Employment would be readily available with the professionalization of domestic work, and thus might engender independence for all adults, male and female.

Despite Gilman's claims that her proposed changes would benefit all, the reactions to her ideas were as extreme as her theories. Domestic economist Miss Winifred S. Gibbs wrote a letter to the editor of *The New York Times* in September of 1907, in response to an article by Gilman in which Gilman explains the necessity for these changes, and accordingly changes in women's education. Miss Gibbs predicts the likely repercussions if Gilman's suggestions are realized, writing, "here follow some of the probable results:

- Increase of infant and child mortality.
- Increase of drunkenness and consequent increase of excesses of all kinds of crime and swelling lists for reformatories and prisons.
- Multiplication of digestive and nervous diseases, which contribute to unhappiness in home life." (8)

However, there were other formidable women's groups that were taking the same moralizing angle as Gilman to defend women's entrée into the public. The Social Reform movement, generally thought to have begun in 1893 at the Chicago's World's Fair with the first meeting of the National Household Economics Association (NHEA)⁷, provided a bridge between the private and public worlds. The group encouraged middle-class

⁷ The National Household Economics Association was established at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893. The organization worked through women's groups on projects focusing on collective laundries, bakeries, kitchens and small-scale poultry and egg raising centers. Related to the "servant problem," they proposed creating "Bureaus of Information" that would provide classes for domestic workers and act as an employment center. Gilman's mentor, Helen Campbell, was involved in the creation of the organization. Campbell and Gilman ran the Chicago chapter for a time (Hayden, *The Grand Domestic Revolution* 186).

women to extend their “housekeeping” to the community. These sorts of moral overtones allowed a small niche for women to be involved in the work of the city, both for pay and voluntarily.

As the opportunity of a life beyond the home, a public life, became an option with the rise in women’s organizations in the 1890s, women were faced with a quandary: on the one hand, the home was the only space where the woman was the authority and manager, a space that she could largely control (this was the accepted perception, anyway). On the other hand, to many it became clear that for women to gain authority and equality on a cultural level it was necessary for them to sever themselves from what was deemed an intrinsic connection to domestic chores. The latter option seemed a risky choice to make. That is, for a woman to disown her traditional space of control to forage into a man’s space was to hazard any agency she did have.

Reacting to her plans of socialized domestic work, some members of Gilman’s audience expressed fear over the loss of privacy of the home. What were the consequences of taking the Victorian home, idealized as a refuge from the chaos of the city, and turning it inside out? If the wife (home) and the work of the home moved outside of the house, would there still be a home? It seemed this private nest would become part of the chaos from which it was meant to insulate. By thrusting housework outside of the home, or, if nothing else, bringing a paid worker inside of the home to do the work, the boundaries of public and private were inevitably blurred; what had been private was now public, and vice versa. Moreover, a wife would unwittingly yield her wifely duties and thus lose control of her domain. Gilman attempted to placate the public on this point, as well. Though she was a socialist and believed in a collective society, she

abhorred communal living, having experienced it as a child, and strongly advocated family privacy.

In fact, for Gilman, the present home was not private enough. She writes, “the progressive individuation of human beings requires a personal home, one room at least for each person.... To women especially, a private room is the luxury of the rich alone” (Gilman, *Women* 258). She argued that home was an “aggregate privacy” rather than an individual privacy, that there was nowhere less private than the home. Gilman suggested that men could achieve a sense of privacy by leaving the home, and so could a woman if she were to join the work force.

Gilman and the late 19th Century Marketplace

Gilman’s designs of a reorganized physical environment invariably required entrepreneurship by women. Her proposed architectural arrangement allowed for new communal industries, and her design for social evolution and women’s equality depended on them. Gilman’s economic ideas were a strange and seemingly contradictory mix of faith in capitalism and the socialist insistence on a collective existence. Though Gilman was an avowed socialist, she worked within the capitalist system to realize her socialist (feminist, and therefore architectural) ideas.

For Gilman, capitalism possessed some appealing qualities. That the vitality of the economic system was based on the individual allowed independence for women from their husbands and theoretically allowed a system for women to navigate their own way. Historian Linda Kerber explains, “as patriarchy eroded, social reality involved unattached individuals, freely negotiating with each other in an expansive market. The patriarch

variant of separate spheres was not congruent with capitalist social relations; capitalism requires that men's and women's economic relations be renegotiated" (21). Gilman's ideas about capitalism were optimistic: if capitalists had good moral intentions they could provide employment, pay the workers well, and use the market to make positive social advances. It was not necessary to exploit workers, she ventured, to make capitalism work. She seemed to align modern freedom with participation in the marketplace. And, indeed, went so far as asserting, "industrial freedom may be a *prerequisite* for political freedom rather than its natural extension" (Van Wienen 614). In an 1893 speech Gilman declared:

We have our religious life.
We have our political life.
We have our industrial life.
In the first two we have made ourselves free, but because we are slaves in
the last we are helpless in all. ("What" 76)

Thus Gilman places industry on the same plane as the state and the church, treating the marketplace with surprising reverence. Moreover, to produce was a natural instinct, she argued. She writes, "we find that production and consumption go hand in hand... Economic production is the natural expression of human energy.... Socially organized human beings tend to produce, as a gland to secrete: it is the essential nature of the relation" (*Women* 116). Historian Mark Van Wienen suggests, however, that for Gilman, "productive labor was any task contributing 'the permanent improvement of the habitable globe'" (611). And while her use of the word "productive" is less economic than creative, she still maintained some faith in the liberating possibilities of the capitalist market. Since "woman, the house-servant, belongs to the lowest grade of unorganized labor" (*Women* 67), even with the downfalls of capitalism, professionalization would

raise them from their current situation. Before they got the vote in 1920, women were more likely to enact social change through the market, rather than legislation.⁸ As the great consumers, women logically had more power in the economy than in Congress. But most importantly, entrepreneurship allowed women to be the employers, professionalize domestic work (thereby contributing to the grand transformation), and earn an income. With professional kitchens, laundrettes, and child-care, work that was once demeaning became a career, giving women wages and thus some dignity in their work.

In some sense it seemed Gilman proposed to use capitalism for socialist (which for her included feminist) enterprises. After all, though present day scholars align her with the feminists of her age, most of her social and political associations were with various socialist groups. She explains: “my socialism was of the early humanitarian kind, based on the first exponents, French and English, with the American enthusiasm of Bellamy” (Hayden, *Grand* 187). Her designs and attached enterprises were meant to create a collective society, to forward socialism. She argued “that the development of socialized domestic work and new domestic environments should be seen as promoting the evolution of socialism, rather than following it” (Hayden, *Grand* 184). For Gilman there appeared no contradiction in the idea of using the individualist economy to promote a collective one, or, in essence, using capitalism to create socialism.

⁸ A laissez-faire economy would, in theory, allow women to change the social structure by participating in the marketplace. The Neoclassical school of Economics offered a model that would seemingly permit women to gain independence through the growth of the market. The model used human behavior as a factor, declaring that people’s instincts are highly rational and self interested. The model “is concerned with human values, the nature of the person, the distribution of wealth, income, and power, and the well-being of those who are not able to fully participate in economic affairs” (O’Boyle). However, Alfred Marshall, whose textbook *Principles of Economics* was published in 1890 and steered mainstream economic thought for the next fifty years, interfered with this system, suggesting that wages for women be kept low so that they would not neglect their house duties (Folbre 365).

Section 2

Gilman's Fiction

Because her vision was so radical, Gilman's activism required much persuasion. She confronted the public through various media, including lecturing; writing theoretical essays, short stories, utopian novels, mysteries, and poetry; drawing political cartoons; and participating in and running numerous political and women's clubs. And she was persuasive. In *The Grand Domestic Revolution* Dolores Hayden describes Gilman's "light, penetrating voice" and infective speaking style: "Although her eyes flashed with anger or indignation when she spoke of women's oppression, she could quickly change pace, joking, prodding, ridiculing traditionalists who romanticized the Victorian home and woman's place within it" (183). Her books philosophizing and theorizing about the situation of women in society included *Women and Economics* (1898) which was translated into seven languages; *The Home: its Work and its Influence* (1903) and *The Man Made World or Our Androcentric Culture* (1911). These books, along with her lectures, were what gained her wide popularity and respect. Her rhetoric was intellectual, meditative, and reasoned; she presented problems in a dialectic manner, asking and answering questions on both sides of the argument to explicate and defend her ideas down to the last detail. She explained her theories about the necessary future of women taking a public role in society to make it seem that no intelligent reader could disagree with her. The inevitability of the change was just a matter of logic, evolution and economic prudence.

Without her fiction, however, her essays and articles would be not nearly as effective as they were. Contrary to the strict logic she used in her theoretical work, with her stories she can weave in her social proposals to the every day context, and allow the illogical thinking of prejudice to live out in the antagonists, in demonstration, to show the dangers of their ideas and how their reactive thinking could be overcome. Examining her fiction is important for this very reason: they reveal not only the imaginings she had from the banal to the wild, but as well, the social objections she was up against.

