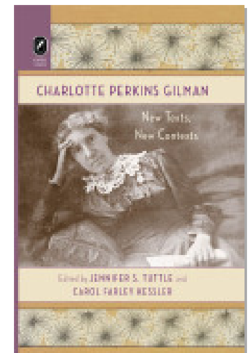
1. “that pure New England stock”



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"that pure New England stock"

Charlotte Perkins Gilman and the Construction of Identity

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In September 1922, American author and lecturer Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860–1935) escaped what she characterized as the "hideous city" of New York with her second husband, Houghton, and relocated to the "dignity and beauty and peace" of Norwich Town, Connecticut, where she would spend the next twelve years. In contrast to the "nerve-wearing noise—the dirt—the ugliness, the steaming masses in the subway" of New York, her new home boasted "the loveliness of New England at its best" (Gilman, *Selected Letters* 151). "After New York it is like heaven," Gilman noted in her memoir. "The people I meet, and mostly those I see in the neighborhood, are of native stock. . . . The long streets are lined with trees, New England fashion, and the majestic old houses stand back under their great elms" (*Living* 324–25). Indeed, in both her autobiography, *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman,* and in personal correspondence, Gilman emphasized repeatedly that New England was an integral part of her identity. Although later in life she lived in California and New York, Gilman still considered herself first and foremost a New Englander, a point she reiterated even as she planned her suicide at the age of seventy-five. Two months before her death, Gilman wrote a terse response to a correspondent who, in her view, sought to strip Gilman of her New England birthright by listing her as a "California woman" in a forthcoming publication: "I am not a California woman," she

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snapped. “I was born in Hartford, Conn., and . . . lived in Rhode Island for fifteen years. . . . I will not be falsely represented” (*Selected Letters* 301).[1]

A significant aspect of Gilman’s New England identity, both actual and symbolic, stemmed from her connection to her famous ancestors. A descendant of the renowned Beecher clan, Gilman was enormously proud of her “Beecher blood,” though her family shared neither their status nor their wealth. Rather, it was the Beechers’ record of public service that Gilman extolled in her autobiography (*Living* 3).[2] She also attributed her powerful oratorical skills to her distinguished lineage. To her then-adult daughter Katharine, who was named after both Catharine Beecher and her long-time friend, Kate Bucklin, Gilman remarked, “My speaking is pure heredity. The result of generations of ministers” (*Selected Letters* 191).[3] That she found lecturing to be “pleasant work” was the result of her natural gift as a “Beecher preacher,” she insisted. “I had plenty to say and the Beecher faculty for saying it” (*Living* 122).[4] But it wasn’t simply the Beecher cognomen that Gilman valued; rather she affirmed her belief in the emotional and intellectual superiority of New Englanders in a larger sense. To her lifelong friend Martha Luther Lane, Gilman wrote: “I don’t know any better blood on earth than that pure New England stock.” New Englanders, Gilman argued, are “so sane and steady and clever and true . . . and yet so open to all finer growth and influence” (*Selected Letters* 56). In fact, Gilman’s allegiance to New England reflects a form of cultural imperialism, whereby she privileged the regional identity of the area by deeming it superior to other geographic locales. In her memoir, Gilman hailed the region not only for its distinction as a “seed-bed of progressive movements” (*Living* 3) but also for the homogeneous nature “in tastes and habits” of its “well-educated, well-read, and well-intentioned people” (*Living* 324–25). The rich cultural, literary, and political history of New England played a significant role in the creation of Gilman’s identity. The region was aligned not only with the struggle for ecclesiastical and political independence, but it also boasted some of the nation’s most prominent intellectual and literary figures, including Emerson, Hawthorne, and Thoreau. New England produced the most educated population in the nineteenth century, and it played a notable role in the industrial revolution. Gilman embraced the Puritan work ethic and maintained throughout her life that it was incumbent upon every human being to find his or her “special work in the world, and . . . [to] do it at all costs” (*Living* 43).

An even stronger affinity with her New England roots is revealed by the importance that Gilman placed on her lineage in a recently recovered letter to Dr. Silas Weir Mitchell, the famed neurologist who treated her for neurasthenia in 1887.[5] Gilman wrote to the doctor, outlining the history

