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"Dame Fashion":
Charlotte Perkins Gilman on the distorted sense of beauty in late Victorian women's dress.

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"The majesty of womanhood will shine out in a far nobler splendor when she drops forever her false decoration, and learns that beauty lies in truth, in dignity, in full expression of our highest human powers"
(Gilman, *The Dress of Women* 141)

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INTRODUCTION

My thesis focuses on the translation of some articles Charlotte Perkins Gilman wrote on feminine fashion, mainly women's dress, in the late Victorian Era. Through these translations, I will point out the author's point of view on the absurdity of women's clothing and her assumption that feminine dress responded to the need of a man-oriented society to remark differences of gender. Furthermore, Gilman expressed her critical position towards women's clothing as a symbol of the middle-class' necessity to display the economic wealth of the household, as the only subject responsible for the family's economic income. The translation focuses on five articles written between 1886 and 1915. Three of them were published on important magazines such as the *Woman's Journal* e *The Independent,* while the other two are typescript articles[1].

I will develop a critical apparatus as well, providing a critical biography of Charlotte Perkins Gilman, followed by the analysis of her pivotal work on fashion, entitled *The Dress of Women,* which leads to my interpretation of four short-stories concerning women's clothes, and Gilman's proposal of a reasonable dress in the utopian novel *Herland.* Finally, I will give an account of the critical reception of the writer's works both in the United States and in Italy.

[1]These articles can be found in The Charlotte Perkins Gilman Collection, Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America, Radcliffe College, Cambridge, Massachusetts. The Collection is available on line; the site link of the Collection and of each article I translated can be found in the "Works Cited" section.

I structured my work in four chapters, each of them concerning fundamental aspects to take into account for a full comprehension of the ideas that lay behind Gilman's articles on feminine fashion.

The first chapter is focused on Charlotte Perkins Gilman's critical biography. From my point of view it is indispensable to mention the most significant events in her life to fully comprehend the theories she exposed in her writings, since there is a strong correlation between her life and her work.

First of all, I will give a brief historical insight of the period between 1860 and 1920, since it is in this crucial historical moment of demand for change in the definition of women's identity, that the process of establishing women's rights reached its climax.

1860 was the year of Gilman's birth and 1920 was the year when the Nineteenth Amendment was ratified establishing women's right to vote. In between these dates a great economical, social and industrial transformation had occurred in the Unites States. Within the historical context, I restricted my perspective to the Women's Movement, pointing out the similarities and differences between Charlotte Perkins Gilman and the suffragists. It is important to notice, as I will point out from the first pages, that Gilman is considered a feminist nowadays, though she considered herself a humanist. According to her ideas, however, today it is reasonable to define her a feminist because she focused her attention mainly on the question of the condition of women in the Victorian society. Yet, a distinction has to be made concerning her position towards the suffragists. The economic question was one of the core aspects concerning the contrast between Gilman's theories and the suffragists' ones. Gilman shared with the suffragists the opinion that women's

rights had to be recognized and established, but while the suffragists did not advocate for a change in women's economical position towards men, Gilman asserted that women's economical independence was a fundamental step in the struggle to overcome their condition of inferiority and cease to be dependent upon men. According to Gilman, a civilized world demanded the re-establishment of the fundamental balance between men and women, which could have been reached only by establishing women's autonomy.

The second section of the first chapter moves on Charlotte Perkins Gilman's biography, which is structured into three parts according to the most important changes in her life. The parameters along which I divided her biography depend on the strong connection between the places in which she lived and her most important works, that are meant to reflect the problems and contradictions of the late Victorian society.

In the first part I took into consideration the years between 1860 and 1887 when she lived in New England. Her early life was marked by the departure of her father from home, which represented a deep loss, and the negative example of her mother, who, according to Gilman herself, was the symbol of the life women should have been able to reject. When she was 24 she married Charles Walter Stetson and, soon after the birth of her daughter, she experienced a serious nervous breakdown, which deeply marked her character but also enabled her to write her most famous short-story "The Yellow Wall-Paper." A new period of her life had begun; she decided to leave for California and she separated from her husband.