Gilman used her stories very practically. At one level, she used stories to simply realize what is impossible without the great amount of money necessary to make architecture. With fiction we can live in the buildings, the blocks, the cities, and the communities that she proposed. On another level, for her, fiction was simply another medium through which she could spread her word. She said quite plainly of her first story, "The Yellow Wall-Paper," "I wrote it to preach. If it is literature, that just happened" (Black 39). The success of "The Yellow Wall-Paper," her first published story, encouraged Gilman to continue writing stories, not just for the money, as she was known to claim, but to push her architectural vision into something that a reader could visualize, that seemed almost palpable. Activist and historian Polly Wynn Allen suggests, "Gilman located her story's characters squarely in the familiar flux of history where decision and actions were always conditioned by the necessities of space and time. Here no one gives any thought to the abstract normative considerations discussed in her formal ethics" (162). Yet, I would argue it is absolutely on the contrary. Gilman does let her "formal ethics" slip in, if not frame her stories entirely. Gilman used her stories as instruction manuals for her theories. Using every situation in a white middle-class

woman's life she could think of, she played out the problems and gave step-by-step directions, as examples, to ameliorate the difficult circumstances.

Gilman's stories are (amusingly) formulaic: frequently the protagonist is a young woman, disenfranchised by her position as either a young wife or a working girl trying to make a living, when an older, wiser, and usually wealthy woman enters the picture and together they devise a plan that often involves a commercialized domestic service in a rented building. The inclusion of this older, wiser, wealthy, firecracker of a woman has conflicting implications. On the one hand, it would communicate that a woman needs help in achieving the changes that Gilman suggests that young women make. On the other hand, Gilman includes women of all ages in the revolution; no one is too old or too poor to have an effect on society. The idea, however, that every woman has tucked away a wealthy, single, older irreverent woman with nothing to do but stir up the status quo undermines Gilman's picture of the independent young woman who endeavors a new social program by sheer discipline and good sense. Such a plot surprise, a *deus ex machina*, undercuts her agenda by, in the end, attributing the progress a character makes to good luck.

The subjects and plots of her stories were very carefully considered. With women in a new role in society, living in a capacity that was more than just a function of a man, literature would require revised narrative conflicts. In *The Man-Made World* Gilman addresses the importance of this revisioning. She writes, since "the makers of books are the makers of thoughts and feelings," (101) and because "fiction is the most popular form in which this world food is taken" (101) society would need new literary realizations of women to truly digest the revised role of women. For Gilman it is not enough to propose

or discuss these changes, or even attempt to revolt by example; we need the realism of fiction to believe. Gilman proclaimed we: “teach not by preaching but by truly representing” (101). She even went so far as to invent new narrative conflicts and to delineate them in *The Man Made World*:

the humanizing of woman itself opens five distinctly fresh fields of fiction: First, the position of the young woman who is called upon to give up her “career” —her humanness— for marriage, and who objects to it. Second, the middle-aged woman who at last discovers that her discontent is social starvation—that it is not more love that she wants, but more business of life: Third, the inter-relation of women with women—a thing we could never write about before because we never had it before: except in harems and convents: Fourth, the interaction between mothers and children; this not the eternal “mother and child,” wherein the child is always a baby, but the long drama of personal relationship; the love and hope, the patience and power, the lasting joy and triumph, the slow eating disappointment which must never be owned to a living soul—here are grounds for novels that a millions mothers and many million children would eagerly read: Fifth, the new attitude of the full-grown woman, who faces the demands of love with the high standards of conscious motherhood. (105)

These proposed literary conflicts render a new consequential woman. No man is required to make these protagonists relevant. With these new conventions, Gilman gives value to women’s lives at any age and to their relations with other women.

Thus even in her own time Gilman was writing outside the conventional form. As with all her theories, she asks her audience to be open minded. Likewise, readers nowadays should consider it not for its traditional literary qualities, but because of the history of ideas it teaches. In this vein, Jane Tompkins suggests in *Sensational Designs* that we cannot examine sensationalist and “domestic fiction” of the 19th century through the same lens as we might a contemporary piece of literature. Instead we should understand them “as attempts to redefine the social order” (xi). We should value writings not “because they manage to escape the limitations of their particular time and place, but

because they offer powerful examples of the way a culture thinks about itself, articulating and proposing solutions for the problems that shape a particular historical moment” (xi). Further, she suggests that the marks of bad literature in modern stories can make for effective stories when it strives to be something other than art: “While [these books] violate what seems to be self-evident norms of probability and formal economy, [they] serve as a means of stating and proposing solutions for social and political predicaments” (xvii). Tompkins revalues literary deficiencies such as stereotypes, suggesting that “they convey enormous amounts of cultural information in an extremely condensed form.... As the telegraphic expression of complex clusters of value, stereotyped characters are *essential* to popularly successful narrative” (xvi). It is perhaps because of these “literary flaws” that few scholars have studied Gilman’s fiction—save “The Yellow Wall-Paper.” However, through a cultural lens, her stories are critical to understanding the social structure that Gilman builds. In this case the stories are also particularly informative about her era’s faith in the transformative abilities of a new architecture, an altered space.

Entrepreneurial Stories—“Making a Change” & *What Diantha Did*

The stories that I will categorize as “entrepreneurial,” or economically oriented, are particularly instructive. Gilman’s plans for women’s economic independence included young women business owners and an architecture that would house their reforms. Normally, the young entrepreneur and the new architecture came hand in hand. A number of her stories highlight the entrepreneurial side, with the architecture playing a smaller role. For Gilman’s conceit to come to fruition, a woman needed a good business head, and to be practical, and hard working, characteristics that Gilman prided in herself.

She wrote a number of stories that teach the lessons a young entrepreneur would need to know: how to run these professionalized domestic businesses, how to make a profit, and how to obtain the buildings.

In the short story “Making a Change” (1911) we witness an unhappy and anxious household whose problems are solved by the wife and mother-in-law’s economic independence once the two covertly create a kinder-garden on the roof of their building and the wife gives music lessons. Julia Gordins is the young mother who is run ragged by child caring. She is not a “natural” mother. She has the “musical temperament [that] does not always include patience, nor necessarily, the power of management” (241). Her mother-in-law, who lives with the couple, is a natural nurturer however. But because Julia feels the baby is her sole responsibility and duty in life she cannot relinquish these tasks to another without great shame. To make matters worse, she had to abandon her passion for playing and teaching music when she married so that she could keep house, and as music was her only skilled form of expression, she has become powerless. Her only option, she decides, is to kill herself. Fortunately, the elder Mrs. Gordins sniffs out the scent of gas from behind Julia’s locked bedroom door. Performing a gymnastic feat, she pulls herself through the transom, rescues her daughter-in-law, and decides to take control of their lives and make some grand changes: because of her love of babies, she will start a baby garden on the roof (renting the top flat of the apartment building for bad weather), and take care of her grandchild; Julia will give music lessons as she did before she was married, when she was free and happy; and with their extra income they will hire a professional housekeeper and French cook. The women’s household revisions are kept a secret from Mr. Gordins; it would be too injurious to his pride to have his mother and

wife working, contributing financially to the household—that was his duty. He is forced to rethink his prejudices, however, when a colleague remarks, “‘I shouldn’t think you’d want your wife to be giving music lessons, Frank!’” (245), and he leaves work in a rage to confront her but finds no one home. At the elevator boy’s suggestion, he looks on the roof and finds “his mother, a smiling, cheerful nursemaid, and fifteen happy babies” (245). His mother readily greets him, and after apologies for the secrets, explains their new financial situation: “I rent the upper flat, you see—it is forty dollars a month, same as ours—and pay Celia [the cook] five dollars a week, and pay Dr. Holbrook downstairs the same for looking over my little ones every day.... The mothers pay me three dollars a week each, and don’t have to keep a nursemaid. And I pay ten dollars a week board to Julia, and still have about ten of my own” (246). Julia arrives, and not seeing her husband, exclaims that she has concert tickets for them that evening. There is, of course, a confrontation, a begging of apologies, but with a plea that Mr. Gordins consider how content they had all been lately and that it was no coincidence: “just think, we’re all so happy, and we earn about a hundred dollars a week—all of us together. You see, I have Mother’s ten to add to the house money, and twenty or more of my own!” (246). And thus Frank concedes that he cannot argue with their happiness and that he must “learn to live with it,” “learn to stand it” (246). The story, of course, has a moral: a woman should not despair and endure, but do what gives her happiness, even if it requires stepping outside accepted social parameters.

The story bears distinctive characteristics of Gilman’s activist stories: there is a miserable woman (Julia tries to kill herself); an older, forward-thinking woman who helps her out of her situation with a business proposal (the elder Mrs. Gordins “but cheer

up now—I've got the *loveliest* plan to tell you about! We *are* going to make a change! Listen now!" [244]); other established professional women who are hired with their newly earned money (Dr. Holbrook, the French cook, the day Housekeeper [a new idea; traditionally the hired help lived in the house or apartment]). There is also the adding up of the math, the listing of the specific numbers, the declaration of profit. Finally, there is renewed passion and satisfaction in life and relationships once the changes are made (we can see Julia's "health improve rapidly and steadily, the delicate pink comes back to her cheeks, the soft light to her eyes; and when she made music for him in the evening...[Mr. Gordins] felt as if his days of courtship had come again." Meanwhile "his mother seemed to have taken a new lease on life. She was so cheerful, so brisk, so full of little jokes and stories—as he had known her in his boyhood" [244]). The tales are consistently optimistic; for any domestic, marital, psychological problem a woman might have, Gilman has a solution for her.