of her emotional collapse, the day before she traveled to Philadelphia to undergo the rest cure—a controversial treatment pioneered by Mitchell.[6] Significantly, Gilman devoted a full third of her sixteen-page handwritten letter to a discussion of her ancestry and justified inclusion of her genealogy by citing New England physician/poet Oliver Wendell Holmes's no longer tenable argument that inherited attributes determine character from generation to generation.[7] Although Gilman looked to her forebears for answers to her own history of despair, her letter to Mitchell also emphasized their finer qualities as New Englanders. Gilman's maternal grandfather, she explained to Mitchell, was Unitarian minister Henry Westcott (1796–1869), a descendant of Stukely Westcott (1592–1677), a planter and colonizer who, along with Roger Williams, was among the thirteen original proprietors of the Providence Plantations and the Colony of Rhode Island. Despite his tendency to be "nervous and fretful," Gilman characterized Westcott as "a sturdy New Englander" (*Selected Letters* 46). She also described her paternal grandfather, Thomas Clap Perkins (1798–1870), as belonging to "a family of New England divines," and her paternal grandmother, Mary Foote Beecher Perkins (1805–1900), as a member of the "very distinguished New England family; the Beechers" (*Selected Letters* 46).[8] It is likely that by touting her illustrious pedigree, Gilman sought both to validate her intellectual credibility and to win Mitchell's respect. On the contrary, however, Gilman's familial history did nothing to secure preferential treatment, according to Gilman; Mitchell "scornfully" dismissed her account of her illness, because he "had a prejudice against the Beechers," having already treated "two women of [her] blood" (*Living* 95).[9] Gilman's long struggle with melancholia, which resulted eventually in a nervous breakdown at the age of twenty-seven, caused her to variously criticize herself for her weakness and to congratulate herself for her strength. In an 1894 letter to her cousin Marian Parker Whitney, written when Gilman was thirty-three, she confided, "At times I don't do as well as a person of my 'parts' might be expected to, but at other times to do anything at all becomes . . . heroic" (*Selected Letters* 66). The reference to Gilman's "parts," which she emphasizes by enclosing the word in quotation marks, is both an acknowledgment of her Beecher heritage and a nod to her geographic roots in New England.

Gilman, of course, eventually recovered her health and went on to have a long and productive literary career. She also amassed a long list of publications during her lifetime. Notably, however, when we examine her early works—those that she wrote before she emerged as "one of the leading intellectuals of the women's movement on both sides of the Atlantic" (Degler xix), according to historian Carl N. Degler—Gilman's clear preference for

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publishing in New England journals and magazines reflected her desire to establish herself as a New England writer.

Gilman's first published poem, for example, written when she was nineteen, appeared in *The New England Journal of Education.*[10] Several other early verses appeared in *The Woman's Journal,* a Boston-based publication edited by Alice Stone Blackwell, to which Gilman later contributed a weekly column. Another early poem, "On the Pawtuxet," an ode to the historic Pawtuxet River in Rhode Island, appeared in 1886 in the *Providence Journal.* Gilman also published early poems in a host of Boston-based papers: the *Boston Budget,* the Boston *Sunday Herald,* the Boston *New Nation,* and the *Boston Evening Traveller.*[11] Significantly, too, her most famous story, "The Yellow Wall-Paper," was first published in *New England Magazine* in 1892 and later reissued as a chapbook by the Boston publishing house, Small, Maynard & Co. Gilman also chose New England-based journals for two of her other early stories: "The Giant Wistaria" (1891) appeared in *New England Magazine,* and "The Rocking-Chair" (1893) was published by *Worthington's Illustrated,* a subsidiary of A. D. Worthington & Co., located in Gilman's birthplace of Hartford, Connecticut. Also noteworthy is a 1930 letter to Alice Locke Park (1861–1961), a California suffragist and correspondent for the *Woman's Journal,* in which Gilman remarked that her internationally acclaimed treatise, *Women and Economics* (1898), was written "in New England, in seventeen days, while visiting about among friends" (Gilman, Letter to Alice Locke Park). While she doesn't expressly say so, by noting that the work was written "in New England" while she was "visiting . . . among friends," Gilman implies that the intellectual culture of the region was so invigorating that she was able to produce a draft of the book in just two and a half weeks.

The fact that Gilman had a predilection for New England publications early in her career is not surprising, given her tenacious nativism and her belief that both her birthright and her birthplace rendered her superior not only to members of other races but also to persons born and raised in other geographic regions. Her belief in—and association with—the hegemony in New England manifested itself in a variety of ways. She not only befriended students at both Harvard and Brown University, but she also showed an appreciation for the rich New England literary tradition from an early age. She became familiar with the works of Nathaniel Hawthorne—arguably New England's greatest writer—and, at the age of sixteen, attended the opening-night theatrical performance of *The Scarlet Letter,* produced at the Boston Theatre, which also had in its audience such distinguished patrons as William Dean Howells, James Russell Lowell, and Henry Wadsworth Long-

fellow (Scharnhorst, *Critical* xxv). Gilman also spent part of her 1882 vacation on Martha's Vineyard reading Hawthorne's *Mosses from an Old Manse* (*Diaries* 1:140). The following year, she received a volume of Hawthorne's fiction as a Christmas present (242) and later characterized the author as a "great and deep" thinker whose work was "honored as one of the distinctive glories of American literature" (Gilman, "Studies" 4).

