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Inner and outer battles: mental health and feminism in Charlotte Perkins Gilman

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Abstract

The main purpose of this thesis is to examine the figure of Charlotte Perkins Gilman by considering the most crucial events and experiences of her life, through her most famous literary works: *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892), a short story which reports the experience of a woman suffering from postnatal depression, *Women and Economics: a study of the economic relation between women and men* (1898), where Gilman outlines her views of women's social roles, and *Herland* (1915), a utopian novel about an all-female society.

Firstly, this project aims to consider Charlotte Perkins Gilman's own experience with mental health, particularly her encounter with the Rest Cure therapy and its creator, Dr. Silas Weir Mitchell, whose approach was steeped in patriarchal prejudice. After this experience, Charlotte Perkins Gilman dedicated her existence to her beliefs and ideals, by writing books, articles and lectures, making her voice heard in a society where women barely had one. She was intensely convinced of the great potential of women, so much that she reported her own vision of a perfect society run by women in her novel *Herland* (1915). In it, she envisioned a better world thanks to women occupying leading roles, in sharp contrast with the prejudiced, unequal and patriarchal society of her time. In addition, I dwell on issues such as women's right to choose for themselves, abortion, and the ethical, moral, and religious controversies it historically faces to refer to how the struggle started by Gilman and other activists before her continues to this day, with no small number of obstacles in its path.

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Introduction

The purpose of my dissertation is to explore one of the topics I am most interested in and attached to, that is mental health. I decided to opt for this specific theme because I wanted to investigate how the issue of mental health was treated in the past two centuries, particularly towards the female world, very often seen through the eyes of prejudice and debasement. During the second academic year, I attended the Anglo-American 1 course, wherein an interesting female figure caught my attention for her courage, for her strength and for her story which is a good example of the topic I want to develop in this project. This woman is an American writer and activist called Charlotte Perkins Gilman, who has been able to survive her depression and, despite it, fight for women's rights, to make sure that their voices were finally heard.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman was an American author who lived between the XIX and XX centuries, whose style is characterized by the firm conviction that a woman is much more than what the society wants her to be. Gilman claimed that a woman can be more than a mother, a wife, the guardian of the household: in fact, through a job, she can contribute to the spiritual and economic development of the society to which she belongs and the author describes these beliefs in one of her most popular works, *Women and Economics: A Study of the Economic Relation Between Men and Women as a Factor in Social Evolution* (1898).

A remarkably crucial stage she underwent during the course of her life, is the challenging and painful experience of postpartum depression, which led her to Dr. Silas W. Mitchell's Rest Cure treatments that have deeply marked her whole existence and, moreover, has been the source of inspiration for her most famous work *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892).

After this very tough phase of her life, Charlotte Perkins Gilman decided to devote herself to her own career as a feminist activist through her writings and as an active member of several organizations like, to mention a few of them, the PCWPA (Pacific Coast Women's Press Association), the Ebell Society, the State Council of Women and the Economic Club.

This thesis project of mine, which concludes three long and educational years, covers the following topics in three chapters: in chapter one, I will describe what Charlotte Perkins Gilman's life was like, how she lived through her depressive phase, based on

her psycho-physical condition and with the help of the analysis of some abstracts from *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892). Furthermore, I will dedicate a part of the chapter to the Rest Cure in which I will explain what it is, who its inventor was and the principles which based the approach of this procedure towards women. Also, there will be a section devoted to the explanation of the treatment of patients with mental health issues at that time by mentioning the nurse Dorothea Dix and the reformation she brought to this field.

In the second chapter, I will go into detail about Gilman's struggle for female's social and economic affirmation through her views and political opinions which are explained clearly in *Women and Economics: A Study of the Economic Relation Between Men and Women as a Factor in Social Evolution* (1898).

To conclude, in the third and last chapter, I will discuss *Herland* (1915), a utopian novel in which Charlotte Perkins Gilman depicts an ideal world where women occupy leading roles in several positions. In this visionary female society, three men coming from the world we know, visit this unknown land where everything appears unusual, if not impossible. According to one of them, "there must be men" (Gilman 1915, 16), in fact, according to the visitors' biased perceptions, everything seems as organized and perfect as only a man can do. Then, I will do an in-depth look at how things have evolved to the present day, how things have changed, women's agency visions of the female body, and today's achievements, which now are reality and in the past were mere utopia. Furthermore, I will go into detail about the power that the woman has today over her body and how she managed to obtain it over the past years until now.

Chapter 1: Profile of the author's origins and life

1.1 *Charlotte Perkins Gilman's background*

Charlotte Anna Perkins was born in Hartford, Connecticut, on July 3rd, 1860. She was the daughter of Mary Westcott and Frederick Beecher Perkins, whose relationship with the family was complicated: in fact, he abandoned it when his children, Charlotte and her brother Thomas, were very young. Despite this, Charlotte Perkins Gilman and her father kept in contact through an epistolary relationship where they mainly talked about books, her father's passion. Gilman's father, Frederick, decided not to follow the advocacy career as his brother and father did, "he took to books as a duck to water" (Gilman 1990, 4). Beyond the letters Gilman and her father wrote to each other, there was nothing more between them. As Gilman states in her autobiography, "the word Father, in the sense of love, care, one to go to in trouble means nothing to me" (Gilman 1990, 6); she will always be grateful for the cultural heritage he passed on to her but, on the other hand, he left the family in economic difficulties and, especially, he left an emotional void to each of them.



Figure 1: Charlotte Perkins Gilman at the age of 14, 1874.

Gilman's mother, Mary, was a very pious woman with a powerful sense of duty who suffered greatly for the separation from her husband and the untimely loss of two of her four children. This led her to promise to herself to avoid her daughter's unnecessary suffering by raising her without showing affection, so that she would get used to it.

Years later, Gilman discovered that her mother used to pet her and give her affection only when she was asleep. Gilman learned many things when she was young, for example, she was taught to sew before she turned five and learned on her own how to read, while her mother was recovering from a difficult period of illness. Gilman attended seven schools where she learned and developed many passions like physical exercise, physics, then called “Natural Philosophy”, and law. In addition, she attended the Rhode Island School of Design where she developed her drawing skills, whose results can be found in the pages of her diaries, even as an adult woman.



Figure 2: Gilman's drawings in her diaries, ca.1885-1895.

1.2 Love and married life

The meaning of the word “love” has been a slow but powerful discovery for Gilman. Indeed, she developed a particular interest for one of her dearest friends, Martha Luther, with whom Gilman had the opportunity to know “perfect happiness” (Gilman 1990, 78). Luther and Gilman were close friends, strongly fond of one another; however, Martha got married a few years later and their relationship remained epistolary.

Gilman got married twice: in 1884 with Charles Walter Stetson and in 1900 with George Houghton Gilman. So that the chapter can be better developed, the second marriage will be taken up and examined in the following pages. In January 1882, Gilman met for the first time the man who would have been her first husband, Charles

Walter Stetson. He was a skilled and talented painter and, as Gilman claimed, “he was quite the greatest man [...] that I had ever known” (Gilman 1990, 82).



Figure 3: Charles Walter Stetson, September 1884

C. W. Stetson, who is simply called “Walter” in Gilman’s diaries, proposed twice to her because she was afraid not to do the right thing and not prone to lose her independence. Nevertheless, after a reflection phase, she agreed to marry him even if she was not totally convinced: she knew she felt strong affection for him but also felt the presence of some doubts about her hard decision. At that time, being a married woman meant sacrificing one’s creative and professional ambitions, things that women like Gilman really cared about and did not want to lose, on the behalf of the husband and the new family that would be born with this union. An example of the many disadvantages caused by marriage is that by getting married, a woman would lose her rights over a property that she possessed when she was not married yet because, through the bond of marriage, the newly married couple was considered as a single person, legally speaking, and wives’ existences became dependent on husbands in several ways. As the American economist Zorina Khan asserts:

granting a wife the right to control her own property [...] would lead to an independence that threatened the institutions of marriage and the family.
(Khan 1996, 360)

In other words, it can be argued that women’s independence was certainly a highly fragile topic; everything was believed to be easier if handled by a man, whose control was able to guarantee the calm and proper management of family affairs, which could be economic or personal between family members. The institution of marriage did not

represent the key for women's emancipation, on the contrary, it stood for women's "imprisonment" as they lost their legal value and autonomy. Furthermore, the expectations and social pressure towards the bride were remarkably high since her role was being "simply" a perfect wife and a perfect mother, able to satisfy every wish of the husband and raise her children worthily, healthy and as the patriarchal society wanted them to be. Indeed, as Zorina Khan reports on her work,

the paramount destiny and mission of woman are to fulfill the noble and benign offices of wife and mother. (Bradwell v. Illinois 1872 in Khan 1996, 360).

Gilman did not feel she was the right person to fulfil those responsibilities, the role of devoted wife and mother did not seem to suit her free spirit, however, in September 1884, Charles's father, who was a Baptist minister, married the couple and Charlotte took the name of her husband, becoming Charlotte Perkins Stetson. It was a quite happy couple, Walter was a kind and devoted husband, Gilman could not be more grateful for this and felt to thank God every day for this precious gift. However, even before the courtship phase that preceded the marriage, some psychological issues closely related to her depressive state began to cause some problems which worsened after Gilman gave birth to her one and only daughter Katharine on March 23rd, 1885. During the first month after the delivery of her daughter, Gilman was being helped with the newborn by several people, due to the gradual decline of her mental condition: Maria Pease, a nurse from Boston, her mother Mary and her husband.

Four years later, in the fall of 1887, the marriage between her and Walter ended: Charlotte Perkins Gilman was facing a really tough period due to her psychological difficulties, so she and her husband agreed to put an end to their relationship.

There was no quarrel, no blame for either one [...] but it seemed plain that if I went crazy it would do my husband no good. (Gilman 1990, 96)

This is how Gilman defined the end of her marriage: for her, Walter was a genuinely good person, a loving and devoted husband, however they decided to separate because of the problems Charlotte was going through. It has been a complicated decision to make but, as the author writes in her autobiography,

It was not a choice between going and staying, but between going, sane, and staying, insane. (Gilman 1990, 97)



Figure 4: Charlotte Perkins Stetson with her daughter Katharine, 1893

1.3 Mental health issue in 19th-20th century

At that time, being sick meant physical suffering confined in bed. The issue of mental disease was not very common, and people did not understand its importance as testified by the ways mentally unstable patients were treated. From the beginning of the story of the United States until the 19th century, there was a theory circulating that somehow explained the issue of mental disorders among people, which was the “supernatural theory”. It consisted of believing that those who showed symptoms of imbalance were popularly accused of being possessed by some demon or curse, as divine punishment. “Religion was the driving motive behind most of society” (Cottrell 2021, 2) and in those cases in which nobody could find a solution or an answer that could explain the unusual condition of a person, religion was the key that could solve the problem. “Anyone who displayed abnormal behaviour regardless of age, social status and economic status, was seen as problematic and a threat to society” (Cottrell 2021, 2) and the consequences changed according to the gender of the patient: distinctions were made between women and men, in fact, women were more likely to be accused of witchcraft and punished severely for this supposed “profession”. Being a psychologically unstable person at that time meant being misunderstood by everybody and suffering more, both psychologically and physically, for being different. As the time went on, the stigma that labelled the patients changed, physicians’ approach towards them got modified, hence patients started to be treated differently, with more respect, humanness and understanding even though the procedures were still painful and physically invasive.

