An Analysis of Material Feminism

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Abstract: This study attempts to show how Gilman's stories are related to material feminism and make a space in which the separation based on gender in a public and a private domain has been officially ended. This paper briefly makes some biographical background and follows the impact of material feminism on Gilman's stories. Then, it involves critiquing Gilman's defects from the perspective of contemporary feminism. Finally it will show how her concern with the problem of women's space contributed to a new wave of feminism in the 1970s and 1980s.

Key words: Feminism, Women, Gender, Material Feminism.

INTRODUCTION

S. Weir Mitchell was a famous physician who treated Gilman after a nervous breakdown following the birth of her daughter Katherine. Mitchell's orders had important effects on Gilman's life and work. They drove her, she believed, to the edge of insanity, inspired her to write one of the most famous feminist stories in American literature, and helped her to focus her critique of the ideology of separate spheres for men and women. Gilman's writing represents a lifelong struggle against all attempts to confine women to a separate space, be it socially or physically. Charlotte Perkins Gilman played an important role in the American feminist movement around the turn of the century. Her book Women and Economics has been called a "bible" for many feminists at that time (Hayden 1981:5). While Gilman's influence as a theorist has been generally acknowledged, her fiction, with the notable exception of the short story The Yellow Wallpaper," has received relatively little attention.

Biography of Gilman:

Charlotte Anna Perkins was born in Hartford, Connecticut, in 1860. Her extended family contained several well-known reformers: her great aunts Harriet Beecher Stowe, author of Uncle Tom's Cabin, and Catharine Beecher, a well-known author of books celebrating women's domestic role, as well as Edward Everett Hale, a noted orator and author of a utopian novel. Her father, Frederic Beecher Perkins, left his wife Mary soon after Charlotte's birth, and provided little financial or emotional support to the family (Gilman 1979: vi). Charlotte experienced no stability in her domestic environment; she, her brother Thomas, and her mother moved 18 times during her childhood. An experiment in "cooperative living" among mystical Swedenborgians left her disillusioned, and her autobiography clearly expressed contempt for all attempts to introduce cooperative housekeeping. In 1884, after a courtship of two and a half years, she married Walter Stetson. During Stetson's courtship, Charlotte had repeatedly expressed her fear of losing her independent self through marriage. In a letter to Stetson she warned him that "there will be times when this frenzy for freedom boils up with force," times she would barely be able to control this second self, this "doppelganger" as she called it (Meyering 1989:3). The marriage was not a happy one. After the birth of her daughter Katherine, Charlotte Stetson suffered from a severe depression that was to find its literary echo in her story "The Yellow Wallpaper." She travelled to California, alone, and eventually separated from Stetson and lived in Pasadena. After the divorce Stetson married Grace Ellery Channing, a good friend of Charlotte's. As Charlotte agreed to have her daughter stay with her father most of the time, she was attacked in the local press as an "unnatural mother," a theme that recurs in her fiction. It was in California that she started her career as a popular lecturer, giving speeches in churches, women's clubs and for the nationalist movement inspired by Edward Bellamy's utopian novel Looking Backward.

Gilman and Feminist Thought:

In 1898 she published Women and Economics, a devastating critique of the economic dependence of women... This was followed in 1903 by The Home: Its Work and Influence and in 1911 by The Man-Made World or, Our Androcentric Culture. During these years Charlotte Perkins Gilman (as she called herself since her marriage to her cousin Houghton Gilman in 1900) not only published, and actually wrote, her own magazine, The Forerunner, but also kept up a strenuous schedule of lectures and speeches while still struggling to repay debts from her early California years. The tragic aspect of Gilman's life is that she, who had been one of the foremost figures in American feminism in the two decades prior to World War I, was almost forgotten at the end of her life. During the 1920s she lived a rather secluded existence. In 1935, after she had been diagnosed...
with cancer, she took her own life, preferring, as she put it in her last note "chloroform to cancer" (Gilman 1972:335).