Hawthorne was not the only New England writer to whom Gilman was drawn, however. At the age of nineteen, she attended a party at Elmwood, the James Russell Lowell estate in Cambridge, Massachussetts, an event also attended by Longfellow (Gilman, *Diaries* 1:21). When she received a copy of the Cambridge edition of Longfellow's works as a wedding present in 1884, Gilman remarked in her diary that the volume made her feel "rich" (275). She also enjoyed reading Sarah Pratt McLean's regional novel, *Cape Cod Folks* (1881), a story about a teacher residing in a New England coastal town. Moreover, her diary reports that she read at least five novels by Massachusetts native Elizabeth Stuart Phelps.[12] And, when she was editor of the *Impress,* a small literary weekly that she managed briefly in San Francisco in 1894–95, Gilman inaugurated a "Studies in Style" series, which featured imitations of writings by a number of prominent authors, including not only Hawthorne, but also New England writers Louisa May Alcott, Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, and Gilman's uncle Edward Everett Hale.[13]

Although Gilman consistently aligned herself with New England, to which she fled "with the delight of a returned exile" (*Living* 325) after living in New York for twenty-two years with "its swarms of jostling aliens," she nevertheless found the fresh air of California, where she resided for several years, to be both invigorating and therapeutic (*Selected Letters* 228).[14] In fact, though Gilman later denounced California, she returned there from Connecticut to die after the sudden death in 1934 of her second husband, George Houghton Gilman. Despite the allure of the climate, however, and the unmatched beauty of the region, Gilman carried on a love-hate relationship with the Golden State for much of her adult life. The east coast/west coast binary is particularly noteworthy when we consider Gilman's New England roots. Although she identified herself with New Englanders and venerated what she believed to be their intellectual superiority, she conceded in her memoir that it was in California that her "professional 'living'" began in 1888 (*Living* 107). It was to California, in fact, that Gilman retreated after separating from her first husband, Charles Walter Stetson, who initially remained in Providence, Rhode Island.[15] Gilman romanticized the California landscape and raved about its "richness of color, profusion of flowers," and "fruit and foliage" (*Living* 107). Her memoir alludes to "tall oleanders [that]

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stood pink against the sky," the "lemon verbena" that graced "the border by the front path," and the "steady peace" of the California climate (Gilman, *Living* 107). In a letter to Martha Luther Lane, Gilman gushed about "the great blue periwinkles" that surrounded her piazza, "the roses" that bloomed "by the hundreds," the fragrant "orange blossoms" that made living in California "a dreamland," and the delightful presence of "mockingbirds and moonlight" (*Selected Letters* 58).

Yet all was not rosy during Gilman's years in California during the early 1890s. She nursed her mother, who joined her in Oakland, through the terminal illness that would claim her life in early 1893. She was publicly ridiculed as a result of her 1894 divorce from Charles Walter Stetson—an act that was considered at the time both reckless and defiant; she also endured a messy split from her romantic love interest, Adeline Knapp, a reporter for the San Francisco *Call;* and she witnessed the demise of a weekly paper that she managed for five months, the *Impress,* which became a casualty of the various scandals in which she found herself embroiled.[16] It was also in California that Gilman made the difficult decision to send Katharine back east to live with Stetson and his new wife, Gilman's lifelong friend Grace Ellery Channing. That decision was a defining moment in her life and a choice that she vigorously defended years later in her autobiography. Moreover, Gilman—along with other members of the Pacific Coast Women's Press Association—endured vicious attacks in the *San Francisco Examiner* from California journalist/writer Ambrose Bierce. While Bierce dismissed women writers in general as "moral idiots" in his 4 October 1891 "Prattle" column, Gilman, in particular, became a favorite "target of his taunts."[17] Bierce published caustic remarks about Gilman's writing, her sexuality, and her divorce from Stetson. Her experiences in California left her feeling so embittered that she determined to return east. In part it was a symbolic attempt to reclaim the regional New England identity—and its historic association with high culture and good "breeding"—that caused Gilman to head back: "I had put in five years of most earnest work [in California], with voice and pen, and registered complete failure," she noted in her memoir, but once "the train rolled eastward . . . [t]he sense of hope and power rose up afresh" (*Living* 180, 176).

Although Gilman sought to sever her ties to California altogether, it was not to be. When Walter Stetson relocated to Pasadena with his new wife and daughter Katharine in December 1894, Gilman was forced to revisit—both literally and figuratively—the Golden State. Unlike his former wife, Stetson clearly preferred Pasadena to Providence: "I cannot understand how anybody who has been in Southern California . . . can prefer New England to it," he mused (qtd. in Eldredge 71).

Shortly before Katharine's twelfth birthday, Gilman wrote to her daughter from New York. Although she had been driven from California by scandal, she tried to put the best spin on an awkward situation. "I think of you . . . picking flowers," she wrote. "[Living in California] will be a deep sweet background of joy to you always, as my New England country life was to me." At the same time, however, Gilman remarked that her "New England country life," which she had enjoyed as a child, had enabled her to spend "lots of time in the woods . . . climbing the tall soft-boughed pine trees and swinging in their tops, wading in brooks, [and] swimming in the little river" (*Selected Letters* 133). And while the focus in this letter shifts away from the intellectual climate of New England, Gilman nevertheless romanticized the region in the construction of her identity. Specifically, the description focuses on the independence that she fostered, particularly when she was blissfully swinging in treetops. While New England as a conceptual space held sway in Gilman's imagination, it was Maine—the Pine Tree state—in particular that played a crucial role in the formation of Gilman's identity.

