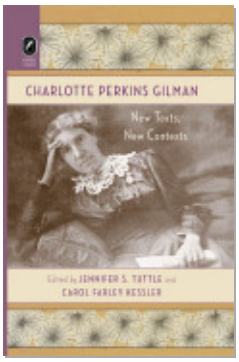
2. Looking Backward



2

Looking Backward

Rereading Gilman in the Early Twenty-First Century

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"Looking backward" to the political activism of second-wave feminism offers a way to review the enduring contributions of Charlotte Perkins Gilman in the early twenty-first century. Gilman might well approve of this approach given her appreciation of Edward Bellamy's 1888 *Looking Backward: 2000–1887*, a utopian romance that influenced parts of her best-known feminist utopian novel, *Herland* (1915). In the late 1960s and 1970s and 1970s, critics began to recognize the work of Gilman among other rediscovered and underrepresented women writers including Kate Chopin, Mary Wilkins Freeman, and Edith Wharton. The critical response to Gilman's work over the last four decades naturally clusters into groupings or "periods." I am using the notion of periodicity to analyze how scholars and critics over time have variously reassessed and reevaluated Gilman's oeuvre.[2] Gilman criticism clusters into three periods—first, the "encomium period," praising her vision for gender equality, suffrage, women and work, professionalized housekeeping services, and community child care; next, the "discontented period," bringing to the fore Gilman's repugnant racism, ethnocentrism, and xenophobia; and third, the "mixed legacy" period, examining concomitantly the prejudice and promise of her oeuvre. These three periods overlap chronologically and respond to each other: although the "encomium period" is most dominant in the 1970s and 80s, "encomium" readings continue to inform Gilman studies because of their inclusion in

books and collections still used in literature, American studies, and women's studies courses. "Discontented" critics in the mid- to late 1980s began to publish articles specifically challenging this celebratory criticism while it was still being written. The "mixed legacy" period, emerging in the mid-1990s and still ongoing, responds to and balances views of "encomium" and "discontented" critics.[3] Gilman studies over the last few decades and criticism on "The Yellow Wall-Paper" (1892) in particular exemplify the trajectory of much feminist criticism on the work of U.S. women authors recovered alongside Gilman's in the 1970s.[4]

The attention Gilman received for "The Yellow Wall-Paper" in the 1970s and early 1980s recalls the kind of international cult status that her revered great-aunt Harriet Beecher Stowe enjoyed following the publication of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852). In 1966, Carl Degler helped focus renewed attention on Gilman's feminist treatise, *Women and Economics* (1898), the text that established Gilman's international reputation at the turn of the twentieth century. But most attention in this phase of scholarship focused on *Herland* and, especially, "The Yellow Wall-Paper." How do we account for this unconditional response to Gilman's work at the dawning of second-wave feminism?

In the 1970s, feminist victories in reproductive rights along with equal opportunity in employment and education and the rise of feminist criticism in the United States, France, and Britain led many scholars to read Gilman sympathetically, optimistically, and enthusiastically. In particular, French feminism—with its focus on language as a tool of patriarchal domination as well as the social construction of Woman as the quintessential "other" (associated with Simone de Beauvoir) and the notion of writing the body (linked to Julia Kristeva)—seemed a prime approach to illuminate the discourse of "The Yellow Wall-Paper" and the narrator's actions of creeping on all fours in endless circles in her nursery/prison.[5] Feminist critics publishing on "The Yellow Wall-Paper" from 1973–81, whom we now refer to as pioneering scholars, include (among others) Elaine R. Hedges, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, Jean Kennard, and Annette Kolodny. They read the narrator sympathetically and present her as a misunderstood, misdiagnosed woman attempting to free herself from the restrictions of her gendered world (encoded in the infamous wallpaper), even if they do not agree on the narrator's fate: Hedges ultimately pronounces the narrator "defeated" while Gilbert and Gubar celebrate her madness as a higher form of sanity. In 1973, Hedges heralded "The Yellow Wall-Paper" as "a small literary masterpiece" (37) in her "Afterword" to the Feminist Press edition that quickly became the press's paperback bestseller. Hedges highlights the sociological importance of the story, the politics of gender, and its biographical significance. On the other hand, Gilbert and Gubar,

in their groundbreaking *The Madwoman in the Attic* published in 1979, focus on the narrator's liberation from her patriarchal world; they proclaim "The Yellow Wall-Paper" is "a striking story of female confinement and escape, a paradigmatic tale which (like *Jane Eyre*) seems to tell *the* story that all literary women would tell if they could speak their 'speechless woe'" (89). Kennard advances that Gilman's story can be read as a feminist work because readers of the 1970s had access to a set of literary conventions not available to readers of the 1890s while Kolodny argues that Gilman—unlike Edgar Allan Poe, who presents madness as idiosyncratic—projects insanity onto a middle-class wife and mother and turns the home, woman's sacrosanct domestic sphere, into the very source of her psychosis. Although each critic has a decided focus, collectively their work helped "The Yellow Wall-Paper" achieve a privileged place among literature by nineteenth-century women writers.

Gilman scholarship during this period aimed to bring Gilman and "The Yellow Wall-Paper" to the forefront of feminist academic circles. In the frenzy to publish "lost" and "neglected" works by U.S. women writers including Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Kate Chopin, Mary Wilkins Freeman, Sarah Orne Jewett, and Edith Wharton, scholars felt an urgency to bring more of Gilman's work back into print. For example, Pantheon reissued *Herland* in 1979 with an introduction by Ann J. Lane, billing it as "A Lost Feminist Utopian Novel by Charlotte Perkins Gilman." Gilman's full oeuvre had not yet received much attention in 1980; to that end, Lane brought out *The Charlotte Perkins Gilman Reader,* which includes Gilman's short stories and excerpts of novellas originally published in *The Forerunner,* such as *Unpunished* and *The Crux*. Lane did so, hoping to place "'The Yellow Wallpaper' for the first time in the context of a wide selection of Gilman's fiction in general, [so that] it becomes a piece with them, while remaining at the same time special and different" ("Fictional" xvii). Literary anthologies and collections of Gilman's fiction published during the 1980s and into the 1990s reprint "The Yellow Wall-Paper" and many of the stories included in the *Charlotte Perkins Gilman Reader* in part, I would argue, because Lane's book made them readily accessible to an academic audience. There was also a growing interest in Gilman's life during this period, leading to the publication of several biographies published between 1980–1990 by Mary A. Hill, Gary Scharnhorst, and Lane, as well as an invaluable bibliography of Gilman's work by Scharnhorst.

