



Faculteit Letteren & Wijsbegeerte

**“But I *must* say what I feel and think in some way!”**

Unravelling Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s Posture

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## Table of Contents

<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Part 1. Gilman the Radical Feminist? .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Part 2. Posture.....</b>	<b>6</b>
1. Posture .....	6
1.1. The textual dimension .....	7
1.2. The contextual dimension.....	8
2. Conclusion .....	8
<b>Part 3. Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s posture .....</b>	<b>9</b>
1. Gilman’s contextual posture.....	10
1.1. Gilman’s network.....	10
1.2. Gilman’s theoretical convictions.....	12
1.3. Intermediate conclusion.....	22
2. Gilman’s textual posture .....	24
2.1. Introduction.....	24
2.2. Anti-realistic fiction .....	25
2.3. Realistic fiction.....	33
2.4. Autobiographical fiction.....	45
2.5. Intermediate conclusion.....	49
<b>Conclusion.....</b>	<b>51</b>
<b>Works Cited.....</b>	<b>i</b>

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## Introduction

As a leading woman writer and a convinced advocate for social reform, Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860-1935) positioned herself in the centre of literary and sociological debates that have questioned, tackled and reshaped conventional American beliefs. Her contestation of patriarchal mistreatment of women resulted in theoretical tracts on society's shortcomings, and in literary narratives exemplifying these flaws and providing alternatives. Gilman persistently wrote about women's deprivation of freedom and society's undervaluation of the female sex, while emphasizing much needed societal alterations. She believed that if women's conditions were to be improved, society and many of its features would be reconfigured for the better. In her theoretical work she elaborated on society's flaws and presented alternatives in which women could flourish and develop their own voices. She sketched ideal communities, drawing on sociological debates concerning the configuration of the home, and worked out detailed ground principles that ensured female independence within those communities. Her literary work challenged the patriarchal vantage of society by either telling the story from the perspective of suppressed women or depicting utopian feminist societies in which women were no longer inferior to men. Consequently, when in the 1970s Gilman studies arose, readers and scholars alike approached Gilman as a radical feminist writer who anticipated later developments in feminist activism and writing. That approach is in need of modification because it tends to misconstrue Gilman's authorship. It is my intention to reconstruct her authorship in the context of late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century debate on society and to examine how she presented herself within her work. Writing theoretical as well as literary pieces, Gilman had plenty of opportunities to verbalize her convictions and critiques on patriarchal society. I will first explore whether there is a difference between the theoretical Gilman and the literary Gilman, and secondly, and most importantly, whether her self-presentation confirms the attributed label of radical feminist.

In trying to unravel Gilman's self-presentation I will use Jérôme Meizoz' literary term 'posture', which allows scholars to come to a better understanding of an author as it combines textual and contextual elements. Constructing an author's posture means taking into account several ways of self-representation. As such, an analysis cannot be solely based on fictional work, autobiographies or theoretical tractates, but has to take as many modes of self-presentation as possible into consideration. In this dissertation I will unravel Gilman's posture by analyzing her literary work and theoretical convictions, which are her two main modes of self-presentation. This will throw a new light on Gilman studies as "most of the books about [her] on the shelves of college and university libraries have been penned by scholars in departments of English and modern languages" and have mainly focused on her fictional narratives (Hill & Deegan xvii).

I will start my dissertation with a brief elaboration on the problematic label of Gilman as a radical feminist writer. Not only is it an undifferentiated denomination, it is also quite ambiguous since 'feminist' is already hard to define. Then, I will provide the theoretical framework of Meizoz, according to which I will analyze Gilman's self-presentation. It will become clear what posture exactly is and why it is relevant in this context. Based on Meizoz' literary notion, I aim to analyze Gilman's main theoretical convictions and a representative sample of her short stories. Due to space restrictions, I have limited the analysis to fifteen stories, which together encompass the scope of her career. As such, it hopes to do justice to the evolution in her thinking. On the whole, I will argue that in order to rightfully understand Gilman's authorship one has to take into account the different ways in which she presented herself. As a passionate and determined woman writer, she felt the urge to help society and express her thoughts and feelings, hence the title of my dissertation.<sup>1</sup> By the end of this endeavor, I hope to have reconstructed Gilman's posture and come to a new understanding of her presumed radical feminism.

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<sup>1</sup> The title of my thesis is a citation taken from Gilman, *The Yellow Wall-Paper, Herland, and Selected Writings* 173.

## Part 1. Gilman the Radical Feminist?

Throughout modern history, writers have been categorized and labeled according to their literary work. The *poète maudit*, the anti-establishment figure, the radical innovator, and even the conventional writer are examples of such authorial presentation. They all have been attributed specific features and thematic preferences which are then expected from them. In “the slipstream of staging [the author], a number of effects become visible, which indeed tell the author to behave accordingly” (Meizoz, “Modern Posterities” 93). Thus once an author has been labeled, he or she is expected to confirm that label and not to deviate from it. The radical innovator, for example, introduces shocking changes in traditional literature and makes original and unfamiliar thematic choices (LeVen 246). Yet, it is obvious that such an ascription only focuses on the bigger picture and fails to recognize the smaller nuances of an author’s identity. It is a simplification and distortion of an often wonderfully complex figure (Petrunik 216).

Even more, authors become stigmatized by the label they get and are consequently read from that perspective. Such readings “unconsciously select ‘facts’ and arguments to bolster the [presupposed] view, set up and destroy strawman interpretations of the opposing approach, or simply talk past each other” (Petrunik 215). Some scholars deem the stigmas “simplified causal statements with considerable ideological attraction” (Petrunik 222). They pin authors down to one specific trademark that classifies them and that creates a specific aura. The result of this is that, for example, “Gide is expected to ‘do Gide’” (Viala 216). This is problematic as the lack of nuance deprives many authors of much needed context, understanding and characterization.

This is the case with the typical perception of Charlotte Perkins Gilman. After her death in 1935, Gilman was forgotten for several decades. In *The Feminism of Charlotte Perkins Gilman*, Allen claims that “1970s feminist scholars rediscovered and celebrated her in projects stretching into the 1980s and beyond” (xiv). Central to Gilman’s ensuing reputation of feminist example and precursor, was the label of a radical feminist. Starting with the preconceived notion that one is reading a feminist work determines the reading and makes one more perceptive of feminist themes in Gilman’s work. The constructed image of Gilman is thus strongly based on a preconceived idea, while many other features and characterizations remain undervalued.

Furthermore, approaching Gilman a radical feminist is tricky as the term ‘radical feminist’ is definitely not unambiguous. It can refer to a member of the Women’s Liberation Movement of the 1960s that was called Radical Feminism. Although Gilman died 25 years before the start of the movement, many contemporary readers and scholars often immediately think of her as a precursor to that movement.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, there is a lot of debate about the question of what constitutes the

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<sup>2</sup> Rowland and Klein argue in *Radical Feminism: History, Politics, Action* that Gilman acted as a predecessor of the Radical Feminist Movement (11).

movement 'radical feminism', which already has led 'to misrepresenting and trivializing radical feminist ideas' (Willis 91). In her article "Radical feminism and feminist radicalism" (1994) Willis, a radical feminist activist in the late 60s, denounces the confusion about the term and tries to disentangle the meanings of "radical feminism". According to her, "radical feminism in its original sense barely exists today" (91). What many scholars see as "radical feminism" began as a political movement "to end male supremacy in all areas of social and economic life, and rejected the whole idea of opposing male and female natures and values as a sexist idea" (Willis 91).<sup>3</sup>

Although it cannot be denied that some of Gilman's convictions are analogous with those of the radical feminist movement, she differed from the movement in both cause and goal. Gilman did not reject the intrinsic difference between men and women, for example, but rather emphasized them as they were crucial in her evolutionary theory. She also did not advocate free love and casual sex. Gilman wanted to establish a society in which men and women lived harmoniously together, domestic duties were communal businesses, and evolutionary progress was the main objective of every mother. An in-depth analysis of her convictions will follow in part three.

Furthermore the term 'feminist' in itself is already problematic as the definitions of 'feminism' and 'feminist' are legion. Bell Hooks clarifies this problem in *Feminism is for Everybody* by giving several circulating definitions: "[F]eminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression. [...] Feminism is [...] about women seeking to be equal to men. [...] Feminism is anti-male. [...] Feminism [...] call[s] for reform as well as overall restructuring of society so that our nation would be fundamentally anti-sexist" (1;4). In line with the title of Hooks' book, it is clear that the terms 'feminism' and 'feminist' can be loosely applied to any social reformer striving for peace, freedom and equality. In this dissertation I will use the term 'feminism' when talking about the female struggle against patriarchy's oppression of women solely for the reason of wanting freedom.

Additionally, most of the books about Gilman 'on the shelves of college and university libraries have been penned by scholars in departments of English and modern languages', while Gilman "self-identified primarily as a sociologist" (Hill & Deegan xvii). Whereas "the literary studies and biographies are numerous [...], Gilman's central sociological purpose and persona" has too often been omitted (Hill & Deegan xvii).<sup>4</sup> Anthologies and studies mainly focus on Gilman's feminist themes, which endorse her reputation of a radical feminist, and neglect or undervalue the sociological structuring of her fictive worlds/communities. Only since the 1990s, "Gilman has

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<sup>3</sup> Contradictions within the radical feminist movement eventually led to an inevitable disintegration. On top of that, many women from outside the movement became aware of the sexual inequality in their own lives, and realized that women's oppression should be stopped. However, they had "no intention of supporting changes that would threaten their (or their husbands') economic and social class status" and thus did not adhere to the radical feminist movement (Willis 107). Their main strategy "for changing women's lives was individual and collective self-improvement" (Willis 108). Others believed that "traditionally feminine behavior was the only truly sisterly behavior" for emancipated women in future society, and did not agree with radical feminists' claim that traditional feminine behavior was "male-identified behavior" (Willis 109).

<sup>4</sup> Important literary studies and biographies include Hill 1980, Kessler 1995, Allen 2009, Davis 2003 and Hausman 1980.

received close attention by a larger number of sociologists,” resulting in new perspectives on Gilman as a person (Hill & Deegan xvii).<sup>5</sup>

Ultimately, Gilman herself struggled with the feminist label and even disassociated herself from “the radical feminists and free lovers who had apparently seized the day” (Davis, *Charlotte Perkins Gilman* 344). Her fight for altered gender politics, childcare, and household, anticipated to some extent the Women’s Liberation Movement of the 1960s, but she did not sympathize with feminists of her time. Her strong aversion towards those feminists made her shun the feminist label and she even recoiled from “flattering attempts to label her ‘America’s leading feminist’” (Davis, *Charlotte Perkins Gilman* 345). Gilman believed that the feminists were too eager to abandon traditional restrictions, which resulted in the pendulum swinging too far: “Public service, the real purpose of all that machinery, is forgotten in the general struggle for private gain” (Gilman, “Women and Democracy” 37). This was far from what she envisioned for the future as feminists “pursued shallow self-indulgence” and clearly lived only for themselves and not for society. For Gilman, the “object of our life [was] the improvement of social relations” for which women needed to be free individuals (“Women and Democracy” 36). As such, the freeing of women was not to be pursued for women as a group, but for society as a whole:

The reason that women need the fullest freedom in human development [...] is twofold: it is needed because women are half of the people of the world and the world needs their service as *people*, not only as women; and secondly [...] that women as women, i.e., as mothers, need full human development in order to transmit it to their children (Gilman, “Women and Democracy” 36).

Gilman disdained the young feminists who acted like “painted, powdered, high-heeled, cigaret smoking idiots’ and only lived ‘for the self and in the moment” (Davis, *Charlotte Perkins Gilman* 345). By stating that she was “not primarily ‘a feminist,’ but a humanist” she strengthened her denouncement of the woman movement (“Women and Democracy” 36). Gilman’s “interest in the position of woman, in the child, in the home, [was] altogether with a view to their influence upon human life, happiness and progress” (“Women and Democracy” 36). Everyone should devote his life to “Humanity,” as a result of which social conditions could be uplifted and improved, “and so benefit every individual, young and old” (Gilman, “Women and Democracy” 38).

So in sum, labeling Gilman ‘a radical feminist’ tends to obscure Gilman’s historical project because we too readily relate it to later twentieth-century developments. Her authorship cannot and should not be reduced to a label that Gilman herself rejected. I will take into account several short stories, ideas, convictions and life events, throughout this thesis in order to reconstruct Gilman’s posture. This will make it more clear how Gilman should be understood, which “is crucial for making her contributions intelligible” (Allen, *The Feminism* xv).

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<sup>5</sup> For example studies on the sociological level in *The Yellow Wall-Paper* by Charles Lemert (15-17) or Gilman’s ‘ecofeminist pragmatism’ by Mary Deegan and Christopher Podeschi (19-36).



## Part 2. Posture

In “Modern Posterities of Posture” (2010), Jérôme Meizoz exemplifies the lack of nuance dealt with above by elaborating on Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s attributed authorship and offers a solution. Rousseau was labeled ‘the people’s friend’, which instigated the denomination of him as ‘the precursor of modern socialism’ (82). Although “such a vision of Rousseau as giving voice to the humble is a post-factual reconstruction,” it is still partly based on the presentation of the self by the writer (Meizoz 82). Rousseau used this ascribed authorial presentation to “set the stage for an anti-establishment lifestyle” and inscribe himself in the literary world (Meizoz 83). In doing so, he could more easily advance critical literary models and thematic options, and spread his anti-establishment ideal. Rousseau basically put on a mask to embody a social role and further his own ends.

Meizoz uses this case study to introduce the notion of ‘postures littéraires’, a literary term first explained by Alain Viala but widened by Meizoz, which offers an all-inclusive authorial presentation.<sup>6</sup> This literary term gives a better understanding of an author as it offers a synthesis for the dichotomy created between contextual, on the one hand, and purely textual analysis, on the other hand, as it combines “la dimension rhétorique (textuelle) et actionnelle (contextuelle)” (Dorleijn 252; Meizoz, *Postures Littéraires* 17). Purely textual analysis confirmed Rousseau’s label as precursor of modern socialism, but analysis of the contextual dimension proved otherwise and showed that Rousseau deliberately adapted his literary work in order to underline the presumed denomination. So therefore, posture “presupposes a dual observation track, because it involves both non-verbal behavior and discourse” (Meizoz, “Modern Posterities” 85). This makes posture the ideal theoretical framework of my thesis. It allows me to analyze Gilman’s theoretical and literary pieces and compare if and how she presented herself differently in those two ‘dimensions’.

### 1. Posture

Viala was the first to define the notion of posture, in the sense of “the manner of taking up a position in the field” (Meizoz, “Modern Posterities” 83). He argues that a literary analysis of the trajectory of an author could determine the “various postures manifested in it [...] or the continuity within the same posture,” and set up “an evaluation of the (general) way of being a writer” (Viala 216). Viala strongly focuses on the author turned fictive enunciator: the author presents and expresses his personal poetics through his fictional work and in doing so, enunciates a posture which marks out his position in the literary field (Meizoz, “Modern Posterities” 84).

Meizoz, however, remarks that posture “is not uniquely an author’s own construction, but an interactive process” and consequently widens the concept to include contextual notions (“Modern

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<sup>6</sup> For more information on Viala’s definition of “postures littéraires: Viala, Alain. “Eléments de sociopoétique.” Molinié, G. & Viala, A., *Approches de la réception, sémiostylistique et sociopoétique de Le Clézio*. Paris: PUF Collections, 1993. 137-297. Print.

Posterities” 84). He emphasizes the importance of taking several different aspects into account, such as the familial background, the existing network of influences, and the entire oeuvre, and not just focusing on the literary genre and content. Not only will each of these contribute to the formation of the bigger picture, the combination of these factors will eventually lead to a better understanding of the author and his incentives (Bongers 13). As De Meyer notes, “the notion of posture would thus allow to better taking hold of the way authors present their positions not only in terms of symbolic capital and notoriety, but also in terms of their worldview” (189). Authorial posture, thus, tries to enclose the voice and figure of an actor in the literary field.