Most of Gilman's characters start off in a state of dissatisfied ignorance. The characters possess a certain inability to see the social problems (gendered work, gendered spaces) in front of them because the problems are ubiquitous in their society, and so rationalized. Gilman reminds us, "what we are used to do we do not notice" (*Women* 76). Both the wife and husband are frustrated and strained, but are unable to pinpoint the source since everything is as it should be: "the conditions were so simple, so usual, so inevitable" (240). Life can be uncomplicated if you have perspective, Gilman seems to be saying. The last line of "Making a Change" reads, "and in after years he was heard to remark, 'This being married and bringing up children is as easy as can be—when you

learn how!' (246).” In this iteration of one family’s problems and solutions, the solutions are uncomplicated once a man can see his biases.

In *What Diantha Did* (1909) Gilman seems more disposed to confront the complications that arise from restructuring the family roles and creating businesses that depend on the public. She challenges the common understanding of what and who makes up a functioning society. Gilman published *What Diantha Did* serially throughout the first year of her journal, *The Forerunner*, and it can well be said to be the most specific picture of what Gilman hoped to inspire young women to do. Diantha, in making changes in her life, becomes an outcast in her family and town, loses her fiancé (for a while), and faces the wrath of the powerful town women. As Gilman is willing to depict such possible social consequences, the story offers a more convincing vision of what a young progressive woman would encounter if she were to take up Gilman’s cause than some of her other stories, but teaches, in the end, the new social and town structure is well worth the resistance.

Diantha Bell’s life as a politically involved young woman is tumultuous. She is engaged to a young man, Ross, who suddenly becomes responsible for his mother and three sisters when his father dies; as a consequence, he must give up his passion of science research to take over his father’s in-debt grocery business. Until he can manage to make the business profitable so that he can afford to support both his own family and his new family with Diantha, the two cannot be married. Since Ross does not have a good head for business and his mother and sisters will not be frugal and live in “careless wastefulness” (a damnable trait to Diantha, a “New England-born girl” “trained in all the minutiae of domestic economy” [7]), Diantha decides that she is unwilling to wait the six

or ten years that it might take for Ross to make enough money, and decides to leave town to start a professional domestic service business.

Gilman conjures up every challenge a young woman might face in this situation. Diantha announces to her family that she intends to make money to help liberate Ross though she keeps her specific business plans a secret. Such a move creates a stir in the community and she must manage tremendous resistance. Besides the expected outrage from her family ("Have your plans also allowed for the affection and duty you owe your parents?" "How about common gratitude! How about what you owe to me--for all the care and pains and cost it's been to bring you up?" [14]), she receives visits from various women neighbors, Ross's family, the minister and finally Ross himself, who all make it clear they disapprove. Her reaction to all of these detractors is polite determination. She sets off for southern California to the town of Orchardina that has a good number of wealthy displaced east coasters, seasonal tourists, a "servant problem,"⁹ and is thus a good market for her business. She begins her small revolution working for six months as a domestic worker. During this time she establishes a reputation for herself amongst the women of Orchardina as a competent, efficient, skilled, and intelligent worker. She also scopes out the market, assessing the practical needs of the women; establishes a society for the domestic workers in town; and culls the best workers in town for her enterprise. At the end of her six months Diantha is asked to give a lecture at the Orchardina's "Women's Club for Home and Culture," an invitation she readily accepts.

⁹ The "servant problem" was a problem not for servants, but for their would-be employers. During the later half of the 19th century, the upper classes complained of the increasing inability to find "good help." A number of circumstances contributed to the shortage of domestic workers, but the opening of positions in factories was the main force. Factory work, while not necessarily higher paid, offered workers a community, and once legislation was passed, regulations about working conditions, including a limited number of work hours and minimum wage gave the women stable working conditions. (Martin v).

Here Gilman makes space in her plot to voice her ideas about professionalized domestic work. By having Diantha speak before others, not only can Gilman inject her theories on domestic economy, addressing issues that would otherwise be difficult to slip into the narrative, but she proffers herself a pulpit; it is almost as if Gilman enters the story. Asked to speak about the servant crises, Diantha explains the problem simply: The “girls” are not treated with the respect they would receive in other professions. Because they live in the houses of their employers they cannot be married, and so keep their positions for only a couple years at most, and never achieving competence because of their short engagements. She announces the solution: the professionalization of domestic services. Diantha, like Gilman in her lectures, very logically lays out why Orchardina should embrace these changes rather than find them alarming:

[Diantha] set forth that the term ‘domestic industry’ did not define certain kinds of labor, but a stage of labor; that all labor was originally domestic; but that most kinds had now become social, as with weaving and spinning, for instance, for centuries confined to the home and done by women only; now done in mills by men and women; that this process of socialization has now been taken from the home of almost all the manufactures—as of wine, beer, soap, candles, pickles and other specialties, and part of the laundry work; that the other processes of cleaning are also being socialized, as by the vacuum cleaners, the professional window-washers, rug cleaners, and similar professional workers; and that even in the preparation of food many kinds are now specialized, as by the baker and confectioner. That in service itself we were now able to hire by the hour or day skilled workers necessarily above the level of the ‘general.’ (97)

Thus she proposes the women be day workers only; live elsewhere than their employers’ homes; and limit their workday to ten hours with a two hour break in the afternoon for fresh air and exercise, plus a half an hour for meals. She also proposes that all domestic services should be outsourced to professional domestic workers to give dignity to those professions. Diantha also insists the women were no longer to be called by their first

names, but like other professionals be addressed by Miss So-and-so. Most of all she emphasizes the necessity of emancipating all of the wives held hostage by these so-called duties. Without actually removing these jobs from the home, this reform for both the wives and the domestic workers would fail. If the chores were done in the home they were duties; outside of the home they became services. This shift in space was therefore absolutely necessary.

Gilman tracks the progress of Diantha's successes. One of Diantha's new devotees, a wealthy Mrs. Weatherstone, helps Diantha follow her ambitious plans. Toward her objective, Diantha rents an old boarding house downtown (which she names the Union House), in which the laborers for her domestic worker business will live, an apartment building for modern-day women. On the first floor of the same building she opens a restaurant where she serves mostly lunch (specifically hundreds upon hundreds of Danish sandwiches that become all the rage in Orchardina, and begins the carry-out culture), hiring the workers she had been training in the months prior to the restaurant's opening. At this point, Diantha's mother moves to Orchardina to help Diantha manage the finances, as she is excellent with "figures." The Union House is merely Diantha's first step in transforming the organization of the home. After time and success with this initial enterprise, she opens another boarding house for working women on the other side of town. Next, with Mrs. Weatherstone's investments and encouragement, Diantha opens the "Hot Food Delivery," a commercialized kitchen, involving stainless steel warm food containers and delivery wagons. All of her businesses have solid and stable patronage, which slowly increases as the naysayers see that the family unit does not fall apart with such changes. On the contrary. Diantha's last feat comes when her fiancé, who has

finally earned enough money to marry, comes to Orchardina and expects Diantha to stop her work. After a great quarrel they break up. Weeks later Ross capitulates, they marry, and she continues her work until she becomes internationally famous. Meanwhile she bears a string of six children. In the end Diantha has her happy home and her work, along with a bit of fame.

What Diantha Did follows the pattern of Gilman's fiction. It has the familiar characters. Women in bad situations: Diantha, in limbo waiting for her fiancé to earn money because he supports five women; her mother, tired, bored; Mrs. Porne, the first woman she works for in Orchardina, who had been an architect before she married, but had to give it up to keep house and is thus miserable; the wives in Orchardina who are expected to keep house and nothing more; and most of the domestic workers in Orchardina who are not paid or treated well. Then there are the other traits: the influential, older woman, who is also an investor or "base capitalist," as she calls herself; the substantial profit from investment; and finally, happiness for all, once the progressive and architectural changes are made to the household: "Orchardina basked and prospered; its citizens found their homes happier and less expensive than ever before, and its citizens began to wake up and to do things worth while" (160). Unequivocally life in Orchardina has improved.

In *What Diantha Did*, Gilman employs the elements of storytelling to convert the reader to her theories by allying the reader with the protagonist and her supporters. The reformists in the tale and their supporters are carefully elected and described: Diantha, the iconoclast, is not only wholly successful and intelligent; she is beautiful, repeatedly courted, and in Gilman's highest praise, "practical, level-headed, and using a scientific

approach to most everything” (54). She also acquires the approval of the clergy. For instance, Diantha’s minister from her hometown trusts that Diantha is doing something good, and thus supports her decision to leave. Two ministers also speak approvingly of her ideas at the Women’s Club lecture when most of the established and wealthy women condemn her. One of the ministers later even expresses romantic interest in her until he learns that she is already engaged. Gilman also predictably depicts the reactionary characters as the antagonists, damning them with such statements as “When wealth and aristocracy combine with that common inertia which we dignify as ‘conservatism’ they exert a powerful influence in the great art of sitting still” (88). Thus, Gilman endows the popular young luminary with brains and God’s approval. In this way, Gilman teaches that a good Christian should be progressive rather than reactionary.

What Diantha Did also introduces overtly political and economic ideas as part of Diantha’s enterprises. Gilman’s normal mode was to give the impression that politics were beside point, and presented her ideas as if they were nothing more than practical. To confuse her ideas with politics would degrade their importance; her ideas on the future of women were scientifically logical and consistent with evolutionary theory. Here however, through Diantha, Gilman insists on placing economic value on women’s labor and insists on the right for women workers to organize and demand better treatment. Workers are to enjoy a private life (living outside the workplace where they would not be at the beck and call of their employer), a limit to work hours, and paid overtime. Domestic workers, like other professionals, have a right to an organized society that provides a collegial sense of support as well as a space for socializing. Gilman suggests

that the domestic worker's business was isolating without propinquity to class equals, always subordinate to those by whom she was surrounded.