Gilman's work has to be understood as part of a long debate on the question of household labor. While many accounts of the American women's movement in the nineteenth century focus on the struggle for suffrage, the importance of the so-called material feminists who demanded a reorganization of the home, the neighborhood and the city as a prerequisite of women's equality, has only recently been given proper attention. This movement, which had begun already in the 1850s, aimed at a reform of domestic labor which would free women from household drudgery or at least alleviate their burden. While material feminism and the suffrage movement overlapped, members of the former movement added an important insight to the struggle for women's equality. They clearly perceived that women's political equality had to be supported by economic equality which was impossible as long as they were limited to unpaid housework. Material feminists like Melusina Fay Pierce, Mary Livermore, or Mary Stevens Howland developed a critique of domestic labor which "proposed a complete transformation of the spatial design and material culture of American homes, neighborhoods, and cities" (Hayden 1981:3). The material feminists' concern with the economic aspects of household work and the design of American homes represented an important attack on the ideology of domesticity which saw a woman's place in the home and vehemently rejected any proposals to change that "sacred" institution. Some feminists suggested producers' cooperatives run by housewives; others advocated consumers' cooperatives, such as food delivery services as a solution (Hayden 1981:20). The central idea of material feminism was to abolish the artificial separation of the world into men's and women's spheres and thus end or at least alleviate women's economic dependence on men.

A number of these projects, such as kitchenless houses, apartment hotels, and cooperative laundry services were actually put into practice, but most of the plans of the material feminists remained hypothetical. Melusina Pierce, wife of the philosopher Charles Sanders Pierce, experienced the pressure of "Husband-Power which is very apt to shut down like an invisible bell-glass over every woman as soon as she is married" (ibidem:82). This opposition led to the failure of many projects, including Pierce's Cambridge Cooperative Housekeeping Society in 1869-1871. Other obstacles were the lack of financial resources and the inability to compete with commercial businesses that paid their workers low wages. Ultimately, though, the goals of the material feminists contained certain contradictions which contributed to their practical failures, particularly their neglect of issues of race and class. Most of their projects were organized by white middle-class women for middle-class women employing the labor of servants (mostly black or immigrant women) whose own household problems were never considered. We will find similar contradictions in the work of Charlotte Perkins Gilman.

Gilman's major contribution to feminist thought is her study Women and Economics. The central thesis of this comprehensive work is that human beings are the only animal species in which the female depends on the male for food, the only animal species in which the sex-relation is also an economic relation (Gilman 1920:5). Gilman then expounds the wide-ranging consequences of this dependence. She maintains that it has led to an exaggerated distinction between the sexes, causing women to emphasize their weakness and femininity: From the odalisque with the most bracelets to the debutante with the most bouquets, the relation still holds good -women's economic profit comes through her power of sex-attraction (ibidem:63).

This artificially heightened opposition, Gilman points out, has hindered the progress of the entire human race.

Gilman's proposed solution is to free women from the ideological and physical confinement of the home. In her vision of a better future professional workers take over many of the traditional household chores, thus liberating women for a life of paid work and motherhood. One of the specific projects outlined by Gilman (ibidem:242) in Women and Economics is the apartment hotel, a way of living also advocated by other material feminists:

The apartments would be without kitchens; but there would be a kitchen belonging to the house from which meals could be served to the families in their rooms or in a common dining room, as preferred. It would be a home where cleaning was done by efficient workers, not separately hired by the families, but engaged by the manager of the establishment, and a roof-garden, day nursery, and kindergarten, under well-trained professional nurses and teachers, would insure proper care of the children.

Major Flaws in Gilman's Theory:

This passage includes several important ideas that we will find again in Gilman’s fiction, but it also reveals major flaws in her theory. First of all, her solution is only addressed to a relatively small group of professional women with children. The family life of other groups, for instance the “efficient workers,” seems of no concern to Gilman. Secondly, Gilman’s argumentation is based entirely on the concept of efficiency, a key word in the era of Taylorism in industrial production, but one that would be viewed much more skeptically today. Although Gilman called herself a socialist, she ignores the question of class and can only envision the apartment hotel as the product of benevolent capitalism. These inner contradictions were to become more visible as the United States moved into an era of corporate capitalism and the mass production of consumer goods.
Gilman and Material Feminism:

Starting in the 1920s, the influence of material feminism began to decrease. One reason, paradoxically, was the achievement of women's suffrage, which in general led to a decline in feminist activity because the major goal had now supposedly been achieved. Furthermore, feminists suffered from the red-baiting of the twenties which lumped them summarily with communists. A third factor in the decline of material feminism was the conscious development of suburban housing which promised greater profits to developers and industry. When Herbert Hoover sponsored a National Conference on Home Building and Home Ownership in 1931, it recommended state support for the suburban single family home that was to dominate American architecture from then on. It was only in the context of the women's liberation movement of the 1960s that the important contributions of American material feminists were rediscovered.