### 1.1. The textual dimension

Posture is first and foremost construed by the author himself (Meizoz, *Posture Littéraires* 18). Discourse analysis often focuses on the enunciator or the implicit author who speaks throughout the book because it offers the textual self-image of the author. The literary work represents the author and serves as a reminder of who he or she is/was and what his convictions are/were (Meizoz, *Posture Littéraires* 19). In other words, the text cannot be studied without its external counterpart (i.e. the author and his beliefs), and vice versa. Thematic and stylistic choices create an image of the author and contribute to the formation of the posture. Whether endorsing or rejecting conventional patterns, the decision will give an author a certain kind of identity and put him in a specific place in the literary field. This view on posture coincides with Viala’s definition of posture as the ethos or the “general way of being a writer” (216). In *Éléments de sociopoétique* (1993), he notes that the chosen literary strategy becomes the writer’s specific ‘hallmark’:

In offering a work, [the author] constructs a self-image and this image is confirmed or evolves in the course of ensuing works: Gide is expected to ‘do Gide’ while at the same time he must be neither completely different nor wholly identical in subsequent books (and likewise of everyone). (216)

The so-called way of being a writer, shows itself in “the tone of the text, which reflects the voice and status of the speaker” (Herman & Vervaeck 18). Because the characterization of the author is merely implied, it is of great importance that the reader construes it when reading. If the reader does not succeed in doing this, there is no connection and subsequently no image of the author made. The adhesion “is only possible if author and reader have a comparable habitus [...] and a common doxa that can be found in a set of stereotypes active even before one word has been spoken” (Herman & Vervaeck 18). Precisely that connection gives a text, and therefore the author, authority.<sup>7</sup> For example, the posture of an author as simple man “who speaks the truth” elicits a well-known image, and will eventually lead to “acceptance on the part of the reader” (Herman & Vervaeck 18).

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<sup>7</sup> It has to be noted that author and narrator should not be confused with each other. The voice in a story can often be seen as the voice of the author because he/she created it, but the author can also create a narrator which either voices the author’s views and values, or contradicts his views and values. Feminist authors can for example write stories in which a dominant patriarchal male is the narrator.

## 1.2. The contextual dimension

Viala's description of authorial posture corresponds more or less with Meizoz' textual dimension. Yet, as noted above, posture is co-constructed by the textual and contextual dimension, and at this point, Meizoz surpasses Viala. When describing the author's posture, it is necessary to take into account the entire oeuvre and several aspects of his life that have formed his character and patterns of thought. Including "the demands and constraints of the contemporary context" will offer an all-inclusive posture (Herman & Vervaeck 18). Public presentations, such as media appearances, theoretical tractates and biographical notes are therefore essential in the analysis of the posture (Meizoz, "Modern Posterities" 85). Likewise, the relationship between the author and "les groups littéraires [...] [et] les genres littéraires qu'elle investit" defines the authorial position within the field and contributes greatly to the formation of the posture (Meizoz, *Posture Littéraires* 31).

The context can feel as an obstacle and a limitation, holding the author back. Therefore, many authors negotiate "the constraints implied in their social position" and try to break free 'from the prevailing artificial gallantries of his time' (Herman & Vervaeck 19). All sorts of strategies have been employed "to fashion an image of themselves" associated with for example professionalism or subjective creativity (Herman & Vervaeck 20). Authors try to hide and erase past convictions or periods and use their creative minds to alter their image as much as needed. Yet, it is of the utmost important to include the contextual dimension to the analysis, and come to a full authorial posture.

## 2. Conclusion

Meizoz' concept of authorial posture combines textual and contextual research in order to encapsulate every important segment of the author's life and person. Confining oneself to either textual or contextual analysis deprives the author of his complex and rich nature. Unraveling the posture results in a thorough depiction of an actor of the literary field. Therefore, it is the perfect theoretical frame for analyzing the complex character of Charlotte Perkins Gilman. In the following parts I will analyze her upbringing and theoretical convictions, which represent the contextual dimension, and a selection of short stories, which represent the textual dimension. Her choice to mainly write short stories already indicates that she deliberately wanted to deviate from contemporary literary rules. So only when following Meizoz' concept of the authorial posture, it is possible to sketch a rightful depiction of Gilman which will help in understanding Gilman.

### Part 3. Charlotte Perkins Gilman's posture

It is no exaggeration to say that the American author Charlotte Perkins Gilman is amongst the most well-known female authors of the twentieth century. Since the publication of her tractate *Women and Economics* – which was promptly deemed “the most significant utterance on the women’s question” – she became “the most original and challenging mind which the woman movement produced” (Degler 21). Her controversial convictions and theories spread to both sides of the Atlantic and became the subject of many critical and praising essays on the woman question.<sup>8</sup> Allen, for example, notes that by 1904 Gilman was “America’s most acclaimed feminist theoretician” and certainly “a force to be reckoned with” (“The Overthrow” 71). In her countless articles, reviews, short stories and books, she denounced the all encompassing male domination and the continued suppression of women in patriarchal society. Because of her many publications and the controversy they gave rise to, Gilman became known as “the major intellectual leader of the struggle for women’s rights” in the first quarter of the twentieth century (Degler 22).

Even more, Gilman was deemed ‘a radical feminist’ who wrote “sustained, radical feminist work” and was idolized by the radical feminist movement in the 1960s (Davis & Knight xvii; Degler 21). The long-term success of her two most well-known stories *The Yellow Wall-Paper* and *Herland* cemented her status as a radical feminist writer. However, such portrayal is too simple. Paying attention to her contextual and textual dimension allows me to have a closer look at her posture. She has presented herself via two ways – theoretical convictions & upbringing (= contextual dimension) and fictional work (= textual dimension) – and firstly analyzing both and secondly comparing them will help in understanding Gilman.

The notion of authorial posture offers the perfect frame to create an all-inclusive characterization of Gilman. In the first part of this chapter, I will look into the contextual dimension of Gilman’s life, and elaborate on important events that have shaped her visions and identity. Subsequently, in part two, the focus stays in the context, but shifts to her work as a social reformer and activist. In the third part of the chapter, the textual dimension is deepened and a selection of Gilman’s short stories will be analyzed. Which narrative blueprints does she use to which world-making purposes? Does her contextual work mirror her textual? And most importantly: how should we understand Gilman’s authorship?

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<sup>8</sup> By 1904, Gilman’s work had appeared in journals and periodicals such as: *Ainslee’s*, *American Fabians*, *Armenia*, *Booklovers*, *Century Club Advance*, *Chautauqua Assembly Herald*, *Christian Register*, *Coming Nation*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Current Literature*, *Independent*, *Harper’s Bazaar*, *Housekeeper’s Weekly*, *Kansas Suffrage Reveille*, *Literary Digest*, *New Nation*, *New York Times*, *New York Tribune*, *Pacific Monthly*, *Pacific Rural Press*, *Providence Journal*, *Puritan*, *Saturday Evening Post*, *Scribner’s Woman’s Column*, *Signal*, *Success*, *Truth*, *Twentieth Century Home*, *Union Southern Educational Journal*, *Worthington’s Illustrated*. (Allen, “The Overthrow” 83)

## 1. Gilman's contextual posture

### 1.1. Gilman's network

As the great niece of Harriet Beecher Stowe, the author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and Henry Ward Beecher, a well-known social reformer, Gilman had the innate talent to write and speak actively on societal gendered mechanisms. It is no wonder she has become a worldwide acclaimed author and social reformer. In order to fully understand Gilman as a *feminist* writer and social reformer, it is necessary to discuss several important relationships, more specifically her relationship with her parents, two husbands, and daughter.

#### 1.1.1. Upbringing

After a long period of uncertainty and indecisiveness, Charlotte Perkins' parents separated when she was nine. Her mother decided to raise her children on her own and had to take in boarders to cover the rent. Although Perkins grew up without her father, she would still write to him "for advice about readings to help her with her intellectual development. He responded with a list of recommendations, many written by the leading evolutionary thinkers of the day" (Moynihan 197). So despite his absence in her upbringing, he contributed greatly to her future intellectual life, as it was he whom made sure that Perkins would intellectually challenge and develop herself.

Perkins' relationship with her mother was complex. In her diary she wrote that her mother would not caress her as a child, "in order to save her from anguish in the future should she, too, suffer from loss of affection," and that her brother was heavily favored (Gilman, cited by Moynihan 198). Later on in her life, however, Perkins realized that her mother had merely adopted patriarchy's belief that women are inferior to men. That is why she favored her son and wanted to toughen up her daughter. When Perkins realized that her mother's identity and behavior was culturally determined, she "used her mother as the model of what she rejected as culturally produced" (Moynihan 199).

It is due to the "early struggle for independence, self-assertion, and self-respect" that she became the strong woman known today (Hill 504). Realizing the negative influence of patriarchy on women, she became convinced that women needed to be freed from the male-dominated culture and that there should be an alternative culture "based on 'female values'" (Willis 91).

#### 1.1.2. Married Life

In 1881, Perkins' best friend Martha Luther got married and moved away. "The vacuum left by Martha's absence heightened Charlotte's longings for affection, and may have paved the way for her acceptance of the comforting protection of a man" (Hill 504). Less than a year later, she encountered the aspiring artist Charles Walter Stetson and he proposed after only seventeen days. The

subsequent inner turmoil forced her to rethink important life choices and choose between marriage and career:

I am beset by my childhood's conscientiousness . . . the voice of all the ages sounds in my ears, saying that this [marriage] is noble, natural, and right; that no woman yet has ever attempted to stand alone as I intend but that she had to submit or else. (Gilman to Walter Stetson on February 20, 1882)

Perkins accepted the proposal but married life left her with no time to write or paint. Her gradually acquired independency and self-respect began to crumble and the first signs of a depression became clear. She wrote in her diary about an incomprehensible weariness and wondered why she was so “tired, tired, tired of life!” (Gilman to Walter Stetson on April 5, 1883). In 1885, Perkins gave birth to her daughter Katherine and that experience seems to have drained every ounce of vitality left in her body. Perkins sought the help of dr. Silas Weir Mitchell, who prescribed the ‘rest cure’ and suggested to “live as domestic a life as possible” (Hill 514). She was forbidden any physical or intellectual stimulation, and forced to stay at home.<sup>9</sup> Perkins herself, however, believed that the ability to express herself and the support and understanding of like-minded were what she needed. Therefore, she decided in 1889 to separate from Charles and move to California, where she hoped to find the much needed support.

In 1900, Perkins married her cousin George Houghton Gilman. Nevertheless, she was again torn “between her feminist convictions and her emotions” (Hill 522). She envied “those good women who really feel that the husband is their whole range of duty” and apologized to Houghton for not devoting her life to his (Hill 522). After a while, she came to terms with her inner conflict and confidently declared that she wanted “a kind of married life that has both love and freedom,” a life in which her convictions and her emotions can go together (Gilman, cited by Hill 522).

### 1.1.3. Motherhood

When Perkins went to California, she took her daughter Katharine with her as she believed that Charles would not be able to sacrifice his art for his daughter. By 1894, Perkins herself, however, was becoming a well-known lecturer and writer, and felt that she was neglecting her daughter. She then made the heart-rending decision to transfer the care of her nine-year-old daughter to Charles and his fiancée, her lifelong friend Grace Channing; assuming that Grace would raise Katharine (Davis and Knight ix-x). Although Perkins justified her decision by saying it was for Katharine’s good, it still caused a massive public outcry which eventually forced Perkins to leave California.<sup>10</sup> She suffered immensely from the separation and was tormented by remorse and grief.

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<sup>9</sup> This traumatic experience inspired her to write *The Yellow Wall-Paper* (1892).

<sup>10</sup> The public outcry instigated her to write *An Unnatural Mother* (1895), which was republished three times.

## 1.2. Gilman's theoretical convictions

Growing up in a strong matriarchate, being educated on contemporary thinkers, being treated with the rest cure, divorcing her husband and transferring the care of her daughter to her ex-husband, all shaped and influenced Gilman's pattern of thought. More so, her upbringing set the stage for her societal reform convictions. In the following part I will briefly discuss four subjects which often return in Gilman's tractates and speeches: her vision on motherhood, architectural feminism, eugenic procreation, and the gynaecocentric theory. Due to space restrictions, I have decided not to analyze entire theoretical works but to focus on her main convictions throughout her career.

### 1.2.1. Motherhood

Motherhood plays a key role in Gilman's life. In both her biographical and fictional pieces, she wrote and talked about the importance of motherhood and deemed the mother "as the highest form of womanhood" (Elbert 105). She even based her feminist arguments on "the conviction that women were [...] holding a mighty fund of Love and Service which [the world] can no longer do without" (Gilman, "Women and Democracy" 36). Gilman believed that the altruism of motherhood could alter the world and "bring into human life a more normal influence" (Degler 33). She was convinced that motherhood could achieve this by a strong breed of children, and "a more enlightened generation of women evolving" (Elbert 104). She would often publicly clarify women's true destiny: motherhood (Davis, "His and Herland" 78). She felt, however, that women could not meet with their responsibility as long as patriarchal society burdened women with many household chores. She wanted a "new form of liberated motherhood, [...] leaving out the false sentiment often associated with the institution of motherhood" (Elbert 121-122). Gilman argued that society had mixed motherhood with house service, and defined mothers on the basis of the quality of their cooking, cleaning and child-rearing (*Women and Economics* 251). All of this needed to change because, for example, when "cooking becomes dissociated from the home, we shall gradually cease to attach emotions to it [...] and learn to judge it impersonally upon a scientific and artistic basis" (*Women and Economics* 251). The change is necessary as the blend of womanhood and domestic service had evolved into a duty for women which men expected daily (P. Allen 61).

Gilman was a reformer who believed in a purified and precious maternity, and was convinced that domestic duties should not keep a mother from her maternal tasks. Patriarchal society, however, did exactly that and even impoverished motherhood as women were expected to care for their children full-time.<sup>11</sup> As such, women were denied their freedom and became house

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<sup>11</sup> In the third volume of her own monthly magazine, Gilman criticized Ida Tarbell, a then-famous historian, who had claimed that "for the normal woman, the fulfillment of life is the making of the thing we best describe as a home" ("Miss Ida Tarbell" 38). Gilman was appalled that such an important leading female figure would promote and confirm patriarchy's degrading vision on womanhood which claimed that women had "no needs, hopes, ambitions, uses or desires" except for the home ("Miss Ida Tarbell" 39).

servant trapped in the home. Gilman believed that only by professionalizing domestic work and child-rearing, women would be freed from their entrapment at home.<sup>12</sup>

This would benefit both mother and child as women would become “wiser, stronger and nobler mothers” and children would get “the widest experience” (*Women and Economics* 269; “Women and Democracy” 37). The interests of a child were, in fact, “best served by the additional love and care, teaching and example, of other persons, specialists in child culture” (“Women and Democracy” 37). This did not mean that a mother’s right and duty to provide the best conditions for her offspring was to be denied, but only clarified that “the individual mother [could never be] as sufficient as an educator of humanity” (“Women and Democracy” 37). A child needed the “love and care and service of those socially specialized to [child-rearing]” (“Women and Democracy” 37). Even so, “the services of a foster-mother, a nurse or a grandma [were] often liked by a baby as well as, and perhaps better than, those of its own mother” (*Women and Economics* 291). Gilman claimed that “a mother knowing the world and living in it [could] be to her children far more than has ever been possible before. Motherhood in the world [would] make that world a different place for her children” (*Women and Economics* 269):

The mother as a social servant instead of a home servant will not lack in true mother duty. She will love her child as well, perhaps better, when she is not in hourly contact with it, when she goes from its life to her own life, and back from her own life to its life, with ever new delight and power. She can keep the deep, thrilling joy of motherhood far fresher in her heart. [...] From her work, loved and honored though it is, she will return to the home life, the child life, with an eager, ceaseless pleasure, cleansed of all the fret and friction and weariness that so mar it now. (*Women and Economics* 290)

It is clear that Gilman’s view on motherhood was quite controversial and innovative. Not only did she wish for a reshaped society, but also for a reconfiguration of the home and the family. Like radical feminists, she deemed the division of domestic duties and raising children enslaving and oppressing for women. Yet, she did not reject the home and the family. Gilman was convinced that “freeing an entire half of humanity from an artificial position” would make “better motherhood and fatherhood, better babyhood and childhood, better food, better homes, better society” (*Women and Economics* 317).