Gilman's introduction to Maine came on the eve of her twenty-second birthday in 1882 when, at the invitation of her Providence friend, Kate Bucklin, she traveled for the first time to Ogunquit, in the southeast corner of the state. A resort community even then, Ogunquit boasted majestic cliffs overlooking a rocky shoreline. Gilman was immediately captivated by its rugged beauty and spent long, lazy days relaxing, sketching, collecting flowers, watching sunsets, and reading works by New England writers Ralph Waldo Emerson and James Russell Lowell. Her last documented trip to Maine occurred some forty-three years later, in August 1925, when her friend Alexander Abbott, a "nice liberal minister," invited her and Houghton Gilman to join him and Mrs. Abbott in Ogunquit (*Selected Letters* 169). Over the years, Gilman visited or traveled through several areas of Maine: Moosehead Lake, Bangor, Upper Wilson Pond, and Green Acre on the Piscataqua River in Eliot.

Because she identified so strongly with the culture and intellect of New England, the allure of Maine was magical. In part, Gilman was drawn by its therapeutic qualities—the fresh air and the primitive power of the roaring sea. But her early visits in particular, especially in the summers of 1882 and 1883, also provided Gilman with a rare taste of freedom—freedom from the ever and over-watchful eye of her mother, Mary Perkins; freedom to pass lazy hours dozing in a hammock; freedom to sleep outdoors, if she were so inclined; and the freedom to have time away from Stetson, her then-suitor, who stayed behind in Providence, allowing her to contemplate the thorny emotional entanglement in which she found herself ensnared. Yet like her

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relationship with California, Gilman's connection to Maine was complex. It represented not only the opportunity for autonomy, but conversely, during a darker chapter in her life—in the months prior to her marriage to Stetson—it became an emblem of domestic oppression, when she worked for ten weeks as a governess for the Jackson family of Providence, much of which was spent in the Maine wilderness. Those ten weeks, in fact, afforded a preview of what marriage and motherhood might portend if Gilman were forced to surrender her independence in exchange for the shackles that she feared would come with domesticity.

Gilman's first trip to Maine, in July 1882, came just six months after she met Stetson. While the early months of their courtship were generally pleasant and Gilman was powerfully attracted to the handsome young artist, she was reluctant to enter a long-term relationship, expressing doubts about marriage both in her diaries and in various letters. When Bucklin extended the original one-week invitation to Ogunquit to two weeks, and then to three and a half, Gilman was overjoyed. Both the physical and psychological space that Maine provided allowed Gilman to assert her independence—a crucial aspect of the identity that she had been consciously cultivating since her youth.[18] On the Fourth of July, Gilman wrote an untitled poem—a reflective piece—that seemed to mirror her ambivalence about marriage. Invoking a trio of metaphors—the rocks, the ocean, and the sky—Gilman explored the tension between her life as a self-sufficient woman and her fears that while marriage did, at times, seem inviting, the prospect of marital happiness, and the surrender of her carefully crafted work ethic, would come at a terrible cost.[19] The last line of the poem in particular, "Even Heaven looks misty & grey," is notable for its ominous depiction of "Heaven"—veiled by "misty" greyness—as a reflection of Gilman's prescience that marriage would bring not only despair but a forfeiture of the independence to which she so tenaciously clung. Her struggle seemed to be reflected in the extremes of nature that she witnessed on the Maine coast; on July 5th, she went out in a fierce nor'easter, simply to see the ocean "rage & foam," and the next evening, she serenely "watch[ed] a gorgeous sunset" (*Diaries* 1:131). Clearly, Gilman was attuned to the vagaries in nature—particularly its dualities—that visited the Maine coast that summer. The extremes—stormy one moment and calm the next—served as an emotional barometer as she worked through her ambivalence about the prospect of marriage, finding it simultaneously enticing and terrifying.

Although she experienced occasional periods of despondency during her first visit to Maine, the trip was nevertheless therapeutic. Many mornings she arose before sunrise, sometimes as early as 3:30 or 4:00 A.M. On those

occasions, she took long, solitary walks, against the backdrop of the rising sun, to gather bouquets of New England wildflowers. But perhaps Gilman's attachment to Maine, and an essential component of her identification as a hardy and self-reliant New Englander, is best reflected by what her friends dubbed "Charlotte Perkins's Leap"—a deep, narrow chasm near Ogunquit across which she would jump. Gilman includes reference to "Charlotte Perkins's Leap" in her memoir, underscoring its importance in the conscious construction of her identity.[20] The "leap," in fact, becomes metaphorically significant when we look at the literal meaning of the word—a "springing free"—and the particular appeal that Maine held for Gilman.