Looking backward, I characterize the "encomium period" of Gilman scholarship as overly accepting of Gilman's work and productive life. Pioneering scholars—with Scharnhorst a notable exception—unabashedly

celebrated Gilman as a feminist foremother by aligning her work with contemporary feminism and seemingly took at face value many of Gilman's now questionable claims about the publication history of "The Yellow Wall-Paper." In turn, Gilman scholars of the 1980s and into the early 1990s—and here I include myself—both read and reinforced 1970s interpretations, which either omit entirely or give only passing attention to Gilman's problems of racism and nativism. These pioneering essays, which tend to be celebratory rather than critical, still command attention due to their inclusion in numerous collections and anthologies, many produced in the 1990s and beyond; as a result, some oft-repeated accounts that we now acknowledge as limited in value have become "legends" in Gilman criticism, to quote Julie Bates Dock (11). "Unlike the critic [Julie] Dock, however, who suggests that twentieth-century feminist scholars distorted facts and engaged in sloppy scholarship in producing the 'dramatic story of Saint Charlotte and the evil Doctor Mitchell,'" Jane F. Thrailkill argues that even if Kolodny and Kennard, among others, "doctored the story in a much less disreputable sense" and turned "The Yellow Wall-Paper" into a feminist tale, they successfully engaged in a "collaborative effort" that Gilman herself referred to as "reformist 'organizing'" and "found productive" (552–53).

Further, I suggest we view such studies by pioneering Gilman scholars in the context of their own historical moment. Feminist critics reclaimed "The Yellow Wall-Paper" during a time when the literary canon contained texts predominantly written by male authors and edited by male academics. As Hedges notes in her 1992 retrospective essay provocatively titled "'Out at Last'?: 'The Yellow Wallpaper' after Two Decades of Feminist Criticism," the resurgence of the woman's movement, replete with groundbreaking legislative triumphs such as *Roe v. Wade* (1973), may have influenced the way feminist scholars optimistically read "The Yellow Wall-Paper" when the Feminist Press reissued it in 1973 (327–28). In an era of active protest for equal rights and reproductive freedom, feminist concern was targeted against patriarchy. Critics in the subsequent "discontented period" of Gilman criticism, influenced by changes in feminism that reflected more working-class, multicultural, and global perspectives, reacted to views by pioneering critics: they faulted Gilman's lifelong crusade for gender reform and women's autonomy because she neglected to consider issues of race, ethnicity, and social class. Moreover, pioneering articles from the "encomium period" preceded a rising interest in textual studies, an ongoing movement that began to flourish in the later 1990s and forms the subject of Shawn St. Jean's 2006 *"The Yellow Wall-Paper" by Charlotte Perkins Gilman: A Dual-Text Critical Edition*. Which textual version of the story "encomium period" critics

read or reprinted was not an urgent consideration—just that the story was published, given wide visibility, and amply discussed and debated.

As a result of efforts that feminists made during the "encomium period" of criticism and the success of their "reformist 'organizing,'" "The Yellow Wall-Paper" has become a recovered classic, enshrined in the U.S. literary canon, regularly anthologized, and taught widely in literature and women's studies or gender studies courses. However, the story's cult status eventually led to a backlash with "discontented" critics questioning its canonical status and privileged place in anthologies of women's literature, U.S. literature, and fiction in general—some even likening its place in feminism to Melville's white whale and Coleridge's albatross.[6] The "discontented period" directly responds to the "encomium period" that precedes it: criticism highlighting the dark side of Gilman's legacy began to appear at the same time as and in reaction to scholarship promoting and praising Gilman's work. What critics in the "encomium period" celebrated as Gilman's radical call for women's liberation now seemed, at the onset of the "discontented period," to be an agenda laced with prejudice, limited solely to white women of the upper and middle classes. Critics in the later 1980s, 1990s, and beyond, concerned with issues of race, ethnicity, and social class, also cast a critical eye on the prejudices rooted in the color and odor of the ubiquitous wallpaper as well as Gilman's ethnocentrism, racism, anti-Semitism, and xenophobia, evident in much of her fiction and nonfiction. Scholars, some of whom placed Gilman among other contemporary feminists who espoused racist views, presented these repugnant qualities as "key to many of her ideas about evolution and social motherhood" (Scharnhorst, "Historicizing" 67). Gilman's rhetoric for white female agency reinforced racial hierarchies and imperialism.

During the "discontented period" of Gilman criticism, scholars also recognized Gilman's tendencies not to credit other authors who influenced her work, as well as her habit of allowing information to be interpreted to her advantage. In her autobiography published nearly forty years after "The Yellow Wall-Paper," Gilman may have refashioned the truth about some early responses to the publication of her landmark story. With the passage of time, she may have simply forgotten some of the crucial details of its publication history. Misinformation and literary refashioning are not unique to Gilman studies. Perhaps the most important lesson scholars and readers can learn from the "legends" surrounding the story's reception is that we need to be cautious when reading an author's account of her own work: many misconceptions about "The Yellow Wall-Paper" in criticism of the 1970s into the early 1990s stem from Gilman herself.