### **1.2.2. Architectural feminism**

With regard to Gilman’s views on motherhood, she obviously did not define it by domestic duties and refused to make it the central point of a mother’s existence. She even found it amusing to see how cleaning, “the least desirable of labors, [had] been so innocently held to be woman’s natural duty” (*Women and Economics* 122). Gilman consequently attacked the configuration of the domestic space and strived for a ‘housewifeless’ home: “Kitchens, nurseries, and laundry facilities should be

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<sup>12</sup> In the next section, on architectural feminism, it is explained how Gilman envisioned the professionalization and division.



removed from the home and commercialized” (Ruegamer 309). Not only the children would benefit from this – as they would be raised by professionals and have a restful place to come home to – but also women/mothers as they would no longer be economically dependent from men. Gilman claimed that only by socializing the domestic duties, a reorganization of society could come into being and women could become independent:

The home would cease to be a workshop, and would become far more the personal expression of its occupants – the place of peace and rest, of love and privacy – than it can be in its present condition of arrested industrial development. (*Women and Economics* 122)

She criticized “the architectural atomism of capitalist society” and blamed it for the alienation of many housewives as they were left unable to engage in social activities (*Women and Economics* 20). She came up with a solution named ‘Applepieville’. In the homonymous article, printed in *The Independent* on the 20<sup>th</sup> of September 1920, she envisioned an ideal village which had a central common area (with, among others, a park, playground, school, and library) “from which would radiate the private homes with their farm land,” spread out like pieces of pie (Gill 21). This clear distinction between the public and the private was essential in Gilman’s theory and would relieve women “of the loneliness” that was “key to the fragmenting strategies of manipulation and confinement exercised by a patriarchal, capitalist system” (Gill 21).

Due to the organization of patriarchal society too many aspects of a woman’s life were concentrated in the home. Whether speaking before a crowd or addressing her readers, Gilman “unflinchingly urged her audience to reconsider their logic in assigning women to the home” (Gill 17). Consequently, she came up with several new compositions of the home without the centrality of domestic chores. As the kitchen, for example, needed to be removed from the house, a common, socialized kitchen would provide the families from meals prepared by professional cooks.

Gilman was determined to improve the world, and starting with the home, domesticity and motherhood were to be redefined. By dividing the labor of housekeeping, women were no longer expected to be a good cook, a good manager, an accurate and thorough cleaner, and a good purchaser (*Women and Economics* 121). They were now free to choose their “position, train for it, and become a most valuable functionary in [their] special branch, all the while living in [their] own home” (*Women and Economics* 121). Only then, motherhood would no longer be a remote occupation, but “the common duty and the common glory of womanhood” (*Women and Economics* 121). It would even be profitable for the entire society, as she believed that “where now twenty women in twenty homes [...] insufficiently accomplish their varied duties, the same work in the hands of specialists could be done in less time by fewer people” (*Women and Economics* 121).

The notion of reorganizing social space to affect social change was not an idea original to Gilman. Gwendolyn Wright notes that “many different groups were campaigning for what they called a progressive approach to house design and upkeep. While their social goals were based on conflicting

values, [...] the popular interest in domestic architecture was responsible for the sudden transformation in residential environments for middle-class Americans” (161). Gilman was introduced to architectural design through “the widespread debate that Charles Fourier and Robert Owen provoked with the communal innovations” (Gill 18). They created “plans for social and architectural revolution,” with two main themes: “first, a desire to overcome the distinction between city and country; and second, a desire to overcome the physical isolation of individuals and families by grouping the community into one large ‘family’ structure” (Howard & Wright 14).

Gilman was mainly inspired by the second theme and more specifically by the visualization of regrouping cities into “ideal communes [...] with a communal dining room and meeting rooms for recreation” (Howard & Wright 14). Gilman, however, took the architectural revolution further and linked it to the economic independence for women. She would persuade her readers and audience that “there [was] no cause for alarm” as no one was going to lose their home or families, “nor any of the sweetness and happiness that [went] with them” (*Women and Economics* 133). Peacefully, she would try to explain that the attribution of domestic chores to women was a consequence of patriarchal capitalism, and that it was “a social duty, not a sexual one” (*Women and Economics* 119). Therefore, changing the home was changing the woman.

By blaming capitalism for the sexist division of labor, Gilman wanted to free women from the “imposition of so-called ‘male values’” (Willis 91). The architectural alteration, “and not suffrage,” was crucial in reshaping society into a better place for women with economic independence (M. Davis 16). Consequently, her contextual posture began to take form: she presented herself as a revolutionary and radical thinker and advocate of women’s economic independence and overall societal improvement. She believed that changing societal arrangements would allow women to study and grow in their function/job, which would result in women being able to compete with men for better jobs and economic prosperity.

### **1.2.3. Gynaecocentric theory**

Gilman’s quest to improve the world was heavily influenced by Lester Frank Ward, the first president of the American Sociological Society and deemed the founding father of American sociology (Finlay 252). Although Ward is hardly remembered by contemporary sociologists, he played an important part in the development of Gilman’s most radical reasoning. His so-called gynaecocentric theory, presented as an alternative to the predominant androcentric theory, offered Gilman a sociological frame in which she could validate her view on motherhood and society (Finlay 253).

Before dealing with the gynaecocentric theory, it is necessary to define the androcentric theory, against which Ward positioned his theory. The androcentric theory is male-centered, as it claims that the male sex is primary and the female sex secondary (Ward 292). As such, women are treated

by biologists “primarily as a means of procreation” and not as social actors in their own right (Finlay 254). In the words of Ward:

All things center [...] about the male, and that the female, though necessary in carrying out the scheme, is only the means of continuing the life of the globe, but is otherwise an unimportant accessory, and incidental factor in the general result. (292)

Ward strongly criticized those biologists who unthinkingly accepted the “assumptions that men are stronger, more highly developed, and more creative than women” (Finlay 254). Many zoologists, for example, presented the female sex as a form of ‘arrested development,’ in contrast to the normal and greater development of the male sex (Ward 292). Although Ward supported the claim that “the males are usually larger, stronger, more varied in structure and organs, and more highly ornamented and adorned than the females,” he argued that it is just the physical side of the subject (292).

Moreover, he believed that male domination amongst humans was unnatural, abnormal and against evolutionary progress (Allen, “The Overthrow” 60). Ward saw it as “the result of specialization in extra-normal directions due to adventitious causes which have nothing to do with the general scheme” and which were “chiefly influenced [...] by tradition, convention, and prejudice” (296-297). So basically male supremacy – which was not part of evolution but slipped in anyhow – was maintained by tradition and convention, and ultimately became the leading principle of patriarchal society. Therefore, Ward developed a theoretical framework in which he insisted that the female sex was “primary in both point of origin and of importance in the history and economy of organic life” (Allen, “The Overthrow” 60). Based on many examples of the animal and plant world, he claimed that in fact the male sex is reduced by nature to the sole function of fertilization and providing reproductive diversity:

Males, originally puny fertilizers who evolved to provide reproductive diversity, were eaten by cruel wives, as with spiders, or as drones treated contemptuously by queen bees, or as mayflies allotted but one day of mating, only to die of starvation. (Allen, “The Overthrow” 64)

As such, gynaecocracy, or “female rule over the social group,” was the earliest phase of human development (Finlay 255):<sup>13</sup> The female stood “unmoved amid the heated strife of rivals [...] [and] instinctively selected the one [male] that had the highest value for the race” (Ward 325). As for generations long only the best of the best would reproduce, human intelligence, and along with it the innate sexual lust, grew (Allen, “The Overthrow” 83). Although sex was initially for reproductive means only, women and men started to enjoy it and wanting it more regularly. Men started to apply “ruse, cunning, sagacity, tact, shrewdness, strategy, [and] diplomacy” to lure women into bed (Ward 490). They would eventually use their developed rationality and strength to push forward their

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<sup>13</sup> Ward cited the German thinker Bachofen for discovering the unnatural male supremacy and the natural female supremacy, and naming it ‘gynaecocracy’. For more information: *Das Mutterrecht. Eine Untersuchung über die Gynaikokratie der alten Welt nach ihrer religiösen und rechtlichen Natur*. Stuttgart: Bachofen, J.J. 1861. Print.

“new-born egoistic reasons” and impose their dominance upon women (Ward 360). This was the beginning of the turning point in human evolutionary progress (Allen, “The Overthrow” 83).

The complete overthrow was caused by men’s recognition of paternity. Ward believed that this completely “reversed the whole social system” (341). As soon as the male began “to perceive that he, too, had a part in the continuance of the race,” children came to be seen as the joint product of the man and the woman (Ward 341). There was, however, uncertainty over who was whose child as a large number of men could be the father. The result of this was “monogamic or polygynic pairing [...] so that the father could be certain that no other man could have had a share in the creation of the children of one or several women with whom he lived” (Ward 342). Once paternity was established and joint authority over the children was discovered, men began “to exert [their] superior power in the direction of exacting not only favors but service from [women]” (Ward 345). This upheaval was the end of the gynaeocentric society and the beginning of the patriarchal:

The man saw that he was the master creature, that woman was smaller, weaker, less shrewd and cunning than he, and at the same time could be made to contribute to his pleasure and his wants, and he proceeded to appropriate her accordingly. [...] This produced a profound social revolution, overthrew the authority of woman, destroyed her power of selection, and finally reduced her to the condition of a mere slave of the stronger sex, although that strength had been conferred by her. (Ward 345)

According to Ward, this unnatural evolution stalled further human progress as it was “the subversion of nature’s method” (Ward 353). Moreover, “the primitive family was an unnatural androcratic excrescence upon society” (Ward 353). If humanity wanted to be regenerated, “it was high time that those forces which woman alone can wield be given free rein, and the whole machinery of society be set into full and harmonious operation” (Ward 259).

As noted in many articles and confirmed by scholars, Gilman was a Wardian (Allen, “The Overthrow” 59). She adored Ward and believed in the historical truth of his gynaeocentric theory, which she had defended in her book *Women and Economics* (1898). She saw it as “the most important that has been offered the world since the Theory of Evolution; and without exception the most important that has ever been put forward concerning women” (*The Man-Made World* 17). More so, Ward had “provided the theory that Gilman then appropriated, enlarged, and politicized in order to lend scientific credence to her arguments from a radically restructured future and a liberated gender politics” (Davis, “His and Herland” 75). “We have taken it for granted,” argued Gilman, “that since the dawn of civilization ‘mankind’ meant men-kind, and the world was theirs” (*The Man-Made World* 4). The world of woman “was the home; because she was female, [...] [her world was] strictly limited to her feminine occupations and interests” (*The Man-Made World* 7). Like Ward, she denounced this as grievously interfering “with the laws of nature [...] [and perverting] the order of

nature” (*The Man-Made World* 19;20). Natural evolution stagnated as a consequence of male dominance:

The relatively small size of women, deliberately preferred, steadfastly chosen, and so built into the race, is a blow at real human progress in every particular. In our upward journey we should and do grow larger, leaving far behind us our dwarfish progenitors. Yet the male, in his unnatural position as selector, preferring for reasons both practical and sentimental, to have “his woman” smaller than himself, has deliberately striven to lower the standard of size in the race. (*The Man-Made World* 22)

Although Gilman wrote enthusiastically about Ward, the feelings were not mutual (Davis, “His and Herland” 74). Ward did not see her as a skillful contributor to his gynaecocentric theory but rather as a poet “whose creativity provided grist to his mill” (Allen, “The Overthrow” 70). Initially oblivious to Ward’s undervaluation, Gilman propagated his theory and was responsible for the widespread circulation of it: “I pitched into that Woman chapter first. [...] Now I am trying to arrange with some big magazine to write an article on that tremendous theory of yours – it ought to be popularized at once” (Gilman to Ward, June 30, 1903). Whereas Gilman’s *Women and Economics* had seven printings and multiple language translations, Ward’s *Dynamic Sociology* (1883) sold a mere 500 copies (Allen, “The Overthrow” 74;60). So although Gilman initially adopted the role of fan and disciple, she was a much bigger name in society and provided Ward a huge platform.

However, Gilman started to notice Ward’s disinterest in her work and was “clearly hurt that Ward apparently had not read [...] her widely touted *Women and Economics*, which she had dedicated to him” (Davis, “His and Herland” 74). The fact that he publicly bemoaned the undervaluation of his reasoning and the lack of sociological and professional support, offended her immensely as “she saw herself as working tirelessly to promote [his theories]” (Davis, “The Two Mrs. Stetsons” 74): “I’ve done my humble best at it, in lecture, book, and article these many years” (Gilman to Ward, March 15, 1906). She sadly came to the conclusion that she must have overrated his interest (Gilman to Ward, June 30, 1903). Gilman consequently became increasingly bitter over his disinterest in her work and grew skeptical of his ideas, even more than any other contemporary critic (Allen, “The Overthrow” 61). This realization made her reread Ward’s *Pure Sociology*, and no longer wearing rose-colored glasses, her unconditional admiration and acclaimed posture as a Wardian declined severely. She started to question Ward’s view on the overthrow of gynaecocentric culture as his explanation did no longer convince her and seemed inconclusive (Allen, “The Overthrow” 74). Gilman came up with a new model of the overthrow in which women’s secondary position was due to patriarchy’s “abnormal sexuo-economic relation”: men saw economic advantage in enslaving women (*The Man-Made World* 23).

Men, uselessly hunting uncertain prey, naturally lazy and parasitic, faced an economically uncertain world. Over time, they jealously realized that nonhunting woman – that is, woman the gatherer, agriculturalist, artisan, trader, and manufacturer – enjoyed prosperity and predictable sustenance. Men followed, emulated, participated, then took over women’s industries, forcibly excluding them,

then advancing these industries over thousands of years into their modern forms. Thereby previously parasitic men robbed women [and] instituted the custom of enslaving the female. (Allen, "The Overthrow" 74-75)

However, the "subjection of woman had involved to an enormous degree the maternalizing of man" (*The Man-Made World* 127). The sex-driven, highly dominant man was forced to take care of his enslaved woman as there were tasks "impossible to male energy alone," and he consequently could not lose her (*The Man-Made World* 127). He had to learn "to work, to serve, to be human," and most importantly "to love and care" for his female; "lest he lose her, he feed her and, perforce, her young" (*The Man-Made World* 127;141). This economic point of view clearly deviated from Ward's perspective, and deemed women's economic dependence as a cause of androcentric culture – not a consequence. Moreover, the forced caretaking and loving was believed to evolve into true love and affection, which on his turn would eventually lead to sexual equality (*The Man-Made World* 129). Gilman was convinced that the "long years of oppression" were a "temporary subversion [...] of the initial superiority of [the female] sex" and would pass as soon as men "were made part mother" (*The Man-Made Word* 128-129). It was her belief that men could contribute more to evolution if there were "two highly developed parents rather than one," and apparently the only way possible was patriarchy:

Therefore, sexual equality has been slowly evolved, not only by increasing the importance of the male element in reproduction, but by developing race-qualities in the male, so long merely a reproductive agent. The last step of this process has been the elevation of the male of genus homo to full racial equality with the female, and this has involved her temporary subjection. Both her physical and psychical tendencies have been transplanted into the organism of the male. He has been made the working mother of the world. (*The Man-Made World* 131)

Finally the long strain was over as "neither men nor the world were any longer benefiting [from female] subordination" (*The Man-Made World* 136). Even more, humanity had reached a stage in which a social duty was felt to "pull against the sex-ties that have been for so long the only ties that we have recognized" (*The Man-Made World* 138). The 'sexuo-economic' relation had thus ultimately driven man "up to where he can become fully human," and pushed humanity towards equality (*The Man-Made World* 142). While it had deepened and developed the human soul to its best possible capacity, the most difficult part had yet to happen as society needed to recognize, accept and internalize these "new forces" (*The Man-Made World* 143). Gilman believed that this step would be the hardest. She argued that "society has always been stone blind toward the future, has always hated and hindered every step of progress, [and] has always done its feeble best to prevent the advance of the world" ("Women and Democracy" 38). So even though societal changes were within reach, Gilman knew it was nearly impossible. Yet, she kept on fighting and pleading in order to convince as many people as possible.

This revolutionary striving for the freedom of women in patriarchal society seemingly corresponded with the feminist struggle of that time. Yet, Gilman strongly condemned feminists who complained about women's subjugation, for she believed it "should never be mentioned nor thought of" – "for the up-building of human life on earth [women] could afford to have [their] own held back" (*The Man-Made World* 136). She even called out women for blowing things out of proportion: "When the centuries of slavery and dishonor [...] seem long to women, let them remember the millions and millions of years when puny, pygmy, parasitic males struggled for existence, and were used or not like a half-tried patent medicine" (*The Man-Made World*, 135). She claimed that "women could well afford their period of subjection for the sake of a conquered world" and that "women should remember that they are still here" (*The Man-Made World* 135). So in fact, Gilman denounced the feminist outcry of unnatural gendered mechanisms and dissociated herself from the woman's liberation movements.