Gilman left Maine "amidst general bewailment" (*Diaries* 1:134) that year, but in July 1883, she returned for a two-week vacation, again at the invitation of Kate Bucklin. She passed her time playing chess, reading, sketching, painting, napping on the rocks, and spending time with her friend, Conway Brown, a "handsome Harvard boy" (*Living* 50) who arrived in Ogunquit with his parents on the third of July, Gilman's twenty-third birthday. As she had the previous summer, Gilman engaged in activities upon which Mary Perkins would undoubtedly frown. On the Fourth of July, she deliberately braved a thunderstorm, simply for the experience of getting drenched; she also climbed on the boulders, adorned herself with wild roses, kicked up her heels and danced with friends, and slept outside. But the behavior that her mother would have found most objectionable occurred when Gilman took a walk with Brown on 9 July, during which he allowed her to "try [out] his [loaded] revolver" (*Diaries* 1:207). She also took time to comfort and counsel Brown, a bright but troubled youth, after he confided that he had often contemplated suicide, an act that just six months later he carried out with a self-inflicted gunshot to the head.

Gilman left Maine this time on 14 July and returned to Rhode Island. Two days later, she began a ten-week stint as a private governess to a young boy, Eddie Jackson. While historically the governess is more associated with Old England than with New, it was in fact one of the few vocations open to young middle-class women—presumably because it was considered both safe and "feminine"—and Gilman relished the opportunity for steady employment. She and her young charge seemed at first to hit it off and spent hours playing billiards, baseball, and battledore. She also tutored Eddie in reading, math, and drawing. Within two weeks, however, when she returned to Maine with the vacationing Jackson family, her patience with Eddie was wearing thin. She grumbled in her diary about the ineffectual parenting of Eddie's mother, who "says he must go to bed at 8, but lets him . . . sit up till almost nine!" (*Diaries* 1:214). By 9 September Gilman wanted out of the arrange-

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ment, reporting in her journal that "Eddie [was] rather ruder than usual to me" and wondering whether she could "stand it all winter" (220).

While Gilman had come to associate trips to Maine with pleasure and autonomy, the liberties she had enjoyed in Ogunquit were supplanted by a sense of oppression and even dread. The dichotomy could not be more striking. When she was removed from the cult of domesticity, Gilman felt unfettered and free; when she was immersed in the domestic sphere, and particularly when she was engaged in child care, she felt shackled and suffocated. To Martha Luther Lane, Gilman announced that she planned to leave her position as governess as soon as possible. Although she had initially rejoiced at the opportunity to return to the Maine wilderness, within weeks it was clear that the Jacksons—exemplars of the nouveau riche—were not members of the cultural elite of New England, with whom Gilman identified as a consequence of her birthright. On the contrary, she found the Jacksons to be "highly obnoxious" and Eddie, in particular, to be "<u>Selfish.</u> <u>Rude.</u> <u>Lazy.</u> <u>Dishonorable.</u> [and] Weak" (*Selected Letters* 34). Among her complaints was that time spent with Eddie meant "very little time by [her] self," which was, significantly, one of the same objections she would voice during her first marriage. Caring for Eddie, she argued, compromised the few opportunities for solitude that she did have.[21] As she drolly remarked in her autobiography over forty years later, Eddie Jackson was an "atrocious little boy" upon whom she "had wasted ten weeks," and she had "learned more about the servant question in that time than most of us" learn in a lifetime (*Living* 153, 69). Stated another way, Eddie challenged Gilman's image of herself as a respectable and congenial figure. Certainly, as a descendant of the Beechers and possessing "the Beecher wit and gift of words" (6), Gilman felt that she deserved respect. Eddie, however, saw it differently. To Lane, she groused, "The hard part of it is having to bend my will and do what [Eddie] likes all the time, wholly regardless of my own feelings. . . . [T]o [spend] all day and every day with a youth who has neither respect nor love for me is <u>hard</u>" (*Selected Letters* 34).

After she left her position as governess, another fourteen years would pass before Gilman again visited Maine. In August 1897, at the age of thirty-seven and just two years after her humiliating departure from California, Gilman left for Green Acre, a resort hotel in Eliot, Maine, that earned its name from New England poet John Greenleaf Whittier, who found inspiration in its beautiful setting overlooking the Piscataqua River.[22] Gilman's most vivid memory of the trip was the intellectual freedom that she enjoyed. Her talk on the theory of motherhood—a controversial subject, given her status as a noncustodial parent—began at 10:30 A.M. and concluded at 8 o'clock

in the evening. Rather than feeling exhausted at the end of the day, however, Gilman was energized: "I had a triumphant feeling of having at last had a chance to say all I wished to on that topic—for once" (*Living* 233). If her early sojourns in Maine had unshackled Gilman from the restraints imposed by the cult of domesticity and offered her a taste of independence that she rarely experienced, the 1897 trip offered a similar measure of freedom. Three days after her talk at Green Acre, in fact, she began to draft her most substantial—and arguably her most important—work, *Women and Economics*.[23]