Beyond insisting for domestic worker's rights, Gilman stresses the overlooked injustice of women's unpaid labor. The idea of placing economic value on women's work is essential to her argument for justifying its professionalization. We see the first glimpse of these political leanings when Diantha tells her father that she intends to leave. Upon the anticipated response that she is ungrateful, Diantha proffers calculations of all that it had cost her parents to raise her in order to reimburse them and thus not feel financially indebted to them. She adds up the food, board, and school supplies. She also includes her mother's labor in making Diantha's clothes. She reads the list aloud: "mother's labor, averaging 20 full days a year at \$2 a day, \$40 a year. For fifteen years, \$600.00. Mother's labor—on one child's, clothes—footing up to \$600.00. It looked strange to see cash value attached to that unfailing source of family comfort and advantage" (17). She also attaches value to woman's labor when she makes up a contract with her first employers in Orchardina. She adds up all that it requires to "keep house," providing an itemized list for Mrs. Porne who then relays it to her husband: "I had no idea food, just the material, cost so little. It's the labor, [Diantha] says, that makes it cost even in the cheapest restaurant" (59). By monetarily assessing domestic labor Gilman both dignifies the work as an economic factor in a household, and makes space for it as a profession and as a business. With a pecuniary value such labor can be sold.

Once Diantha establishes the economic value of domestic labor, it is clear the domestic workers can organize. Diantha insists that with her rules workers earn not only money but group leverage to demand certain lifestyle rights. When negotiating her

contract with Mrs. Porne, Diantha stipulates particular hours and a maximum of ten hours a day with time off during the day for exercise and sun.¹⁰ Diantha's workers followed the same schedule:

[They] were all up at five-thirty or thereabouts, breakfasting at six, and the girls off in time to reach their various places by seven. Their day was from 7 A. M. to 8.30 P. M., with half an hour out, from 11.30 to twelve, for their lunch; and three hours, between 2.20 and 5.30, for their own time, including their tea. Then they worked again from 5.30 to 8.30, on the dinner and the dishes, and then they came home to a pleasant nine o'clock supper, and had all hour to dance or rest before the 10.30 bell for bed time. (136)

Gilman recognizes women, and domestic workers in particular, as a labor group capable of forming unions and negotiating power. In *Women and Economics* she writes "to specialize any form of labor is a step up: to organize it is another step. Specialization and organization are the basis of human progress, the organic methods of social life" (67). Labor organization would firmly establish domestic work as a profession, and thus allow the transformation of the home.

Still, Gilman is quite comfortable with the rights of the entrepreneur. That the businesses were profitable was especially important to demonstrate that these movements were more than just positive social changes; they were good investments. Gilman's

¹⁰ While Gilman accepted Capitalism in many ways, these notions sound reminiscent of Marx in *Capital*: "[Capital] usurps the time for growth, development, and healthy maintenance of the body. It steals the time required for the consumption of fresh air and sunlight. It higgles over a meal-time, incorporating it where possible with the process of production itself, so that food is given to the labourer as to a mere means of production, as coal is supplied to the boiler, grease and oil to the machinery. It reduces the sound sleep needed for the restoration, reparation, refreshment to the bodily powers to just so many hours of torpor as the revival of an organism, absolutely exhausted, renders essential. Hence it is self-evident that the labourer is nothing else, his whole life through, than labour-power, that therefore all his disposable time is by nature and law labour-power, that therefore all his disposable time is by nature and law labour-time, to be devoted to the self-expansion of capital" (265). While Gilman later in life in her autobiography claimed to disagree with Marxist ideas, many of her ideas were clearly aligned with Marx, and evidently influenced by Engels. See Van Wienen.

calculations of the profits from her proposed commercialization of domestic work demonstrated what was to her an absurd pecuniary and labor waste, an argument that would have been well received in the great expanse of the industrial revolution, and especially with women, following the domestic science movement. It was with business and the possibility for profits that Gilman saw an opportunity for women's economic independence.

Gilman uses her stories in this way not only to convince but to instruct, propelling her fiction into another genre, one that would include manuals or pamphlets. Such extra-narrative elements manifest most often in the display of calculations. Gilman lays out specific expenses of each enterprise, like an itemized receipt. Such computations add nothing to the plot line, and are clearly just there to teach. Gilman actually shows the mathematics. For instance, when Mrs. Bell comes to the aid of her daughter to help with her finances, Diantha asks her to separate the cost of the Union House from the other expenses "to show that any group of twenty or thirty girls could do this thing in a city" (145). So Mrs. Bell untangles the Union House finances as such:

Rent of Union House	\$1,500
Rent of furniture	\$ 300
One payment on furniture	\$ 400
Fuel and lights, etc	\$ 352
Service of 5 at \$10 a week each	\$2,600
Food for thirty-seven	\$3,848
Total	<u>\$9,000</u>

The inclusion of information superfluous to the advancing of the story shifts it into another realm, someplace between fiction and essay. In this way, Gilman's stories supplement her essays and vice versa. We see this again, later, when Mrs. Porne is

explaining the costs of the new domestic service arrangements to a conservative, but curious woman in town. She does a similar count:

“We don’t save much in money,” she explained to the eager Mrs. Ree, who hovered, fascinated, over the dangerous topic, “but we do in comfort, I can tell you. You see I had two girls, paid them \$12 a week; now I keep just the one, for \$6. My food and fuel for the four of us (don’t count the babies either time—they remain as before), was all of \$16, often more. That made \$28 a week. Now I pay for three meals a day, delivered, for three of us, \$15 a week—with the nurse’s wages, \$21. Then I pay a laundress one day, \$2, and her two meals, \$.50 a day for six days, \$3, and one maid Sunday, \$.25, \$26.75 in all. So we only make \$1.25.” (151)

When Mrs. Porne explains to Mrs. Ree, “we don’t make much in money,” Gilman is clarifying the priorities of her cause. While the businesses must be solvent, if not somewhat profitable for them to function in a capitalist society, Gilman points out that there are other, more valuable benefits. In the case of Mrs. Porne, the domestic workers she hires and the hot food she orders allow her time to be with her baby and work on her architecture business. The professional services also solve her marital troubles. The food, unlike when Mrs. Porne cooked, is not burnt, which makes her husband happy, and she no longer feels incompetent.

In another story, “Martha’s Mother,” (1910), Gilman offers similar calculations, this time between Martha’s mother, Mrs. Joyce, a bored rural woman good with figures, and Miss Podder, a clever woman trying to organize a boarding house for young working girls in the city:

“Let’s figger it out,” said she. “You say that house rents furnished at \$3,200. It would take a cook and a chambermaid.”

“And a furnace man,” said Miss Podder. “They come to about fifty a year. The cook would be thirty a month, the maid twenty-five, if you got first-class help, and you’d need it.”

“That amounts to \$710 altogether,” stated Mrs. Joyce.

“Fuel and light and such things would be \$200,” Miss Podder estimated, “and I think you ought to allow \$200 more for breakage and extras generally.”

“That’s \$4,310 already,” said Mrs. Joyce.

“Then there’s the food,” Miss Podder went on. “How much do you think it would cost to feed twenty girls, two meals a day, and three Sundays?”

“And three more,” Mrs. Joyce added, “with me, and the help, twenty-three. I could do it for \$2.00 a week apiece.”

“Oh!” said Miss Podder. “*Could* you? At New York prices?”

“See me do it!” said Mrs. Joyce.

“That makes a total expense for \$6,710 a year. Now, what’s that income,

Ma’am?”

The income was clear—if they could get it. Ten girls at \$6.00 and ten at \$7.00 made \$130.00 a week--\$6,760.00 a year.

“There you are!” said Mrs. Joyce triumphantly. “And the ‘mealers’—if my griddle-cakes don’t fetch ‘em I’m mistaken! If I have ten—at \$5.00 a week and clear \$3.00 off ‘em—that’ll be another bit--\$1,560.00 more. Total income \$8,320.00. More’n one thousand clear! Maybe I can fee ‘em a little higher—or charge less.” (3)

Here Gilman makes the financing of business appear fun, simple, and a topic in women’s conversation. Any two women can sit down and figure out an enterprise and have it be amusing to boot. One need not be an expert; she just needs some gumption.

This exercising of entrepreneurship is essential to Gilman’s plans for women’s economic freedom. In her stories women are creating their own economic system—women working for women hiring other women—and finally getting paid for the labor that was attached to their sex.

City Dwelling Stories—“Her Memories” & “Martha’s Mother”

While Gilman was concerned with improving the lives of women in any situation, her main interest lay with middle-class women in the city. Gilman herself lived in cities until her old age, living off the energy and progress that surrounded her. For Gilman the

city held the greatest potential for her vision of a reorganized physical environment and lacked the social inertia of the countryside, due to the isolation of individuals, which held women in their traditional roles. Her plan for centralized services would be more efficient and effective in a city, which by definition is dense in both people and buildings, as more people would have access to the services. Thus she wrote a series of stories situated in the city, which valorize the urban condition and depict the happy family lives and moral working girls inside the kitchen-less apartment buildings. Because apartment buildings were still tainted with the reputation that they “could encourage promiscuous sexuality, female rebelliousness, communistic sentiments, or warped children” and were responsible for “the rising divorce rate, the declining birth rate, [and] premarital sex” (Wright, *Building* 151) Gilman used her fiction to undermine these baseless notions and represent a new type of architecture that would assure her readers that it was possible to live in an apartment building and remain moral.