#### **1.2.4. Eugenic procreation**

With a renewed view on motherhood, the configuration of the home and the origin of female suppression, Gilman was well on her way to redefine womanhood. Yet, near the end of her life, she started to adhere to a controversial line of evolutionary thought, eugenic procreation, which contributed to Gilman's reputation as a radical feminist (Seitler 63). She claimed that it was women's duty, as mothers, "to regenerate the race [and] make it clean":

Is the race weak? She can make it strong. Is it stupid? She can make it intelligent. Is it foul with disease? She can make it clean. Whatever qualities she finds desirable she can develop in the race, through her initial function as a mother. We should have conventions of young women gathered to study what is most needed in their race and how they may soonest develop it. For instance, far-seeing Japanese women might determine to raise the standard of height, or patriotic French women determine to raise the standard of fertility, or wise American women unite with the slogan, "No more morons!" (*His Religion and Hers* 85)

When Gilman wrote "to make it clean," she was referring to racial and sexual issues in society. In 1927, Gilman argued that birth rates "of many races should be restricted for sheer economic and political necessity" and even wished for the removal of the least cultivated African-Americans in society "until such point as they evolved to an as high a level as whites" ("A Suggestion" 78). This clearly resembled Gilman's view on men, as they too were once of a lesser level than women. The solution for the gender inequality was patriarchy, which was supposed to discharge once the equality was reached. Therefore, her claim that African Americans need to be evolved to a higher level is not intentionally racist but only expresses the flaws of society. Whereas gender equality was nearly reached, the social problem of uneducated African Americans had just arisen. Because Gilman wanted to re-establish the natural order and allow further evolutionary

progress, she aspired to raise humanity and cultivate as many people as possible, regardless of one's race or gender:

A plan of organized labor that would make all negroes self supporting; a plan of education that would make the whole race rise in social evolution. ("A Suggestion" 85)

Gilman's ambition to get men and women to same status is handled in 2.3. She made her affections towards "the negro race" clear in *A Suggestion on the Negro Problem*, published in 1908. Although Gilman deemed the African-Americans "a race widely dissimilar and in many respects inferior," she admitted that the race had the capacity to become a worthy part of society (1908, 78). That "so many negroes, in this brief time, have made such great progress is the element not only of hope, but of security in facing our problem" ("A Suggestion" 79). Even more, she had sympathy for their condition as it was created "much against their wills" and they were "so suddenly thrown" in society, which makes the inequality "with us [...] not remarkable" ("A Suggestion" 79)

Free – an alien race, in a foreign land; under social, economic, political and religious conditions to which he was by heredity a stranger. ("A Suggestion" 79)

Though racist in her belief that the African-American civilians are "far inferior to other members," Gilman still deemed them "essential to the life of the whole" and "an advantage to us all" once elevated ("A Suggestion" 80). By enlisting the least cultivated African-Americans and removing them for a while from society, Gilman believed that things would change for the better. That is, if they stayed in society, they would stall the overall cultivation and progression of society ("A Suggestion" 83). The enlisted groups would be trained and educated "as much as each individual [could] take"; "every negro graduated would be better fitted to take a place in the community" ("A Suggestion 83). Eventually "the bureau of Labor and Education" would become a "school for all ages" as the younger generation of African-Americans would start education at a normal school ("A Suggestion" 85).

Gilman claimed that "not until we attained the idea of evolution as the main law of life did any of us dream that we were a growing race instead of a stationary race" ("A Suggestion" 89). As seen in 2.3, she believed that humanity had finally reached the point of social growth and that we consequently could "work toward perfection and approach more closely to it in every generation" ("A Suggestion" 90). The inequality between the races was a problem but was not insuperable, as appropriate education could cultivate everyone. And as mentioned before, the inequality between men and women was well on its way to resolution.

The major factor in overcoming social problems was motherhood, but her position towards it changed drastically. Whereas she initially argued that both parents were essential in the child's upbringing, her conviction radically changed under the influence of eugenic feminism. She would now advocate "the disaggregation of reproduction from patriarchal authority" as children needed



“the best education possible” (“A Suggestion” 88). She was convinced that, like communal kitchens, childcare should become “a form of community labor” (Seitler 77). She wondered:

The builders and decorators of the great cathedrals of the past gave successive lifetimes to the gradual perfection of a mighty work. Can we not hold the same attitude toward the mightiest work of God, the human race? (“A Suggestion” 89)

Therefore, society should try to “develop a race far more intelligent, efficient, and well-organized, living naturally at a much higher level of social progress” (Seitler 78). This entailed so-called ‘social motherhood’ (dealt with in 2.1.), which “required an evacuation of sex attraction” and was extremely focused on eugenic progress (*Women and Economics* 209). Casual sex, or non-eugenic sex as Gilman called it, “tends to pervert and exhaust desire,” and “bears no relation to the original needs of the organism” (*Women and Economics* 31). Moreover, “sexual pleasure itself came to be a sign and symptom of degeneracy” (Seitler 83). Now that society had grown socially, Gilman had hoped that “[women] would progressively de-emphasize their sexual characteristics” and accept reproduction as the sole reason for sex (Moynihan 204). Eugenic procreation, thus, “changed conceptions of both family and motherhood” (Seitler 82). Gilman believed that reproduction became the identity and imperative, as women’s renunciation was required for the common good (Seitler 82).

### 1.3. Intermediate conclusion

When going over the main aspects of Gilman’s reform career, it is understandable that critics have generally deemed Gilman’s views radical. Especially when taking in to account Gilman’s notorious and trouble past. Already as a young child, her father did not treat her typically. He made sure that his daughter grew up as a well-educated and independent young woman, who could stand up for herself and question ruling principles. After seeing how her mother suffered from patriarchy’s emphasis on female inferiority, Gilman knew she had to object and used her acquired knowledge to successfully tackle the gendered mechanisms in society. Though she married twice, her independent spirit did not give in and she kept on expressing her discomfort with society. She even transferred the care of her daughter to her husband for the sake of her social reform career. This short synopsis of Gilman’s life has made it clear that her life was stuffed with radical situations and decisions. So based on her life, critics’ reasoning that Gilman is a radical feminist is completely understandable.

Yet, her theoretical convictions make some much needed nuances. Her view on motherhood and the evolution of mankind was highly idealized as she claimed that children should always come first and that everything should be done to ensure their future and wellbeing. Gilman’s architectural feminism allowed her to develop such a theory. With a new configuration of the home, women were freed from the supposedly female house chores, and domestic duties and childcare were organized on communal scale. She strengthened her theory with the conviction that society was ready for

social change. It was crucial, however, that society recognized the necessity of change because otherwise, natural evolution would be stalled once more. Gilman's aspiration to further evolve humanity and create generations of enlightened men and women, clarified her idiosyncratic emphasis on motherhood as only motherhood could procure eugenic evolution. Although she initially argued that a child needed a father and a mother of equal intellect and standing, her conviction gradually became more controversial. In *Women and Economics* she argued that patriarchy was nature's way of fine-tuning men and women, which in doing so, created the best possible parents. Moreover, women should have the right to combine a career with motherhood, as they could easily leave the child with someone else. This evolved, under the influence of eugenic feminism, into the conviction that only the prime caretakers and educators should handle the youngest generation; like communal kitchens, Gilman strived for communal childcare. By the end of her career, her commitment to motherhood had reached its radical peak as she conservatively claimed that sex should only result in reproduction; she refuted casual sex as it did not serve the higher purpose of elevating humanity.

Gilman's incentives to fight for women's freedom have to be seen in a wider context. Her social fight for women's freedom had nothing to do with the so-called "unnatural" male domination and even less with the "unnatural" female oppression to which feminist movements objected. Gilman deemed patriarchy nature's way of getting both the male and female sex on the same page, so they could work on mankind's evolution. She accused women of blowing things out of proportion and forgetting the greater good: "Women could well afford their period of subjection for the sake of a conquered world. [...] When the centuries of slavery and dishonor [...] seem long to women, let them remember the millions and millions of years when puny pygmy, parasitic males struggled for existence" (*Women and Economics* 135). Although Gilman felt that feminism was "reasonable and necessary," it was "by no means as important as some of its protagonists held" (*The Living* 187). She seemingly only supported the feminist movements as "women's liberation was the precondition of human progress" (Van Wienen 624). In 1897, Gilman clarified her thoughts on feminism in a letter to her second husband:

You see I was to speak on Woman Suffrage pure and simple, and that never did interest me. I can only fire up on that subject when I apply it to other things in life (Gilman to George Gilman, 1897).

Within her theoretical work, Gilman verbalized her convictions and thoughts on society. Therefore, they offer a great insight in her contextual posture. After the previous four points it has become clear that Gilman stepped forward as a radical humanist with a revolutionary view on motherhood and humanity's evolution. She consequently created the posture of a radical social reformer, who fought for women's liberation. Even more, she never – in her theoretical works – identified nor presented herself as a feminist.

## 2. Gilman's textual posture

In part three of the analysis of Gilman's posture, the textual dimension of Meizoz' concept will be handled. Based on her convictions, I have divided her fictional work into realistic, non-realistic and autobiographical fiction. These three generalities encompass several genres Gilman frequently used. I will start each section with a brief elaboration on the genre, before diving into her prose and analyzing how she uses fiction to express her inner self. Since "textual clues point to the narrator's authorship," it will be interesting to see if and how Gilman's posture in the textual dimension differs from her posture in the contextual dimension (Cortiel 39).

The chosen short stories for the analysis are not randomly picked. Gilman started her literary career around 1890 with the publication of *That Rare Jewel* and *Circumstances Alter Cases*, and continued writing short stories until 1895. From then on, "she criss-crossed the country as a lecturer [and] attended European labor and women's conferences" (Shulman xxv). It was also the period in which she wrote many of her now-famous non-fiction works such as *Women and Economics* (1898) and "A Suggestion on the Negro Problem" (1908). By 1909, however, she found it increasingly difficult to publish whatever she wanted and decided to start an own monthly journal, *The Forerunner* (Shulman xxvi). From then on, till the conclusion of the periodical in 1916, she wrote short stories again. After seven years of *The Forerunner*, Gilman focused on writing articles and eventually her autobiography, which appeared posthumously in 1935 (P. Allen 30). There are, thus, two periods in which Gilman's short fiction was published: 1890-1895 and 1909-1916. In order to represent her work correctly, I will cover each year of writing and discuss at least one short story published in that year.<sup>14</sup>

### 2.1. Introduction

Joanne Russ, feminist writer and critic, has been challenging "the prototypical patriarchal ideology" in writing (Cortiel 35). She argued that the "traditional plot-patterns [...] are dramatic embodiments of what a culture believes to be true – or what it would like to be true" (Russ 83). And since "culture is male, [o]ur literary myths are for heroes, not heroines" (Russ 83). As women in patriarchal society were denied an own identity and sexuality, female literary characters were also denied any trait of an individual. In the stories told by Western culture, women were constructed as second-class citizens without a will of their own. Therefore, Russ appealed to a radical rewriting of the narrative of authorship and even stated that if a woman writer "abandons female protagonists altogether and sticks to male myths with male protagonists [...], she falsifies herself and much of her own experience" (90). "Female character in fiction," could displace "male authority and authorship"

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<sup>14</sup> In chronological order: *That Rare Jewel* (1890), *The Giant Wistaria & An Extinct Angel* (1891), *The Yellow Wall-Paper* (1892), *Through This* (1893), *Five Girls* (1894), *An Unnatural Mother* (1895), *According To Solomon* (1909), *Two Storks* (1910), *Mrs. Beazley's Deeds* (1911), *A Strange Land* (1912), *Bee Wise & A Council of War* (1913), *His Mother* (1914), *Dr. Clair's Place* (1915), *Joan's Defender* (1916).

according to Cortiel as it was the key to “unhinge the essence of [women’s] own identity as women” (35).

When women writers sought and found artistic modes of expression to articulate their own authorship, they consequently began “to envision alternative plots of women’s live” with attention to female sexuality and independence, distressed marriages and deceptive balances of power (Silbergleid 160). Such narratives represented new possibilities for women and went beyond the traditional marriage plot by refusing to comply with social oppression as codified in the conventional literature. In addition to different plot structures, these ‘female narratives’ differed formally from conventional literature. The majority of them were more interested in the short story than in the “full-length three-decker Victorian novel” as new subjects required new forms of expression (Showalter ix). The short story offered women in the late nineteenth-century “flexibility and freedom from the traditional plots [...] which invariably ended in the heroine’s marriage or her death” (Showalter ix). It was the perfect medium for women writers to ventilate their convictions and express their body of thought to the rest of the world.

The aforementioned innovations are applicable to Gilman, as “literary practices of her cultural moment may have constrained [her], causing [her] to look to other techniques of representation” (Rich 167). She found those techniques in her reformist convictions which she carefully kneaded into powerful narrative techniques by which she could “represent female desire as a creative force in artistic imagination as well as in biological reproduction” and could differ from the popular male-dominated literary culture (Showalter xi). Her focus on “transforming the forms of desire, and the terms and genres of then-prevailing [patriarchy] generated the narratives and strategies for which she is known today– from the 1892 short story, *The Yellow Wall-Paper*, to her advocacy of ‘baby-gardens’ and kitchenless homes” (Allen, *The Feminism* xv). Ultimately, the analysis of the chosen literary genres and the short stories will bring forward Gilman’s textual posture and will demonstrate if she can be denominated as a radical feminist writer.

## **2.2. Anti-realistic fiction**

One of the most popular modes to articulate feminist critique was anti-realistic fiction, also known as the fiction “of fantasy, illogicality, and absurdity” (Littlejohn 250). It is “the whole body of non-imitative writing, including earlier domestic instances and an adversarial stance towards what many [...] consider the great realist tradition” (Kuehl 18). Anti-realist writers such as James Joyce, Franz Kafka, Samuel Beckett and Djuna Barnes dramatize the subconscious experience and often present “the dream-life of a civilization” or “the nightmares and visions of an age” (Littlejohn 250). Their anti-realism is either achieved “through a reduction or intensification of reality,” or, more often, “through a radical and systematic distortion” (Littlejohn 254). Jorge Luis Borges, for example, creates “new orders of reality,” which he describes meticulously as a universe of pure ideality, and

“chilling allegories of the existing world” (Littlejohn 255-256). His anti-realities force the reader “to stretch so far beyond the demands of a closed and traditional scheme” (Littlejohn 256).

Literary feminists joined the anti-realistic tradition as they wanted to expose “the absurdities and limitations of patriarchal practices and institutions” (Knight, “Introduction” xii). In writing feminist allegories, women writers found a way to describe “the failures of the present and the dangers of the future,” and criticize patriarchal discourses (Showalter xviii). Gilman was no exception to this. She often expressed her discontent with the everyday fiction as “fiction, under androcentric culture, has not given any true picture of woman’s life” and suggested that there were “fresh fields of fiction” in which women could be depicted truthfully (*The Man-Made World* 102;104). She was mainly interested in the feminist utopian narrative and the allegory, both emplotments she frequently used to articulate feminist critiques (Rich 167).

### **2.2.1. Feminist utopian fiction**

A utopia is both “a movement of outrage and a movement of hope” (Stimpson 2). It rejects and criticizes the ruling power structures which deprive society and mankind of supposedly unsuitable aspects, and at the same time, proposes a new future and emphasizes the otherwise repressed citizens and facets. The desire of the utopian impulse is to “progress from the current state of things to a more perfect, more idealized state” (Whigham 220). Because of that, it is the perfect narrative technique to give expression to feminist thinking, given that it envisions “a dream of a basically different world; the opposite of the existing patriarchal world” (Halsa 327).

Feminist utopian fiction provides “an alternative story for women” and develops “a world they would like to see achieved” (Silbergleid 160); it is the generic term for an imagined society (Kessler 7). The utopian world can, however, only be understood in relation to the current state of affairs: “the authenticity of the utopian fantasy reverberates against the illogic of contemporary social and economic discrimination” (Pfaelzer 282). The reader “wanders between the real and the utopian, between the patriarchal and the feminist” (Pfaelzer 282). Overtly criticizing the established power and the existing sexist conceptualization of woman’s position as a second-class citizen, utopian fiction calls into question the authority of the ruling cultural, political and literary dominion. It supplies in fiction “what the authors believe society [...] and women, lack in the here-and-now” (Russ 81):

Feminist utopian novels reconstruct citizenship by interrogating ideological assumptions at the root of civil rights theory, particularly its reliance on the sexual contract and the family romance narrative. While many feminist citizenships still depend on such assumptions, utopian fiction deconstructs the logic of natural rights and replaces traditional governments and nation-states with social structures based on community and global-ecological awareness. They thereby underscore the importance of narrative for feminist philosophy and political theory. (Silbergleib 156)

The definition of utopia “as a fictionalized society in the progress of becoming better [...], as a guide” and the belief that the utopia is “realizable, possible or achievable,” is clearly present in Gilman’s literary work (Kessler 7). Gilman does not create outer world societies based on fantasy, but relies on realism and uses it subversively. Although Kessler claims that “the alternative or partner-oriented gender roles [Gilman] depicts *could be* realized or achieved then or in the present-day society,” I do not fully agree with her (7). Especially the all-female parthenogenetic society of *Herland* does not seem like a future possibility. *Bee Wise*, however, does have a realistic foundation but I will return to this story in the next section.