During the 19th century, Western Europe saw an evolution in the field of medicine, including a greater interest in mental health which resulted in the birth of psychiatry. In England and France, doctors tried to treat patients by adopting a different approach: they simply tried to see beyond their patients' disease by considering them as human beings. Before the 19th century, those people who manifested some psychological difficulties and disorders were labelled as “idiots” or “criminals” (Sigurðardóttir 2013, 3), therefore they were subject to discrimination and mistreatment in both social and health care settings. Regarding the United States, things started to change when “the army nurse and activist” (Sigurðardóttir 2013, 3) Dorothea Dix, began tirelessly to promote this new and functional approach after noticing improvements in European hospitals. She wanted to shed light on “the abusive and horrendous conditions of the asylums” (Cottrell 2021, 3) and reshape a system where patients were not considered important only for their social position and wealth.

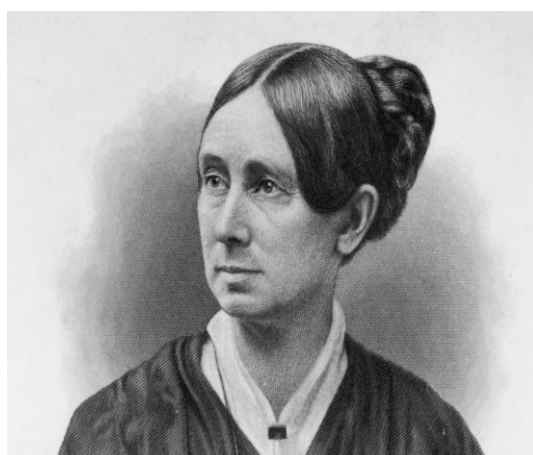


Figure 5: Dorothea Dix

According to Dix's point of view, mentally ill people are only “sick humans needing care” (Sigurðardóttir 2013, 7), therefore their suffering is not linked to a physical pain, but to a psychological one which can not be observed directly. For women, everything was more complicated to handle because, beyond their psychological difficulties, they had to face the fact of being thought of as inferior and weaker than men. Indeed, as reported in the previous lines, distinctions were made between genders by putting into practice different procedures, very often heavier on women. The female role in society has always been explained and justified by referring to medical and biological evidence, in fact,

since at least the time of Hippocrates and Aristotle, the roles assigned to women have attracted an elaborate body of medical and biological justification. (Smith-Rosenberg, Rosenberg 1973, 332)

In order to prevent women's advancement, men restricted their actions in the public sphere suggesting that public life was unnatural and unhealthy for them:

men [...] employed medical and biological arguments to rationalize traditional sex roles as rooted inevitably and irreversibly in the prescriptions of anatomy and physiology. (Smith-Rosenberg, Rosenberg 1973, 333)

Many conservative physicians claimed that the women's physical and psychological traits were weaker than the men's: women's bodies were believed to be characterized by "a greater physical fragility, smaller bones and weaker muscles" (Smith-Rosenberg, Rosenberg 1973, 334). Furthermore, the main difference between men and women was marked by the diversity of the related nervous systems: actually, doctors asserted that women's nervous system was finer than men's, consequently, women's weakness was somehow justified. During the course of the 19th century, the world started to evolve economically and socially and women expected that this change would have affected and improved their condition too and, additionally, started to make some requests for their own interests regarding the access to birth control and abortion and the achievement of a better level of instruction. With respect to birth control, as Charles Rosenberg and Carrol Smith-Rosenberg report in their article *The Female Animal: Medical and Biological Views of Woman and Her Role in Nineteenth-Century America*, women began to request it because they wanted to protect their own health and wealth but, in this specific case, the response to this request did not sound positive and welcoming. In fact, in 1857, a special committee was founded to solve the problem and condemn all the doctors who practiced abortion without opposing it (Smith-Rosenberg, Rosenberg 1973, 344). Regarding instruction, it was not recommended that a young woman embarked on a school career because it would have "consumed her vital force" (Smith-Rosenberg, Rosenberg 1973, 340) and it would not have led her to the achievement of "the true womanhood"¹. Women's vital forces were thought to be limited so, why waste them for education instead of directing them towards physical

¹It is an expression which indicates the level of perfection that a woman can reach in society, by being a good mother, daughter, wife and sister. (Welter 1966, 152)

and reproductive development? According to experts of the time, “the brain and ovary could not develop at the same time” (Smith-Rosenberg, Rosenberg 1973, 340), therefore an instructed woman was more likely to develop mental disorders and pass them on to her children. Of course, more conservative physicians did not take in consideration these demands and answered by giving “medical and scientific arguments” which “formed an ideological system rigid in its support of tradition, yet infinitely flexible in the particular mechanisms which could be made to explain and legitimate woman's role” (Smith-Rosenberg, Rosenberg 1973, 334). By affirming this, doctors thought they had given a valid and reliable reason to prevent women from doing what the society did not expect them to do.

1.4 *Charlotte Perkins Gilman and the Rest Cure*

Charlotte Perkins Gilman used to record her daily life in her diaries, also those parts where she talked about her psycho-physical condition. Even before the birth of her daughter, she used to express herself by using these words:

Feel sick and remain so all day.
Walter stays home and does everything for me.
(Gilman 1990, 88)

Her husband Walter has been a crucial presence for her, he gave her a great amount of support with Katharine in a period where Gilman could not even stand and hold things with her hands. Actually, the only thing that the author could do without someone's assistance was “lay all day on the lounge and cry” (Gilman 1990, 89) and that prompted her to define herself as a “mental wreck”. As Gilman reported in her autobiography, this condition was so debilitating that it prevented her from eating, writing, sewing, painting or doing even the most basic actions. The only thing she was able to do was cry day and night and doctors who examined her physically did not find anything wrong because the real problem was in her head. Gilman stated that physical pain was something totally different from the situation she was experiencing, but she would have preferred delivering a child weekly instead of feeling this kind of mental torture. Her husband Walter was seriously concerned about her wife's health, therefore he decided to try to act even more concretely by seeking real and professional help in the hope of making

her feel better. He opted to have her examined by “the greatest nerve specialist in the country” (Gilman 1990, 95), Dr. Silas Weir Mitchell who worked in Philadelphia.

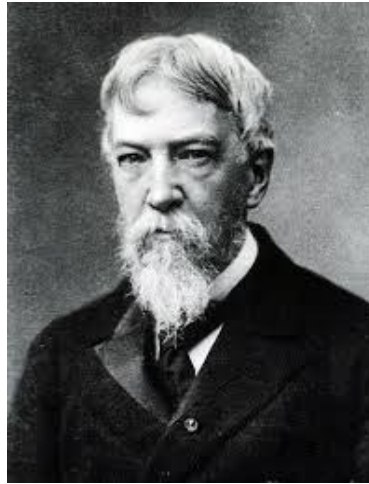


Figure 6: Dr. Silas Weir Mitchell

A week before the appointment with Dr. Mitchell, on Tuesday 19th April 1887, Gilman wrote him a sixteen-page letter to introduce to him her case, what was wrong with her, in order to help him formulate as precise a diagnosis as possible. In this letter she presented the members of her family, including all the grandparents, her parents and a long paragraph where she wrote about herself: she reported some significant events of her life, the problematic relationship she had with her parents and, mostly, her psychological situation since the beginning of her marriage. Gilman hoped that, by writing about herself and explaining her familiar background, it would have been easier for Dr. Mitchell to find a solution and finally put a stop to her pain; however, in her autobiography, Gilman reports that, from the very beginning, she perceived hostility from the famous physician because “he had a prejudice against the Beechers” (Gilman 1990, 95). Actually, some years before, he treated her two paternal aunts Catherine and Isabella Beecher.

Dr. Silas W. Mitchell, nerve specialist and physician, became famous for the cure he developed for those who suffered from psychological disorders, both women and men. The development of this therapy was deeply rooted in his beliefs about the social roles of men and women: men were thought to be stronger and powerful while women had to limit themselves to procreation and taking care of the family, therefore, he developed

two versions of this medical approach. Regarding men, the therapy is not as famous as the one reserved for the other gender and it is called “West Cure”: as Bipin Dimri wrote in his article *Silas Weir Mitchell and the Rest Cure: Brilliant Doctor or Cruel Tyrant?* in 2022,

Instead of recommending the nervous men to rest, Mitchell sent the men out to the western United States in order to enable them to engage in activities such as hunting, cattle roping, male bonding, and rough riding for a prolonged period. [...] It was believed that such activities could help in rehabilitating the men and ensuring better success in intellectual and commercial pursuits. (Dimri, 2022)

Therefore, Mitchell was convinced that physical activity would have reduced the gravity of the disease and reinforced the nervous system, and he considered this approach as “an ideal alternative to drug treatment” (Dimri 2022). This may seem rather odd since women who presented with the same symptomatology were treated through a completely different approach, the “Rest Cure”. This version of the therapy included no physical and psychological activity and, in some cases, a specific diet to follow that could have been high-fat or high-calorie. However, the most important characteristic of this cure, which is implied in its own name, is the concept of “rest”: in fact, this treatment comprised complete isolation from everything and everyone for a period ranging from six to eight weeks, because it could have compromised the progress that the therapy was bringing. As can be deduced from this information, there was a serious difference between the West Cure and the Rest Cure although the symptoms were the same in all patients: the first one, reserved to men, was much more “permissive” than the second one, it implied some activities and social interaction, things that the Rest Cure did not presuppose. Actually, as stated in the previous lines, the development of the Rest Cure derives from Dr. Mitchell’s own views about women and their roles in society. In fact, he was deeply convinced that the women could not aspire to become nothing more than mothers and everything beyond reproduction, like teaching or working, was deemed as inappropriate and far from her nature.

Dr. Mitchell diagnosed Charlotte Perkins Gilman with hysteria and prescribed her three months under the Rest Cure with these precise instructions:

Live as domestic life as possible,
Have about two hours of intellectual life a day,
Never touch pen, brush or pencil as long as she lived.
(Gilman 1990, 96).

Gilman tried to follow these rigid rules because she wanted to feel better and go back to her life, however the therapy did not work because she “came perilously near to losing her mind” (Gilman 1990, 96). She felt that she needed opposite instructions, physical movements and psychological stimuli in order to recover faster. Certainly, this cure brought nothing but negative effects on Gilman who decided to write a short story very similar to her experience, the work that made her famous: *The Yellow Wallpaper*.