Of the writers whose works characterize this "discontented period"

of Gilman scholarship—and here I include the writings of Gail Bederman, Louise Newman, Janice Haney-Peritz, Susan Lanser, and Alys Eve Weinbaum—I single out the latter three and their essays: Janice Haney-Peritz's "Monumental Feminism and Literature's Ancestral House: Another Look at 'The Yellow Wall-Paper'" (1986); Susan Lanser's "Feminist Criticism, 'The Yellow Wallpaper,' and the Politics of Color in America" (1989); and Alys Eve Weinbaum's "Writing Feminist Genealogy: Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Racial Nationalism, and the Reproduction of Maternalist Feminism" (2001). Haney-Peritz begins her piece by summarizing and positioning herself in response to previous feminist criticism by Hedges, Kennard, Kolodny, and Gilbert and Gubar—who gave "The Yellow Wall-Paper" too hegemonic a reading and too privileged a status, in her opinion. Neither identifying nor sympathizing with the narrator, Haney-Peritz reads the wallpaper by applying Lacanian psychoanalytic concepts to explore the narrator's struggle with the oppressive structures of male discourse and her retreat into the realm of haunted houses from the linguistic realm (in which she can construct her speaking and writing identity). To Haney-Peritz the narrator at the end of the tale remains encrypted in the imaginary. Also questioning the canonical status of Gilman's story lauded exclusively by white feminist academics, Lanser views it from the perspective of late nineteenth-century mass immigration of Asians and southern and eastern Europeans to the United States and the accompanying prejudices toward "yellow skinned" peoples—a term that includes Chinese, Japanese, and light-skinned African-Americans as well as Poles, Jews, Hungarians, Italians, and Irish. Lanser brings to light racism and class privilege in Gilman's mission for changing women's lives; if Lanser's attention to the political ideology of the text deflated the story's heretofore privileged status as an exemplary text, it urged Gilman scholars to recognize Gilman's prejudices and biases as part of her legacy.

Weinbaum's essay, first published in *Feminist Studies* (2001) and then reprinted in her book titled *Wayward Reproductions* (2004), focuses on Gilman's nativism and racism as well as the dangers resulting from the enduring power of "encomium" readings by pioneering scholars and those they influenced. Building upon the work of Lanser, Newman, and Bederman, Weinbaum, illustrating that "race animates Gilman's thinking" (273), reads Gilman's autobiography and *Herland* as evidence that her brand of feminism is troublingly preoccupied with issues of "pedigree" and "purity." From Gilman's investigation into her forebears at the age of fifteen to her creation of what Weinbaum reads as a pure Aryan race of Herlanders, complete with a eugenically based system of reproduction that ensures national genealogy and an unpolluted lineage, Gilman emerges as a thinker whose racism,

imperialism, and ethnocentrism preclude the possibility of her being an early feminist role model. Weinbaum does not call for a purging of Gilman's texts from the feminist canon—a move that she recognizes would mimic Gilman's own mission for "genealogical 'purity'"—but rather suggests "that as feminists we keep Gilman in full view" (296), an approach that resonates with practices of "mixed legacy" critics.

The pressing issues of any given historical moment have influenced how an evolving community of feminist critics has variously celebrated and reclaimed, then qualified, and thirdly balanced the strengths and limitations of Gilman's fiction and theory. At the Second International Gilman Conference in 1997, Gary Scharnhorst signaled a third period in Gilman criticism in suggesting that we approach Gilman as a scholar "not in our time but in her own," making a plea for scholars to read all of Gilman's work, "warts" and all. Scharnhorst's essay titled "Historicizing Gilman: A Bibliographer's View" concludes: "In short, many of Gilman's ideas, more stale than fresh, simply do not translate well. Rather than read her writings selectively, rather than appropriate from them only those ideas we can adapt to our purposes, rather than remake Gilman into some kind of femme ideal or role model, I believe that as scholars we should read all of her work we can find but read it critically, measuring her achievement on a historical template, situating her not only in our time but in her own" (71–72). Scharnhorst incisively addresses the failings of critics of the "encomium" and "discontented" periods and, in essence, defines the "mixed legacy period." Rather than "remake" Gilman into a "femme ideal" (as some pioneering critics did) or condemn and dismiss her (as some "discontented" critics did), Scharnhorst urges scholars to view the "fresh," the "stale," and even the noxious on "a historical template" and to read critically as much of her work as we can without discrediting her accomplishments (71–72).

The title of Scharnhorst's essay, his plea, and the "mixed legacy period" itself grow out of a larger shift in literary criticism toward new historicism, a movement beginning in the 1980s and gaining wide influence in the 1990s that situates author and text in a specific time and place to consider the social, political, artistic, and intellectual developments of a particular age. Not all people of Gilman's era shared her racism, ethnocentrism, anti-Semitism, and classism; however, these views existed in the intellectual climate at the turn of the twentieth century. The "mixed legacy" approach suggests that if we historicize Gilman, then her biases emerge in the context of prejudices of early twentieth-century Anglo America, evident in other writers of Gilman's time; nonetheless, we cannot use an historical context to excuse or justify her shortcomings either.

In her vision for a new and better world, Gilman was insensitive to the plight of the working-class woman, the immigrant, and the racial minority. "Mixed legacy" criticism does not obscure Gilman's racism, ethnocentrism, and nativism, which "discontented" critics bemoan in their critique of "encomium" scholarship. In fact, some "mixed legacy" scholars—and here I include myself—have reconsidered and reevaluated celebratory assessments of Gilman, which they may have unwittingly perpetuated, or even their willingness to overlook Gilman's racism and ethnocentrism in light of her formative plans for white, middle-class women's rights. We now recognize that Gilman's agenda for widespread improvements to liberate women sets her far ahead of her time, but she expressed her reforms through a language laced with prejudices against race, class, religion, and ethnicity, firmly grounding her work in her time and causing problems for reading Gilman as a feminist foremother or even a positive role model. By the late 1990s, her racism was well documented by, among others, Bederman and Newman.[7] Critics began to weigh Gilman's shortcomings against her overall achievement, a trend exemplified in the title and contents of *The Mixed Legacy of Charlotte Perkins Gilman* (2000). For example, in "On Editing Gilman's Diaries" in *The Mixed Legacy,* Denise D. Knight explores how Gilman's diaries include various kinds of information: intimate details of Gilman's life, political and social events of the late nineteenth century, groundwork for Gilman's insightful views on woman's domestic subservience (informing her notion of the "sexuoeconomic" condition in *Women and Economics* [1898]), and the "subtleties of late-nineteenth-century class and race issues" (61). In "Reading Gilman in the Twenty-First Century," the concluding essay of the collection, Shelley Fisher Fishkin raises dated aspects of Gilman's agenda (such as votes for women and physical fitness, which are now realities in our modern world) as well as the repugnant side to Gilman (such as her racism, ethnocentrism, anti-Semitism, homophobia, and class biases) as she concomitantly celebrates Gilman's insights on gender and dress reform and Gilman's very modern appeals for conservation. Gilman scholars today continue to maintain a healthy dose of skepticism about Gilman's views, a respect for her groundbreaking work without a full-fledged acceptance of it. At the same time, however, twenty-first-century critics, such as Weinbaum, keep potent the views of "discontented critics" in speaking against the tendency of "mixed legacy" scholars to read Gilman as a role model by balancing the distasteful in Gilman with her feminist contributions.