Pfaelzer also disagrees with Kessler and argues that whereas traditional utopias tend to take place in distant worlds and faraway planets, authors of feminist utopias often established their new societies in the patriarchal world. Because of that, “the utopian world interacts with and impacts upon the present,” which is the wished for effect of feminist writers (Pfaelzer 284). He notes that many feminist utopias even take it a step further than traditional utopias as they reproduce “women’s marginality, which already exists in [patriarchal] society” (284). So the feminist utopia is not only situated within the known society, it also reproduces societal demarcations and even ends “up privileging the very characteristics assigned to women in patriarchal cultures” (Silbergleib 170).

Gilman came to the realization that “readers would more readily accept nontraditional views if they were presented as stories illustrating possibilities for future action” (Kessler 6). By placing her new society within the known patriarchal society, there would be some form of familiarity and awareness that although things might change, it would not be for the worse. Gilman was convinced that one should “teach, not by preaching but by truly re-presenting; and we should grow up becoming acquainted with a far wider range of life in books than could even be ours in person” (*The Man-Made World* 21). In representing the ideal society, readers would be presented an alternative to ruling society and would start to think for themselves. The question is, however, do they endorse or subvert the patriarchal body of thought in their narratives?

#### **i. *Five Girls* (1894)<sup>15</sup>**

*Five Girls* anticipates the utopian dream of establishing an all-female community most notable portrayed in the three short stories below and the *Herland*-trilogy.<sup>16</sup> This story recounts the decision of five college friends to go live together as they “hate to be separated the way [they] shall be” (83). Fortunately for them, their combined professions and attributes could facilitate their plans: Serena

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<sup>15</sup> Unless stated otherwise, the quotations are taken from Gilman, *The Yellow Wall-Paper and Other Stories* (1995).

<sup>16</sup> Although *Herland*, one of her most popular works, is a perfect example of utopian fiction, I restrict my research to just the short stories. These have not been analyzed much and deserve more attention. Additionally, this makes sure that I do not dwell on characters and plots that have been the subject of so many articles. For an analysis and more information on *Herland*, I refer to Johnson-Bogart, Kim. “The Utopian Imagination of Charlotte Perkins Gilman: Reconstruction of Meaning in “Herland”.” *Pacific Coast Philology* 27.1 (1992): 85-92. Print.; Johnston, Georgia. “Three Men in Herland: Why They Enter the Text.” *Utopian Studies* 1.4 (1991): 55-59. Print.; Peyser, Thomas Galt. “Reproducing Utopia: Charlotte Perkins Gilman and “Herland”.” *Studies in American Fiction* 20.1 (1992): 1-16. Print.

was a promising architect, Julia an interior designer, Maud a painter, and Olive was going to have “some money as soon as [she is] twenty-one”(84). It was “but a year or two before the lovely plan came true, for after all there was nothing impossible in it” (85).

In line with Gilman’s architectural reconfiguration of the home, the girls in the story plan to build “a sort of apartment home, [...] a beautiful ‘mode tenement’ affair, artistic and hygienic and esthetic and everything else; with central kitchens, and a hall to exhibit in and so on” (85). Furthermore, they express their discomfort with marital conventions and societal confusion about women and domestic duties: “[I]f we do marry we don’t mean to give up our work. I mean to marry some time, perhaps – but I don’t mean to cook! I mean to decorate always, and make lots of money and hire a housekeeper” (85). Just like Gilman, these girls do not agree with patriarchal society forcing married women to stay at home and become the cook, the cleaner, the mother, the educator etc. Domestic tasks are to be performed by specially trained individuals, since not everyone is a born cook, cleaner or educator. Allowing everyone to develop their own talent, would give rise to the best possible community. The five ladies “are all grown and trained,” and want to work their loved professions (85).

As independent women living together, they clearly personify Gilman’s wishes for the future. With a communal kitchen, organized childcare, and clear distribution of domestic and professional work, it is clear that Gilman already laid bare the seeds of many of her convictions in this overlooked short story. She would eventually fine-tune them in other short stories, in order to present the fully grown feminist utopian community in *Herland*.

## ii. *A Strange Land* (1912)<sup>17</sup>

This short story describes “a certain land wherein all the [...] growth and progress were made by the people” and which presented “an entirely new form of government – a Democracy” (182). It was a land where “people managed their affairs; all the people, and all the affairs,” regardless of one’s family, clan or sex (182). But more importantly, they all “gave their minds to the problem of How to Make Better People and continually studied it” (183). Since women had “especial love for maintaining and improving People,” they were highly adorned and “stood high in the government” (183). The inhabitants translated their ambition of humanity’s improvement to ecological improvement as they created “a Blooming Garden” where birds sang in the trees (184). For foreign people, “it was [...] a strange land” (183)

*A Strange Land* depicts many of Gilman’s theoretical convictions of how society should be: a land without the all encompassing male supremacy, with sex equality, with highly deemed motherhood, and with the intention of improving the world and evolving humanity. However, the story ends with the threatening interest of the younger generation in foreigners’ country and governmental system. This could possible result in an overthrow of the utopian society and consequently imply a

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<sup>17</sup> Unless stated otherwise, the quotations are taken from Gilman, *The Yellow Wall-Paper and Other Stories* (1995).

return to the contemporary state of society. The looming danger is in line with Gilman's belief that society needs to realize and accept the natural structuring of humanity, or all the enlightened thinking and writing has been for nothing:

Unless the human soul sees these new forces, feels hem, gives way to them in loyal service, it fails to reach the level from which all further progress must proceed, and falls back. (*Women and Economics* 143)

### iii. *Bee Wise* (1913)<sup>18</sup>

Although *Herland* is the better known utopian narrative, *Bee Wise* is considered to be Gilman's best and most ambitious (Kessler 211). It tells the story of a group of enterprising women who "were advanced in their ideas" and took up the idea of establishing two utopian communities in California: "Beewise and Herways" (265;263). These were to be "a little Eden [...] by women, for women and children, [and would] be of real help to humanity" (266).<sup>19</sup> Over the course of twenty years, the two towns grew out to be self-supporting and incredibly stable. They built a "cable line from beach to hill which made the whole growth possible," a powerhouse "supplemented by wind-mills" and "a solar engine [...] to minimize labor and add to their producing capacity" (267). Ultimately, Herways and Beewise became prime examples of how communities should be organized and their ideas spread far and wide.

The women of Beewise and Herways embody many facets of Gilman's theory on the natural evolution of mankind. The most obvious reference to her convictions is the town's name Beewise. While it clearly refers to 'being wise', it more importantly hints at Ward's ideal of a gynaeocentric society structured like a beehive, in which men are treated "contemptuously by queen bees as drones" (Allen, "The Overthrow" 64). The women in the narrative similarly see men as 'help': "We want to show what a bunch of women can do successfully. Men can help, but this time we will manage" (268). Furthermore, Beewise and Herways were seen as the mere starting point of humanity's improvement. It became obvious that these women-centered towns were hugely successful and that the time had come for them to "swarm like the bees and start [other towns]" (270).

These references to the animal world are not just randomly chosen metaphors but are carefully chosen. They resemble Ward's and Gilman's initial belief that the natural evolution of mankind has been distorted by male supremacy, and therefore differs from the rest of the animal world. The male-female hierarchy of bees, storks and spiders are just mere examples of female dominance and consequently act as model for the supposedly natural configuration of humanity.

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<sup>18</sup> Unless stated otherwise, the quotations are taken from Gilman, *The Yellow Wall-Paper, Herland, and Selected Writings* (1999).

<sup>19</sup> It is important to mention that the establishment of the utopian experiment was only possible after 'the Mother' of the group had been gifted ten million dollar from her uncle (265).



Gilman even concludes her narrative with the meaningful phrase: “Go to the ant, thou sluggard, consider her ways and be wise” (271).

Even more, the women of *Beewise* and *Herways* eugenically selected men: “They must prove clean health – for a high grade of motherhood was the continuing ideal of the group” (269). Gilman’s eugenic theory and importance of motherhood radiates from this narrative and was part of her utopian vision. Although it would be unimaginable for a society to carefully select appropriate procreators, she deemed it highly important and crucial in successfully evolving humanity. Creating this utopian narrative was Gilman’s way of creating a universe in which all of her beliefs were applied as fundamental principles and lead mankind to the restoration of its natural evolution.

### 2.2.2. Allegories

As an extended metaphor, an allegory is particularly useful when wishing to criticize society indirectly. The used representation is a disguised, obscured form of the real object of representation, and makes an “unrepresentableness represented, an unspeakableness spoken” (Johnson 67). Pierre Fontanier clarifies the allegory and its value to literature: “Allegory is a proposition which has a double meaning – one literal and the other spiritual – taken together” (114). A thought is presented through the image of another thought, “which can properly make the first more perceptible and striking than if it were presented directly and without any sort of veil” (Johnson 67). Through personification, anthropomorphism and symbolism, an allegory succeeds in veiling the spiritual meaning and camouflaging the true meaning of the narrative. As such, the allegory offers many writers a convenient way to make their critical voices heard. Many feminist writers have employed this strategy to formulate their problems with patriarchal society and the female suppression.

#### i. *An extinct angel* (1891)<sup>20</sup>

In *An extinct angel*, the narrator tells the tragic story of the demise of “a species of angel inhabiting this planet” (163). Every family had an angel which was “to have no passion [...] – unless self-sacrifice may be called a passion” – and was “required [...] to do kitchen service, cleaning, sewing, nursing, and other mundane tasks” (163). Several degrading sorts of physical labor were “relegated wholly to [them], [...] doing things as their natural duty which the human creature loathed and scorned” (164-165). While doing this, they had to “wear a smile for [mankind’s] benefit” and keep their robes “spotlessly clean” because “the human creature took great delight in contemplating the flowing robes” (164). Furthermore, the angels were kept dumb as “it was harder to reconcile things when the angels had any sense” (165). The angels “- bless their submissive, patient hearts! – never thought of questioning [their condition]” (164). Due to intermarriages, however, angels became more intelligent and started to question their position within society. However, as domestic abuse

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<sup>20</sup> Unless stated otherwise, the quotations are taken from Gilman, *The Yellow Wall-Paper, Herland, and Selected Writings* (1999).

was legal, angels were beaten with a stick when they did not obey (163). This ultimately resulted in the extinction of “the race as a race” (165).

When transposing the described balance of power between angels and men to the balance of power between women and men in patriarchal society, the similarities are legion. The inferior domestic situation of women is quite similar to the inferior slavery of angels; cf. the following paragraphs:

Their embellished dress was chosen not for utility but to gratify their sexual master. Women performed the bulk of domestic labor and the lowest status of nondomestic labor refused by men. Denied equal education and career opportunities, women everywhere were destitute of both intellectual energy and aspiration. – Allen on the female situation (“The Overthrow” 66)

Yet one of her first and most rigid duties was the keeping of her angelic robes spotlessly clean. The human creature took great delight in contemplating the flowing robes of the angels. Their changeful motion suggested to him all manner of sweet and lovely thoughts and memories. [...] Therefore flow they must, and the ample garments waved unchecked over the weary limbs of the wearer. – Gilman on the enslaved angels (165)

It is quite obvious to interpret this allegory as a critical prospect of women’s condition in patriarchal society. With this allegory, Gilman criticized and questioned the supposedly natural submissiveness of women and male domination. By replacing women by angels, she found a way to express her discontent with the position of women in society. In line with her convictions, she belittlingly told the story of the celestial creature which – “bless their submissive, patient hearts! – never thought of questioning [their inferior position]” (164). Published a few years after *Women and Economics*, Gilman’s dedication to the natural evolution of mankind was still fiercely present and she expressed hopes that things would change for the better. The subtly implemented phrases such as “this looks strange to us to-day as we consider these past conditions” and “yes, it does seem strange to this enlightened age” truly showcase Gilman’s strive to change society and her high hopes for the future (164;165).

Presented as an allegory but with a subtext rooted in historical facts, Gilman’s *An extinct angel* “effectively illustrates [her] view that domestic servility is both unhealthy and potentially dangerous” (Showalter xvi). She hoped that by alienating the readers, an ‘aha-experience’ would be aroused and the readers would fully realize the imminent danger of patriarchal society for the future. Only when society came to realize and accept her evolutionary theory that the time has come to end female inferiority and place men and women next to one another, natural evolution would be ensured.

## ii. *Two Storks* (1910)<sup>21</sup>

In 1910 Gilman published the allegory *Two Storks* in which anthropomorphized storks portrayed the perfect patriarchal couple and which summarized many aspects of Gilman's critical view on society. At the beginning of the story, the male stork declared his love for the female stork and called her "his All-Satisfying Wife" (203). He became enthralled with the "marvelous instincts and processes of motherhood" and loved how she "sat [on the nest] so long, so lovingly, to such noble ends" (203). Still, "he labored [assiduously] to help her build the nest, to help her feed the young" and "performed his share of the brooding" (204). Yet when time flew by, he started to envision his future and longed for "vast heights and boundless spaces of the earth streaming beneath him" (204). One day, when the bird migration started, he yelled "It is time to Go! [...] I must Go! Goodbye my wife! Goodbye my children!" (204).

When keeping in mind Gilman's initial belief in the gynaecocentric theory, it can be argued that she has described the natural situation of female supremacy before the overthrow. While the female was initially much loved by the male, the realization of the benefits of a domestic wife changed everything. Little by little, he no longer appreciated the efforts of the female stork, and started to expect them. He could envision a future of his own because he expected his wife to take care of the nest and their children. He had the freedom to do whatever he wanted, whereas the female stork was supposed to obediently stay at home. This resembles Ward's (and Gilman's initial) gynaecocentric theory in which the "increasing desirability of woman's services" caused the gynaecocentric culture to shift to a male-dominated culture (Allen, "The Overthrow" 77).

True to her beliefs, Gilman did not end the story there. When the male stork prepared to fly out, the emancipated female stork immediately joined him and said: "Yes! It is time to Go! [...] I am ready! Come!" (204). She "spread her wide wings and swept and circled far and high above" (204). The male stork, however, was shocked and found it "preposterous" as her "wings are for brooding tender little ones! [...] Not for days and nights of ceaseless soaring!" (204). With this, Gilman described the typical relationship and power of balance between men and women in patriarchal society. Women needed to stay at home and take care of domestic duties, whereas men just needed to provide for his family. For a long time, this situation was considered normal and natural. But by the end of the nineteenth century, things began to change and women began to stand up to the oppression. The female stork in this allegory represents an enlightened and emancipated woman of that time who does not agree with male domination and female suppression. She has raised her children and wants her freedom back. The male stork accused her of forgetting "the Order of Nature" and deemed her an "unnatural Mother" (204). But with the children flying beside her, she retorted: "I was a Stork before I was a Mother! And afterward! And All the Time!" (205).

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<sup>21</sup> Unless stated otherwise, the quotations are taken from Gilman, *The Yellow Wall-Paper and selected stories of Charlotte Perkins Gilman* (1994).

Gilman strongly criticized the supposedly natural order of patriarchal society and its fixed placement of the woman in the home. In compliance with her beliefs, she deemed it normal for the female to question her position and leave the home. Gilman argued, that is, that women were fragmented “by a patriarchal, capitalist system” that “exercised confinement” and isolated them from the rest of the world (Gill 21).<sup>22</sup> By using animals, Gilman more strongly emphasized her belief that female independence is natural and that denying women their freedom is unnatural. Although the male stork initially forbade the female to fly out, she did not heed him. This resembles the feminist struggle of Gilman’s time. The Women’s Liberation Movements were incompatible with male supremacy and strived for female independence; they too wanted freedom. Gilman was convinced that many, like the male stork, will see female independence as unnatural but will eventually come to the conclusion that it is in fact the natural way of life and will further human evolution.

Not forgetting the importance of the family, the female stork only wanted to fly out when the children were old enough. And once they were, she could finally leave her solitary confinement and participate in society: “And the Storks were Flying” (205). Gilman envisioned this as the ideal future of society as the male stork ultimately flies out next his wife. So the male accepted that the female should no longer be kept at home, but should have the same freedom he has. In line with her later evolutionary theory, this is what Gilman saw as the requisite for human evolution: male and female flying out together, after having raised their children together.