1.5 The Yellow Wallpaper

Being subjected to the Rest Cure for three months, Charlotte Perkins Gilman felt the necessity to report her experience, and this is how *The Yellow Wallpaper* was born and published in January 1892. Gilman tried to gain a publication for her work: firstly, it was noticed by the literary critic W. D. Howells who proposed it to Horace Scudder, the editor of the “Atlantic Monthly”. However, Mr. Scudder refused to publish *The Yellow Wallpaper* and justified his decision directly to Charlotte Perkins Gilman by sending her a letter, in which he informed her of the reasons which led him not to publish her story. In this short letter, the editor wrote:

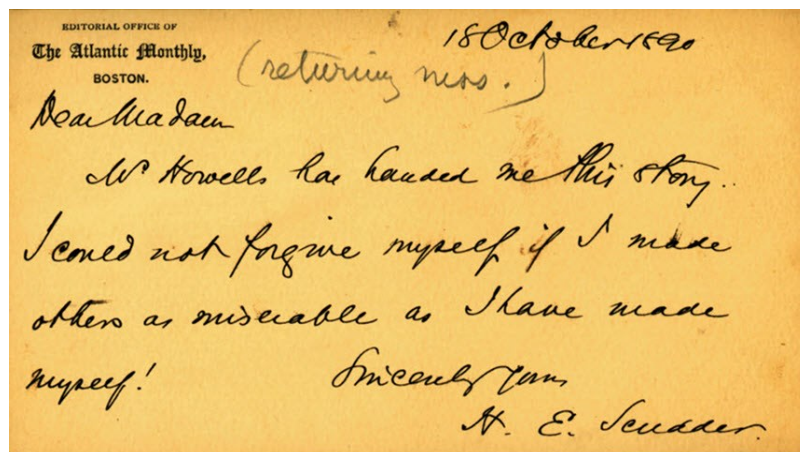


Figure 7: H.E. Scudder’s response, on October 18th, 1890

It says:

Dear Madam, Mr. Howells has handed me this story. I could not forgive myself if I made others as miserable as I have made myself.

Despite this hurdle, Gilman first published this book in 1892 in the New England Magazine and W.D. Howells published it in his own collection *Great Modern American*

Stories where it is presented as “terrible and too wholly dire” and “too terribly good to be printed” (Boni and Liveright, 1920 in Shumaker, 1985).

This work is considered to be a semi-autobiographical short story in which the author narrates her relationship with mental disorders, telling everything by stepping into the shoes of a sort of double. The protagonist of *The Yellow Wallpaper* is a woman, an anonymous narrator and character. The known facts about her are few: she has recently given birth to a child and, after that, she started suffering psychologically. She is surrounded by doctors, her husband John and her brother, who diagnose her with a “temporary nervous depression” and “a slight hysterical tendency” (Gilman 1892, 1) therefore, they take care of her in their own way:

So I take phosphates or phosphites - whichever it is, and tonics, and journeys, and air, and exercise, and am absolutely forbidden to “work” until I am well again. (Gilman 1892, 1)

Hand in hand with Gilman’s own experience, even the narrator herself does not agree with the way the therapy is structured and believes profoundly that what she truly needs is “less opposition and more society and stimulus” (Gilman 1892, 2), indeed, she keeps a diary and writes behind her husband’s back to get some relief.

But I must say what I feel and think in some way - it is such a relief.
(Gilman 1892, 10)

However, John is the doctor and he thinks he knows what is best for her wife because it is scientifically proven, as everything he believes in, in fact, John, accepts as true and real only what can be seen and touched. Furthermore, he acts optimistically towards his wife’s condition by saying that she is getting better:

Really, dear, you are better.
(Gilman 1892, 13)

However, as the plot progresses, the situation does not appear as he claims. The protagonist tries to warn her husband that the therapy is not working as he thinks it is,

because the actual problem affects her mental health and not her physical one but, with a serious expression in his face, John replies:

I beg of you, for my sake and for our child's sake, as well as for your own, that you will never for one instant let the idea enter your mind.
(Gilman 1892, 13)

John tries to explain that, even if she does not see any improvement regarding her condition, she is actually getting better, she just needs to trust her husband's professional opinion and that everything would have been fine. The fact that John tries to convince the protagonist that she is slowly recovering and everything is going well is symptomatic of a phenomenon called "gaslighting". The term "gaslighting" refers to the process of manipulating a person with the aim of making them doubt themselves and their own sanity. It is a typical way of psychological and emotional abuse that is used to manipulate fragile people in order to convince them to think or do something they lucidly would not consider. According to the authors of "'And What Can One Do?' Gaslighting in *The Yellow Wallpaper*", John's actions can be labelled as acts of gaslighting "because most of the woman's psychological issues develop after she is placed in isolation" (Cayann, Prestes de Oliveira, Jacobsen de Oliveira 2020, 5). Indeed, the more she spends her days locked up in her bedroom, a former nursery with barred windows and bed nailed to the floor, the more she develops an obsession with the wallpaper, which grows gradually: at first, it starts as an "optic horror" (Gilman 1892, 9), then it looks more attractive. When the protagonist starts to see the shape of a woman behind the pattern of the wallpaper the situation becomes more complicated. Indeed, at some point in the plot, the narrator starts blaming the pattern for the tough condition she is experiencing, for her negative thoughts she has but it seems also a positive aspect because now she has something to do, which is to monitor the wallpaper and the presumed movements behind it. The obsession becomes heavier when the protagonist perceives a "yellow smell" coming from the wall, an unpleasant smell which almost led the protagonist to set the house on fire to make it stop. Furthermore, she notices that, at night, the pattern moves and she is convinced of the fact that it is the imprisoned woman to do it, as a sort of help signal. Therefore, a desire arises in her, that of freeing the imprisoned woman and all the other imprisoned women whose presence

is perceived behind the pattern. This aspect of the protagonist hallucinating marks a difference between her experience and Gilman's, as she never suffered from those kinds of symptoms. The protagonist compulsively thinks about the imprisoned woman, then she starts to rip the wallpaper off the wall while she is locked in her bedroom because she does not want her husband and any other person to see what she is doing. John, who is deeply worried about her wife being locked in the bedroom, manages to go in by retrieving the key that had been thrown into the garden and faints when he sees that her wife's psychological conditions are that damaged, in fact, she is crawling around the room, trying to imitate the movements of all those women who she believes she set free from that "prison". This short story indicates the gravity of the condition of a woman whose voice has not been listened to, exactly as happened to the author herself.

In 1913, Gilman published in her magazine *The Forerunner* an article entitled *Why I wrote the Yellow Wallpaper*, in which she clarified the reasons that led her to discuss this kind of topic. The Rest Cure therapy was not bringing any benefit, on the contrary, it was driving her crazy, therefore she realized that all she needed was going back to her life and giving up the therapy. After the publication of *The Yellow Wallpaper* in 1892, Gilman sent a copy of the book to Dr. Mitchell because she wanted him to understand how harmful his treatment could be, but he never gave a response. However, in the article Gilman confesses that, some years after the publication of the short story she gained the best result that she could hope for: Dr. Mitchell modified the Rest Cure approach after reading her work which "was not intended to drive people crazy, but to save people from being driven crazy, and it worked" (Gilman, 1913).

1.6 Rest Cure: cause or consequence of psychological distress?

Both in Gilman's case and in the one narrated in her short story, the symptoms of psychological distress seem to be getting worse as the treatment of the Rest Cure progresses and the question arises whether the treatment itself is the cause or the consequence of this worsening. During one of the long days spent in that room in the company of "the optical horror" represented by the wallpaper, the narrator reveals to her husband John that she felt that everything was wrong, that the time for recovery was getting farther and farther away, and that "maybe in the physical" things were actually getting better. However, regarding the psychological aspect, the situation was

progressively degenerating. The fact that she was not allowed to distract herself in any way, forced the protagonist to spend her endless days focusing all her energies in the revulsion she felt toward the wallpaper, behind which, the protagonist saw trapped women, whom she will try to set free, thus giving a practical manifestation of her unease, a consequence then of the forced confinement and her unheard opinion. As Vivian Delchamps wrote in her essay *A Slight Hysterical Tendency: Performing Diagnosis in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper"*:

Over the course of the text, hysteria, the rest cure, the house itself, and the wallpaper are all submitted as possible causes for the narrator's symptoms. (Delchamps 2020, 118)

Therefore, it can be claimed that, if a different medical approach had been used or, more simply, if the Rest Cure had never been prescribed, both Gilman and *The Yellow Wallpaper's* protagonist would have recovered faster and would have benefited more.

Chapter 2: Charlotte Perkins Gilman's political views and battles

2.1 Charlotte Perkins Gilman's activist career and thought

After quitting the Rest Cure therapy and ending the marriage with Walter, for Charlotte Perkins Gilman began a new phase of her life in Pasadena (California), where she started her “professional living” (Gilman 1990, 107), a humble career as writer and teacher to ensure economical support both to herself and her daughter Katharine who, at that time, was five years old. Gilman hoped that the divorce could have solved most of the problems she was going through and, when at Christmas 1889 Walter joined her and Katharine, a small part of her hoped that the distancing from him would have been the key of her improvement and, now that she was finally feeling better, they might have reconsidered their decision. However, Charlotte and Walter never got back together and in January 1890 started the divorce practices, officialised in April 1894. Gilman spent two years in Pasadena and then moved to Oakland, where she started her activism projects: she considered herself as an “early humanitarian kind” socialist, who only partially embraced Marx's ideas, in fact, she did not accept Marx's concepts of “economic determinism”, the “class struggle”, the “class consciousness” and “the political methods pursued by the Marxians” (Gilman 1990, 131). Gilman was totally interested “in the position of women, and the need for more scientific care for children” (Gilman 1990, 131). The author strongly argued that women's economic independence was far more important than the ballot, a crucial concept which she would have discussed in *Women and Economics: A Study of the Economic Relation Between Men and Women as a Factor in Social Evolution*, written in 1898. For the following decades, despite the fluctuating fragility of her mental health, Gilman dedicated her career to writing articles, books and teaching activities which were fundamental to provide economic support both for herself and her daughter, who managed to handle her mother's fragilities, despite her young age. Once they arrived in San Francisco, Gilman's activist mission started officially: actually, she was an active member of several groups (The Ebell Society, The Economic Club, The Pacific Coast Women's Press Association, The State Council of Women) which aimed to achieve more rights

and equality for women. She also was called upon to give speeches: in 1896 Gilman took part in the Suffrage Convention in Washington and in the International Socialist and Labour Conference in London, both as California's delegate. On these occasions, she had the opportunity to exchange opinions, points of view and ideas with other figures belonging to the political field. In the introduction of the book *La Terra delle Donne: Herland e altri racconti* (2011), Anna Scacchi wrote that what made Charlotte Perkins Gilman a highly acclaimed speaker was her ability to report concrete evidence and rational proofs about innovative and radical ideas about women's role within the society. Her style impressed those who heard her because she made use of tangible views over contemporary social science, which led her to become a controversial figure among the conservatives but also a popular one in the feminist context.



Figure 8: Charlotte Perkins Gilman giving a speech in front of a group of women.