In one such story, “Martha’s Mother,” (1910), two women’s problems are solved with the establishment of a new young woman-worker’s boarding house in the city; it is the city as much as the women that makes this success possible. Martha Joyce lives in the city working as a stenographer and typewriter, making enough money to live in a tiny apartment in a boarding house with other young women workers. This boarding house, however, is poorly kept up, cold, dreary; and the rooms are all small (Martha’s is nine feet by six feet), there are no social areas, no places to receive visitors, no places for privacy in the public areas (for courting), and the food is bad and overpriced. Because of the lack of public space the girls go out on the town, potentially compromising their reputations. A woman from the Girls’ Trade Union Organization, Mrs. MacAvelly,

encourages a colleague from the organization to start a boarding house for working girls. By some coincidence she has met Martha's mother, Mrs. Joyce, who lives out in the country and is very bored. Mrs. MacAvelly suggests Mrs. Joyce would be a good candidate to run the place, having had experience running a hotel. Everyone thinks this is a perfect idea. Martha's mother is eager for the job and to get out of the countryside. The place is set up quickly after they find an old building. The boarding house is a quick success. The business is profitable, and the food is so delicious that its popularity enables them to get "mealers" for extra income. Martha and her mother even get to share a room. While this story shares elements of Gilman's other stories, in "Martha's Mother" Gilman focuses on the physical space of the building, and how the building offers an improved life to the young women living in it as well as the older woman running it.

Gilman focuses the story on the actual boarding house building, as well as the behavior that it creates. She describes the size of the rooms of both the old boarding house (which is meant to depict the typical situation a young working girl such as Martha finds herself in when living in the city), and the new boarding house that they create. The new building, in contrast to the old, is a superior place, clearly, seeing its popularity and efficiency. "[The building] was one of those once spacious houses, not of "old," but at least of "middle-aged" New York; with large rooms arbitrarily divided into smaller ones" (5). She goes on to describe the amenities that the boarders needed and that the building had: a new furnace, new range, and a large ice-closet, extra ovens, nice furnishings. In the new building,

the smallest rooms were larger than hall bedrooms, the big ones were shared by friends. Martha and her mother had a chamber with two beds and space to spare!

The dining-room was very large, and at night the tables were turned into 'settles' by the wall and the girls could dance to the sound of a hired pianola. So could the 'mealers,' when invited. (5)

It is important that Gilman offer this picture of life in the boarding house to let a scene play out, like theater, before the reader so that it is imaginable. The girls must appear proper to belie the image of the promiscuous working girl. In reality, Gilman shows, these girls have good, clean fun. They eat together and dance, they have a matron watching over them, they observe proper courting rituals in the public parlor, things they did not have in their former residence. The liberated—but moral—life for the young women is dependent on a respectable home. The women gain respect as independent beings if they live in a space that allows their independence in a not necessarily traditional but nevertheless moral, setting.¹¹

That this social organization is in a city is crucial to Gilman's plan. According to Gilman, living in the city was more socially advanced, for it allowed organization, collaboration, and centralization of services. She also placed much emphasis upon the psychic energy gained from living amongst many people. In *Women and Economics* she writes,

On wide western prairies, or anywhere in lonely farm houses, the women of to-day, confined absolutely to this strangling cradle of the race, go mad by scores and hundreds. Our asylums show a greater proportion of insane women among farmers' wives than in any other class. In the cities, where there is less "home life," people seem to stand it better. There are more distractions, the men say, and seek them. There is more excitement, amusement, variety, the women say, and seek them. What is really felt is

¹¹ The morality of young women in the cities was a contested topic in the late nineteenth century America. Young unmarried women were migrating to the cities from rural America at increasing levels at the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth. They came to gain employment, at first in textile mills and garment shops, but by the 1910s they were working as stenographers, typewriters, telephone operators, and assistants in department stores. For history on women in the city see Mona Domosh's *Invented Cities*.

the larger social interests and the pressure of forces newer than those of the home circle. (267)

Gilman displays this country-life ennui in Martha's mother. When a Miss Podder visits Mrs. Joyce in the countryside she comments on the "pleasant" view. Mrs. Joyce responds

"Pleasant! ...Maybe you city folks wouldn't think so much of views if you had nothing else to look at!"

"What would you like to look at?"

"Folks!" said Mrs. Joyce briefly. "Lots of folks! Somethin' doin'."

"You'd like to live in the city?"

"Yes, ma'am—I would so!" (3)

The interaction forced by city living is critical to the necessary exposure Gilman believed women needed to take part in the marketplace, gain skills, and financially and otherwise liberate themselves. Gilman exposes this condition of her fellow woman tethered to the house by work. She writes "her restricted impression, her confinement to the four walls of the home, has done great execution of course, in limiting her ideas, her information, her thought-processes, and power of judgment" (*Women* 65). Gilman emphasizes the simplicity of the idea that the underlying problem women face is the constant confinement to the domestic sphere, this architecture of work, that keeps them from progressing and advancing. Wynn Allen explains, "Gilman was convinced that conventional housing design prevented the development of social ethics" (74). For Gilman there was no gap between spatial reorganization and social reorganization. For women to develop, the house needed to crack open.

"Her Memories" (1912), another short story published in *The Forerunner*, demonstrates this interrelated condition, this faith in a specific architecture in an urban setting to create an egalitarian and productive society. This short piece takes place in a

canoe with a woman and a man, the narrator, who do not seem to know each other well, floating down the Hudson River along Riverside Drive. They pass a cluster of tall buildings called “High Court,” a collection of four apartment buildings, linked by bridges and common services, a Gilmanesque urban utopia. It turns out the woman (we are not given names) lives and grew up in High Court. The man is dubious of how life in a high rise could be pleasant and feel like a home. “Her Memories” is little more than what the title suggests. The content of the story is the woman’s defense as she describes the buildings and the lives in them. There is neither plot nor action. She starts with the basics:

the four roofs together made about 32,000 square feet; each one about 8,000. One was mostly gymnasium; one had a tennis court; one was for roof-suppers and dancing; and one the children’s own—the baby-garden. Daytimes we divided them up, mostly. That allowed—I remember we used to boast of it to visitors—200 square feet per child. It seemed plenty to us. (4)

She continues,

there are twelve stories, and the towers, and the basement. It’s a good high basement—windows above ground, I mean. The machinery and so on is all in the cellar. They used to take classes of us down there—to show things about steam and electricity. About half of the basement—that block is 200’ x 200’—is gymnasium, bowling-alley and swimming pools and baths. Kitchens and storerooms and so on are in the other half.

The ground floor is our dining-room, with the public ones, and big entertainment rooms—for dances and lectures. Then there was a floor of small club-rooms, reading rooms and the like. We used them, and people from the outside rented them—it paid well.

Then nine stories of flats, all sizes, and the top floor; children in one building, the upstairs dancing-room, roof-kitchen in one, and all the house employees. (5)

Though the woman talks about High Court in terms of real estate, listing the square footage and included amenities, the description is significant in the details Gilman includes. Gilman describes the complex as a family and child oriented place—so much

so that the “child” is used as a unit of measurement (“200 sq ft/child”). That High Court is spacious and conducive to child rearing are two elements that apartments purportedly lacked. Gwendolyn Wright explains that due to the small spaces “apartment life continued to be associated with young childless couples, bachelors and working women, widows or widowers, whose space needs were less demanding. ‘The newly wed and the nearly dead’ could contend with the situation more easily” (*Building* 142). Moreover, “imitation of decadent European living patterns did not seem fitting for good American families” (*Advantages* 145). Not so at High Court. With the vast amount of both private and public room there is space enough for good fitness (gymnasium, pool, bowling alley), hygiene (baths), and ventilation and light (basement windows, courtyard, exterior walkways, roof gardens). With high technology (electricity and “machinery”) the building itself is educational for the children, a built-in science class. With the designated social spaces (dining room, entertainment rooms, club rooms, reading rooms) High Court seems like a small town community, simply enclosed in a collection of buildings. And though the building type might be new, Gilman seemed to be saying, the concept is not; this is small town America, traditional as ever (because to free women from domestic housework allowed more family time), stacked on top of itself for efficiency. Part of Gilman’s goal with the fiction was convincing her audience that her values were fundamentally moral, Christian, and American (to which she would add Socialist and Feminist) and could be trusted.

Unlike what Gilman could do in a lecture or article, in this story she uses the effect of emotion. We witness the female character’s nostalgia as she speaks longingly for High Court (“her eyes were wet”), so it is a bit of a surprise in the end to realize that

she still lives there, and has lived there her whole life. She describes the life that this architectural type provides. The narrator comments,

“It sounds so like a big hotel.”

“You’d get over that idea if you lived there,” she explained patiently.

“Now, see. You wake up—your own bed—your own room—your own Mother and father and brothers and sisters in their rooms; you all get up and dress and flock together and the breakfast comes up----“

“Comes up?”

“Yes—of course—what’s cooked comes up on the service elevator, and is set on your table.”

“Hot?”