The second part of her biography is focused on the period 1888-1900, when Gilman, living in California before and in Chicago after, experienced an

engaging intellectual life, being publicly recognized as a prominent lecturer. From my point of view, it is extremely important to point out Gilman's personal relationships, especially in this crucial period, because they strongly influenced not only her life, but also her writings. In this period of her life she came into contact with prominent personalities of her time, such as Edward Bellamy, Jane Addams and Helen Campbell, with whom she undertook the project, which lasted five months, of running the *Impress*. In Chicago, where she experienced the community life at Addams' Hull House, she came into contact with her cousin Houghton Gilman, whom she married in 1900. In 1898 she wrote the non-fiction book which is considered her masterpiece, *Women and Economics: The Economic Relation Between Men and Women as a Factor in Social Evolution,* where she deeply analysed the causes of women's condition of inferiority and the consequences of their dependence upon men, defining it a "sexuo-economic" dependence.

The third, and last part, of Gilman's biography, is focused on the years between 1901 and 1935, when she moved back to New York on Upper West Side first and Connecticut then, where, she fully dedicated herself to her writings. In 1903 she published *The Home: Its Work and Influence,* which is strictly focused on the relation woman-home. Gilman's aim was that of making women realize that they had to free themselves from the realm of the home, as the commonly recognized women's sphere, and enter actively in society through a working activity carried out outside the home, making it become a space to share with the family, no longer being a working place. In 1911 she published *The Man-Made World; or Our Androcentric Culture*, where she pointed out how society was dominated by men, confining women to the domestic realm.

This dominion had been shaped by the course of history and it did not stand on natural basis, so that it was still possible for women to improve their condition by gaining higher self-awareness and self-confidence.

While the first chapter is an overview of Gilman's life and work to illustrate her major ideas, the second chapter is specifically centred on her works concerning women's clothing. Pointing out the writer's critical position towards feminine fashion is a fundamental step in the understanding of the articles I translated, since Gilman strongly advocated a change in women's way of clothing believing it to be an indispensable passage in the establishment women's identity.

The second chapter is structured into two sections. In the first section I analyse her non-fiction study *The Dress of Women,* published on the *Forerunner* in 1915, where she pointed out the main sociological and symbolical aspects in feminine fashion. According to Gilman the inappropriateness of the common clothing was not suitable to represent the subject's identity and it deeply distorted it; clothing as well was a product of the male-oriented society in which women lived, and unreasonable clothes were imposed on them since childhood by the fashion industry run by men. In this study it is clearly noticeable the influence of Thorstein Veblen on Gilman's ideas. According to him, women's clothes were indeed meant to be the symbol of the social and pecuniary status of the husband or father.

In the second section, I focus my attention on feminine fashion in Gilman's fiction, analysing four short-stories and a utopian novel. The first short story, published on the *Forerunner* in 1913, is "Her Beauty" and it deals with women's fashion industry. In this case, the dressmaking business is run by a

woman, not by a man, and it represents an example of the capability of women to undertake activities which were commonly recognized as men's territory. Not only so, this story is the demonstration of how an active working life could be a chance for women, as exemplified by the protagonist, to affirm themselves in society, if they succeed in being strong and independent individuals both economically and personally. The two following short-stories are "The Girl with the Pink Hat", which appeared in the February 1916 issue of the *Forerunner,* and "A Council of War", which was published in the August 1913 issue of the *Forerunner*. I will demonstrate how these stories are strongly correlated with "Her Beauty"; in particular the key element which links "Her Beauty" and "The Girl with the Pink Hat" is the symbolism of the hat in women's clothing, while the women-lead fashion industry constitutes the common ground both of "A Council of War" and of "Her Beauty. The fourth short-story is entitled "If I Were a Man" and it was published on *Physical Culture* in 1914. From the point of view of dress description, it is functional to show men's perspective on women's clothes, since it deals with a woman who experiences how it feels to be her husband for one day. Comparing women's clothing with men's, Gilman enables the protagonist to be aware of the potential improvement women would experience if only they chose comfortable clothes rather than their cumbrous dresses.

The last fictional work I took into consideration is the utopian novel *Herland,* written in 1915. This novel focuses on the importance of motherhood to improve the future society. Yet, I analysed it from the point of view of feminine clothes, since they are a fundamental aspect in this society inhabited

only by women, strong, wise, and capable women who are considerably favoured in their daily activities thanks to their right and reasonable clothes.