During the course of her career, Gilman wrote articles for many magazines and newspapers such as the *Cosmopolitan Magazine* where she expressed her opinion regarding a wide range of topics, including the status of women, social policy, home economics, and gender issues, topics that she would have faced in the *Forerunner*, a monthly magazine totally written and edited by her from 1909 to 1916. Particularly, Gilman often gave a speech called *The Humanness of Women* between 1909 and 1910, in which she insists on the missteps that have been committed and are still being committed against women. Firstly, the author asserts that women and men stand at the same level and the mistake made by society has always been that of considering man as

“the race type” and the woman as “his female”, excluding her humanity. Furthermore, Gilman keeps mentioning that the domestic role of women, which has become typical of the female stereotype, is totally wrong and it is time to change it and evolve to a new view, which comprises women as active members of society with the achievement of equal rights and duties. Then, Gilman makes reference to the feminist fight and the small but great achievements that have been made over time:

At first the women strove for a little liberty, for education; then for some equality before the law, for common justice; then, with larger insight, for full equal rights with men in every human field; and as essential base of these, for the right of suffrage. (Gilman 1909-1910)

Furthermore, also in her autobiography, Gilman cites the topic of her commitment to the economic change she hoped society would achieve by writing:

For some thirty-seven years, with voice and pen, I have endeavored to explain and advocate this change, and the gain made in that time is probably all that could be expected in so deep-rooted custom as that to-every-man-his-own-cook. (Gilman 1990, 321)

2.2 *Exclusionary feminism: the ideological limits of Gilman's thought*

Gilman’s ideology was not only characterized by feminist ideals, it also had some critical aspects. For example, a characteristic element of her belief is the concept of “eugenics”, a movement which supported the improvement of human kind by selecting specific tracts, which were considered “better” than others. Gilman’s eugenic principles are visible in her works, for example in *Herland* (1915). *Herland* is about a utopian world completely inhabited by women who, due to the total male absence, have the biological, and unrealistic, ability to generate children without the necessary and natural male presence, through a process called “parthenogenesis”. However, as the author writes throughout the pages, women could generate only one child but not all of them could do it and here lies the eugenic side of the story, because only those who could give the best could contribute to the evolution. Indeed, one of the explorers seems to have understood this aspect, and says addressing to those women:

I understand that you make Motherhood the highest social service — a sacrament, really; that it is only undertaken once, by the majority of the population; that those held unfit are not allowed even that; and that to be

encouraged to bear more than one child is the very highest reward and honor in the power of the state. (Gilman 1915, 75)

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's ideology focused on another particular element, indeed, this author is considered to have racist views which supported the ideal of cultural superiority, and not only, of white people. This aspect of Gilman's thought has been criticized by scholars and writers who expressed their disapproval against her for using the ideas of civilization and progress to justify the superiority of white culture and the forced assimilation of minorities. Despite being more open-minded than the rest of society about issues such as control over one's body or women's economic independence, Charlotte Perkins Gilman demonstrated to be quite skeptical about communities that were different from the one she belonged from. As stated in the previous lines, racism and eugenics were part of some of her works, for example, in her essay *A Suggestion on the Negro Problem* (1908), the author proposes that African Americans worked for white civilization under supervision, reflecting a deeply racist view. In her essay, the author refers this way about African American community:

They were forcibly extradited from a distant country, from a status far lower than our own; and we for our own purposes gave them a compulsory introduction into our economic group, and made them working factors in our society. (Gilman 1908, 78)

Furthermore, she adds:

We have to consider the unavoidable presence of a large body of aliens, of a race widely dissimilar and in many respects inferior, whose present status is to us a social injury. If we had left them alone in their own country this dissimilarity and inferiority would be, so to speak, none of our business. (Gilman 1908, 78)

By stating so, Gilman gives a more precise idea of what her ideology was, highlighting more and more the difference she felt there was between her ethnicity and African Americans'. According to her:

The problem is this:

Given: in the same country, Race A, progressed in social evolution, say, to Status 10; and Race B, progressed in social evolution, say, to Status 4.

Given: That Race A outnumbers Race B as ten to one.

Given: That Race B was forcibly imported by Race A, and cannot be deported.

Given: That Race B, in its present condition, does not develop fast enough to suit Race A.

Question: How can Race A best and most quickly promote the development of Race B? (Gilman 1908, 79)

In other words, Gilman wonders how, in the same country, a wholly developed race could contribute to the development of the one considered as inferior and provides the answer to this question by asserting this:

The whole body of negroes who do not progress, who are not self-supporting, who are degenerating into an increasing percentage of social burdens or actual criminals, should be taken hold of by the state. (Gilman 1908, 81)

Besides, Gilman suggests a new social organization from which all could benefit and that could solve the question that was asked. As the author reports, “this proposed organization is not enslavement, but enlistment” (Gilman 1908, 81) and it also includes a new scholar system for children and employment that concretely helps society. Because of her racist tendencies, Charlotte Perkins Gilman is considered to be one of the white feminist who fought for rights only in favour of white women, excluding other communities. In her essay *Feminist Criticism, "The Yellow Wallpaper," and the Politics of Color in America* (1989), Susan S. Lanser addresses the critique against Gilman’s racist tendencies:

Despite her socialist values [...], Gilman upheld white Protestant supremacy; belonged for a time to eugenics and nationalist organizations; opposed open immigration; and inscribed racism, nationalism, and classism into her proposals for social change. (Lanser 1989, 429)

The writer and scholar Anna De Biasio is very clear about this aspect: indeed, in her essay *Una critica del cuore: la controversa vicenda degli studi su Charlotte Perkins Gilman* (2019), she gives evidence of the presence of Gilman’s racist tendencies in some other works she wrote, such as *Concerning Children* (1900) and *With Her in Ourland* (1916) where the author expresses her point of view concerning, respectively, Indian and Chinese, and Jews. Furthermore, Anna De Biasio blames Gilman, along with other female authors, to fight only on behalf of a small part of the female gender, only for privileged white and western women, exactly as they were, with patronizing and discriminating tendencies towards other ethnicities. Gilman’s contribution in rethinking women’s role in the society is highly significant, however, she did not take into account the female gender as a whole, composed of women belonging to different ethnicities

and social classes. If the condition of privileged white and western women was difficult because of patriarchal social schemes and limitations, the situation for African American and native women was even more challenging. Before 1865, when the XIII Amendment definitively abolished slavery in the United States, black women's lives were not definable as dignified and free. African American women worked for hours as slaves during the day but, unlike men, they underwent an additional difficulty which was becoming mothers in such a hostile environment. As Dorothy Roberts writes in her work *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty* (1997),

Slave women's childbearing replenished the enslaved labor force: Black women bore children who belonged to the slaveowner from the moment of their conception. This feature of slavery made control of reproduction a central aspect of whites' subjugation of African people in America. It marked Black women from the beginning as objects whose decision about reproduction should be subject to social regulation rather than to their own will. For slave women, procreation had little to do with liberty. To the contrary, Black women's childbearing in bondage was largely a product of oppression rather than expression of self-definition and personhood. (Roberts 1997, 22-23)

Thanks to the publication of the XIII Amendment, African American people became legally emancipated and free from their condition of servitude, however, although Black people gained legal freedom, their reproductive rights continued to be violated and restricted by white people who carried forward the ideology of white supremacy. Indeed, as Paola Alonso reports in her essay *Autonomy Revoked: The Forced Sterilization of Women of Color in 20th Century America*:

Much of this violence derives from beliefs of white supremacy, which perpetuates the notion that the lives of people of color are less important than the lives of the Anglo-Saxon population. (Alonso 2020, 1)

Alonso affirms that, with the advent of the 20th century, the United States saw a great amount of immigrants coming from all over Europe and, with them, African American people who were migrating from the agricultural South to North-American cities. As Alonso states:

This rapid shift in populations worried powerful, upper-class whites, which led many of them to adopt Eugenics as a way to preserve the American way of life. Eugenics was then embraced by scientists, social activists, and politicians as a progressive social movement aimed at ridding society of undesirable characteristics. (Alonso 2020, 1)

These eugenics and racist views led to a particularly restrictive and severe control over African American women's pregnancies, up to the forced sterilization, also called “eugenic surgery”, a widespread medical practice that from the early 20th century until the 1970s concerned men’s, but especially women’s, reproductive opportunities. This much-debated practice consisted in depriving people of the ability to reproduce for several reasons, mainly for “safety reasons” in order to “prevent the procreation of confirmed criminals, idiots, imbeciles, and rapists” (Stern 2011, 98) or because of an alleged psychological disability. However, not all cases of forced sterilization covered these options; indeed, there are experiences of women who assert that they underwent this procedure without even knowing it, during other medical interventions. For example during surgeries, as in the case of Fannie Lou Hamer, the African American activist who was rendered infertile against her consent during a cyst removal surgery; another one is Esperanza, a Puerto Rican woman who underwent tubal ligation as contraceptive method by a doctor who omitted the resulting infertility (Alonso 2020, 5). Furthermore, laws were instituted, laws which turned this procedure as legal in those cases where patients were considered psychologically fragile. To illustrate, in 1907 the state of Indiana passed the first sterilization law, making it legal. Alonso reports some data from Johanna Schoen’s essay *Choice and Coercion: Birth Control, Sterilization, and Abortion in Public Health and Welfare* (2005), which discusses some information regarding these laws which allowed such a terrible and unjustified practice.

These laws provided the state with the ability to sterilize those who were perceived as feeble-minded, with African American welfare recipients being one of the groups coerced into sterilization on this basis. The percentage of African American state-sterilized patients in North Carolina increased tremendously throughout the twentieth century, from 23% in the 1930s-1940s, to 59% between 1958 and 1960, and then 64% between 1964 and 1966. (Schoen 2005 in Alonso 2020, 3)

African Americans were not the only ethnicity subjected to this procedure; it also targeted Latina and, especially, Puerto Rico’s women who represent the highest number of victims who underwent forced sterilization. They used to call it “La Operación”, the procedure that would prevent them from having children and it consisted in the tubal ligation, a surgical operation about which patients were not properly informed, as they thought it was reversible. Along with these two ethnicities, there is a third one who had

experiences with this medical treatment and they are Native American women who, similarly to Latinas and Puerto Ricans, had some difficulties in integrating with American society because of several differences, cultural and language barriers. This procedure especially affected the Navajo tribe and it can be deduced because, according to their traditions and culture, Navajo's wealth was not based on economical richness or material possessions, it was established by the number of children one had (Pember 2018 in Alonso 2020, 9-10). Clearly, coercive sterilization led to a significant decrease in all the tribes, ethnicities, social groups and populations who have been affected by this phenomenon. Most of those women, who without knowing it, underwent coercive sterilization claimed that this was a discovery they made years later during other operations they needed to do, or, more frequently, "other women were coerced into sterilization through false information told to them by their physician" (Alonso 2020, 10), as in Esperanza's case. The situation of forced sterilization has been a huge problem which affected American reality for a significant part of the 20th century, the period of time when white feminists like Charlotte Perkins Gilman, were fighting for equal rights and white women's economic independence. What they did not do, was fight for all women. They did not realize that in fighting patriarchy they were still unconsciously adopting part of its hierarchical and exclusionary approach, which excluded many women from their vision of the female gender, leaving in the dark the difficulties and injustices that African American, Latinas and Native women were going through.