### **2.3. Realistic fiction**

The term ‘realistic fiction’ might be seen as a paradoxical term, since “*realistic* is perhaps a contradictory term when used with the word *fiction*” (McElmeel 50). In fact, when speaking of realistic fiction it is fiction that has to be “realistic in terms of being within the realm of possibility” (McElmeel 50). It includes “all fiction, prosaic and poetical, dramatic and narrative, which makes any serious attempt at accuracy in the delineation of life” (Firkins 132). Therefore the story “must not [...] bring an imaginary world to our doorstep; [...] the setting must be realistic [...] in both time and place” (McElmeel 51). As such, the literary genres and works presented below will showcase realistic people, settings and happenings. Unlike Gilman’s anti-realistic fiction, these stories do not alienate readers but rather include them. By describing everyday events, it becomes familiar and authentic. Many of her stories tackle the unfair treatment of women and show different ways of how the female protagonist got out of her difficult situation, and how she took back her freedom.

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<sup>22</sup> See part 2 for a brief overview of Gilman’s convictions on the female restrictions. Gill (1998) and Allen (1988) offer an extensive overview of Gilman’s architectural feminism.

i. *That Rare Jewel* (1890)<sup>23</sup>

In this story, Gilman offers insight in the feelings of a young man and a young woman about chivalry. It starts off with male banter and lamentation on “modern girls” and “their high-minded social conscientiousness” (20). Sherman pitied himself after a female friend fell in love with him. They were “having all manner of good times,” when he “discovered that she was taking care of [his] heart all the time”: “Bah! It’s enough to make a man forswear womankind for ever” (20). Harold took it a step further by claiming that

Girls nowadays are awfully complex. There is no naturalness to them. Women were always mysterious enough, heaven knows; but “higher education” seems to have added an intense self-consciousness of their own intricacy. Where they used to be queer and couldn’t account for it, now they are queer and can give you a thousand reasons. It is wearing to a humble, plain, consistent, creature like man. [...] What a shame it is, that a man can’t find a natural honest woman, either for friend or sweetheart. (21)

Sherman, however, did not completely give up on women, and left the conversation to meet up with a female friend. At this point, the narration shifts from the male perspective to the female, and the narrator introduces Julia Farwell. She was waiting on Sherman, but expressed second thoughts: “I don’t know, mother. I hate to go with him all the time. He might think...” (21). Pretty much in line with the statements made by Sherman and Harold, Julia feared that she might give the wrong impression and wrongfully encouraging Sherman (21). Yet, her mother argued that “when [men] are kind and gentlemanly and polite to a girl, [...] the girl ought to quarrel with it” (22). She even deemed it improper to “try to take care of a man’s heart” and believed that she should “let [men] take care of themselves” (22).

Julia and Sherman eventually went for a walk, but – as Julia had dreaded – Sherman proposed. She immediately declined and they “silently [walked] back together,” after which he went to his room (23). Julia lamented about women’s pitiful situation: “It is something to grieve over, [...] to have things so that a girl cannot live naturally and honestly, try as she may” (23). While at the same time, Sherman complained about the “cursed, double-faced dishonesty” of women: “Lead a man on with the openest, baldest encouragement, till he’s fool enough really to show his heart, and then they’re so sorry!” (24).

Gilman wrote a critical story on Victorian courtship as the ritual confused men and women alike. Since men have to court women by socializing with them, and women have to politely socialize with men, no one really knows exactly what is going on. As both men and women need to socialize, it is difficult for both to distinguish between friends and lovers, and both fear giving the wrong impression. Although Julia tried her very best to not lead Sherman on, “it appears [she] did go too far” (23). However, tired of societal conventions having “things so that a girl cannot live naturally

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<sup>23</sup> Unless stated otherwise, the quotations are taken from Gilman, *The Yellow Wall-Paper and Other Stories* (1995).

and honestly, try as she may,” Julia decided “to enjoy the rest of [her] life as best [she] can, and not bother” (23). Rejecting the Victorian courtship, that has determined society for decades, was much needed for Gilman. Only by objecting to patriarchal rule, women could eventually attain the freedom they deserved.

ii. *The Giant Wistaria* (1891)<sup>24</sup>

This short story comprises two stories connected through the same setting, yet set apart a hundred years. The first storyline recounts an illegitimate pregnancy and shows how the grandparents mistreated their daughter after having given birth. Moreover, they separated mother and child: “Give me my child, mother, and then I will be quiet! [...] Art thou a mother and hast no pity on me, a mother? Give me my child!” (154). Although their intention was to take their daughter to England, where no one knew of the “stain”, the eventual conclusion was something completely different (155). She had to give up her own child and marry her cousin, who is “yet willing to marry her”: “He hath always desired her, but she would none of him, the stubborn! She hath small choice now!” (155). Regardless of what she wanted, she had to marry him now “or she stayeth ever in that chamber” (155). And on that note, the first storyline concludes.

In the second storyline, set years later, George and Mrs. Jenny rented the house for the summer but experienced frightening occurrences. They saw “a female ghost, [...] all wrapped up in shawl, and she had a big bundle under her arm [...] and a little red cross hung from her neck” (159). On one evening, they went in the cellar and saw “a woman [...] [with] a little red cross” at the bottom of the well (160). The family decided to get to the bottom of the mystery and have a closer look at the well. There they found a bucket on a chain with the remnants of “a very little baby, not more than a month” (162). Simultaneously, workmen were renovating the floor and broke out sides of the porch. “And there, in the strangling grasp of the roots of the great wisteria, lay the bones of a woman, from whose neck still hung a tiny scarlet cross on a thin chain of gold” (162).

*The Giant Wistaria* deals with “the suffering of women who are literally and metaphorically silenced by the patriarchy” (Knight, “Introduction” xvi). The daughter in the first storyline defied patriarchal conventions by having a baby out of wedlock and wanting to raise it on her own, much to the embarrassment of her parents. Not only were they ashamed of her, they locked her up like a madwoman. Since she did not emit patriarchal structure, she should be locked away. Even more, the father clarified to his wife that if he had known earlier, he would sooner have made sure to “see our child cleanly drowned, than living to this end!” (154). Obviously a patriarchal entity, the father dominated the mother and daughter, and decided what happened. While it is also clear that the mother tried to protect her daughter, the father had already made up his mind and did not regard her suggestions. Even when she emotionally expressed her fears for the life of their daughter as

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<sup>24</sup> Unless stated otherwise, the quotations are taken from Gilman, *The Yellow Wall-Paper, Herland, and Selected Writings* (1999).

“she grieveth sore for the child,” he said that she already had lost more than life (155). The mother did not want to marry off her daughter to her cousin, “a coarse fellow, and she ever shunned him” (155). Yet, the father believed that they should be happy that there still was someone willing to marry their daughter. A woman with a child out of wedlock was considered to be a shame, and the only way to get past it was “a new life to cover the old” (155). He called his own wife mad for questioning his solution, and “strode heavily” away of her (155).

The short story criticizes patriarchal silencing of women (Knight 1999, xvi). Although the reader has to put the pieces together, it is quite obvious that the daughter of the first story did not keep quiet and did not listen to her father, which ultimately resulted in her death. He tried to silence her by initially locking her up in her room, and secondly by returning to England and marrying her off. However, there was no way in which she would end up like her mother, who was silenced by her dominant husband. She did not allow him to silence her own voice and revolted against him, but she ended up being literally silenced. In the story there are numerous occasions in which her parents ask/demand her to be quiet: “and yet thou wilt not be quiet! [...] Hush hush, thou fool!” (154). The metaphorical and literal silencing of women is much in line with Gilman’s belief that male supremacy suppresses female independence. Patriarchal society did not allow women to develop an own voice as women were meant to be domestically enslaved by men and predestined to fulfill the male’s sexual needs.

There are some recurring motives in *The Giant Wistaria* which draw more attention to the patriarchal silencing of women and the oppression of women. Firstly, the wisteria, a precious new vine of the mother that was a gift from the father. The story begins with the daughter touching the plant and accidentally breaking off “the tender shoot,” after which she got reprimanded. In the second storyline the plant is mentioned occasionally, most noteworthy in the end: “And there, in the strangling grasp of the roots of the great wisteria, lay the bones of a woman” (162). The vine, once cherished by a mother, had now contributed to the silencing of another mother.

A second motive is the necklace “that hung from [the daughter’s] neck” (154). Gilman made sure that the reader noticed this jewelry at the beginning of the story by letting the daughter clutch it. The daughter valued this necklace greatly and held on to it tightly when she was separated from her child and felt alienated by her parents. In the second storyline some of the renters saw the ghost of a young woman wearing “a little red cross” (159). And soon after discovering the body of the child, they found the bones of “a woman, from whose neck still hung a tiny scarlet cross on a thin chain of gold” (162). Although the cross is mentioned three times, the color differed each time. Whereas it had a reddish hue when she was alive, it changed to full red and eventually to scarlet after her death. The evolution to scarlet, “the color of sin,” is peculiar (Ryken 158). Although initially associated with the great harlot of Babylon and consequently with sin, the association with scarlet has been continued in the imagery of modern literature, most noteworthy in *The Scarlet Letter* of Nathaniel Hawthorne. Gilman’s choice to ultimately give the necklace that color is remarkable

and in fact only intensifies her criticism of patriarchal conventions. By having a child out of wedlock, the daughter in the story has committed a sin. She did not behave according to patriarchal conventions and was therefore punished by her father. He was ashamed of her and saw her as a stain on the family's reputation. While the necklace was initially carnelian, the more she was stigmatized as a sinner, the more red it became. Even after her death, which was a direct result of her sin, the necklace continued to brand her a sinner. The jewelry has, thus, taken over the patriarchal role of the father of reprimanding the sinful daughter. Much like patriarchy stigmatized women as passive, domestic and inferior, the necklace stigmatized the daughter as sinful even after her death.

### iii. *Through This* (1893)<sup>25</sup>

*Through This* chronicles a day in the busy life of a young housewife. She is swamped with domestic duties and does not know what to do first. Her continuous streams of consciousness and realizations of other duties cause the constant abruption of thoughts and actions. She has subordinated her own needs to such a degree that she does not fully realize that she is in fact exhausted and unhappy. By keeping herself busy, she does not have the time to reflect on her own situation and question her personal state. Every time she starts to ponder about the restrictions on her life, another chore needs to be handled. Moreover, she has internalized the patriarchal chaining together of womanhood and domesticity, and does not object to her domestic duty:

Ah, well! – Yes – I'd like to have joined. I believe in it, but I can't now. Home duties forbid. This is my work. Through this, in time – there's the bell again, and it waked the baby! (195)

The protagonist claims that “housework is noble if you do it in a right spirit,” with which she pretty much fools herself (195). It appears to be more like a convenient phrase patriarchy has used to indoctrinate women and keep them satisfied with their ‘innate’ secondary role as housewives. The female protagonist seems very much happy with her assigned role and even sympathizes with an unhappy friend by claiming that she “can't be [happy], poor thing, till she's a wife and mother” (196). In sketching such a submissive and passive, yet convinced character, Gilman in fact heavily criticized patriarchal conceptions of women. Even more, in opting to write from the point of view of a woman acquiescing in those conceptions, she wanted to evoke epiphanies and liberate as much women as possible from the constraining domestic duties imposed on women by patriarchy.

Furthermore, the story demonstrates “the potential cost to women who subordinate their own needs to those of others” (Knight, “Introduction” xviii). Although the protagonist might seem happy with her situation, there are definitely some subtle indications of the opposite. Much like the narrator in *The Yellow Wall-Paper* (discussed below), the protagonist in *Through This* becomes

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<sup>25</sup> Unless stated otherwise, the quotations are taken from Gilman, *The Yellow Wall-Paper, Herland, and Selected Writings* (1999).



mesmerized by the wallpaper and the captivating colors of the sun creeping up or down the paper. Every morning and every evening, she recites the “dawn colors”: “darkness, dim gray, dull blue, soft lavender, clear pink, pale yellow, warm gold” in the morning, and “warm gold – pale yellow – clear pink – soft lavender – dull blue – dim gray – darkness” in the evening (194;197). She needs the stability of the wallpaper and the daily recurring morning/evening shades to compensate for the chaotic domestic life in which she is not allowed to serve her own needs. The story is, as such, a subtle way of Gilman to criticize the unbearable patriarchal expectations of women. Through this constant pressure she will eventually break down, hence the title of the short story.

**iv. *According to Solomon (1909)*<sup>26</sup>**

In *According to Solomon* Gilman depicts the marital anxieties from the perspective of both husband and wife. Although they seem happily married, it became clear that they both had doubts: “[he] had married her with a sudden decision that he often wondered about in later years [...] and so did she” (123). Solomon regretted not sufficiently considering “her spirit of incorrigible independence” (123). For him, it was of the utmost importance that conduct was based on principle, “built firmly into habit and buttressed by scriptural quotations” (123). Hers, in contrast, seemed “as inconsequent as the flight of a moth” (123). For her, the biggest problem was his inability to give gifts. Each year he selected them “on the nature of the gift – not on the desires of the recipient” (124). It was not the materiality of the gift that bothered her, but the expected “love for Solomon, pride in Solomon, respect for Solomon’s judgment and power to pay, gratitude for his unfailing kindness and generosity, impatience with his always giving her this one big valuable permanent thing” (124). So while Solomon had second doubts about their marriage because of her independence, she started to have conflicting emotions as she felt that he did not know her and did not want to know her. As his wife, she was supposed to be happy and grateful because she got an expensive gift, whether or not she loved it. Being an independent woman, this bothered her immensely.

When Mrs. MacAvelly taught Molly “the time-honored art of weaving,” her so-called “incorrigible independence” expanded even more (125). She “showed inventive genius” and “the fineness and quality of the work increased” (126). Even more, her work became in demand and she started selling it. However, she was afraid of telling this to Solomon, as “[he] would never forgive [her]” (127). She dreaded offending him and therefore hid and saved her money – “the first she had ever earned” (127). Already being mentally independent, she now was becoming economically independent. It was inevitable for him to figure it out, and when he did, he cried out in disbelief: “My wife, earning money!” (129). It was “a most mortifying and painful thing for [him] – most unprecedented” (129). But ultimately, he got used to it and became proud of her: “Give her of the fruit of her hands, and let her own works praise her in the gates” (129).

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<sup>26</sup> Unless stated otherwise, the quotations are taken from Gilman, *The Yellow Wall-Paper and Other Stories* (1995).

Gilman used this story to depict a typical married couple and their issues with the other sex in patriarchal society. In doing so, she followed the stereotypical depiction of men and women: Solomon adored strict rules and principles, while Molly acted more spontaneous and unrestrained; Solomon earned a living, and Molly took care of the children and the household. For several years they maintained this division of labor and no one really gave it a moment's thought. When Molly's weaving became popular, however, things changed. For the first time in her life she had the possibility of earning money, of becoming economically independent from her husband. She knew that this could possibly offend Solomon, so together with Mrs. MacAvelly she set up a 'smuggling' business. The women justified their actions by claiming that they should not respect the law, as it is "a set of silly rules made by some men one day and changed by some more the next" (127). So although they seemed to accept patriarchal rules, they in fact disapproved of them and recognized their sex biased nature: "We don't make [the rules] – nor God – nor nature," but men do (127).

Because Molly knew of the gender distinctions, she found it difficult to deviate from what she had been doing her whole life. Although she was excited to earn her own money, she knew she would offend her husband and kept quiet for a while. Eventually she could no longer keep the secret and found an ingenious way in which she would tell him:

But when his turn came – when gifts upon gifts were offered to him – sets of silken handkerchiefs (he couldn't bear the touch of a silk handkerchief!), a cabinet of cards and chips and counters of all sorts (he never played cards), an inlaid chess-table and ivory men (the game was unknown to him), a five pound box candy (he never ate it). (129)

Exactly like Solomon gave her, she now gave him several expensive gifts he could not use. She had selected them "on the nature of the gift – not on the desires of the recipient" (124). By copying Solomon's acts, she implicitly assumed the role of patriarchal wage-earner and became an equal of him. He, however, felt belittled and mortified. A woman should not earn her own money; it was "most unprecedented" (129). It was the duty of the man to provide for his family. Yet, Molly convinced him that it was in fact quite normal by quoting the Bible: "She maketh fine linen and selleth it – and delivereth girdles unto the merchants!" (129). Being a man who highly valued scriptural quotations, he "came down handsomely" and "got used to it after a while" (129). He needed the quotation in order to accept his wife's financial prosperity.