Of the many critics who have consciously attempted to keep both sides of Gilman—her prejudice and her promise—in "full view," I highlight Dana Seitler and her article "Unnatural Selection: Mothers, Eugenic Feminism, and

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's Regeneration Narratives," published in *American Quarterly* (2003). Seitler establishes from the outset that she wishes neither to repudiate Gilman for her racist and nativist ideologies nor to excuse her in light of Gilman's enduring contributions to feminist thought—thus, from the start, Seitler disassociates her essay from writings of repudiation or reclamation of Gilman's legacy that "discontented" and "encomium" critics have, respectively, employed. Rather, she suggests that we "re-read Gilman's work not for its contradictions but for the coterminous ideologies of feminism and eugenics that she engages" (64). Seitler examines Gilman's nonfiction and fiction (*The Crux*) for its "promise and damage" (83) to argue that Gilman offers readers an understanding of how white women at the turn of the twentieth century turned to a popular scientific discourse with a feminist agenda, viewing eugenic discipline as a means to address and stave off degenerate modernity and exert female agency to positively impact cultural evolution. To view Gilman fully is to recognize that "the driving forces of white progressive feminism helped instantiate and inform what we might think of as a new version of liberal humanism, one in which the mother acts as ideal civic progenitor" (83).

Due to critical interest in reading "all of [Gilman's] work we can find" ("[r]ather than read her writings selectively," as Scharnhorst cautions against), the "mixed legacy" period has also become one of reclamation of Gilman's larger oeuvre ("Historicizing" 71–72). Knight is responsible for many of these recoveries. In the 1990s, Knight brought out *The Diaries of Charlotte Perkins Gilman* (1994), and, in 2001, she established Gilman as the author of *Art Gems,* previously attributed to the second Mrs. Stetson, Grace Ellery Channing.[8] In 1997, Knight and I edited and wrote an Afterword to Gilman's heretofore unpublished feminist detective novel, *Unpunished*. With Jennifer S. Tuttle, Knight edited *The Selected Letters of Charlotte Perkins Gilman,* a much-awaited volume published in 2009 by the University of Alabama Press. Others have joined in these recovery efforts. In 2002, Tuttle edited and wrote an introduction to *The Crux,* published by University of Delaware Press; another edition of *The Crux* followed in 2003, edited by Dana Seitler and published by Duke University Press. In 2005, Charlotte Rich edited and wrote an introduction to *What Diantha Did,* also published by Duke University Press. All the novels included in excerpt form in Lane's *Charlotte Perkins Gilman Reader* are now available in their entirety. Moreover, the ever-popular "The Yellow Wall-Paper" now attracts critics from fields as diverse as media studies, textual studies, and queer theory as well as literature, psychology, sociology, and women's studies. The "mixed legacy" period has also witnessed a growing interest in pedagogy. Knight and Cyn-

thia J. Davis's 2003 book on teaching "The Yellow Wall-Paper" and *Herland* in the MLA Approaches to Teaching series responds to the critical interest in historicizing Gilman and setting her work in a cultural context, as well as an appreciation of Gilman as "a study in contrasts: progressive in her activism on behalf of women, yet troublingly conservative in her racial views; an outspoken intellectual, but one with very little formal education; an advocate of social motherhood, who relinquished custody of her own young daughter" (xv). My own 2004 sourcebook on Gilman's "The Yellow Wall-Paper" in the Routledge Guides to Literature series is another recent teaching text; richly annotated, it introduces students to Gilman's landmark story in context with her poems, autobiography, and contemporary documents, reviews, and literature to present Gilman "as a woman ahead of her time, but uncomfortably rooted in her time" (*Charlotte* 2).

In its mix of enlightened views and blatant racism, *Unpunished* illustrates the promise and prejudice we have come to recognize as part of Gilman's oeuvre during this "mixed legacy" period. This last section of my essay offers a detailed discussion of Gilman's detective novel as a case in point. Lillian Robinson was the first to publish a scholarly article on *Unpunished* titled "Killing Patriarchy: Charlotte Perkins Gilman, the Murder Mystery, and Post-Feminist Propaganda" in *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* in 1991, when the novel was still not in print. What drew Robinson to the novel was a parallel she perceived between Gilman's despair in the 1920s that women had achieved only a degree of emancipation, that the gaining of the vote led to a dismantling of a mass women's movement—motivating Gilman to write her lone feminist detective novel—and "post-feminism" of the 1990s, "where once again we are being told that women's struggle is over, where female oppression is rapidly slipping out of acceptable political discourse as that discourse itself slips rapidly to the right, and where existing gains are being threatened" (Robinson 283). As Robinson aptly notes of Gilman, in writing *Unpunished,* "The idea, this time, was not so much to hurl feminism into the jaws of post-feminism as to pry open those jaws and slip in a sugar-coated pill" (277). As "mixed legacy" critics, Knight and I likewise saw in *Unpunished* Gilman's efforts to disguise her feminist "pill" in a then popular genre at the twilight of a productive career; however, this novel also afforded an opportunity to explore the ways Gilman, in her final work of fiction, managed to convey a timely message about domestic, emotional, and sexual abuse even as she embedded her personal inclinations (such as physical culture, mercy killings, and the West)[9] and prejudices (such as racism, classism, and xenophobia) into the novel. *Unpunished* demonstrates how Charlotte Perkins Gilman—a leading intellectual of the women's movement at the