2.3 Charlotte Perkins Gilman's last fight

In the late 1800s, Gilman met for the first time George Houghton Gilman, her second husband who was seven years younger than her. At first, they communicated through letters because both were busy due to professional commitments, she with her writer's activities and he with the law practice. However, in 1900, they got married and lived together with Gilman's daughter.



Figure 9: Charlotte Perkins Gilman and George Houghton Gilman

Charlotte Perkins Gilman experienced the second marriage with more serenity with respect to the first one, psychologically speaking she still was fragile, but the Rest Cure had become only a bad and distant memory. Charlotte and Houghton spent the next twenty years in New York, the city where they lived when women obtained the right to vote on 26th of August 1922. Although it was a fundamental step for women rights, Gilman never considered it as “the summum bonum” as other people did, because women’s situation did not change much:

They remain, for instance, as much as slaves of fashion as before, lifting their skirts, baring their backs, exhibiting their legs, powdering their noses, behaving just as foolish as ever, if not more so. (Gilman 1990, 318)

In 1922, the Gilmans left New York for Norwich Town, in Connecticut where Charlotte continued her writer’s activity: she kept writing articles, lectures and published some novels like *His religion and Hers: A Study of the Faith of Our Fathers and the Work of Our Mothers* (1923). Everything was going quite fine, however, ten years later, she received terrible news: she had breast cancer and reports this fact in her autobiography:

In January, 1932, I discovered that I had cancer of the breast. My only distress was for Houghton. I had not the least objection to dying. (Gilman 1990, 333)

Gilman was not afraid of death, the only thing she was worried about was leaving her husband, who suffered greatly for her; however, Houghton died suddenly on May 4th, 1934, of a cerebral hemorrhage and, although this episode made Charlotte suffer way

more than cancer did, she was partially relieved because then he would not see her die. Charlotte Perkins Gilman was a determined and resolute person, who fought not only for women's rights but also for the idea that everyone should have control over his or her own life. Indeed, shortly before her death, the author wrote in the pages of her autobiography these words, to strengthen her point of view over suicide:

Human life consists in mutual service. No grief, pain, misfortunate, or "broken heart" is excuse for cutting off one's life while any power of service remains. But when all usefulness is over, when one is assured of unavoidable and imminent death, it is the simplest of human rights to choose a quick and easy death in place of a slow and horrible one. (Gilman 1990, 333)

Gilman was deeply tired of her condition, she was fully aware that she would die soon and she did not want to die in pain therefore, she decided to committ suicide. This author believed that, only in specific circumstances, as a terminal cancer, this should have been an open choice and she considered it "abhorrent" to not allow a suffering human being, as she was, to die quickly. The last years of her life were spent at the house of her daughter Katharine and her nephews, where her great friend, as well as stepmother of her daughter, Grace Channing assisted her. The breast cancer was extremely difficult and painful to handle despite the treatments she went through, therefore, on August 17th, 1935, Gilman took a lethal dose of chloroform to put an end to her pain and, consequently, to her life.

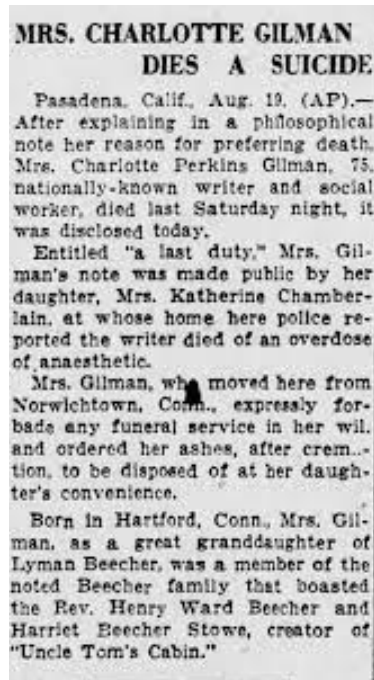


Figure 10: article reporting Charlotte Perkins Gilman's death on 19th August 1935

2.4 Patriarchy: distinctions between gender and gender roles

As described in the previous chapter, in the past centuries, women lived in a position of inferiority to men. Women were responsible for the proper running of the house, for the family, and for the safe raising of the children while their husband's duty was to work to ensure the subsistence of the whole family. Social constructs on which western societies were based, were clear about the roles to which each of its members had to fulfil; on one hand men were reserved for power and relevant positions in both work and social life, on the other hand women, although they were considered inferior, had a crucial role which was to have children, regardlessly of their desires and projects. This clear contrast between gender roles is determined by the core principles of "patriarchy"; in the present day, the word "patriarchy" is defined in dictionaries as "a social system in which men have all the power" (Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English). Sociologically and anthropologically speaking, patriarchy consists in assigning to men powerful social positions as political leadership or moral and religious authority and, if the focus is shifted to the familiar environment, patriarchy is mentioned in a situation where the head of the family, also known as the "patriarch", is the father figure who imposes his authority within the domestic confines. In addition, patriarchy can be defined as:

the power of the fathers: a familial-social, ideological, political system in which men - by force, direct pressure, or through ritual, tradition, law, and language, customs, etiquette, education, and the division of labor - determine what part women shall or shall not play, and in which the female everywhere is subsumed under the male (Rich 1977, 54).

The origins of the patriarchal system are still unclear and scholars formulated several hypotheses about it. According to Gerda Lerner, the author of *The creation of patriarchy*, many versions of the origins of patriarchy exist: before the Neolithic Revolution, societies were more egalitarian because everybody, both men and women, contributed to food collection and it was with the advent of agriculture that men assumed more dominant roles, because greater physical strength was required and women have been relegated to purely domestic roles. According to traditionalist scholars, women's main purpose in life is becoming mothers and they see "in motherhood woman's chief goal in life" (Lerner 1986, 17), because it is something established by the divine will which cannot be questioned, while other scholars support the so-called "biological determinism" which somewhat explains women's inferiority through biological evidence. The patriarchal system consolidated with the birth of private property, when the necessity to ensure the maintenance of power within the family became vital for the legacy of families, especially the affluent ones. Influential men, such as political figures, began to consider of essential importance to secure offspring and, in order to make sure that their properties were lawfully inherited by their children, they started to exert even more pressure and control over their wives' lives and habits.

Patriarchy, with all its might, has encouraged men to have children, male children, because patriarchy values them more than females. As a consequence, many families have more children than they need to get that longed-for son. (Fortier 1975, 280)

However, it must be said that in some ancient cultures, such as the Minoan one, women were central to society, holding important positions in both religious and political spheres and the principle of equality among members of society, regardless of their gender, was generally widespread. Nevertheless, throughout the centuries, patriarchy evolved and developed, becoming pressing and annihilating for the female gender and leading to an even more concise distinction between gender roles; the idea of male dominance over women already existed and it has been consolidated over time with the

gradual establishment of social hierarchies, institutions and structures which did not acknowledge the contribution or the mere presence of women. These structures were based on the idea of “natural” roles assigned to men and women, which simultaneously reinforced the idea of the “perfect woman”.

The “perfect woman” was considered to be the one who obeys, who strives to meet the needs of her family and husband and, most importantly, the one who becomes a mother. Indeed, while men, especially the high-ranking ones, could decide for themselves about any aspect of their life and professional career, women’s fate was already determined since the day of their birth. Even their educational path was aimed at the training of future mothers, and it generally consisted in teaching how to take care of children and how to run a household. However, not all women were housewives, actually, things started to evolve with the advent of the 20th century when women began to have some more professional possibilities. In fact, at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries the world has witnessed a rapid growth in the industrial sector which, consequently, needed more workers, especially during the I World War when weapons production had to be fruitful and rapid. This marked an important achievement for women, who started to be part of the working sector and claiming their right to their personal economic independence. Marion Foster Washburne in *Masculine and Feminine Occupations* wrote about women seeking their financial autonomy:

they see that, if they have not money enough to live on in their own way, they are virtually slaves, compelled to live, not as they would like to live, but as some one who can support them would like to have them live. (Foster Washburne 1904, 557)

In other words, women saw money as the key to their freedom. Nevertheless, women’s economic autonomy was considered as a sort of hurdle to the typically patriarchal power structures of that time, which had restrictive views towards the role that the female gender had to fulfill.

With respect to the United States context, patriarchy has deep roots in the country’s tradition and developed in a scenario which that fueled its growth.

There are examples which analyze the presence of patriarchy into American society, both from inside and outside of it. When in 1835 the French politician Alexis De Tocqueville wrote and published the first volume of his essay *Democracy in America*,

he also inserted a description of how he perceived the relationship between men and women and how patriarchy was part of the American social structure:

As for myself, I do not hesitate to avow that, although the women of the United States are confined within the narrow circle of domestic life, and their situation is in some respects one of extreme dependence, I have nowhere seen woman occupying a loftier position; and if I were asked, now that I am drawing to the close of this work, in which I have spoken of so many important things done by the Americans, to what the singular prosperity and growing strength of that people ought mainly to be attributed, I should reply - to the superiority of their women. (De Tocqueville 2002, 675)

Of course, Alexis De Tocqueville was an external subject with respect to American people, therefore he expressed what he saw and compared it to the context he used to live in. American women did not live in a situation of superiority since they were not economically independent, nor could they enjoy an egalitarian status with men. As Linda K. Kerber wrote in her essay *Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman's Place: The Rhetoric of Women's History* (1988),

Women were said to live in a distinct "world," engaged in nurturant activities, focused on children, husbands, and family dependents. (Kerber 1988, 10)

In the XIX century, the establishment of patriarchy was rooted in the concept of "separate spheres" which indicates the social difference between men and women.