Why, then, are the material feminists, and especially Gilman, still relevant today? The answer would have to be that their most important achievement is the realization that concepts such as "home," "domestic space" or "a woman's sphere" are not natural ideas, but the result of social and political forces. Gilman recognized, as one scholar expressed it that the layout of physical spaces is both arbitrary and political, thus alerting people to the environmental dimension of their efforts to harmonize family and job (Allen 1988:6). In our decade in which increasing numbers of families face pressures exerted by the ideology of the single-family, one-income home, Gilman's critique of domesticity has more than just historical relevance. Looking backward from the 1980s, we can clearly recognize Gilman as the forerunner (to use the title of her magazine) who recognized and analyzed problems still current in American society.

While her theoretical writings have been widely discussed by feminist historians, her stories and novels remain relatively unknown. These fictions, however, represented an important vehicle for the popularization of Gilman's ideas. They are also important because they envision new roles for female characters' in fiction. Gilman did not call herself feminist, but rather insisted that her society was androcentric, man-centered. Her fiction can be interpreted as a protest against this androcentrism which keeps women both literally and figuratively imprisoned in the home.

Gilman's critique of domesticity finds its foremost expression in her story, "The Yellow Wallpaper." This story describes a young wife's struggle for her sanity after her husband has practically incarcerated her in an attic room. Gilman's personal experiences with the so-called rest cure administered by the prominent psychiatrist S. Weir Mitchell forms the basis of this text. Gilman herself discusses this connection in her autobiography, and she even mentions sending a copy of the story to S. Weir Mitchell. The famous physician did not acknowledge receipt, but as Gilman reports in her autobiography, he is supposed to have changed his treatment of similar cases after reading the story. "If that is a fact," Gilman (1972:121) explains, "I have not lived in vain."

The woman who narrates the story is a young mother suffering from a severe depression. Her husband John, a physician, treats her by confining her to an upstairs room that once served as a nursery. The narrator's description of this room in the "ancestral halls" (Gilman 1980:3) that they have rented for the summer emphasizes images of imprisonment, both in the room and, metaphorically, in the ideology of domesticity. The house itself has "hedges and walls and gates that lock" (p.4), the windows of the room are barred, and the pattern in the yellow wallpaper also suggests prison bars. The woman is confined by the attitudes of a husband who, as she remarks early in the story "is very careful and loving, and hardly lets me stir without special direction" (p.5), like her doppelganger, the woman figure she discovers behind the wallpaper pattern, the narrator, starts to "shake the pattern" (p.11). Gradually, the narrator begins to identify herself with the woman in the wallpaper. Then she equates the figure in the pattern with women in general: "Sometimes I think that there are a great many women behind, and sometimes only one, and she crawls around fast, and her crawling shakes it all over" (p.15). The two women (or are they one?) begin to cooperate: "I pulled and she shook. I shook and she pulled, and before morning we had peeled yards of that paper" (p.17).

The narrator suffers from an increasing regression into infantile behavior, which manifests most obviously in her crawling around in the room. This regression, though, can be interpreted as the intended result of the "cure" administered by her physician/husband. Note that the room the narrator is forced to stay in is a former nursery. The woman is also supposed to remain inactive and give up all adult intellectual pursuits, especially her writing. The parallels to S. Weir Mitchell's "rest cure" are obvious. Mitchell, who also treated Jane Addams and Edith Wharton, based his method on strict control of the patient. His treatment included "seclusion, massage, electricity, immobility, and overfeeding. Isolated for up to six weeks, some women gained as much as fifty pounds on a milk-based diet" (Wagner-Martin 1989:53). Gilman herself later described how she "made a rag baby, hung it on the doorknob and played with it." like the protagonist of her story she "would crawl into remote closets and under beds" (Gilman 1972:96). This rest cure might appear grotesque today, but one has to realize that it merely represents an extreme form of enforced domesticity. By restricting the patient's physical mobility, the physician attempts to restore her "natural" role as housewife and mother. Ironically, the conclusion of Gilman's story shows the husband immobilized, having fainted in an almost ladylike fashion. The woman, however, has lost her struggle against insanity.
"The Yellow Wallpaper" has become a classic of women's literature and now can be found in many anthologies. For a long time, though, this story was perceived as a tale of gothic horror. It was only after 1973, when The Feminist Press issued a new edition of this text that feminist interpretations began to appear. Since then, readers have discovered new layers of complexity in this story. "The ability to read the narrator's confinement in a room as symbolic of the situation of women in a patriarchal society," as Kennard (1989:83) points out, "depends on an agreement, on a literary convention, which ... was formed from contemporary experience both literary and extra literary." Readers familiar with feminist theory and the work of such writers as Virginia Woolf, Margaret Atwood, or Marge Piercy, to name only a few, can no longer perceive this text as a simple example of gothic horror.