Gilman's final documented trip to Maine occurred in 1925, when she and Houghton accepted the Abbotts' invitation to join them on vacation in Maine. Gilman later reported to Katharine that she and Houghton had been chauffeured to Ogunquit in style in the Abbotts' "big Cadillac" (*Selected Letters* 170). Her autobiographical depiction of the trip, however, documents not only her pride in her New England heritage but also, regrettably, her growing xenophobia. She remarked in her autobiography that "no one with a sense of historical perspective can live in a New England town and not suffer to see its gradual extinction" as the result of an invasion by "foreigners" (*Living* 326, 330). Her privileging of Maine was likely a result of her belief that it was the least compromised of the New England states. "I could have hugged the gaunt New England farmers and fishermen," she wrote, because they exemplified what "my people looked like" before the influx of immigrants "outnumbered and swallowed" the "native stock" (316, 324). Over her long career, Gilman made other similar remarks in letters and in essays, consistently pitting those people whom she referred to as the "aliens" against the "native stock" and against New Englanders in particular, whom she insisted were superior both to immigrants and even to other American-born inhabitants. It was a conviction that she would take to her grave.

But seeing the New England farmers and fishermen wasn't Gilman's only motive for returning to Maine. Rather, in a letter to Katharine, Gilman, then sixty-five, wrote that Mrs. Abbott "knows [about] 'Charlotte Perkins'[s] Leap' up there, and I am curious to see if I can leap it now!" (*Selected Letters* 169). While we don't know whether she took the literal leap one last time, we can at least imagine that she was pleased and amused by Mrs. Abbott's challenge. In 1935, the year Gilman died, she lamented to her cousin Lyman Beecher Stowe that their distinguished lineage had become adulterated: "When I looked at that array of outsiders—adopteds [*sic*], marrieds [*sic*], and such; as well as diluted descendants—it seemed to me the Beecher stock was running rather thin! Our greatgrandfather [*sic*] was certainly a 'prepotent sire,'" she wrote. "[B]ut then he had a 'prepotent dam[e]' to help him; two perhaps—the second was good stock, too. Anyhow, they did their

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work—and that keeps"[24] (*Selected Letters* 295). As she planned her suicide, she reiterated her philosophical belief about social contributions: "The one predominant duty is to find one's work and do it," she wrote at the conclusion of her autobiography (*Living* 335). Even at the end of her life, Gilman's work ethic remained intact.

Less than four months before her death, a longtime friend, Elizabeth Beau Willcox, paid tribute to Gilman's New England heritage: "It does seem to me that you have served your generation marvellously [*sic*], living up to your exceptional background and tradition as very few New Englanders have done. 'Outstanding'—'worthy'—'a Great Leader,' these terms come to my mind when I think of you" (Willcox). We can well imagine that Willcox's words brought comfort to Charlotte Perkins Gilman, who, until the very end, resolutely remained a New England woman.[25]

NOTES

1. Daisy Bannerman Coats was a longtime California resident whose civic activities included work for the National Woman's Party and the Historical Society of Southern California. Gilman admitted to Coats that she was "raging over" the "old grievance" of being labeled: "It is a pitifully small business, for a state to grab at tourists, visitors, temporary visitors, as its own—shall we call Robert Louis Stevenson 'a Samoan man?' 'A Samoan author?'" (*Selected Letters* 301). I am grateful to Jennifer S. Tuttle, the first scholar to discuss Gilman's love-hate relationship with California, for providing the text of this letter.

2. The Unitarian minister Theodore Parker once quipped that Lyman Beecher was "the father of more brains than any other man in America," though several of Beecher's descendants became embroiled in public controversy. Gilman took pride in having her preaching compared to the sermons of great uncle Henry Ward Beecher, who, despite extraordinary popularity, endured the humiliation of a protracted adultery trial. Great-aunt Catharine Beecher, founder of the Hartford Female Seminary, was condemned by many for her advocacy of "domestic femininity." Another great-aunt, Isabella Beecher Hooker, was plagued by scandal as a result of her support of feminist Victoria Woodhull, who accused Henry Ward Beecher of infidelity. Even great aunt Harriet Beecher Stowe endured condemnation, primarily from Southern readers, who challenged her depiction of the brutalities of slavery in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

3. In another letter to Katharine, dated 14 February 1925, Gilman asks, "Do you remember hearing about an old friend of mine named Kate Bucklin—whom I whimsically included with your great great aunt . . . Catharine Beecher, in naming you?" (*Selected Letters* 167). It is significant, too, that Gilman used "Beecher" as Katharine's middle name, a designation that Katharine chose to retain throughout her life.