According to Kelter:

Separate spheres were due neither to cultural accident nor to biological determinism. They were social constructions, camouflaging social and economic service, a service whose benefits were unequally shared. (Kelter 1988, 14)

Stereotypically, women were assigned to the domestic sphere, the only contest where they could have control. Central to this aspect was the so-called "cult of True Womanhood" that defined the dominant female idea of that time which saw women only within the domestic walls and devoted to their family. As Barbara Welter writes in her essay, the cult of True Womanhood predicted four main principles "by which a woman judged herself and was judged by her husband, her neighbors and society" (Welter 1966, 152); they are "purity, piety, submissiveness and domesticity" and, as Welter states:

Put them all together and they spelled mother, daughter, sister, wife, woman. Without them, no matter whether there was fame, achievement or wealth, all

was ashes. With them she was promised happiness and power. (Welter 1966, 152)

These four aspects reinforced the idea that the role of women was to be devoted wives and mothers who were responsible for the prosperity of their house and children and, consequently, they also justified women's exclusion from public life. As the society was deeply rooted in these convictions about gender roles and duties, society built its schemes, rules and core principles according to these stereotypes, suffice it to think that the legal and economic system limited women's rights by not seeing them as individual entities as men were. However, things started to change with the suffrage movement which made the first steps by obtaining laboriously but tirelessly, women's right to vote. All the feminist struggles that have been fought and are still being fought are centered on moving the image of women away from what society wanted them to be. What figures like Charlotte Perkins Gilman tried to do has been to struggle in order to destroy women's identity analyzed through the eyes of patriarchy, who saw them only within the domestic sphere and, therefore, not allowed them to develop their potential and give their contribution to the public social context. Gilman, naturally, was deeply opposed to this way of depicting women and expressed her critique to the cult of the True Womanhood in her work *The Home: Its Work and Influence* (1903). As Anna Scacchi writes in her essay *Una città per le donne borghesi: la rivoluzione domestica di Charlotte Perkins Gilman*, the American author declares her firm opposition to "l'irrazionalità della sfera domestica statunitense, in cui sopravvivono rapporti feudali in contrasto con la devozione americana al progresso." (Scacchi 2023, 30) However, Gilman

difende la superiore efficienza e "moralità" di spazi abitativi alternativi, in cui il lavoro ripetitivo e gratuito di cui le donne sono costrette a farsi carico sia trasferito all'esterno e svolto con cura da professionisti preparati e ben pagati e la casa sia luogo di serenità e armonia per tutti i suoi abitanti. (Scacchi 2023, 30)

Gilman supports the idea that women's domestic role forced them into economically unproductive work which deprived them of autonomy and social participation and, consequently, perpetuated their dependence on the men who are part of their life. Indeed, as Gilman states:

The economic dependence of women upon men, with all its deadly consequences, is defended because of our conviction that her labour in the home

is as productive as his out of it; that the marriage is a partnership in which, if she does not contribute in cash, she does in labour, care, and saving. (Gilman 1903, 52)

2.5 *Women and Economics: Charlotte Perkins Gilman's view over female rights*

After the challenging period due to the Rest Cure therapy, Gilman started even more concretely her feminist fight against gender discrimination. In June 1898 she published *Women and Economics: a study of the economic relation between men and women as a Factor in Social Evolution*, where she expresses her firm vision about some aspects of gender inequality, mainly based on economic factors. In the book *Charlotte Perkins Gilman: Optimist Reformer*, which also contains contemporary critiques of her ideals, Ann J. Lane, who cured the 1990 version of Gilman's autobiography, defined *Women and Economics* this way:

She examined the economic relationship between men and women and asserted that the economic dependence of women on men was the key to understanding the subordination of women. (Lane 1999, 5)

Women and Economics gained a meaningful success for the concepts that were covered, so much so that it was translated into seven languages. Furthermore, it meant a lot for the feminist movement of the time, which started to struggle more for the improvement of women's economical condition and the achievement of more and better rights. In this work, which is considered one of the most defining works of Gilman's feminist identity, the author explores in fourteen chapters the topics regarding women's financial situation contextualized within the patriarchal society. Gilman argues that women's economic dependence on their husbands, more generally on men, is due to the exaggerated sexual distinction in the human race, which is judged unethical, an obstacle to the progress of mankind and a key factor perpetuating economic inequality. In fact, having women less opportunities and less financial autonomy than the men in their families, was a contributing factor for their stronger and increasingly necessary dependence on their husbands and an inevitable cause of their condition of inferiority and submission, which was thought to be closely related to the biological characteristics of the related gender. Indeed, in the prologue of the book, Gilman expresses her deep rejection to the biological determinism that, in other words, corresponds to the idea that the natural inferiority of women is justified by biological evidence; according to Gilman's point of

view, the matter of biological characteristics had nothing to do with women's ability to emancipate themselves in society, like all the supposed historical evidence that supported the patriarchal position over women's social role. Another aspect of women's condition that the author reports negatively in her book is the repressive nature of traditional marriage: in fact, in Section V, Gilman defines traditional marriage, by using also the term "slavery", as a form of prostitution because of women's inferiority and financial dependence on their husbands. Regarding marriage leading to women's economic dependence on men, Gilman suggests and encourages readers, as well as members of society, towards a mutation that would improve female's condition which "necessarily involves a change in the home and family relation" (Gilman 1994, 210). Although it might have seemed like something to react to with skepticism, it would not have been the right answer in fact, as Gilman asserts,

if the change is for the advantage of individuals and race, we need not to fear it.
(Gilman 1994, 210)

The improvement that Gilman suggests and deeply wishes for the society she lives in, as all the improvements, needs efforts that must be made by everyone: what Gilman is trying to make clear is that the figure of the woman is allowed to change. Women need to be thought away from domesticity and ideal of homemaking, because, as Gilman tries to explain, they are not their alleged biological destiny and they can do great things beyond the boundaries of the family structure. Women's status of that time, can be explained by a proverb cited by the author in Section IV, which says:

A woman should leave her home but three times,—when she is christened, when she is married, and when she is buried. (Gilman 1994, 65)

This is a clear proof which demonstrates the control exerted over women. Gilman asserts that the change she wants to see in the society concerns many other fields such as family structures, education and the value of domestic work. Regarding family structures, Gilman states that they need to be reformed in order to give the same opportunities to each member of the family, starting from education. With respect to education for young women, it was not particularly focused on culture, but mainly on the stereotypical figure of the woman, which means that they were taught how to run a household, look after children as they were maids, the only difference is that there is no salary established. In fact, according to Gilman,

the labor which the wife performs in the household is given as part of her functional duty, not as employment (Gilman 1994, 13).

In other words, being a housewife is not considered a real profession as being a lawyer or a doctor, it is believed to be as something predetermined which is part of a woman's identity as an arm is part of her body. Again, Gilman asserts:

The labor which the wife performs in the household is given as part of her functional duty, not as employment. The wife of the poor man, who works hard in a small house, doing all the work for the family, or the wife of the rich man, who wisely and gracefully manages a large house and administers its functions, each is entitled to fair pay for services rendered. (Gilman 1994, 13-14)

In order to clarify this concept, Gilman gives an example:

If a man plus a valet can perform more useful service than he could minus a valet, then the valet is performing useful service. But, if the valet is the property of the man, is obliged to perform this service, and is not paid for it, he is not economically independent. (Gilman 1994, 13)

From these words, it can be inferred that if a valet "is property of the man", the man may decide not to remunerate his work and the same mechanism is reserved for wives, who, since they are wives, they just have to perform the tasks they came into the world to do. The publication of *Women and Economics* marked an important step for the feminist fight and the achievement of rights that would promote gender equality, affecting the views of several readers all around the world and promoting the debate about economic reforms and the overgrowth of gender inequality.

Chapter 3: Women's strength and achievements

3.1 Herland: *a projection of a perfect world*

In the panorama of feminist literature of the 20th century, *Herland* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman represents an interesting and relevant example. Written in 1915 and first published in instalments in Gilman's monthly magazine "The Forerunner", *Herland* is a feminist utopian novel which is about a fictional society entirely composed by women and seen through the eyes of three men who explore for the first time this unknown land. This work presents interesting food for thought on education, maternity and social organization in a society without any patriarchal structure. In *Herland*, Gilman criticizes indirectly the society she lives in where the position of women is at clear disadvantage compared to men's. Therefore, through this novel, she proposes an alternative version where women occupy leading roles and thrive in a world characterized by mutual respect, education and equality. The novel describes a world where women developed efficient, advanced and functional social structures demonstrating that the presence of men is not that essential for the proper functioning of a society; on the contrary, Gilman, highlights how the absence of men contributes to the social flourishing in harmony and justice. The protagonists of the novel are three men coming from our actual world, representing a different mentality and approach from one another: they are Terry O. Nicholson, the most traditionalist and skeptical of them, Jeff Margrave, with a noble and helpful soul, and Vandyck (Van) Jennings, the figure who narrates the story and the most curious of them all, who proves from the outset to be open and interested in the new world. They are all well-educated and cultured men involved in a scientific expedition aimed at the discovery of unknown places which are not in the maps. Once they first arrived in this unexplored world, they thought it was inhabited by amazonian tribes, a little corner which the Spanish conquest did not affect, however, they could not imagine what they would find: a world totally inhabited and managed by women with the complete absence of men. Trying to explore it, the protagonists' attention gets caught by three young girls, Alima, Celis and Ellador, who did not seem as wild as they expected, they were just three civilized girls trying to socialize with them. Suddenly, the three protagonists get caught by a group of women, narcotized, and locked up in a large and comfortable room. However, the way they are detained is way more different than

the one they are used to, indeed, it is a sort of precautionary probationary period in which Van, Jeff and Terry can explore the environment under the supervision of three private teachers with whom they discuss the differences between the two worlds that, although so geographically close, are distant in many ways. By analyzing specific episodes from the book, it can be observed how Gilman's reality is overshadowed by male dominance and how, in parallel, women's land thrives in cooperation and equality among its inhabitants. For example, chapter five, is characterized by the description of how both worlds' social and professional organization is built. Van, Terry and Jeff explain to their teachers that, in their reality, women are not expected to have a job; in particular, Terry believed that women could have a "professional life" only within the domestic sphere because, as he states:

The world's work was different — that had to be done by men, and required the competitive element. (Gilman 1915, 65)

Furthermore, he adds:

The men do everything [...] We do not allow our women to work. Women are loved — idolized — honored — kept in the home to care for the children. (Gilman 1915, 65)

The teachers simply do not understand this strange way of treating women, in fact, in their reality, women are considered as the functional part of it, each member has her role. Education is the essential element which guarantees the growth of their society, which was not characterized "by competition, but by united action" (Gilman 1915, 64). It is a key element for the evolution of this female society, which is highly characterized by equality, oriented to the maximum development of all the students and the social common prosperity. Since childhood, every little girl is educated to become a strong and independent woman but, most importantly, they are all addressed to the real and vital duty that is "motherhood". However, *Herland's* sense of motherhood is different from the one the male characters know, in fact, the novel includes a description, a reflexion made by Van about this role, according to the two realities:

They were Mothers, but not in the way we mean the word, as fertility without power and will, compelled to populate and overpopulate the earth, every earth, to see their children suffer, sin, and die, fighting bitterly with one another. They were conscious Creators of people. Mother love with them was not a blind passion, a mere "instinct", an exclusively individual feeling. It was... a Religion. [...] These women worked together at the greatest of tasks: they made people, and they made them well. (Gilman 1915, 68)

Every mother is the mother of everyone, which demonstrates the rooted ideal of mutual help that is widespread in this world. Each mother collaborates with the others in order to create a healthy growing environment for their daughters and their happiness. Furthermore, *Herland's* children were seen, from a very young age, as adults while those of men's world as goods to be protected and safeguarded at all costs and, depending on their gender, treated differently. Indeed, as Van claims:

We have two life cycles: the man's and the woman's. To the man there is growth, struggle, conquest, the establishment of his family, and as much further success in gain or ambition as he can achieve. To the woman, growth, the securing of a husband, the subordinate activities of family life, and afterward such "social" or charitable interests as her position allows. Here was but one cycle, and that a large one [...] in which motherhood was the one great personal contribution to the national life, and all the rest the individual share in their common activities. (Gilman 1915, 110)

Regarding relationships and gender roles, the differences between the two worlds are even more significant: towards the end of the story Ellador, Celis and Alima and the three male characters start a phase of courtship, and each couple behaves differently from one another. There is to be said that the two realities have different definitions of the concept of love: on one hand, Feminisia's inhabitants do not know the romantic side of love because they only conceive the concept of sisterhood, the bond of sisterly love and also parental one; for them, the sense of love is educating their daughters on maternal love, giving them protection and cures in the best way possible. On the other hand, the male characters have a precise idea of how marriage works and try to explain everything to the three girls, who will become their wives. Another important unknown concept is the concept of wife, actually, since the institution of marriage did not exist, neither did the role of wife. Terry, who has traditionalist views, asserts that:

A man wants a home of his own, with his wife and family in it. (Gilman 1915, 104)

and insists on women's social role in his reality by saying that "they do not work and take care of the home — and the children" (Gilman 1915, 105), it is a typical female social duty.