Gilman's other stories, many of which were published in her magazine The Forerunner, lack the symbolic complexity of "The Yellow Wallpaper." Nevertheless, they also revolve around the question of women's space. Many of her stories deal with domestic problems and provide a practical solution, usually involving a rearrangement of gender roles or domestic space. "The Cottagette" published in 1910 is a good example for this formula. It describes the pastoral life of two women, the first-person narrator and her friend Lois, in an idyllic kind of summer resort. Like many of the ideal houses proposed by material feminists, their cottage is kitchenless, and they eat at a central boardinghouse. When the narrator falls in love with Ford Matthews, another boarder, Lois advises her to set up a "real household, including a kitchen." Lois' advice about men echoes all the stereotypes of the cult of domesticity (Gilman 1980:51): This serious. What they care most for, after all, is domesticity. Of course they'll fall in love with anything; but what they want to marry is a homemaker .... If I were you -if I really loved this man and wished to marry him -I would make a home of this place.

This, however, proves to be a disaster. The narrator, who does artistic needlework for a living, finds that cooking does interfere with her work a good deal (ibidem:52). The double strain of housework, and profession saps her strength. Ironically, the solution comes from Ford Matthews who proposes to her under the condition that she stops cooking. In "If I Were a Man" which appeared in 1914 Gilman further exposes the ideology of separate spheres that dominated much of the discussion of domestic work in nineteenth-century America. Mollie, a young wife, suddenly finds herself in the body of her husband Gerald and leaves the domestic sphere to venture out into the "real," i.e., the men's world. She finds men's clothing infinitely more comfortable than woman's dresses in the age of the corset. Seeing through the eyes of a man, she perceives women's elaborate hats as "the decorations of an insane monkey" (ibidem: 35).

The story "Making a Change" which was published in The Forerunner in 1911 addresses the issue of child care. Julia, a young wife, formerly a musician, suffers in her new role of housewife and mother. Her husband and his mother berate Julia for her lack of maternal instinct. When Julia is "near the verge of complete disaster" (ibidem:68), a mysterious change occurs. The baby stops crying, the wife regains her health, the household is run more efficiently. It is only by accident that the husband, unexpectedly coming home early, discovers the secret cause: his mother had started a "baby garden"(a daycare center) while his wife resumed her piano teaching. After initial consternation, the husband realizes that everybody profits from this arrangement, and they all live happily ever after.

Both "The Cottagette" and "Making a Change" propose relatively simple, if not to say simplistic, solutions to the domestic isolation of women; a rearrangement of domestic space is enough to avert marital disaster. "If I Were a Man," however, suggests a more severe problem: women are imprisoned by the ideology of domesticity which keeps them from engaging in outside work.

During the years when Gilman wrote her magazine The Forerunner she finally turned to the genre of the utopian novel to express her vision of an ideal world in which women would no longer be confined to the home. Her portrayal of the "politics of utopia" (Sangari 1983:9) is a logical choice, both in the light of her previous work and in relation to the literary environment of her time. Edward Bellamy's utopian novel Looking Backward (1888) had enjoyed an enormous popularity and inspired a large number of sequels, imitations, and refutations. Gilman, like William Dean Howells (who also wrote a series of utopias entitled The Altrurian Romances), had been a member of the Nationalist movement in the 1890s. She admired Bellamy's work because it proposed a society in which everybody would have a guaranteed income and women would be economically independent. Looking Backward also describes kitchenless houses and communal dining facilities that were to reappear in Gilman's own utopias.

In many cases, however, the theme was used to satirize women's claim to equality. In the nineteenth century a tradition of feminist utopias developed in the United States. "Masculinist dystopias," as Gilbert and Gubar (1989:72) remark: fuel feminist utopias, for if woman is dispossessed, a nobody in the somewhere of patriarchy, it may be that she can only become somebody in the nowhere of utopia.

The country of Herland itself, like so many utopian locales, is defined through its radical difference from the empirical world of the author. The three utopian travellers find "no dirt," "no smoke," and "no noise" (ibidem:19). There are also no wars, no kings, no priests, and no aristocracies (ibidem:60). The women of Herland, according to Terry, the group's male chauvinist, have "no modesty ... no patience, no submissiveness, none of that natural yielding which is woman's greatest charm" (ibidem:98). The most radical difference,
though, is that there have been no men in Herland for 2000 years. During a war against powerful neighbors, the entire army was cut off from the country when an earthquake destroyed a mountain pass. Shortly afterwards, the women crushed a slave rebellion by killing all the male slaves. After these events only women were left in Herland. Miraculously, one woman gave birth parthenogenetically, and all the women of Herland are descended from this one mother.