As such, Gilman criticized the unconditional and indisputable belief and value attached to patriarchal rules by men. They do not question it, but merely accept and internalize the rules. When Molly violated the rule, Solomon was mainly upset because he thought it was "unprecedented" (129). Once he knew that it stood in the Bible, he came to terms with it and even became proud of his wife. He had to appeal to a highly valued authority before accepting it. Although Solomon was initially portrayed as a stereotypical patriarchal man, he eventually became an example of how men should become. In line with her evolutionary beliefs, the acceptance of women's freedom and equal status would be the hardest part. Once that is accomplished, humanity could progress. This

conviction is mirrored in the initial protest and eventual acceptance of Molly's financial prosperity by Solomon.

v. *Mrs. Beazley's Deeds* (1911)<sup>27</sup>

*Mrs. Beazley's Deeds* is shaped by women's struggle with the restricting patriarchal society. The protagonist, Maria, epitomizes the enslaved, suppressed housewife to the extreme and fears her tyrannical husband William. The patriarchal balance of power is already clear from the opening scene in which Maria was scrubbing the floor while William was sitting "quite comfortable in his black-tilted chair, enjoying a leisurely pipe" (207). He did not treat her as an individual with own thoughts and desires, but as a housekeeper only wishing to serve him. As such, he did not ask Maria to sign over the deeds to a large tract of land inherited from her late father, but merely mentioned that he has "got another deed for [her] to sign" (208): "You just tell him you're perfectly willin' and under no compulsion, and sign the paper – that's all you have to do!" (208). However, Maria refused to sign as it was the last piece of land her father left her. With William having sold all of the other tracts, in spite of her, she could not say goodbye to the last remnant of her father. William viciously told her that she was "talking nonsense [...] – and too much of it" (209). He then underlined "the real law – 'Wives submit yourselves to your husbands!'" (209). To further assert his control, he let Maria know that there was a boarder moving in and that she had "a day to put her room in order" (210). When she protested, he laughed her arguments away by saying that she had "nothing to do but keep house for a small family" (210). So inevitably, the boarder, Miss Lawrence, came to live with them. Fortunately it took just a few weeks in order for Maria to confidentially talk with Miss Lawrence about her husband's dominating demeanor, and it was a conversation Maria would never forget or regret. Miss Lawrence happened to be "the best woman lawyer in New York" and convinced Maria to leave her husband for the sake of the children:

It seems to me, Mrs. Beazley, that you owe it [your children] to make a stand. Think now – before it is too late. If you kept possession of this property in Rockwell, and had control of your share of what has been sold heretofore – [you] could live on it.

Finally recognizing the emotional cost of her husband's dominant behavior to her children, she decided to turn her life around. With the help of Miss Lawrence, Mrs. Beazley realized that "she had larger business interests than she supposed" (220). She consequently divorced her husband, acquired full custody of the children, and was in control of her father's inheritance.

In this story Gilman strongly contrasted the female victim with the male offender. Mr. and Mrs. Beazley both embodied the expected features and reasoning of a man and a woman in patriarchal society: Mr. Beazley as the dominant, oppressing wage-earner, Mrs. Beazley as the passive, suppressed housewife. William had clearly internalized the patriarchal sex bias and was convinced

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<sup>27</sup> Unless stated otherwise, the quotations are taken from Gilman, *The Yellow Wall-Paper, Herland, and Selected Writings* (1999).

that women were merely meant to do domestic work and take care of the children. Business, for example, was nothing for women, as “women are words, and men are deeds” (209). His character and convictions are fused within his credo: “Wives submit yourselves to your husbands” (209).

In creating the character of Miss Lawrence, Gilman tackled this patriarchal conviction and subverted the gendered hierarchy. Her arrival instigated Maria to fight back and take control of her and her children’s life. She realized that she was not dependent of him, that she did not need him. It was, in fact, the complete opposite. William’s business was completely dependent of the money and deeds of Maria. So once she realized she had been wrong her entire life, she left William and started a new life with her children. Gilman thus created a narrative in which women helped women to stand up to patriarchal conventions and be freed from male oppression. Moreover, Gilman created this narrative as an example of how women’s passivity solidifies the patriarchal conventions. Only when breaking free from the restricting patriarchal regulations women can truly become an active participant in society and contribute to the evolution of humanity.

Mrs. Beazley had thought of leaving her husband many times before, but never went through with it because she did not believe in divorce. Even if she did, “this is New York state and [she] couldn’t get it” (213). Her marriage had been hard on her, especially since she saw how her children were affected by it. Her oldest son left home at the age of twelve – “he couldn’t stand his father” – without getting a proper education. He would “come back to [her] any day – if it wasn’t for his father” (214). A baby even died because Mr. Beazley “wouldn’t hitch up [to the doctor]” (214). Her youngest daughter, Luella, “oughtn’t to be tendin’ store the whole time – she ought to be at a good school” (214). Mrs. Beazley lamented that “when [she] was Luella’s age, [...] [she] got married not much later – girls don’t know nothing!” (214). She feared that her daughter would end up exactly like her. Miss Lawrence eventually succeeded in convincing Maria to get a divorce, which was “in the interest of the children.” (214). This is completely in line with Gilman’s conviction that motherhood and education are the stepping stones for the future and should be valued more highly. It took Mrs. Beazley some time to realize that, but ultimately she made the best possible decision and planned to have her children properly educated.

#### vi. *His Mother* (1914)<sup>28</sup>

After the death of her husband, a young mother, Ellen Burrell, decided to dedicate her entire life to her son, Jack – initially to provide him the best possible education and upbringing, but eventually to make up for “his obvious faults and weaknesses worse than faults” (272). Years of hard work, of careful instruction could not prevent “this fatal gift” which “seemed to work like a poison among his better qualities” (272). Although she saved and planned for college, Jack slipped out of high school and went away, leaving his pregnant girlfriend all by herself. Ellen, as a mother, realized that

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<sup>28</sup> Unless stated otherwise, the quotations are taken from Gilman, *The Yellow Wall-Paper, Herland, and Selected Writings* (1999).

her son “ought to have been taking care of [his girlfriend] all this time,” but concluded that she would have to do it (274). When the girl eventually left town herself, Ellen went “into the business of girl saving” as “there are other [girls] – hundreds of ‘em – thousands of ‘em” that need help (274):

Her keen, deep feeling for the one poor little victim, lost and ruined through her own boy’s fault, was now broadened into care for ignorant girlhood everywhere, and as it broadened, the bitterness of personal shame was lifted from her. She felt that she could now atone for Jack’s misbehavior, and perhaps do more good, in the end, than he had done harm. (275)

Her maternal guilt defined her future and urged her on to help women realize “that it’s not a question of losing their hearts, but of keeping their heads” (276). She studied eagerly to become a probation officer and fought against prostitution. She rejected “a good position as the head of a great reformatory for women,” as she preferred to work “before the horse was stolen” (276). Much to her dismay, she discovered that her son had been using an alias and worked as a procurer for young prostitutes. Upon meeting him, she did not recognize him: “This was not her boy. Her boy was dead. This was a man as hard and hollow as a brazen bell, a bell of base metal, ringing false at every stroke.” (278). Realizing how dangerous he was to society, she made sure that he was arrested and “withdrawn from circulation” (279). She spent the rest of her life “trying to do good enough to make up for her own share in his evil” (279).

Gilman’s views on motherhood and humanity’s evolution are strongly expressed throughout this story. In line with her belief that society was ready to elevate women to the same level as men, the narrator of *This Mother* argues that “modern society, stirring to new consciousness of its responsibility, [was] beginning to exert itself to secure the safety of young girls” (274). While society had “filled [girls] with old sex-traditions, false and mischievous,” things were thus ready to change (275). The hardest part was, however, to make society and its inhabitants realize that the changes are necessary for the evolution of mankind.

According to Gilman it seems that the best way to achieve this was eugenic evolution. *This Mother* was written in 1914, the period in which Gilman became acquainted with eugenic theory and had defined her own gynaecocentric theory. She was convinced that women should select the best possible husband in order to have the best possible children. Only this would benefit society and could nudge mankind’s natural evolution. The narrator recounts that Ellen “let herself go by marrying an Italian lover,” and as such unknowingly determined Jack’s fate: “[Jack] had given way to his own worst weaknesses, without excuse. Unless it’s his father that’s in him! And that’s my fault for giving him such a father” (276). The narrator states that Ellen’s bad choice of father was like a “fatal gift” which “seemed to work like a poison among [Jack’s] better qualities” (272). As such, *This Mother* depicts the consequences for society and for oneself when not choosing the best possible man to procreate. Ellen had made a bad decision in choosing a father for her child, which ended up being a malicious citizen, and became torn by an almost unbearable maternal guilt. Ellen realized

her mistake and tried her hardest “to make up for her own share in [her son’s] evil” (279). She dedicated her entire life to protecting and educating young women, hoping that they would not make the same mistake she made:

[Women] ought to realize that it’s not a question of losing their hearts, but of keeping their heads. What if they do fall in love! My heavens! Wouldn’t I rather be a stark old maid a hundred times than go through what I’ve had to bear – and have to bear now. (276)

Throughout this story, the narrator criticized the exploitation of women in society and tackled mothers’ responsibility in choosing a father for their children. Eugenic reproduction was society’s only way to elevate women to the same level of men, and further mankind’s natural evolution.

#### vii. *Dr. Clair’s Place* (1915)<sup>29</sup>

*Dr. Clair’s Place* demonstrates an alternative treatment to the conventional rest cure treatment that Gilman described in *The Yellow Wall-Paper* (see 3.3.). In this story, Octavia Welch was “so sunk in internal misery that her expression was that of one who had been in prison for a lifetime” (280). One day, on the bus, she expressed her death wish as she was on the brink of committing suicide after battling nervous breakdowns for many years. A casual acquaintance successfully persuaded her to see Dr. Clair, a doctor specializing in nervous disorders who had created “the only place in the world where a sick soul could go and be sure of help” (284). Unlike the rest cure, her treatment emphasized the importance of both mental and physical activity as patients were kept busy all the time:

She had for the weakest ones just chairs and hammocks; but these were moved from day to day so that the patient had new views. There was an excellent library, and all manner of magazines and papers. There were picture-puzzles too, with little rimmed trays to set them up in – they could be carried here and there, but not easily lost. Then there were all manner of easy things to learn to do; basket-work, spinning, weaving, knitting, embroidery; it cost very little to the patients and kept them occupied. For those who were able there was gardening and building. (283)

After several months of bath, sleep, food, music and color treatments, Octavia grew physically and mentally stronger. Her “misery and pain and shame seemed to fade into a remote past,” and she was finally happy (287). In contrast to the rest cure treatment, this method accentuated everything Gilman had to avoid. Whereas Gilman had to stop reading, writing, etc., Octavia had to do these things as part of her treatment. Gilman wrote this story to raise awareness for the awful consequences of the rest cure, more clearly expressed in *The Yellow Wall-Paper*. In both stories the protagonist felt trapped by society, and consequently became depressed. Written 23 years apart from each other, the two stories can be seen as illness and remedy, since the problem sketched in

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<sup>29</sup> Unless stated otherwise, the quotations are taken from Gilman, *The Yellow Wall-Paper, Herland, and Selected Writings* (1999).

*The Yellow Wall-Paper* is solved in *Dr. Clair's Place*. Over the course of her career, Gilman had thought of many possible solutions to women's problematic treatment and fictionalized them. In this short story she expressed hopes in letting women act freely, without patriarchal restrictions.

viii. *Joan's Defender* (1916)<sup>30</sup>

Joan was the only daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Marsden. She had one brother who unremittingly tormented her and got away with it every single time. Their parents did not hide the fact that they favored their boy and stigmatized their daughter as a cry baby and a constant nag. Mrs. Marsden suffered from mental and physical issues which made it unbearable for her "to stand the strain of adjudicating the constant difficulties between Joan and Gerald" (289). Mr. Marsden highly disapproved of his family and blamed their "general deficiencies wholly to [Mrs. Marsden's] side of the house" (290). It was, however, that side of the house that became Joan's rescue. Arthur, Mrs. Marsden's brother, lived a few days with the family and saw how Joan was becoming more forlorn and insecure by the minute. Therefore, he decided to bring her to his family ranch for a short vacation. There she discovered that her cousins were wearing the same clothes, had the same short hairstyle, and played the same games, regardless of their sex. In this gender-neutral environment, Joan was finally free and thrived (Knight, "Introduction" xxii). She became a bright, intelligent, cheerful and assertive young girl.

This story contains several remnants of Gilman's utopian stories such as *Herland* and *Bee Wise*. The genderless farm in which Joan flourished allowed her to act uninhibitedly and freed her from the gendered constraints imposed by patriarchal society and preserved by her parents. Her parents would not let her cut off her hair, as they would not raise a tomboy, and were well on their way in raising a submissive woman (293). Fortunately for Joan's wellbeing, Arthur took over the role of educator and helped "her heal now she's escaped" that patriarchal family. In line with Gilman's eugenic beliefs, Joan was raised by better fitted parents. Her biological parents endorsed the patriarchal gender hierarchy and pushed Joan in the wrong direction. As this would hinder natural evolution, in accordance to Gilman's gynaecocentric theory, their children should be raised by more enlightened parents – in this case Joan's uncle and aunt.

At the ranch, Joan's uncle and aunt employed "a cheerful Chinese cook and houseboy" so that they could fully concentrate on raising their family. When Joan saw her cousins, "giggling happily," she was shocked: "the four boys were quite as friendly as Hilda!" (294). She was amazed by the fact that boys could be friendly and were not always hostile and aggressive such as her brother and father were. Even more, seeing that they did not treat their sons and daughters differently, Joan began to feel at ease. All of the children "were taught to reason, as well as to remember; taught to think for themselves, and to see through fallacious arguments" (295). Being the better educators,

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<sup>30</sup> Unless stated otherwise, the quotations are taken from Gilman, *The Yellow Wall-Paper, Herland, and Selected Writings* (1999).

they made sure she grew up to be a respectable and independent young woman who could tackle society's gendered composition.

## 2.4. Autobiographical fiction

### i. *The Yellow Wall-Paper* (1892)<sup>31</sup>

Unlike most of her fiction, Gilman has written *The Yellow Wall-Paper* based on personal experiences. It does not alienate the readers, is not intent to show the perfect configuration of society and does not display strong women risen up to male suppression. Gilman recounted personal experiences because she wanted to help people. Since suffering and eventually recovering from "a severe and continuous nervous breakdown tending to melancholia," she decided to write *The Yellow Wall-Paper* "with its embellishments and additions to carry out the ideal" (Gilman, *The Living* 120). She wanted "to save people from being driven crazy," by demonstrating the dreadful consequences of the rest cure:

This wise man put me to bed and applied the rest cure. [...] [He] sent me home with solemn advice to live as domestic a life as far as possible, to have but two hours' intellectual life a day, and never to touch a pen, brush or pencil again as long as I lived. [...] I went home and obeyed those directions for some three months, and came so near the border line of utter mental ruin that I could see over. Then, using the remnants of intelligence that remained, [...] I cast the noted specialist's advice to the winds and went to work again; [...] ultimately recovering some measure of power. (Gilman, *The Living* 120)

Because of the direct critique on patriarchal treatment of women, the short story soon became praised as a feminist document. Elaine Hedges claims that the story emerged "both from Gilman's personal experience and her general awareness of women's victimization through marriage" and consequently "dramatizes the connection between the insanity and the sex of the victim" (41). Keeping in mind Gilman's initial gynaeocentric belief, this makes perfectly sense. As Gilman already deemed male supremacy unnatural and blamed it for suppressing women, the personal experience of near insanity must have served as the catalyst for speaking out against patriarchal treatment of women. In fact, nearly all of her theoretical works and fictional short stories were published after the publication of *The Yellow Wall-Paper*.

The female protagonist of *The Yellow Wall-Paper* is a strong-willed woman, yet more strongly determined by patriarchal society and its hierarchy. She disagrees with the ideas of the physicians and believes "that congenial work, with excitement and change, would do [her] good," but "what is one to do?" (166). She knows that she cannot act on her own and has to follow the instructions of her husband and male physicians, who do not believe that she is sick (166). So she agrees to be put in isolation in the nursery at the top of the house. Much like Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre*, she is held in the attic by her husband. There she is confronted with yellow wallpaper which initially fascinates

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<sup>31</sup> Unless stated otherwise, the quotations are taken from Gilman, *The Yellow Wall-Paper, Herland, and Selected Writings* (1999).



her, but eventually drives her crazy: “It is the strangest yellow, that wall-paper! A sickly penetrating suggestive yellow” (176). She becomes convinced that there is a woman behind the front pattern, shaking the bars, and tries to free her. The story ends with the female protagonist identifying with that woman and seemingly having lost her mind (178).