Furthermore, Feminisia's people do not even know the sense of sensuality, romantic and physical attraction that is considered quite essential in men's reality. Before having contact with this unknown world, the three explorers were convinced that these women

were as their home society conceived them, pervaded by what they called “feminine vanity”, the kind of femininity characterized by “frills and furbelows” (Gilman 1915, 87). Van explains that they actually expected those women to have some defects, however, he tells:

We had expected a dull submissive monotony, and found a daring social inventiveness far beyond our own, and a mechanical and scientific development fully equal to ours. We had expected pettiness, and found a social consciousness besides which our nations looked like quarreling children — feebleminded ones at that. We had expected jealousy, and found a broad sisterly affection, a fairminded intelligence, to which we could produce no parallel. We had expected hysteria, and found a standard of health and vigor, a calmness of temper, to which the habit of profanity, for instance, was impossible to explain — we tried it. (Gilman 1915, 87)

Through *Herland's* utopian society, Charlotte Perkins Gilman attempted to give evidence of the potential that women have and, more importantly, how a society can improve thanks to their contribution. With its innovation and advanced social organization, *Herland's* reality anticipates some of the achievements gained by women in the last century; the active participation of Feminisia's inhabitants in their social environment reflects the strong will of women of the opposite reality of being finally an active part of something bigger, an important contribution to their society which goes beyond their mother and wife figures. Gilman's point of view, which puts the stress on women's wit and intelligence, served as a model of inspiration for the women of her time and their successes.

3.2 *Women's fight for power over themselves*

Through *Herland's* female population, Charlotte Perkins Gilman intended giving evidence of how men's androcentric mentality used to overshadow women's potentials. *Herland* shows us a reality where the concept of motherhood is deeply different from the one of Gilman's world, characterized by patriarchal social schemes and prejudices typical of oppressive realities that women historically had to face. Furthermore, in this utopian world, cooperation rules, women decide for themselves and have control over themselves. *Herland's* inhabitants embody a powerful and independent version of femininity, which is not confined within the boundaries of reproductive role or domestic walls; this consolidated and purely patriarchal version of women has been put into

practice in Gilman's reality for many years now and its disruption became duty of XX century's feminists, as Gilman was. Over the past two centuries, feminist and suffragist movements fought for the achievement of several rights for women such as the right to vote, women's reproductive rights like contraception and abortion. The history of female vote in the United States is a proof of women's determination and perseverance. It has been a long and tough process which officially began with Seneca Falls Convention in 1848, organized by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott who, from that time, started to project a strategy to end women's inferiority status and men's controlling hegemony. In particular, Elizabeth Cady Stanton wrote and signed the *Declaration of Sentiments*, based on the Declaration of Independence which marked the beginning of the United States. In her Declaration, Stanton states:

That all men and women are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; that to secure these rights governments are instituted, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed. (Stanton 1848)

With the rise of figures like Alice Paul and the birth of the National Women's Party in 1916, the strategies planned and implemented by suffragists for the achievement of a better condition for women became more powerful by tactically using legal mobilization campaigns to advocate for equal rights in the United States. In 1917, with her "silent sentinels", she protested for months in front of the White House and, because of that, she got arrested and sentenced to jail for seven months. The positive turning point in feminist struggle arrived on August 18th, 1920, with the approval of the XIX Amendment of American Constitution sanctioning:

The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex.
Congress shall have power to enforce this article by appropriate legislation.
(Amendment XIX)



Figure 81: Women protesting for their right to vote, 1919 ca.

Although this has been a huge step forward for women's rights, it was not reserved for all American women. In fact, it was addressed only to white women leaving out Afro-American ones because of discriminatory laws which would not be passed until the Civil Rights movements, which aimed to stop all the discriminations and social exclusion based on skin colour, and the Voting Right Act of 1965 which allowed all American citizens to express at the polling stations their political opinion regardless of ethnicity. Gaining the vote represented for women an important first step, which would give impetus to the feminist struggles that would be waged over the years. Women's achievements also involve results regarding aspects such as the transformation of patriarchal social structures that limit women's access to work, education and economic autonomy. Feminist fights for female education played a key role in ensuring women the opportunity to study and educate themselves on the same level as men. Indeed, traditional social and cultural schemes predicted that it was inappropriate for a woman to receive an education, and this was somehow justified by the perception of female gender that society had a century ago, that saw women only within the domestic walls. As Thomas Woody writes in his book *A History Of Women's Education In The United States* (Volume I):

[...] the belief that women were destined for the hearth, effectually quenched any latent ambition for higher education. Such education as was afforded, if it had any definite goal in this life, looked towards a satisfactory marriage. (Woody 1929, 107)

What the author expresses through this passage is that, in the past two centuries, women did not need to have an education that went beyond the ability to write, read and do the math because it was not included in their stereotyped primary duty, that was to get married, become mothers and take care of their families. This same reason was used to justify women's unemployment and economic dependence on their husband, which prevented them from becoming autonomous people capable of making decisions for themselves in a free way, in several aspects of their life, such as deciding for themselves within the physical-biological context. Indeed, a crucial topic for the feminist movement was the struggle for the control over one's own body, a battle that over the years has been carried on with strength and determination. The achievement of contraception methods has been a tough process to face; the nurse and activist Margaret Sanger fought on the first lines for the legalization and approval of the birth contraceptive pill starting in the 1910s. As a nurse who worked closely with labouring women, she knew the pain and also the risk that women took for giving birth to their children, therefore she started fighting for pregnancy to become a free and safe choice for women. In 1917 the FDA (The United States Food and Drug Administration) approved the contraceptive pill, at first just to married women; however, it has been quite difficult for certain social realities to accept it, such as religious, political and social oppositions which did not support the 1960s "Sexual Revolution" that was snaking through American society. The use of the birth control pill prevented unintended pregnancy which led women to finally have control over their bodies. The introduction of the contraceptive pill represented a huge step in women's reproductive autonomy, which allowed them to live more freely their sexuality without worrying about an unplanned pregnancy. The next step in this field has been the legalization of abortion, a widely discussed medical practice. Before the 20th century, the United States considered abortion, the voluntary termination of pregnancy, as something illegal and there were many restricting laws in order to impede and punish this medical practice. Something started to change in the 1900s when abortion was practiced only in specific cases, for example when the mother's life was endangered by her pregnancy: this decision was being carefully made by a group of physicians in agreement. When the contraceptive pill and abortion had not yet been legally approved, women, especially those living in poverty, resorted to dangerous medical practices to solve the problem of unplanned pregnancy, risking causing harm to

her own health. Illegal and unsafe abortion was the answer to unintentional maternity in fact, as Rachel Benson Gold from the Guttmacher Institute asserts:

A study of low-income women in New York City in the 1960s found that almost one in 10 (8%) had ever attempted to terminate a pregnancy by illegal abortion; almost four in 10 (38%) said that a friend, relative or acquaintance had attempted to obtain an abortion. Of the low-income women in that study who said they had had an abortion, eight in 10 (77%) said that they had attempted a self-induced procedure, with only 2% saying that a physician had been involved in any way. (Benson Gold, 2003)

The turning point in the process of achieving legal abortion occurred in 1973 with *Roe v. Wade* sentence of the American Supreme Court which established women’s recognized right to decide whether to interrupt unplanned pregnancies. However, this topic has always been controversial for some social groups who do not believe in this procedure; therefore, in this field, steps have been taken backward with the Supreme Court’s decision in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization* in 2022 which cancelled the effects of the 1973 sentence, leading each state of the United States to handle on its own the topic of abortion by having its own laws. Consequently, at least 16 states stopped guaranteeing abortion services and each state started organizing on its own with the rules about abortion; different criteria can be followed for deciding whether a situation is worthy of considering the procedure or not, allowing it within a specific number of weeks or in extreme cases as rape or incest.

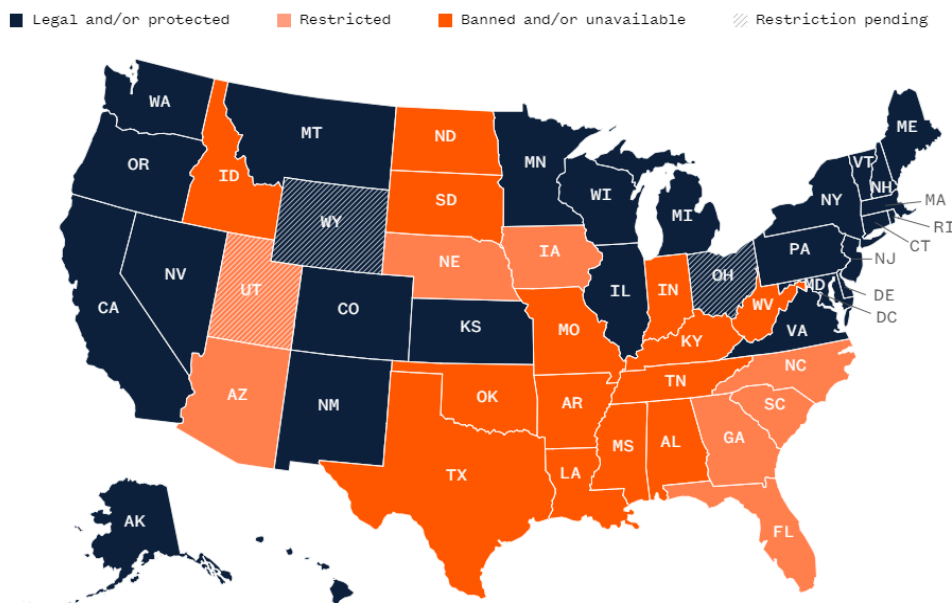


Figure 12: A map of the United States showing the prevalence of abortion practice, data updated as of July 29th, 2024.