turn of the twentieth century—foresaw the needs of our modern age in her creation of a heroine who fights back against her abusers. Gilman is forward looking. She frees oppressed middle-class white women from subjugation and marital rape well over four decades before society even recognized these kinds of concerns in the 1970s as "battered woman syndrome" or intimate partner violence (IPV), as we currently refer to this syndrome in twenty-first century sociological studies; moreover, she allows her heroine (Jacqueline "Jack" Warner), who uses vigilante justice against her abuser, literally to go unpunished. However, the plot of the detective novel also reveals how Gilman was willing to sacrifice the labor and lives of the working class and racial minorities to pursue her feminist aims.

Gilman wrote *Unpunished* around 1929 when first-wave feminism was declining, and she could not find a ready audience for her work. Her readership was waning, and times were changing. Post-World War I audiences were put off by Gilman's dual allegiances to socialism and feminism. The women's movement dwindled following suffrage. Still eager for an audience, Gilman turned to a genre popular between the two World Wars to create a "whodunit" with a satirical twist: in *Unpunished,* she makes a strong case against domestic abuse. Wade Vaughn has emotionally and sexually abused his wife (Iris Booth Vaughn), psychologically battered his disfigured, crippled sister-in-law (Jack Warner), driven his wife to suicide, blackmailed countless people, and attempted, through coercion, to marry his step-daughter (young Iris Booth) to a brute. Although we never meet the most corrupt patriarch in Gilman's oeuvre, his manifold crimes allow us to construct a character whom Gilman deems "worse than Jack the Ripper" (135). We quickly learn that Vaughn has been "killed four times over. Or four ways at once. Possibly five" (16). We eventually learn that the real cause of death is a heart attack: Jack discloses in the final chapter that to make Vaughn "*feel* for once!" (207), she dresses up as her dead sister so convincingly that she literally frightens Vaughn to death. Gilman vindicates Jack—there is no question that Vaughn should die, and the official explanation of his death remains that "He just died of heart disease!" (206). Gilman uses the death of the socially respected, well-off Vaughn to expose, if not to topple, injustice to women rampant in her patriarchal society and still disturbing in our world today.

Despite the great advances in women's suffrage, the women's movement in the early twentieth century did not challenge women's subjugation in the sanctity of the home, as Gilman did in writing *Unpunished*. In her portrayal of Iris Booth Vaughn, Gilman seems to have read into the mindset of a victim of psychological abuse and marital rape, who could be living in the early twenty-first century, as statistics from current sociological studies confirm.

Gilman takes a stand against domestic abuse long before the term "battered woman syndrome" entered our vocabulary. Granted, "battered woman syndrome" might not exactly fit what Gilman was describing since the phenomenon that Gilman presciently engages was not yet named. Was she thinking about marital rape and abuse in the same way as those who have written about "battered woman syndrome" since the term was coined? Moreover, we can only speculate why Gilman dared to write about a longstanding abuse of women that was not yet being discussed. Might the silence surrounding this yet unnamed syndrome even have motivated Gilman to represent it in her fiction? Despite a potential difference between the behavior Gilman describes in her fiction and "battered woman syndrome," as sociologists coined it decades later, this now recognized pattern of abuse arguably works retroactively to help twenty-first century readers understand how Gilman was forward-thinking in presaging a set of symptoms and a vicious cycle of violence to women that Lenore Walker first defined in 1977.

As Walker notes in *The Battered Woman* (1979), "Most of the women . . . describe incidents involving psychological humiliation and verbal harassment as their worst battering experiences, whether or not they have been physically abused" (xv). Gilman incisively captures Iris Booth Vaughn's feelings of entrapment and despair in her "shrinking" (*Unpunished* 86) from Wade Vaughn's "cruel" love: he teases her for her absentmindedness, criticizes her nervous cough, and tells her how to act and to dress, actions ultimately leading her to take her own life with a favorite black-and-white scarf that Vaughn despises (he insists that she wear bright colors).[10] In exploring the profile of a batterer in *Heroes of Their Own Lives: The Politics and History of Family Violence,* Linda Gordon confirms throughout her study that violence is but a means to increase the abuser's control over his wife. Part egomaniac, part sadist (Gilman, *Unpunished* 96), Vaughn fits the profile of the domestic abuser described by criminologist Ronald Flowers by "resort[ing] to violence through brute strength and force as a means to maintain respect and domination over their wives and lovers" (15). Moreover, like men who batter, Vaughn justifies his sexual abuse in finding fault with his wife for not being sexually responsive or deferential (Ptacek 147). In forcing Iris to submit sexually, Vaughn has been guilty, in effect, of what we now call marital rape, although in the late 1920s, the way he manages his "wife/property" would not have landed him in a court of law.