“Hot as anybody wants it. Besides, we all had out little electric table heaters. Lots of people who had almost no breakfast made it on the table—toast and coffee, you know. Well, so far that’s home, isn’t it—in spite of the ‘up?’ If I said the breakfast came ‘in’ from an adjoining kitchen—what’s the difference?”

I agreed that so far it was home.

“Very well. Then the kids are kissed and sent to the nursery—kindergarten—school; mamma carries the baby and leaves her, rosy and gurgling, in the baby-garden. Mamma goes to her work and papa goes to his work—and home isn’t home for the time being—eh? And by and by they all come back—mamma, papa and the baby—and then it’s home again—isn’t it? Well, then if they go out to the theater, or a dance, or a club, home does not cease to be home, does it? We weren’t any different [only]... most of our pleasure was under the same roof—or on it—and the women had a far better time!” (201)

Gilman uses this deliberate reasoning to coax the skeptical reader of the ability for the city to host a good Christian family. The characters engage in a dialectic argument where the man, the stranger to High Court, asks questions with an incredulous prejudice and then allows the patient woman to explain how his prejudices are unfounded. He asks the questions as a reactionary, giving voice to Gilman’s own doubters, saying such things as, “How could anything be better for a child than its own home—and its own mother?” or “Wasn’t it crowded?” But the woman says such things, as “you’d get over that idea if you lived there” and laughs at him kindly as if he were a little naïve and did not get out much.

By the end of the story the narrator admits “I began to grasp the idea a little better...” and closes the story with “the next time I went by High Court I regarded it with keen and special interest” (201), encouraging the reader to consider it with an open mind, too. It is significant that the narrator, the skeptic, is a man. If the woman in the tale is able to convert the patriarch, the one with the greatest interest in maintaining gendered space, Gilman’s ideas can be realized.

Gilman allows the doubters in her audience room to ruminate, allows their objections to be heard, but expects that by the end of the tale they will have made the same journey as the narrator. The man makes comments suggesting High Court is a bit fantastic: “Look here!...What kind of a—summer resort is that place, anyhow?” and “It sounds more like a casino than a home” (201). Such comments acknowledge the first reaction a person might have to such an ideal community and that this reaction is understandable but needs to be overcome. Families living in such feminist organized cities were the solution to moving society forward to a more egalitarian one.

Utopian Stories—“Beewise” and *Herland*

Though Gilman was mostly concerned with recreating cities, by taking her invented social organization totally out of a familiar context—a utopia, a “nowhere”—she could believably create a revised civilization. In a utopian land she would not have to negotiate troubling inconsistencies in her plan and the existing social and urban system. It is not surprising that Gilman would use utopian fiction to work out her idealized reformed society. Using fiction and architectural designs as a social critique—utopian or dystopian—was common in the 19th century. In the same year that

Bellamy's *Looking Backward*¹² was published, 1888, more than one hundred other utopian novels were published (Jacoby 75). During this time, political groups used projections of utopias to further their cause—and understandably. With the industrial revolution, nearly every person was affected by the shift of work from homes to factories. With technology becoming more advanced and gender relations and responsibilities becoming fuzzy, planning out a better civilization in the middle of social disorder made sense. Most utopian societies were designed outside of the familiar society, often situated someplace isolated. William Morris, for instance, combining ideas from John Ruskin and Karl Marx, created a civilization in *News from Nowhere* where “work is pleasure, individuals are free, and the centuries-old process of rural exodus has been reversed so that the differences between the city and countryside have diminished as the respective populations have leveled out” (245). Like many utopias since the industrial revolution, Morris' was in reaction to the era's products and lifestyle—especially mass production—lamenting the loss of medieval process of craft and the artisan.¹³

Unlike Morris', Gilman's utopian societies are a mixture of the rural and the urban. For Gilman, industrialization was not necessarily a problem; creating a utopia did not necessitate that it exist outside the city. However, to demonstrate the self-sufficient and independent structure of her created societies, she often placed them far from our familiar settings. In her two most specific utopian societies, those from her short novel

¹² In *Looking Backward* the protagonist leaps forward in time to a collectivist, ordered society and then compares his present day Victorian society to it.

¹³ The Arts and Crafts movement, which lasted approximately from 1880-1910, was critical of the process and effects of industrialization and mass production. The group, influenced by the writings of John Ruskin and William Morris, wanted to create products that were useful and beautiful, and hand made by well-paid workers using good quality materials that were affordable to everyone. For more on the movement see *The Arts and Crafts Movement: a Study of its Sources, Ideals and Influence on Design Theory* by Gillian Naylor. For information on Morris, see *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary* by EP Thompson.

Herland and her short story “Beewise,” the communities are remote. Nevertheless, they are intricate and efficient little cities in themselves. Having created the cities and landscapes to conform to her theories of an architecture for feminism, and filtering out any unwanted forces in her lands, she can demonstrate more clearly the link between architecture and the lives lived out in it.

In the story of *Herland*, three American male explorers find a land of parthenogenetic (reproduction without fertilization) women. The plot is quite simple: the men land in Herland on a biplane (it is inaccessible by land) and the women, very gently, capture them, confine them to beautiful, efficient, and comfortable quarters with an up-to-date bathroom and perfectly groomed garden, until the women have learned from them all they can about the outside world and have taught them about their own country. When the women deem them safe, they are allowed to mingle with the rest of the countrywomen. The three men eventually court three women, marry them, and expect the same from their wives as they would in America: the wife is to give up her own interests and occupation, stay in the house and devote herself to her husband. To these women of Herland, the men’s idea of a “home,” being stuck in one building and giving up one’s duty to their larger home (whole land), is inconceivable. When one of the men, the macho character Terry, tries to “master” his wife, he is expelled from the country. The narrator, Vandyk, and his wife Ellador return with him so that she can see America. And this is where the tale ends.

Like most utopian literature, *Herland* (1915), offers an alternative life to the contemporaneous culture and ethos. In *Herland*, Gilman suggests that the environment creates the people. Herland is a country the size of Holland with three million people, the

terrain ranging from the mountains to (almost) the sea. Most impressively, it is an ungendered space. The women have a collective sense of home—that is, one not limited to a built structure but encompassing the entire land, which creates a sense of communal responsibility coupled with a lack of proprietary attitudes, whereas in America, “the... government tends to juxtapose and to fuse male space with public space. Women’s space, by definition, [is] what is left: sleeping enclosures, gardens” (Kerber 31). In a country with only one sex there is no such division. So even though the women have a peripatetic life, traveling to work all of their land, they are always at home.

How the women function every day is familiarly Gilmanesque. Each woman has one or two rooms and a bath. The women have a very high level of hygiene, not to mention privacy: “it seemed to be recognized we should breathe easier if able to free our minds in real seclusion” (124). The eating arrangement is reminiscent of Gilman’s city-life plans of centralized domestic services: “for food we either went to any convenient eating-house, ordered a meal brought in, or took it with us to the woods, always and equally good” (124). With no men in Herland, there is no one to serve. There would be no reason for everyone to have her own house and kitchen.

Gilman presents the women of Herland as exceedingly practical, good-hearted, and always in mind of their babies and how to develop them for future generations. Like a model progressive, Gilman thus aligns goodness with practicality. The women of Herland have their own religion and god; “they develop their central theory of a Loving Power.... Here was a religion which gave to the searching mind a rational basis in life, the concept of an immense Loving Power working steadily out through, toward good. It gave clear, simple, rational directions as to how we should live—and why. Then, being

nothing if not practical, they set their keen and active minds to discover the kind of conduct expected of them” (115). The story is clear: society should function on a well-reasoned system for living. Tradition for tradition’s sake was unconsidered, if not ignorant. With an imaginary society Gilman can create a new value system as well, void of prejudice and androcentric tradition. Once Gilman establishes the women’s goodness and practicality, because the women created their own society, Gilman presents the entire land and culture as indisputably enlightened and superior to Gilman’s reality in America. If society were ruled by goodness and common sense, this is what it would look like.

Gilman’s highly praised values of efficiency and practicality are the real heroes of the story. These women are enlightened, we read, because the land and how they function on it has been planned; there is nothing that has not been thought through. The land itself could not yield more. The forests are pruned and the trees are all producing, food or lumber, impressing the three explorers: “I never saw a forest so petted, even in Germany. Look, there’s not a dead bough—the vines are trained—actually! Food bearing, practically all of them...The rest, splendid hard-wood” (15). Everything is perfect. The explorers, upon first sight, are overwhelmed by all of the cultivation and engineering:

The road was some sort of hard manufactured stuff, sloped slightly to shed rain, with every curve and grade and gutter as perfect as if it were Europe’s best.... They’ve got architects and landscape gardeners in plenty, that’s sure.... Everything was beauty, order, perfect cleanness, and the pleasantest sense of home over it all. As we neared the center of the town the houses stood thicker, ran together as it were, grew into rambling palaces grouped among parks and open squares... (20)

Traditionally gendered occupations are obsolete. The women are civil engineers as well as organizers, planners and nesters. They can make the land function, perfecting a 2% grade to shed water from the street, and can beautify the land equally well. The planning

decisions for their “race” affect the population and the land equally. When the women realize they are nearing maximum population for comfort they decide to “effectually and permanently limit the population in numbers, so that the country furnished plenty for the fullest, richest life for all of them: plenty of everything, including room, air, solitude even” (72), and thereafter each woman would have only one child. The land has to adjust with the women: “That trees were the best food plants, they had early decided, requiring far less labor in tilling the soil, and bearing a larger amount of food for the same ground space; also doing much to preserve and enrich the soil” (80). Moreover, their conciliatory relationship with nature extended to composting: “all the scraps and leavings of their food, plant waste from lumber work or textile industry, all the solid matter from the sewage, properly treated and combined—everything which came from the earth went back to it” (80). For the most efficient use of the land they were all vegetarians and had long since stopped burying their dead, cremating them instead.