4. Not only did Gilman acquire the Beecher penchant for preaching but also shared her ancestors' belief in white superiority in general and in their own higher intelligence in particular, a fact that has been well documented by Gilman scholars. See, for example,

Knight, "Charlotte Perkins Gilman and the Shadow of Racism."

5. Despite the fact that Gilman scholars had been searching for the Mitchell letter for years, it was, until recently, presumed to be either lost or destroyed. The original copy is in the Wisconsin Historical Society. The letter was acquired in July 1944, when it was donated by William L. Breese, husband of the late American writer Zona Gale (1874–1938). For additional information, see Knight, "'All the Facts of the Case.'"

6. Mitchell's promotion of the rest cure was based on his belief that the patient had reached a state of "cerebral exhaustion,—a condition in which the mental organs become more or less completely incapacitated for labor" (*Wear* par. 72). The remedy, he argued, was enforced bed rest where the patient was spared from physical exertion and deprived of intellectual stimulation. "Rest becomes for some women a rather bitter medicine, and they are glad enough to accept the order to rise and go about when the doctor issues [such] a mandate," Mitchell argued (*Fat* 42–43). After remaining in Mitchell's care for a month, Gilman was instructed to "live as domestic a life as possible," to limit her "intellectual life" to "two hours" per day, and to never again "touch pen, brush or pencil" (Gilman, *Living* 96). She subsequently suffered a nervous breakdown.

7. In his preface to the 1867 edition of *The Guardian Angel,* American author and physician Oliver Wendell Holmes (1809–94) argued that inherited attributes determine character from generation to generation:

> The story which follows comes more nearly within the range of common experience. The successive development of inherited bodily aspects and habitudes is well known to all who have lived long enough to see families grow up under their own eyes. The same thing happens, but less obviously to common observation, in the mental and moral nature. There is something frightful in the way in which not only characteristic qualities, but particular manifestations of them, are repeated from generation to generation.

By the middle of the twentieth century, the theory was no longer considered credible.

8. Mary Foote Beecher Perkins was the daughter of the renowned Presbyterian minister, Lyman Beecher Stowe (1775–1863), and sister of author Harriet Beecher Stowe (1811–1896).

9. In her biography, *Harriet Beecher Stowe: A Life,* biographer Joan D. Hedrick identifies one of Gilman's relatives who underwent Mitchell's rest cure as Stowe's daughter Georgiana, who sought treatment from Mitchell in 1876 (396). Some Gilman scholars have suggested that the other Gilman relative was Catharine Beecher. While Beecher did suffer two breakdowns and railed against controversial medical treatments in *Letters to the People on Health and Happiness* (1855), I have found nothing to corroborate the identity of Catharine Beecher as the other patient of Gilman's "blood" to be treated by Mitchell. Beecher did, however, undergo the "Water Cure," an alternative medical treatment that its proponents believed could purify and rejuvenate the body's physiology.

10. Titled "To D—G—," the twenty-line poem celebrated the common dandelion as "the luxury of [a] humble life" (31).

11. In addition to publishing verse and fiction in *The Woman's Journal* over the years, Gilman contributed a weekly column to the publication in 1904. For a virtually complete listing of Gilman's publications, see Gary Scharnhorst's *Charlotte Perkins Gilman: A Bibliography.*

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12. Gilman read several novels by Phelps (1844–1911), including *The Gates Ajar* (1868), *The Story of Avis* (1877), *An Old Maid's Paradise* (1879), *Dr. Zay* (1882), and *Beyond the Gates* (1883), which Gilman erroneously referred to as "Behind the Gates" in her diary entry of 23 July 1897.

13. Much later in life, shortly before her seventy-second birthday, Gilman still showed a predilection for New England fiction. To her lifelong friend Grace Ellery Channing, she wrote, "Have you read those two nice Cape Cod Murder stories, with 'Asey Mayo' in them? The last one is called "Death Lights a Candle," I forget the other, and, alas! the author" (*Selected Letters* 111). *Death Lights a Candle* (1932) was one of several mysteries written by American author Phoebe Atwood Taylor (1909–1976) featuring the character of Asey Mayo.

14. `The reference to "swarms of jostling aliens" is from a 1923 letter to Alice Stone Blackwell. The date of the Blackwell letter is the 19th; the month, however, is illegible.

15. Charles Walter Stetson followed Gilman to California in 1889 in a futile attempt at reconciliation.

16. Gilman's relationship with Adeline Knapp has been well documented by biographers. See, for example, Hill. *The Impress* failed, according to Gilman's friend Helen Campbell (1839–1918), an author, reformer, and home economist, because of Gilman's reputation as a divorcée. "Nothing that Mrs. Stetson does can succeed" in California, Gilman was told, and "no self-respecting woman could have [*The Impress*] on her table" (*Living* 173).

17. See Scharnhorst and Oliver. Gilman also developed a lifelong antipathy toward another California resident, publishing magnate William Randolph Hearst, whose newspapers sensationalized her 1894 divorce.