Vaughn's verbal violence appears equally chilling. A "Psychological Maltreatment of Women Inventory" developed by R. M. Tolman in 1989 to assess how males control their female partners includes many of the traits that Vaughn exhibits in his psychological abuse of his wife: shaming, name

calling, and labeling the victim as crazy (qtd. in O'Leary 6–7). In 1991, C. M. Sullivan, J. A. Parisian, and W. S. Davidson compiled a list of thirty-three traits to measure the abuser's manipulation, harassment, and ridicule of a victim, including threats and restrictions that echo those traits Vaughn exhibits in *Unpunished* (qtd. in O'Leary 8). Kris Henning and Lisa M. Klesges, in a 2003 study published in the *Journal of Interpersonal Violence,* compiled a list of questions to give insight into the profile of the abuser, including whether the abuser threatens to harm children if the relationship ends, acts jealous, restricts friendships, calls the victim names, and frequently checks up on the victim (Table 1, 862). Vaughn, who exhibits many of these characteristics, most disturbingly tells his fragile wife, Iris: "If you care to remain at home with your sister and your child you must be calmer, more naturally affectionate, more obedient. If you make any noise or disturbance of any sort I am sure that an examining physician would quite agree with me that—restraint was necessary, and seclusion. You need sleep my dear. Come back to bed" (Gilman, *Unpunished* 88).[11]

Gilman keenly recognized that domestic violence cuts across boundaries of age, social class, and gender: Vaughn's psychological abuse of two white, middle-class women extends to their children, respectively, young Iris Booth and Hal Warner. Iris and Jack are disinherited because each marries against her father's wishes. Following the fatal car crash that kills their husbands, they have no relatives to support them, and, unlike her sister Jack, Iris has no skills or resources of her own to support herself without her batterer, whom she reluctantly marries, and then quietly takes her own life. Vaughn refuses to pay for the reconstructive surgery of his disfigured and wheelchair-bound sister-in-law, whom he psychologically abuses: carrying her into his study, he insists she give him "a nice crooked kiss" (82). Although Jack possesses self-taught clerical skills, she lacks the resources to leave: she is too disfigured to flee since Vaughn refuses to pay for her surgery. Jack is also afraid for her niece, young Iris, and her son, Hal Warner, who are also under Vaughn's slave-driving power.[12] As Hal testifies at the inquest into Vaughn's murder, "He was tyrannical—and enjoyed it. . . . [W]e couldn't call our souls our own" (164). Detective Bess Hunt, who goes undercover as a maid to help solve the case, further confirms Jack's lack of legal redress and resulting powerlessness in saving herself and the children following Iris's suicide: "Even if she could have escaped with them, any sort of court would have given them back to him—what could she bring against him—that would hold?" (136). Gilman anticipates what sociologists today confirm—battered women lack the resources to leave an abusive partner and commonly fear that the bat-

terer will abuse their children; national research substantiates this fear with chilling statistics (New York State Office).[13]

Jack concludes that Vaughn's emotional and sexual abuse of Iris drives her to suicide, which Gilman equates to murder: "We stayed two years in Wade's house, during which time he killed my sister. I don't mean with an axe, nothing so crude, nothing against the law—not he! He loved her, as such a man loves; . . . But he hated her because she did not love him and had loved Sydney Booth" (86). In making a conscious choice to end her life, Iris infuriates her abuser, who, Gilman tells us, frantically tries to revive dead Iris; he responds to his wife's suicide like a feral cat toying with a mouse: "did you ever take a mouse away from a cat, kill it, and give it back again?" (89). Gilman's connection of Iris's suicide with Vaughn's abuse of her is once again prescient. The 2003 CDC report titled *Costs of Intimate Partner Violence* advances, "Abused women experience more physical health problems and have a higher occurrence of depression, drug and alcohol use, and suicide attempts than do women who are not abused" (Centers 3), and the CDC backs this claim with five studies completed between 1989 and 1996.[14]

Battered women still face violence in the early twenty-first century even though courts of law now hold men accountable for violence against women. Safe Space, a support organization for battered women, offers a staggering statistic from the National Center for Disease Control and Prevention: battering remains the major cause of injury to American women, ranking above traffic accidents, muggings, and (nonmarital) rapes combined.[15] According to Maggie Fronk, Executive Director of the Domestic Violence/Rape Crisis Services of Saratoga County, recent studies suggest battering occurs every nine seconds in the United States.[16] As Knight and I conclude in our "Afterword" to *Unpunished,* Gilman "seemed to anticipate a time when 'a man [who] thinks he has a right to manage his own wife' (87) had better think again, lest he be made to answer to a legal system that is finally holding men accountable for violence against women" (232). Certainly Gilman's portrait of such violence is limited by its recognition of only a narrow female demographic. A twenty-first-century author might be much more likely to consider how issues of race, ethnicity, and social class help explain why some groups of women are able to flee their abusers while other groups of women more readily become IPV victims. That Gilman dared to present this message in 1929, however, makes her vision not only prophetic but bold.[17]

In bringing justice to a middle-class, white heroine in her efforts to build a world with gender equality, Gilman was willing to exploit, and even do violence to, the working class and the immigrant. Recognizing this intensely

problematic underside of Gilman's feminism is a key element of a "mixed legacy" interpretation: arguably, Gilman's feminist plot even depends on a degree of oppression of the racial "other." Gilman refers irreverently to black Americans, who are hired in the novel to perform housekeeping services, such as laundry and cooking, for the white middle class: "our little black Jenny" does the laundry for Bess and Jim Hunt and Jack Warner's family (63); later in the novel, an "amiable colored helper" (167) serves lunch to all the white folks during the inquest of Vaughn's murder. Certainly "little black Jenny's" work as a laundress allows Bess more time to be an undercover sleuth; acting in that capacity, Bess finds in a wall safe Jack's "record . . . of the goings on in that house" (69), which proves invaluable to the Hunts solving the crime, ultimately facilitating Gilman's feminist aims. The invisible labor of the "colored helper" seemingly allows the wheels of justice to turn during the inquest into Vaughn's death and ultimately benefits the white, middle-class women who attend the investigation. We even see traces of Gilman's "mixed legacy" in her decision to have a white, middle-class woman play the part of a maid. Bess Hunt may temporarily be pleased to earn praise for being "an honest servant girl" (69) noted for her efficiency and skill in cooking, but she chooses to work as a maid to assist her husband and their joint efforts at sleuthing; once she gains the information she needs to solve the Vaughn case, Bess has the liberty to leave her working-class labor, and her temporary stint at housekeeping ultimately benefits the white, middle-class women at the center of the plot.