By establishing this land of women as socially, environmentally, and morally advanced people Gilman endows them with credibility, and positions them as the arbiters of civilization. Implicit in her descriptions is that Gilman’s America should learn from Herland women and emulate them. Gilman establishes their superiority most pointedly when she reveals the women’s reactions to what they learn about American society. The women’s reactions are horror and shock when they learn about American culture, making it seem uncivilized. Gilman writes: “they were much surprised to learn that we were still burying [the dead]...” (57), with the emphasis on “still,” so that the Americans appear like barbarians. When the vegetarian Herlanders hear about the American meat industry: “they... [look] very white, and presently begged to be excused” (50), as if the women

would be ill if they were to hear anymore. If the superior women disapprove of American culture, Gilman shows, it is for good reason; it is inferior and needs to be improved.¹⁴

The very fact that Herland is genderless, that is there are no masculine or feminine characteristics because there is no contrast without men, and most importantly, no gendered spaces, Gilman can elucidate how the concepts of gender form the environment. The most significant discovery the men make in Herland is an understanding of femininity and masculinity as learned characteristics. The narrator is at first struck by the androgynous nature of the women in both look and character. He writes,

never, anywhere before, had I seen women of precisely this quality. Fishwives and market women might show similar strength, but it was coarse and heavy. These were merely athletic, light, and powerful. College professors, teachers, writers—many women showed similar intelligence but often wore a strained nervous look while these were as calm as cows, for all their evident intellect. (24)

Implicit in this description is that the reason “intelligent” women in America “wore a strained nervous look” is because they live outside their societal roles, living as something other than a wife and mother. That the women the men first encounter are all over forty was striking for the men as well. It is as if only a woman associated with a man could be categorized:

“woman” in the abstract is young, and we assume, charming. As they get older they pass off the stage, somehow, into private ownership mostly, or out of it altogether. But these good ladies were very much on the

¹⁴ The preoccupation in the late nineteenth century with the need for self improvement included adopting vegetarianism. In the 1880s outside of Manchester, England the Bible Christian Church popularized the vegetarian movement. Many of the participants were newly middle-class, as a result of industrialism, and took part in the larger health campaign which sought a pure lifestyle free of alcohol and tobacco. For more on vegetarianism see *The Heretics Feast: a History of Vegetarianism* by Colin Spencer.

stage...Yet they were not old women. Each was in the full bloom of rosy heath, erect, serene, standing sure-footed and light as any pugilist. (22)

Gilman's metaphor of the stage refers to the public space, men's sphere, where women are displayed for courting, then tucked into the home, to the women's sphere. Gender distinction does not exist in Herland. To the men, even in appearance, the women are gender-less. The women "all wore short hair; some few inches at most; some curly, some not; all light and clean and fresh looking" (32). Their clothes, as well, were loose fitting, bedecked with pockets, and appropriate for any occasion, be it climbing trees and doing gymnastics (which they did), or having dinner. These clothes hid their figures somewhat and, to the conservative in the group of men, made them utterly unrecognizable as women.

In his observations of the women of Herland, the narrator, Vandyk, has some revelations about the construction of gender in his own culture. He philosophizes:

With us, women are kept as different as possible and as feminine as possible. We men have our own world, with only men in it; we get tired of our ultra-maleness and turn gladly to the ultra-femaleness. Also, in keeping our women as feminine as possible, we see to it that when we turn to them we find the thing we want always in evidence. Well the atmosphere of this place [Herland] was anything but seductive. The very numbers of these human women, always in human relation, made them anything but alluring.... I see now clearly enough why a certain kind of man, like Sir Almoroth Wright, resents the professional development of women. It gets in the way of the sex idea; it temporarily covers and excludes femininity. (128)

Moreover, he realizes, "...those 'feminine charms' we are so fond of are not feminine at all, but mere reflected masculinity—developed to please us because they had to please us, and in no way essential to the real fulfillment of their great process" (60). Landing in a world that is not divided into men's space and women's space allows the men to witness how this separateness of space creates the kind of women they are used to. Gilman's

underlying point is that to separate women—to keep them segregated in the house, removed from the city and its economy—renders them useless and dependent, mere parasites on society.¹⁵ Linda Kerber notes that “...historians who examined sex roles were likely to link physical separation with social subordination” (“Separate” 31)—a fundamental element to Gilman’s argument. Gilman suggests that if we were to dismantle the gendered culture, we would begin to see happiness, efficiency, better educated children, and an enormous workforce to improve society.

Gilman’s short story “BeeWise” (1913) relates another removed utopian society of (mainly) women that thrives because of its good economics and thoughtful planning of the built environment. One woman, nicknamed “The Manager” by her group of college friends, fortunately enough comes into ten million dollars and decides to start a community with the group of friends with whom she is just graduating from college. (This fortuitous bequest reminds us of limits to Gilman’s plans that often depend upon dumb luck.) Their piece of land, as in *Herland*, stretches from a fertile valley to the sea. Gilman describes the civil engineering the women design:

The first cash outlay of the Manager, after starting the cable line from beach to hill which made the whole growth possible, was to build a reservoir at either end, one of which furnished drinking water and irrigation in the long summer, the other a swimming pool and steady stream of power. The powerhouse in the cañon was supplemented by wind-mills on the heights and tide-mill on the beach, and among them they furnished light, heat, and power—clean, economical electric energy. Later they set up a solar engine which furnished additional force, to minimize labor and add to their producing capacity. (267)

Not only, then, are the two joined communities, Beewise and Herways, the most energy efficient communities to date (still) but they are filled with surely the most diverse and

¹⁵ Gilman often pointed out that “we are the only animal species in which the female depends on the male for food, the only animal species in which the sex-relation is also an economic relation” (*Women* 5).

industrious women in one spot. The products of their industry include preserved fruits “exquisitely prepared, packed in the new fiber cartons which are more sanitary than tin and lighter than glass”; angora goats and their wool from which they export “fluffy blankets, flannels and knitted garments”; cotton and silk from which they weave their own material in their own mills and create “Beewise” gowns and coats (from “year to year the demand...increased”). From their goats and with their tannery they make leather goods, gloves and shoes—shoes “that came to be known at last through the length and breadth of the land—a shoe that fitted the human foot, allowed for free action, and was pleasant to the eye” (268). They also produced hard wood, honey, and perfume.

One defining trait of her vision here is planning. Admission to the community is controlled: “the men were carefully selected. They must prove clean health” (269). For others, the primary admission standard is that they offer the community a trade or skill that is not represented. They too must “be clean physically and morally as far as could be ascertained” (269). As in *Herland* the population is controlled. After twenty years the Manager decrees: “here we must stop.... If we have more people here we shall develop the diseases of cities. But look at our financial standing—every cent laid out is now returned, the place is absolutely self-supporting and will grow richer as years pass. Now we’ll swarm like the bees and start another...” (270). The strict controls of Beewise allow for an ideal community with the confidence of pre-World War II optimism that perfection was possible.¹⁶ If all aspects are controlled, the towns laid out on bare land, a

¹⁶ After the wars attempts at a perfect society were seen to have resulted in the mass murders of Nazism and Stalinism. Under this idea utopian thinking was understandably distrusted. For more on the link between utopianism and totalitarianism, one can look as far back to Karl Mannheim’s *Ideology and Utopia* published in the 1920s. For more recent criticism see *The End of Ideology and Utopia?: Moral Imagination and Cultural Criticism in the Twentieth Century* by Leonidas Donskis.

blank slate, the efficiency and success of the town could be reproduced, and town by town, society would be improved.

The communities they “swarm” to create bear Gilman’s distinct marks for health conscience egalitarian families. The families are sure to be vigorous able-bodied people with space set aside especially for fitness: “Among their first enterprises was a guest house, planned and arranged mainly for women and children. In connection with this was a pleasure garden for all manner of games, gymnastics and dancing, with wide courts and fields and roofed places for use in the rainy season” (269). To ensure proper living in their society they create the architecture for it. Architecture dictates their behavior. For food the people of Beewise implement Gilman’s plans of professionalized cooking:

there were no servants in the old sense. The dainty houses had no kitchens, only the small electric outfit where those who would might prepare coffee and the like. Food was prepared in clean wide laboratories, attended by a few skilled experts, highly paid, who knew their business, and great progress was made in the study of nutrition, and in the keeping of all the people well. Nevertheless the food cost less than if prepared by many unskilled, ill-paid cooks in imperfect kitchens. (270)

Having shed the architecture of domestic work, the women are free to live like men, occupying themselves with what they like, but eat more nutritious meals than with the patriarchal system.

As a story, “Beewise” derails. We lose the protagonist somewhere in the middle and it soon becomes a kind of progressive real estate advertisement for a fanciful land. Nevertheless, it is a description of a civilization with the good qualities that Gilman finds lacking in her own society. Gilman emphasizes, “that a group of human beings could live together in such ways as to decrease the hours of labor, increase the value of the product, ensure health, peace and prosperity, and multiply human happiness beyond

measure” (271). For women the message is especially poignant: “wherever there were a few hundred women banded together their combined labor could produce wealth, and their combined motherhood ensure order, comfort, happiness, and the improvement of humanity” (271). Though Gilman’s tendency here with this utopian community seems over-controlled, this is the point. In these imagined communities, Gilman can make them as perfect as she wants, even when her perfection includes her prejudices.