18. See, for example, chapters IV ("Building a Religion") and VI ("Power and Glory") of Gilman's *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman,* where she expounds on the conscious creation of an independent spirit.

19. The full text of the untitled poem that was written in Maine on 4 July 1882 is as follows:

> I sit at my ease & gaze on the seas
> Three things before me lie;
> The rock where I sit, the sea under it,
> And the overarching sky.
> The rock[']s iron brow is the life I have now;
> Too hard for peaceful rest;
> Too warm in the sun, too cold when there's none
> Uncomfortable at best.
> The wide ocean comes next; now quiet, now vext;
> It wants me, to hold & to keep;
> It looks pleasant & warm—but there might come a storm—
> And the ocean is pathless & deep.
> And above hangs the dome of our dear future home
> To be ours if we work through the day:
> But these rocks hide the sun, the azure is gone—
> Even Heaven looks misty & grey.

The image of the rock represented Gilman's current life, which she described in the poem as both "uncomfortable" and "hard." The ocean, alternately "quiet" and "vext," represented the paradox of tranquility and storminess, further reflecting her fears about marriage; and the sky, like the ocean, was emblematic both of the promise of marriage, represented by the clear "azure" "dome" and, conversely, the potential for misery, as suggested by the elusiveness of blue skies. The allusion to the sky, however, also represents the literal heaven. Significantly, and consistent with Gilman's work ethic, the poem suggests that one's entrance into heaven is contingent upon the "work" one does on earth, a principle she feared she would compromise if she married. Gilman writes, "Above hangs the dome or our dear future home / To be ours *if* we work through the day" (emphasis added). This is an untitled poem that appears on 4 July 1882 (*Diaries* 1:131).

20. In her memoir, Gilman writes that "One deep, narrow chasm they named Charlotte Perkins's Leap, because I jumped across it. It was not really very wide, but looked dangerous enough if one was not clear-headed and sure-footed" (*Living* 49–50).

21. To Martha Luther Lane, Gilman wrote:

> We had chartered one of these little steamers for the day and were fishing. At least the men were, and Eddie. . . . I was loafing about aboard . . . when Mrs. J[ackson] thoughtfully asked me if I wouldn't like to take the boat and go off by myself [for] a little while. There was a shady island close by; and I joyfully acquiesced. . . . But Master E[ddie] beheld [me], and wanted to go. His mother demurred, but I smothered my selfishness and let him go. Off I set, meaning to row around the island. . . . I was so glad to stretch my arms. Then he didn't want to go around the island so I came back. Then he proposed that I should row him over to the fishing place and he'd fish! . . . To give up not only my promised aloneness and shady trees, but the quiet haven of the steamboat where was shade and cleanliness, and row out there in that still heat, and sit, (which is hotter) in a dirty boat while he slaughtered fish under my eyes and expected me to sympathize, and all without need—I could not. I would not. I told him so, saying it was too hot, and that he could go with his father just as well. . . .
>
> Said he, "Weren't you coming out here to row?" "Yes" said I. "Well then!" said he, and in words I do not just remember gave it as his opinion that a person who would go out to row in the heat and not be willing to sit still in it, was a fool! To which I said nothing. (He went back to the boat & I had nearly an hour on the island. And was happy there.) Now isn't that a lovely boy? (*Selected Letters* 35-36)

22. With the backing of Sarah Jane Farmer, the daughter of a prominent transcendentalist and philanthropist, Green Acre opened in 1890, as a center for the study of religions. Still in existence today, Green Acre focuses on the establishment of world peace, gender equality, racial unity, and spiritual transformation. During Gilman's 1897 visit, Dharmapala, a Buddhist from present-day Sri Lanka, was also in residence, where he participated in a forum devoted to a comparative study of religions. Gilman notes in her autobiography that she "remember[ed] him enthroned in a rocking-chair, surrounded by admiring women" (*Living* 232).

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23. Gilman also returned briefly to Eliot, Maine, in 1907. In 1907 and 1908, Gilman corresponded with Elizabeth Lanier and Sidney Lanier, Jr., son of American poet Sidney Lanier, about the possibility of giving some lectures in or around Eliot. The Laniers had opened a camp there in 1908, which promoted the "art of living," where guests studied nature, crafts, and music. In late July 1907, Gilman again traveled to Eliot, remarking in an extant letter to Sidney Lanier, "It was a big pleasure to be with you, and did me good—people working toward the light" (qtd. in Knight, "Gilman in Maine" 380).

24. In another letter to her acquaintance Mrs. Roantree, Gilman lamented the declining impact of the Beecher name: "There are fewer people every year who care anything about what used to be perhaps . . . [the] greatest name in America? (outside of politics!): Beecher" (Gilman, Letter to Mrs. Roantree).

25. Unlike her mother, whose remains were returned to Providence for burial, Gilman left instructions that her ashes be scattered in the Sierra Madre Mountains of California.

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