All these medical procedures have been and continue to be topics for debate, especially ethical ones because of the opposition made by some social groups. Especially abortion, is still the object of ethical debates; for example, one of the issues regarding the ethical side of this medical procedure concerns when the fetus begins to be considered a human being, or how long after conception it can be considered one. According to Judith Jarvis Thompson, the author of *A Defence of Abortion* (1971),

Most opposition to abortion relies on the premise that the fetus is a human being, a person, from the moment of conception. (Thompson 1971, 142)

This idea is deeply supported by religious organizations, such as the Catholic Church. In 1968, Pope Paul VI published the encyclical named *Humanae Vitae*. This religious document is a clear proof of one of the many social groups opposing contraceptive practices and abortion. The encyclical expresses the explicit condemnation of all the procedures which are aimed at preventing unplanned pregnancies, in fact, as the Pope wrote:

[...] We base Our words on the first principles of a human and Christian doctrine of marriage when We are obliged once more to declare that the direct interruption of the generative process already begun and, above all, all direct abortion, even for therapeutic reasons, are to be absolutely excluded as lawful means of regulating the number of children. (Pope Paul VI, 1968)

The topic of the strong opposition to these controversial medical procedures is reintroduced again almost 30 years later. Indeed, in 1995, Pope John Paul II wrote and published the encyclical entitled *Evangelium Vitae* which is about the worth and inviolability of human life. In it, he asserts that:

Whatever is opposed to life itself, such as any type of murder, genocide, abortion, euthanasia, or wilful self-destruction [...] all these things and others like them are infamies indeed. They poison human society, and they do more harm to those who practise them than to those who suffer from the injury. Moreover, they are a supreme dishonour to the Creator. (Pope John Paul II, 1995)

Naturally, it can be asserted that religion has always played a crucial role in the opposition against abortion, and it still represents a huge moral hurdle which impedes the complete achievement of this procedure. Of course, not everybody shared this point of view. In fact, Ruth Bader Ginsburg, one of the most famous judges of the Supreme

Court of the United States, supported abortion and women's reproductive rights as part of the gender equality principle. In 1993, during the Senate confirmation hearings for her nomination to the United States Supreme Court, Ginsburg expressed her view regarding abortion using these words:

(Abortion) "is something central to a woman's life, to her dignity," [...] "It's a decision that she must make for herself. And when government controls that decision for her, she's being treated as less than a fully adult human responsible for her own choices." (Ginsburg, 1993)

What she tried to say is that if this decision concerns women's lives, it should be a decision made by them rather than being imposed upon them.

Other issues that focus on women's right to make thoughtful decisions about their body and fertility are assisted fertilization, and the donation of gametes, both male and female, with the purpose to help those couples who struggle to create a family. Until the 1970s, the idea of conceiving a child in a situation of fertility issues was still considered a hopeless mission which forced couples to give up their wish to have children and become a family. Nevertheless, thanks to the advances in science and to ongoing research, assisted fertilization became a widely practiced method that fights against infertility.

The fight among the several opinions regarding abortion and all the practices which affect women's right to decide over their body, represents one of the most controversial and discussed issues of our modern society. On one hand, science and research has contributed to increasing women's opportunities to choose for themselves, on the other hand social, ethical, political and religious challenges put in their path several debates and hurdles. Women's right to decide for their own body and their own life is still crucial to guarantee the development of a better and more equal society, as Charlotte Perkins Gilman desired and fought for.

Conclusion

Being a woman throughout the centuries and historical periods has always meant living in a position of disadvantage compared to men, for several reasons. Firstly, women's social role was very specific and clear, they had the duty to generate children and take care of the household, while men had to work and earn money in order to support their families. Economically speaking, women in the past could not manage their own savings individually and independently because their husbands had the control over it. Women had no voice, until 1920s American women could not express officially the political views and vote for those who would represent them in the government. The fights made by the suffragist movements led women to gain more social importance. The seemingly simple act of casting a vote, which is today taken for granted, has behind it a history made of battles, protests and sacrifices that have allowed the women of the present to vote and to be represented by those they deem suitable. Charlotte Perkins Gilman was one of those women who fought for women's empowerment; throughout her works, specifically those mentioned and elaborated in this dissertation, she left a meaningful impact and heritage in feminist literature and thought. In *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892), the author tells the difficult story of a young mother suffering from a "slight hysterical tendency" after giving birth to her child and forced to undergo the well-known Rest Cure by Dr. Mitchell, which reflects perfectly the oppressive social schemes that were imposed on women at that time. Gilman and the female protagonist of the short story have many things in common: the author experienced the Rest Cure after giving birth to Katharine, her daughter, and, even if both the author and the character claimed that they needed stimula, everybody seemed to ignore them, making them almost invisible and acting as they knew perfectly well what the better choice for them was. With *The Yellow Wallpaper*; Charlotte Perkins Gilman wanted to tell how women's voices were ignored and made invisible in the public social environment.

Moving on to *Women and Economics: A Study of the Economic Relation Between Men and Women as a Factor in Social Evolution* (1898), Charlotte Perkins Gilman highlights her critique of the female domestic role, asserting that women's economic dependence on their husbands deprives them of their potential. What the author believes is necessary for her reality, is an economic and social evolution, which would allow women to set free from the limitations imposed by traditional marriage, to develop their potential and

give their contribution in the society they live in, exactly as men do. Gilman's points of view regarding women's role were innovative for the historical period she lived in, however, they anticipated the fighting spirit of the suffragist and feminist movement which would have fought for women's social and economic empowerment. This last topic is central and fundamental in the all-female society protagonist of *Herland* (1915), a utopian world inhabited only by women. This alternative reality described by Charlotte Perkins Gilman is completely independent and peaceful and, presenting it as a sort of evidence, the author wants to demonstrate that women have potential and if it is fully exploited, under the banner of cooperation and common interest, great things can be done. This novel expresses Gilman's desire of a more egalitarian society, where everyone, both men and women, can live freely and have the same opportunities; also, it is a critique to the restrictive schemes that her society imposes to women, relegating them to their "social duty" which is motherhood. Charlotte Perkins Gilman's works, whether novels, short stories, articles or lectures, express the concept of women's control over their bodies, which is linked to reproductive rights, a topic which became popular and controversial mostly in the last century. Feminist movements struggled for female's social and legal achievements, explaining how important procedures such as contraception and abortion represent two key points for female's independence, the same way as freedom from patriarchal rules is crucial in the works analyzed in depth in this thesis project. Through the centuries, women's freedom has always been obstructed by several hurdles: they had to face their "established" social and biological duty of motherhood, fight for their right to express their political opinion, for their right to do whatever they want with their lives and their bodies. The possibility to choose is the key to the feminist movements, which are currently still struggling for reproductive rights and to consolidate those which are already established.

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Images

Figure 1:

<https://www.nlm.nih.gov/exhibition/theliteratureofprescription/exhibition1.html>

Figure 2: <https://www.rochester.edu/newscenter/the-voice-writings-of-an-early-feminist-charlotte-perkins-gilman-360012/>

Figure 3: <https://artvee.com/artist/charles-walter-stetson/>

Figure 4: <https://www.literaryladiesguide.com/author-biography/charlotte-perkins-gilman/>

Figure 5: <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/health/dorothea-dixs-tireless-fight-to-end-inhumane-treatment-for-mental-health-patients>

Figure 6: <https://www.med.upenn.edu/neurology/silas-weir-mitchell.html>

Figure 7:

<https://www.nlm.nih.gov/exhibition/theliteratureofprescription/exhibition4.html#!>

Figure 8: <https://archive.curbed.com/2019/7/24/20697836/charlotte-perkins-gilman-feminist-theorist-utopian-architecture>

Figure 9:

<https://www.nlm.nih.gov/exhibition/theliteratureofprescription/exhibition5.html>

Figure 10: <https://www.newspapers.com/article/the-gazette-and-daily-obituary-for-charl/41151047/>

Figure 11: <https://www.newyorkcity4all.com/il-voto-alle-donne-negli-usa-100-anni-di-storia/>

Figure 12: <https://www.guttmacher.org/gpr/2003/03/lessons-roe-will-past-be-prologue#box>

Italian summary

Charlotte Perkins Gilman è stata un'autrice americana vissuta tra il XIX-XX secolo, che ha quindi avuto la possibilità di essere testimone di diversi e importanti eventi storici. La sua identità di autrice è stata particolarmente influenzata dalla sua condizione psicologica, che è stata sottoposta ad innumerevoli sfide sin da quando era molto giovane. Non appena diventata madre, la sua salute mentale ha iniziato gradualmente a peggiorare, spingendo il suo primo marito, Charles Walter Stetson, a chiedere un aiuto più concreto, sottoponendo la moglie Charlotte alla cura del riposo, una terapia studiata e sviluppata dal medico americano Silas Weir Mitchell, e prescritta a tutte quelle donne che presentavano difficoltà psicologiche, specialmente dopo aver partorito. La cura del riposo, come dice il nome stesso, prevedeva riposo assoluto per la paziente, la quale sarebbe dovuta rimanere chiusa in una stanza per circa sei settimane, lontano da ogni tipo di stimolo. Come Gilman racconta nella short story *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892), che prende ispirazione dalla sua stessa esperienza, la cura del riposo non ha fatto altro che peggiorare la già fragile situazione della protagonista, conducendola quasi alla pazzia, sebbene avesse reso noto più volte che ciò di cui aveva bisogno fossero stimoli e distrazioni. Attraverso quest'opera, e non solo, Gilman ha cercato di mettere luce su un aspetto molto importante e negativo della sua realtà, ovvero come le donne non venissero prese in considerazione in alcun contesto della vita sociale, sia privata nella sfera familiare e domestica, sia pubblica. Nell'opera *Women and Economics: A Study of the Economic Relation Between Men and Women as a Factor in Social Evolution* (1898), l'autrice si focalizza in modo particolare sul ruolo della donna nella società in cui vive, risaltando la sua posizione di svantaggio rispetto all'uomo. Ciò che Charlotte Perkins Gilman critica è la mancanza di uguaglianza, ma soprattutto, la dipendenza economica a cui le donne sono costrette, che rappresenta ciò che non permette loro di sviluppare a pieno le proprie potenzialità e di metterle in pratica a favore dell'interesse comune. Quest'ultimo aspetto rispecchia in maniera opposta la natura del mondo utopico in cui è ambientata l'opera *Herland* (1915), che racconta di una società abitata e composta solamente da donne che vivono all'insegna della cooperazione, dell'armonia e della giustizia. Attraverso le sue parole, l'autrice avanza una critica nei confronti della società a cui appartiene, profondamente radicata nel patriarcato e in strutture sociali che impediscono alle donne di vivere in libertà. La realtà di *Herland* offre una versione

alternativa della società, in cui tutti i suoi membri vivono in un clima di uguaglianza e armonia, dove diventare madre non è una missione limitante ma un atto fatto nell'interesse della comunità e del suo sviluppo. In quest'opera, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, mette in evidenza come le abitanti della realtà utopica siano libere, abbiano il controllo su ogni aspetto della loro terra ma soprattutto, del loro corpo e della loro vita. Ciò rappresenta un'anticipazione delle battaglie che le donne del XIX e XX secolo hanno affrontato per poter ottenere uguaglianza e diritti; il movimento suffragista e femminista, nel tempo si sono impegnati e hanno combattuto per il conseguimento dei loro obiettivi come l'ottenimento del voto e, più di recente, di libertà che nel passato erano considerate mera fantasia. Sono conquiste che, ad oggi, continuano la loro battaglia contro ostacoli etici e morali ma che perseverano e sopravvivono grazie alla forza e alla determinazione di chi combatte per esse.