A Guarded Optimism

It is difficult not to wonder what happened to Gilman’s ideas. Did she have an effect in the end? American has society certainly changed since her day, but Gilman’s suggestions are *still* radical. Searching for a direct lineage from Gilman’s ideas about how domestic life should be to a picture of the state of today’s domestic life yields little. One could argue that Gilman’s ideas were almost skipped over. In the evolution of the kitchen, the progressive domestic design of the 1920s and 30s reveal a closer resemblance to Catharine Beecher’s drawings of the advanced kitchen of the 1860s [Fig. 3] than to Gilman’s ideas. The socialist housing movement produced hyper organized and streamlined kitchens, namely, Grete Schutte-Lihotzky’s famous Frankfurt kitchen [Fig. 4] where the emphasis, once again, was upon efficiency and hygiene.

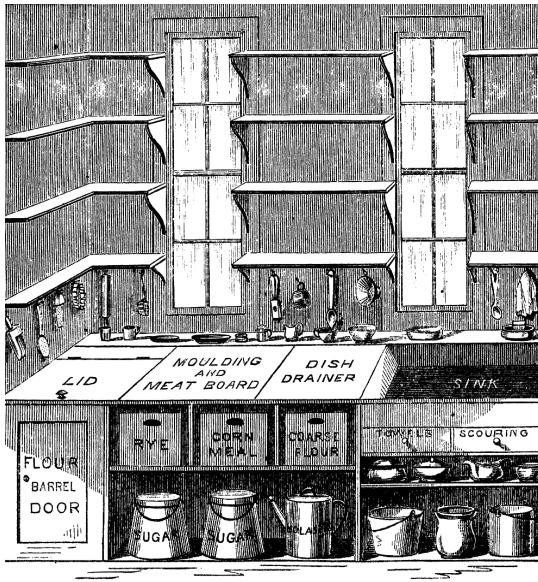


Fig. 3. An organized, efficient kitchen. 1869. Catharine Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe.

Fig. 4 The Frankfurt Kitchen, 1926, designed by Grete Schutte-Lihotzky

In fact, to look at our kitchens now, the trend in American domestic architecture is for larger, not smaller or non-existent, kitchens.

Some of Gilman's visions did materialize in built form. European designers and community members were more receptive to Gilman's proposed changes than Americans. When *Women and Economics* was translated into Danish, architect Otto Fick implemented her theories and built "The Service House" in Copenhagen in 1903 [Fig. 5, 6], which stayed in operation until 1943. In turn other European architects responded with their own interpretations, particularly in Sweden. While the various buildings all functioned well at the start, changes in tenants, owners, and the economy eventually undermined them. Making the services affordable while paying the workers a union wage proved to be the downfall of a number of the buildings. When the buildings changed hands, new owners were less invested in the socialist program than the potential profit, and eventually closed the social services.

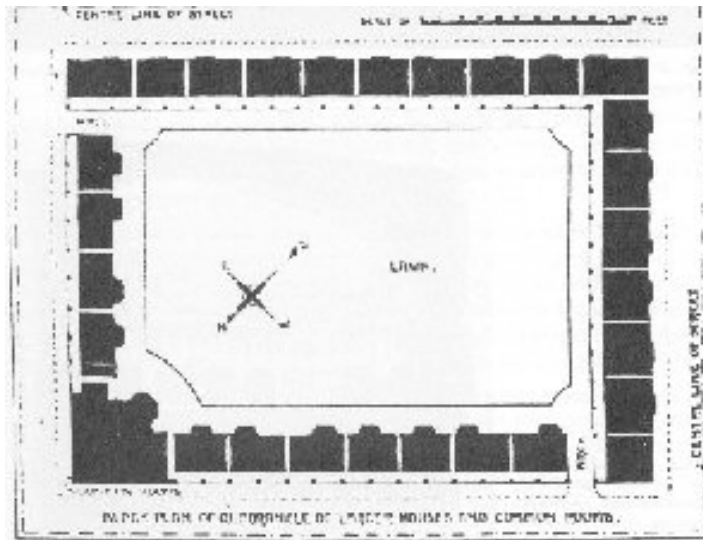


Figure 5 Plan, "the Service House," Copenhagen, 1903, Otto Fick.

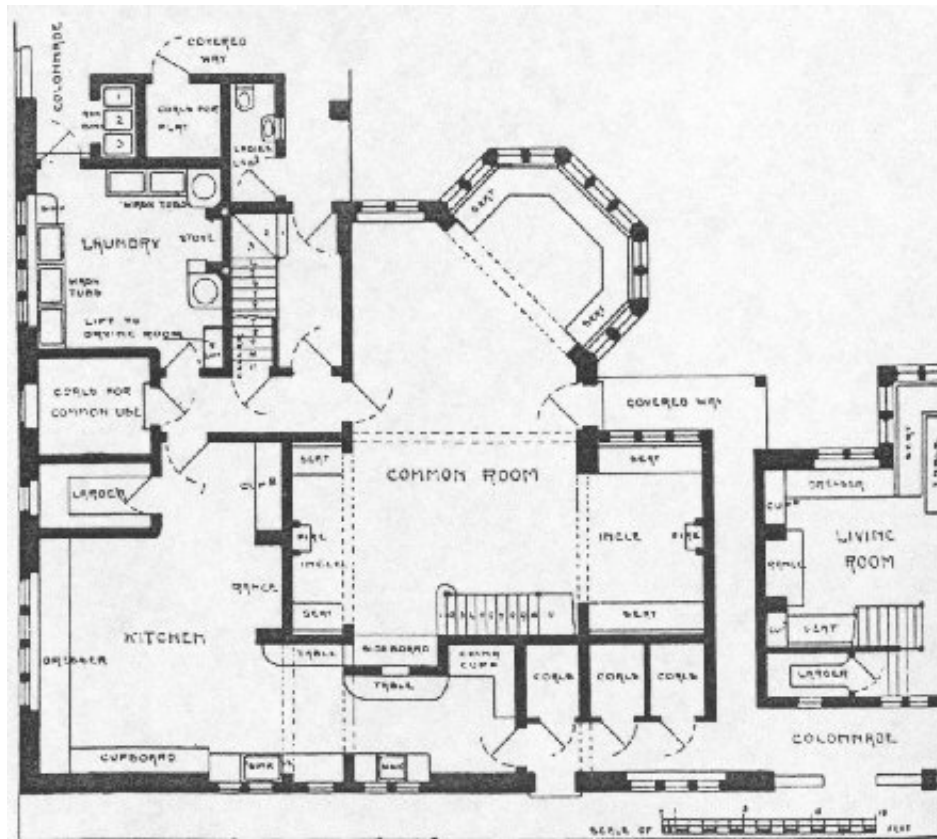


Fig. 6. Close-up Floor Plan of common services in "The Service House" Copenhagen, 1903, Otto Fick.

Such an outcome where capitalism, pessimism, and apathy undermine the success of these buildings and their enterprises is consistent with the eventual arc of Gilman's work, and answers why her ideas were never truly embraced and implemented, and how they were essentially skipped over in the evolution of domestic architecture. Her idea to emancipate women was one that had to be accepted totally; there was no room for accommodation, or acceptance of it in parts. The different pieces of her plan could not be separated. There was no financially independent woman without the displacement of the domestic chores, which depended on removing the architecture of house work, which depended on centralization of professionalized services, which depended on professionals who did the work. Take out any part and the machine breaks apart. Between World War I and the Red Scare, any hint of idealism seemed too close to utopian notions which then seemed to lean toward totalitarianism (Jacoby 76). Gilman's plan was nothing if not exceedingly optimistic. Without a sense of idealism, a notion that humans could be cured of their behavior and that architecture could act as a social panacea, it would be difficult to accept Gilman's ideas; it is easier to brush them off as just a part of history in the era when "people didn't know better." For the same reasons, it is no surprise the "The Yellow Wall-Paper" is Gilman's favored story. It is one of three stories (of 186) that ends "truthfully," without the central conflict resolved happily and progressively. There is no hope in "The Yellow Wall-Paper."

Gilman's idea of removing the kitchen from the house is now moot. There is still inequality between the sexes in this country, but I, for one, have never felt particularly oppressed by my kitchen. Even though Gilman's architectural ideas never panned out, not in the totalizing way that she wanted them to, many of her goals for women's

independence have. Perhaps what is best to hold on to of Gilman's legacy is her eternal optimism, her persistent belief that she could improve the society, that a sweeping social revolution for goodness toward our fellow beings was possible. Historian Russell Jacoby suggests that it is the hopeful spirit of the utopian writers which we lack, and which causes us to see utopias as quaint and naïve. After debunking the notion that the World Wars were rooted in utopian visions, he writes, "if that spirit is almost universally derided nowadays, it may be not because we are smarter but because we are narrower—and more resigned" (80). If Gilman, were to visit the year 2006, as in a utopian novel, it would be the widespread resignation in our country that would cause her greatest dismay. It was Gilman's belief that society could progress that kept her from going mad as a young wife, and in the 1920s compelled her to continue writing utopias when few people would read them.

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