Parthenogenesis, or reproduction without the help of the male sex, has been a popular theme in feminist utopias from Mary Lane's Mizora (1883) to Sally Miller Gearhart's The Wanderground (1979) and Rochelle Singer's The Demeter Flower (1980). The scientific plausibility of the idea is of less interest than the narrative possibilities it offers, namely the portrayal of a world without gender stereotypes in which women's true nature can unfold.

The women of Herland are first and foremost ideal mothers, and their religion is an idealization of motherhood. While Gilman criticized traditional notions of the sanctity of motherhood in her studies Women and Economics and The Home, she nevertheless portrays the women of Herland as "naturally" maternal. Recent critics have singled out this ambiguity between an environmentalist and an essentialist explanation of femininity as one of the major flaws of her work (Hill 1980:45).

After a failed attempt to escape from their mild captivity, the three men are given the guided tour of the utopian country that readers of literary utopias have come to expect. Van describes in turn Hetland's history, its educational system, agriculture, and religion. The three travellers marry utopian women, but only two of the marriages are successful. After Terry attempts to rape his wife, he is exiled from Hetland, Van and his wife, Ellead accompany Terry on his return trip to the United States. The plot of Her/and is quite conventional and shows many parallels to Mizora (with the exception of Lane's choice of a woman as the utopian traveller). What makes Gilman's novel remarkable is its wealth of details with which it envisions a land in which women are not constrained by the ideology of domestic space. Her/and is also a very funny book which constantly satirizes stereotypes. The three explorers, expecting to meet "girls," are surprised to encounter strong women instead. Gilman reaches a Swiftian level of irony in the numerous dialogues in which Van, Terry, and Jefftry to gloss over the contradictions of their patriarchal and capitalist society-only to find out later that their interrogators deduced the truth anyway. Her/and is thus one of the most amusing books in a didactic genre that is not exactly known for its entertainment value.

Gilman herself regarded her fiction as consciously didactic and even remarked about "The Yellow Wallpaper" that it was no more 'literature' than her other stuff, being definitely written 'with a purpose.' In my judgment it is a pretty poor thing to write, to talk without purpose (Gilman 1972:121). This statement, as Meyering (1989:7) has pointed out, should be seen less as a self-deprecation of Gilman's part, but rather as an indictment of the dominant, i.e., male, literary tradition of the time which, from this perspective, would be "without purpose." It is therefore questionable whether one would be justified in applying a poetics of fiction that is Jamesian rather than Wellsian, that celebrates the self-contained work of art while scorning fiction with a clear political or social purpose.

Given Gilman's self-criticism of her fiction as well as the speed with which she wrote some of her works, it is not surprising that her short stories contain little formal innovation. The notable example, of course, is "The Yellow Wallpaper," whose narrative perspective gives the story its haunting intensity. Stories like "The Cottagette," "When I Was a Man," or "The Change" conform to the conventions of popular magazine fiction of her time. Herland follows the standard pattern of utopian novels which had become so popular in the wake of Bellamy's Looking Backward, but exhibits none of the self-conscious complexity of H. G. Wells' A Modern Utopia (1905). Though she was a contemporary of Henry James, D. H. lawrence and Dorothy Richardson, Gilman appears to have cared little for the formal experimentation of the modernist movement. Admittedly, her goal was a different one:

I have never made any pretence of being literary. As far as I had any method in mind! it was to express the idea with clearness and vivacity, so that it might be apprehended with ease and pleasure (Gilman 1972:284-285).

Gilman's characters might also be criticized as flat and unrealistic. Most of her stories provide only sketchy characterization (and the characters in Her/and appear rather stereotypical. Characters in utopian fiction, however, rarely resemble those in realistic fiction as they are supposed to express the social type rather than the individual. Characters in literary utopias, or "teaching stories," as Plessis (1979:2) has remarked: may be flat because they represent compendia of typical traits . . . . further, characters in a teaching story seem to function as Socratic questions, that is, the ideas, not the characters are well-rounded.

**Conclusion:**

She vehemently rejected Marx and expected business interests to support social experiments. Her utopia, as expressed in Moving the Mountain, is one in which wealth "is not what you call 'equality distributed,' but everyone has enough" (Gilman 1980:183). However, if Gilman can be accused of ignoring the problem of class in her analysis of women's dependence, one can as well criticize traditional Marxism for largely ignoring the issue of gender. If Gilman's short-term predictions have fared rather poorly, her utopian spirit has seen a
remarkable renaissance. In the 1970s a new group of feminist utopias emerged which revived the dream of women's space.

REFERENCES