The obsession with the woman behind the bars of the wallpaper is pretty significant, especially since the protagonist becomes that woman in the end. The entrapped woman becomes “increasingly desperate to escape and the narrator comes to her aid” (Knight, “Introduction” xvii): “I got up and ran to help her. I pulled and she shook, I shook and she pulled, and before morning we had peeled off yards of that paper” (180). The next day she kept on imagining and thinking about the pattern and the woman, but eventually she became the woman behind the paper: “I suppose I shall have to get back behind the pattern when it comes night” (181). That identification is an important element in Gilman’s story as the ending scene quite strongly refers to Gilman’s personal feeling of entrapment within society. Her husband and doctor did not allow her to be free, to do whatever made her happy, and forced her to stay in her room and rest, which drove her crazy. She only recovered because she revolted against their rules and acted on her own.

In the story, the protagonist is controlled by her husband, the patriarchal dominant male, who tells her what she can and cannot do; he controls her as if she was his property. Additionally, Jane – “a perfect and enthusiastic housekeeper [that] hopes for no better profession” – “thinks it is the writing which made [her] sick” and laughs at/with her (171). This illustrated that both men and women will refuse to help an assertive, independent woman. With superior men and conservative, domesticated women fighting against her, the protagonist could not act independently and stand up to her predetermined position. Ultimately, she did do it by shaking the bars, peeling off the wallpaper and getting “out at last” (182). Beating the rules of patriarchal society, she got out and could start her independent life.

Based on her own experiences, Gilman wrote this short story to help others. She added more dramatic events, such as the hallucinations, to make the story more striking and reach a bigger audience (*The Living* 120). As claimed by Hedges, Gilman also wrote this story to raise awareness for the female entrapment of patriarchal conventions and awaken social protest. As women have lost their independence and were continuously silenced, Gilman deemed it time to fight back, to shake the bars and finally get out of their inferior position.

## ii. *An Unnatural Mother* (1895)<sup>32</sup>

When Gilman was raising her daughter Katherine in California as a single mother, “the good mamas of Pasadena were extremely critical of [her] methods” (Gilman, *The Living* 171). They thought it scandalous that she taught Katherine “the simple facts of sex” and let her run around “barefooted in

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<sup>32</sup> Unless stated otherwise, the quotations are taken from Gilman, *The Yellow Wall-Paper, Herland, and Selected Writings* (1999).

the California sunshine” (Gilman, *The Living* 171). Consequently, the community accused her of neglecting her own child and not doing what she was ‘supposed’ to do. It even took a turn for the worse when Gilman in 1894 felt that she wanted to do more than just being a mother. She wanted to change society and could only achieve this if she had the freedom to travel across America. Therefore, she decided to transfer the care of her daughter to her ex-husband and his fiancée, as they could ensure a good education for Katherine. Though being tormented by remorse and grief, she was convinced that it was in both her own and her daughter’s best interest. Yet, the massive public vilification forced her to leave California immediately. Being offended and hurt, Gilman started writing *An Unnatural Mother* “to expose the narrow-mindedness of people” who condemned her and considered her to be “an unnatural mother” (Knight, “Introduction” xxii). Significantly, the story was republished three times in her lifetime, one of which was in 1916 in her magazine *The Forerunner*.

In the story, the narrator recounts a meeting between different women who were extremely judgmental of Esther Greenwood, the much-condemned heroine from Toddsville. The City Boarder, however, did not know the story and asked them what exactly happened. Although “there was no difficulty in eliciting particulars,” “the difficulty was rather in discriminating amidst their profusion and contradictoriness” (305-306). Esther, “the somewhat neglected child of a heart-broken widower,” had a “wild, healthy childhood [that] had made [her] very different in her early womanhood from the meek, well-behaved damsels of [Toddsville]” (307). As a girl who had short hair “till she was fifteen and walked around barefooted, the matrons of the town were quick to shake their head and “prophesied no good of a girl who was ‘queer’” (307). Eventually, Esther married and had a daughter, but “she never seemed to have no maternal feelin’ at all!” (310).

At the time of “that awful disaster,” Esther saw “that ‘twas givin’ way’ and ran towards the village, past her house and child” (311). She warned everyone and ultimately, she saved “a matter of fifteen hundred people” (312). Esther run back to her house and child as soon as possible, but it was too late: “the dam give way and the water [...] struck the house” (312). Esther and her husband did not survive the disaster, but their child did and was being taken care of by Mrs. Stone.

It is clear from the story that Gilman tackled conventional beliefs on women, sexuality and childcare. Whereas Gilman was a strong advocate for women’s freedom, sexual education and communal childcare, the women in *An Unnatural Mother* epitomized patriarchal stigmatization of women. They believed that “young women should be kept innocent” and were perplexed to hear that Esther’s father had “actually taught his daughter how babies come” so that she could rightfully “choose a father” (309). The townswomen found it ridiculous that he believed she would ‘choose’ a father. They were taught that women were supposed to marry and have children, it was not a choice. Being a mother, then, meant giving up everything else, even societal/communal wellbeing: “A mother’s duty is to her own child! She neglected her own to look after other folks’ – the Lord

never gave her them other children to care for!” (321). Moreover, they believed that men were “not fit to bring up children,” that is, “how can they? Mothers have the instinct.” (308)

The strong resemblance of the story with Gilman’s own life underlines the critical meaning of the story. Being condemned for her unconventional educational methods and assigning the care of her daughter to her ex-husband, give Gilman plenty of material to write a story. The events described in the story were as such based on her own experiences. Since she believed that a child’s care and education were essential, a mother should be able to take a step back and let someone more suited educate her child. Even more, children should be taught as much as possible. Gilman’s father continuously made her read and learn more about the world and its leading thinkers, as did Esther’s father. The conventional women, however, condemned him for doing that as they believed that women should be kept in the dark: “As if any man alive would want to marry a young girl who knew all the evil of life!” (309). Having completely internalized patriarchal view on women, they were quick to pass judgment on the actions of Esther and her father. Even after having saved fifteen hundred townspeople, Esther was ostracized by the community for her unconventional behavior.

Yet, there is a hopeful element throughout the story. The youngest Briggs girl, Maria ‘Melia often tried to reason with the women and defended Esther’s choices. She emphasized that Esther acted in the best interest of the community and that she was very much loved by children. She recalled that she “was kind and pleasant, [...] [would] teach us new games and tell us things” (307). The women, however, immediately turned down her arguments by claiming that she was not in the position to judge: “You’ve no children of your own, and you can’t judge a mother’s duty” (305). Maria’s mother eventually grew tired of the endless objections of her daughter and silenced her: “Maria ‘Melia, I’m ashamed of you! But you ain’t married and ain’t a mother!” (312). Gilman showcased patriarchal treatment of critical and objecting voices. It did not matter if Maria was right or not, her opinion was going to be put aside and disregarded because she was “thirty-six but unmarried” (309). Even more, the women only talked about sex education when Maria was outside the room as unmarried women should not hear this. It is noteworthy that it is never made explicit why she was still unmarried. It could have been her own choice as she might not have wanted children, or wanted to be dependent on her husband. She knew that once she got married, she was supposed to get children, raise them, cook, clean, etc. As the clearest female thinker, she might have resented patriarchal conventions and the narrow-mindedness of the women of the town. So Gilman mainly sketched the absurd degree of criticism women get for deviating from the convention, but also showed the struggle of critical voices in patriarchy. Maria unsuccessfully tried to reason with the women and get them to see that maybe their disapproval of Esther was unfair.

## 2.5. Intermediate conclusion

The fifteen discussed short stories have served as “textual clues point[ing] to [Gilman’s] authorship” (Cortiel 39). That is, being a small but representative selection of her oeuvre, these stories make up the textual dimension, which brings us one step closer to the reconstruction of Gilman’s posture. In the beginning of part three I divided the stories into three categories, to make sure that Gilman’s literary techniques were clear. For this recapitulation, however, I am dealing with the stories chronologically. As such, it will allow me to see Gilman’s thematic and literary evolution.

From 1890 to 1895 Gilman wrote stories that can be categorized as critiques on patriarchal society and its gendered mechanisms. Either by indicating the unbearable pressure on women in *Through This* or signaling the mistreatment of women in *The Yellow Wall-Paper* and *An Extinct Angel*, Gilman’s short stories harshly criticized patriarchy. Gilman has had plenty of malicious and degrading experiences which might have inspired and powered the stories. For the first four years of her career, she was clearly very critical of society and not the least hopeful for the future. Her stories either ended with miserable protagonists (*That Rare Jewel*, *The Yellow Wall-Paper*, *Through This*) or in death (*The Giant Wistaria*, *An Extinct Angel*).

Between 1895 and 1909 Gilman mainly focused on her theoretical work and lectured across America. Throughout this period her reasoning and convictions evolved and became more profound. She developed several new configurations of society that would improve social conditions for humanity and free women from their suppressed role (see part 2). This in-depth exploration of patriarchal conditions strongly influenced Gilman’s future fictional work.

When Gilman started her own literary magazine in 1909, she did not have to worry anymore about censorship. So until 1916 she wrote every month a short story for the magazine, which differed from her initial stories in both content and message. She abandoned the mere critiques on society and started to explore territory “ignored in most mainstream fiction” (Shulman xxvii). Her female protagonists within her social reform fiction often struggled with the repressive gender expectations and practices, and realized that there were so many more things to do than just household duties. Gilman also depicted archetypical husbands who embodied the old patriarchal power, such as “the Bible-quoting Mr. Solomon of *According to Solomon*” and the tyrannical Mr. Beazley in *Mrs. Beazley’s Deeds* (Shulman xxviii). The biggest difference between these *Forerunner*-stories and her first short stories is, however, that Gilman became more positive for the future. Her stories showed again and again women succeeding in business, in revolting against patriarchal oppression, and in establishing gender equal communities with empowered women. Reforming society was no longer a utopian dream, but became achievable. Gilman believed that the time was right for societal change as society’s mindset became increasingly enlightened. The social revolutions of that time were mere demonstrations of those clarified state of minds.

Yet, Gilman was well-aware that it would not happen all of a sudden and without any resistance. There were still many narrow-minded people unwilling to change traditions and end

gender inequality. Mr. Beazley, for example, in *Mrs. Beazley's Deeds* did not let go of conventional reasoning and was consequently blind for societal change. Still, Gilman remained positive. In *Two Storks* and *According to Solomon* she demonstrated that although there might be some initial resistance, most people will realize the advantage of gender equality and a reconfigured society. In the two mentioned stories this is precisely the case as the male characters were not happy with the newly acquired independence of their wives.

Gilman saw that there were some harsh measures to be taken. In order to exclude the petty, conservative individuals from society, she believed that society would have to adhere to eugenic procreation. Only then mankind would be able to evolve naturally. *His Mother* is a perfect example of how non-eugenic procreation could potentially harm society and its inhabitants, as bad genes continued to be passed on. *Joan's Defender* demonstrated that not all parents are born to be good parents, and that – in line with Gilman's convictions – childcare should be arranged on communal scale with the best educators in charge. Since Joan's parents had adapted patriarchal reasoning to the fullest, she did not have the chance to develop her own potential. Once at the farm of her uncle and aunt, she flourished and became an independent, confident young woman.

It is clear that Gilman initially has presented herself as a strongly convinced feminist revolting against patriarchal oppression of women and fighting for gender equality. Yet, analysis of her *Forerunner*-stories showed that Gilman evolved in the direction of overall societal change. As such, her radical feminist posture developed into a radical activist posture.

## Conclusion

Jérôme Meizoz' notion of authorial posture has enabled the unravelling of Gilman's intricate authorship. Being misconstrued as a 'radical feminist' who anticipated future developments in feminist activism and writing, Gilman became stigmatized by scholars and readers alike. Her historical project had been obscured as it was too readily related to later twentieth-century developments. By exploring her theoretical convictions and literary pieces I have reconstructed Gilman's posture and justified my claim that her authorship cannot and should not be reduced to the confining label of 'radical feminist'.

As previously mentioned, Gilman grew up as a strong, independent young woman who found it difficult to abdicate her beliefs in favor of the gendered institution of marriage. At the expense of her mental health, she eventually did submit. Yet, she never felt at ease with her newly acquired position and consequently experienced numerous nervous breakdowns which were treated with the infamous rest cure. That traumatic experience reshaped Gilman's societal vision completely. Once recovered, she reconnected with her progressive background and started writing short stories which overtly criticized patriarchal treatment of women. She thus created a textual posture of a radical feminist that she continued well within her theoretical work.

Analyses of her main theoretical convictions, however, have made it clear that her convictions have evolved tremendously. Still, a constant factor has been her revolutionary view on motherhood, which she grounded in late-nineteenth century, early twentieth century sociological debates. Initially supporting the radical architectural feminism and Ward's gynaeocentric theory, Gilman presented herself as a radical feminist. She objected to male supremacy and blamed patriarchy for preserving gendered mechanisms that made women second class citizens. However, when she started to question Ward's theory, her entire objective changed and she developed an own version of his theory in which patriarchy became a natural structuring. Her initial radical criticism evolved into an alleviated appeal to accept societal equalizing of the sexes. This drastic reversal was strengthened by the realization that feminists of her time went too far and neglected their social duty of public service. This was far from what she aspired to achieve and she consequently distanced herself from the feminist label and criticized feminists who complained about their inferior situation. Although her initial motive was patriarchal mistreatment of women, she evolved to overall societal change in which freeing women was a necessary means to an end. The new object of life was "the improvement of social relations" for which "women needed to be free individuals" ("Women and Democracy" 36). Gilman's contextual posture can therefore be summarized as a radical social activist aspiring to improve societal conditions for men and women alike.

The change of perspective sketched above is also visible in Gilman's textual posture as she no longer formulated mere critiques in her *Forerunner*-stories, but presented alternatives which

expressed her pacifist hopes for the future. Her stories became more positive and showed that indeed, the time was right for big social changes that would improve humanity's condition and progress evolution. As such, her initial radical feminist textual posture evolved into a radical activist posture which was characterized by a denouncement of feminism.

Gilman's evolution as a writer has been too often neglected as scholars and readers alike focus too easily on her radical feminist work. Yet, if her authorship is to be understood correctly, a comprehensive analysis of her work is in order. Meizoz' notion of posture has allowed me to reconstruct Gilman's authorship and to examine how she presented herself within her work. For the first years of her career, Gilman presented herself as a radical feminist in both literary pieces and theoretical convictions. Though not specifically labeling herself as a feminist, her convictions and narratives do point at a feminist stance. However, she explicitly distanced herself from the feminist movement as they were too eager to abandon societal duties. This must have been the starting point for her evolution towards a more humanist role as her theoretical convictions and literary pieces became more moderate and positive. She rejected previously supported theories and came up with own theories which focused on the equality between men and women, and denounced feminist criticism of patriarchy. So whereas she initially was overtly critical of society, she had now switched sides and criticized women lamenting on their inferior position. Gilman claimed that patriarchy was a natural solution to human equalization and that it was in its final stage (i.e. the acceptance of women's freedom). In order to advance this acceptance, Gilman adhered to the radical eugenic procreation theory which would purify humanity as only the best could procreate. As such, her radical feminism had evolved into a radical humanism denouncing feminist lamentation.

Obviously there is no clear difference between the theoretical Gilman and the literary Gilman as both modes of self-presentation are intertwined and consequently cannot be unravelled. Furthermore, Gilman's authorship partially confirms the attributed label of radical feminist given to her by late twentieth-century scholars. It has to be clarified, however, that it is not a correct label or denomination to understand Gilman as a writer. She was much more passionate and vocal about social issues in general than she was about specific feminist concerns. Undeniably she objected to patriarchal mistreatment of women and questioned the presumed inferior female position, yet these feminist struggles cannot be separated from her social aspirations and need to be seen in the context of Gilman's social activism. As a wonderfully rich and complex person with elaborated societal plans, it would be a shame if Gilman was solely remembered as a radical feminist.

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But I must say what I feel and think in some way—it is such a relief! But the effort is getting to be greater than the relief. Half the time now I am awfully lazy, and lie down ever so much. And dear John gathered me up in his arms, and just carried me upstairs and laid me on the bed, and sat by me and read to me till it tired my head. He said I was his darling and his comfort and all he had, and that I must take care of myself for his sake, and keep well. He says no one but myself can help me out of it, that I must use my will and self-control and not let any silly fancies run away with me. There's one comfort, the baby is well and happy, and does not have to occupy this nursery with the horrid wall-paper. If we had not used it, that blessed child would have!