Most troubling is Gilman's dismissal of the accidental death of an Italian manservant from "sunny Italy" (*Unpunished* 130) whose name Gilman makes inconsequential: the slain manservant becomes "Angelo or Mario or something" (130), "Beppo or Marco or whatever he is" (133), then a string of other names rhyming with "o," and, most distressingly, a "Wop" (29). The unfortunate "Beppo" becomes a casualty in the Vaughn murder: Joe White regrets killing "that little dago in the alley" (199), but our heroine, Jack Warner—Gilman's mouthpiece—dismisses his concern, saying: "that was no loss after all!" (202). This repugnant scene in *Unpunished* is more than "Italian bashing." While the death of the "little dago" is apparently an accident, it enables Joe White, whom Jack calls a "gentleman" (202), to escape from the clutches of "that—unspeakable man!" (199) along with two other "servants," Norah and Nellie Brown, Joe's wife and mother-in-law, all of whom settle under new names in Gilman's beloved California. In the novel, casual homicide of an Italian emerges as a small and necessary cost to pay for the liberation of Joe, Norah, and Nellie, all white victims of Vaughn's blackmail.

Racial stereotyping also extends to the Asian in this novel. We learn that advances in reconstructive surgery might grant Jack independence, mobility, and self-esteem, but Vaughn refuses: "When I asked to have it done, humiliated myself and begged, urged that if I were straightened out I could earn enough to pay him back, he said I was sufficiently useful to him as I was, and more likely to stay! Like the Chinese women" (70–71). While Gilman embeds the nativist tendency to stereotype in her portrayal of Vaughn as a misogynist patriarch, this racial stereotyping of Chinese women convincingly speaks to Gilman's xenophobia, which appears even more palpably in her representation of Italian Americans. In its persistent racism toward a range of minority groups, *Unpunished* remains an anathema in our time.

Unpunished illustrates how, in Gilman's fiction and theoretical works, "her racism was deep-woven into the fabric of her social thought, as inextricable from it as a Gordian knot" (Scharnhorst, "Historicizing" 67).[18] Gilman's reactionary insensitivity becomes entangled with her forward-thinking feminism and forms an interconnected part of her "mixed legacy." Gilman's ethnic and racial stereotyping and insensitivity to working-class women in her final work of fiction—which the plot seemingly depends upon to achieve her feminist purpose so smoothly—do not translate well in an age where we are now keenly sensitive to such lingering inequalities. Concomitantly, Gilman's message about the consequences of physical and emotional abuse in *Unpunished* valuably anticipates what we now recognize as the very real dangers of "battered woman syndrome" and other forms of interpersonal violence (IPV), making her work chilling and timely.

Unpunished is just one of many of Gilman's works to be reclaimed during this "mixed legacy" period of criticism. The publishing boom of Gilman fiction and criticism shows no sign of abating, as the publication of this very collection attests. Critics writing about Gilman in the first decades of the twenty-first century well recognize that the future of Gilman scholarship requires "looking backward," situating new arguments in relation to contributions by "encomium," "discontented," and "mixed legacy" critics. Sari Edelstein exhibits this practice, for example, in "Charlotte Perkins Gilman and the Yellow Newspaper." In establishing her "mixed legacy" argument that Gilman critiques yet undeniably participates in sensational practices of "yellow journalism," Edelstein nimbly nods to and positions her claim in terms of previous scholarship celebrating Gilman's indictment of the repressive cult of motherhood and the male medical model, the "encomium" view, as well as studies deriding Gilman's "now well-documented nativism" (73), which "discontented" critics challenged. New discoveries about Gilman's

oeuvre, changing political climates, and novel approaches to literature and culture (e.g., material culture) will continue to affect the way we read Gilman's work as literature and social criticism. To that end, in *Women, Compulsion, Modernity: The Moment of American Naturalism* (2004), Jennifer Fleissner, who reads Gilman's work alongside that of Stephen Crane, Frank Norris, and Mary Wilkins Freeman, analyzes "The Yellow Wall-Paper" in relation to "modernized" notions of industrialism, consumerism, and compulsion[19]—the nameless narrator reads compulsively and becomes "stuck" in the endless process of consuming details of the yellow wallpaper lining the walls of her suffocating domestic sphere that she no longer wants to leave; if tearing the wallpaper is an attempt at liberation, Fleissner argues, the narrator becomes "'stuck on' the sticky wallpaper in a sense that is no longer merely metaphorical but has become quite literal indeed. It is as if the full realization of the meaning of womanhood is itself what entraps her" (67).

The "mixed legacy" period of Gilman criticism, which remains the dominant view today, offers the promise of a balanced reading in which critics acknowledge, but do not excuse, Gilman's limitations even as we continue to appreciate her reforms. Gilman's insightful vision for women to fight back against their abusers—which women in the twenty-first century have not fully realized—creates an enduring part of her legacy. At the end of her extraordinarily productive life, Gilman feared that society had made poor progress in attaining the widespread reforms she had envisioned for women. We can only hope that the offensive views and theories that Gilman regrettably espouses will continue to lose credibility while her most visionary ideas may one day become realities in women's continued progress in the twenty-first century.[20]

NOTES

1. Gilman earned praise from Bellamy for her poetry that championed the Nationalist Movement. He even called her "the poet of nationalism" in an 1893 essay in *New Nation* (qtd. in Scharnhorst, "Historicizing" 65).

2. It seems fitting to apply the concept of "periodicity" from the field of art history to review Gilman's achievements in literature and social criticism: prior to her first marriage to Providence artist Charles Walter Stetson, Gilman took a two-year course of study at the Rhode Island School of Design, gave art lessons, and painted advertising cards for Kendall's Soap Company before turning to writing to make her creative mark in poetry, fiction, nonfiction, and journalism.

3. While scholars commonly refer to each other's ideas, this tendency seems particularly prominent in Gilman criticism, wherein scholars align themselves with and against

contributions of other critics. For example, in her 1986 essay, "Monumental Feminism and Literature's Ancestral House: Another Look at 'The Yellow Wall-Paper,'" Janice Haney-Peritz begins her piece by summarizing and positioning herself against previous feminist criticism by Hedges, Kennard, Kolodny, and Gilbert and Gubar.

4. In my 2004 Routledge Guide titled *Charlotte Perkins Gilman's The Yellow Wall-Paper: A Sourcebook and Critical Edition,* I discuss how feminist criticism of "The Yellow Wall-Paper" exemplifies this trajectory; see 71–80.

5. In the early 1970s when feminist scholars were resurrecting long-neglected works including Gilman's "The Yellow Wall-Paper," Simone de Beauvoir and Julia Kristeva were known to academics, likely informing readings of Gilman's story in patriarchal domination as well as language and gender. A prominent French existentialist philosopher and writer, Simone de Beauvoir explored the historical treatment and social construction of Woman as abnormal, deviant, and the quintessential "other" in *The Second Sex;* first published in French in 1949 and translated into English in 1953, it is now hailed as a major feminist work. The contributions of Julia Kristeva, a key proponent of French feminism, made a significant impact on feminism in the United States and the United Kingdom, particularly her consideration of the intersections of language, culture, literature, and gender. *Desire and Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* came out in a French edition in 1969 and in English, as titled above, in 1980; *Revolution in Poetic Language* came out in a French edition in 1974 and in English, under the above title, in 1984.

6. Elaine Hedges makes this point in "'Out at Last'?" 320.

7. See Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization,* and Louise Newman, *White Women's Rights: The Racial Origins of Feminism in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999). For example, Bederman, in chapter 4 titled "'Not to *Sex*—But to *Race!*' Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Civilized Anglo-Saxon Womanhood, and the Return of the Primitive Rapist," advances the notion that while Gilman is now recognized as a "feminist foremother," "historians have not recognized that her work was firmly based upon the raced and gendered discourse of civilization and, as such, was at its very base racist" (122).

8. See Knight, "Charlotte Perkins Gilman's Lost Book."

9. See Golden and Knight, Afterword 228–30.

10. For more discussion of Iris's suicide and the sociological relevance of Gilman's forward-thinking novel, see Golden and Knight, "No Good Deed Goes *Unpunished?*"

11. Likewise, reporting on a 2005 domestic violence workshop in upstate New York in an article titled "Workshop to Help Sort Domestic Violence Myths from Facts," Margarita Raycheva comments: "A woman can have many reasons to stay with a partner who beats or abuses her on a regular basis. She might be afraid for her children, she might have no money or she could have been threatened by her abuser" (3A).

12. Jack's fears still appear well founded. In a 2004 literature review titled "Psychological Abuse of Women," Virginia Kelly notes, "Psychological abuse may affect a woman's overall psychological well-being to the same extent as physical abuse or battering" (383).

13. A 2003 study of intimate partner violence quoted in *Costs of Intimate Partner Violence* concludes that, each year, nearly 5.3 million victimizations occur among women in the United States who are eighteen years or older (Centers 19). This figure

is likely conservative: psychological and domestic abuse remains underreported since researchers have been unable to agree on a definition of psychological abuse and intimate partner violence; victims of same-sex and heterosexual abuse have been reluctant to report this crime, and repeated assaults to one or more family members go unreported.

14. Maggie Fronk, executive director of the Domestic Violence/Rape Crisis Services of Saratoga County, reported in her interview of 18 May 2005 that today it takes battered women an average of eight times to leave an abusive situation permanently. Moreover, Iris's choice to take her life chillingly reverberates in current statistics of battered women by Kris Henning and Lisa Klesges, Virginia Kelly, and the Centers for Disease Control. I am grateful to Skidmore College graduate Katie Largo '06 , a Sociology major, for her help in my research for this essay by directing me to articles on what is now commonly referred to as interpersonal violence (IPV).

15. Safe Space, a private, nonprofit organization dedicated to victims of domestic violence and sexual assault, has compiled a range of chilling statistics about domestic violence. For more information about their statistics, contact Safe Space, P. O. Box 594, Butte, Montana, 50701.

16. Fronk included this statistic in her interview of 18 May 2005.

17. In her creation of an empowered and ingenious disabled heroine, Gilman also anticipates the needs of disabled citizens in our society; recent legislation mandating handicap accessible accommodations for all public buildings has allowed disabled citizens to more fully participate in their world. In addition to its incisive social message, Gilman's final work of fiction allows us to take a fuller look at themes across her oeuvre and gain a deeper insight into her convictions. *Unpunished* reveals how Gilman sustained some of her fictional techniques and embedded her personal inclinations from earlier works. As Knight and I observe in our Afterword, Gilman recalls from "The Yellow Wall-Paper" both the first-person narrative technique and the notion of writing as therapy. The West emerges as a panacea for her characters in *Unpunished*, as it does in *The Crux* (1911) and her short story "Joan's Defender" (1916). In her creation of the maligned Dr. Ross Akers, who is guilty of mercy killing, Gilman takes a stand for euthanasia: she creates the kind of Kevorkian-like physician she personally searched for as she planned her own suicide in the 1930s. Also vivid is Gilman's belief in physical culture, evident in her short story "Old Water" (1911) and *Mag—Marjorie* (1912). *Unpunished* also boasts a surprise ending reminiscent of the denouement of many of her short stories, including "The Vintage" (1916) and "Turned" (1911).

18. See Scharnhorst, *Charlotte* 75; he notes, for example, how in *What Diantha Did* (1910), the middle-class white entrepreneur, Diantha Bell, employs ethnic and racial types to provide white customers with housekeeping services and comments on Gilman's racial stereotyping in her theoretical works, such as *Women and Economics* (1898).

19. Walter Benn Michaels offers an earlier argument about Gilman and commodity culture in *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism: American Literature at the Turn of the Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987); Benn Michaels discusses "The Yellow Wall-Paper" in terms of production and consumption, processes essential to capitalism.

20. I thank Jennifer S. Tuttle, Carol Farley Kessler, and Sari Edelstein for their excellent suggestions on ways to expand my plenary session presentation at the 2006 Charlotte Perkins Gilman Conference into this essay.

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