The third chapter is focused on Charlotte Perkins Gilman's critical reception in the United States and in Italy. *Women and Economics* and "The Yellow Wall-Paper" made her internationally known. At the time of their publication, contemporary critics acknowledged their modernity and poignancy. However, Charlotte Perkins Gilman did not receive the careful attention she would have deserved. It is important to point out that, after her death, the publication of her works diminished considerably until when, in the late Sixties a new edition of *Women and Economics* was published and paved the way for the feminist critical interpretation of her writings. In Italy she is not widely known; yet, from 1976 her works were reprinted and translated several times on the verge of the development of women's literary panorama; two years ago, in 2011, the utopian novel *Herland* came out in a new edition translated by Anna Scacchi, a translation which demonstrates how much the writings of Charlotte Perkins Gilman could be interesting to investigate and how much her ideas can be applied nowadays as their were in her own time.

The fourth and last chapter consists of my personal translation of five articles concerning women's clothes. I tried to convey the modernity of Gilman's thought and to show how a contemporary reader can appreciate a woman's words, which were written more than one hundred years ago. In the section "Notes on translation" which precedes the translated articles, I fully explain the topic of each translation and the main problems I faced while translating, so as to give the reader a concrete idea of the subject matter concerning each text and relative translation.

The aim of my thesis is to demonstrate the enormous and great poignancy of a writer such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman, if we take into consideration the period in which she lived and expressed her ideas. From my point of view, Charlotte Perkins Gilman's work would deserve to be wholly translated, being an enormous source of reflection for readers who approach her theories nowadays, and being extremely valuable to comprehend the importance of women's struggle to provide us the world where we live today.

CHAPTER ONE

I. 1

Charlotte Perkins Gilman and the Women's Movement

I. 1. 1

A brief historical insight, 1860-1920.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's principal interest laid in analysing history as well as culture. From this starting point, Gilman formulated a "social theory" (Lane *To Herland* 5) that merged feminism with socialism, although, as Ann J. Lane affirms, she did not consider herself a feminist, but a humanist[2]. What she tried to do was to bring about a balance between what was considered as "feminine" and the common "masculine" attitude. That attitude came from the dominance that men had imposed on women since recorded history and it derived from the economic dependence of women upon men. Women's condition of inferiority originated in the primeval society, when women developed their sense of domesticity and nurturance while men, wandering in the woods, developed their sense of freedom.[3] As it happened in the animal species, the human males "competed for their mates, and the strongest and cleverest perpetuated the

[2] The differentiation between the term "feminist" and the term "humanist" is necessary in the analysis of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's intellectual position towards the condition of women in the late Victorian Era. Critics today consider Gilman a feminist, meaning that she dedicated her whole work to the question of women in the society of the late nineteenth-century. However, she considered herself a humanist because she strongly relied on the fact that women, as well as men, were, first of all, human beings with equal rights and duties.

[3] For a deep analysis of the origins of men's supremacy upon women, see Kraditor, Chapter Five "Woman and the Home."

kind" (Kraditor 98) and the evolution of the human race came, first of all, thanks to the capability of both men and women to obtain and ensure their own food. But when human males ceased to enter into competition for their mates and realized that "it was cheaper and easier to fight a little female, and have it done with it, than to fight a big male every time" (Gilman, *Women and Economics* 31), women could no longer obtain their food for themselves and men became the only holders of economic power, imposing their authority over women. A civilized world demanded the reestablishment of the fundamental balance between men and women, incorporating women's qualities, such as interaction, solidarity, caring and nurturance. To free themselves from that dependence, it was necessary for women to impose their autonomy and, consequently, men would have been discharged from the "distortions that come from dominance" (Lane, *To Herland* 5) towards women's condition.

Gilman's vision of the world embraced not only history and sociology, but ethics as well. Her goal was to change the present through the understanding of the errors of the past. Education was, according to her, the main instrument to make the change possible:

> Education can do much; but the body and the brain the child is born with are all that you have to educate. The progress of humanity must be recorded in living flesh. Unless the child is a more advanced specimen than his father and mother, there is no racial improvement (Gilman, *Concerning Children* 4).

Gilman believed that society was a collective institution, where people, both men and women, had their rights and duties. The mother, thanks to her procreating power of giving birth to new generations of human beings, was the key figure in the process of building up a community that could be shared by

both sexes equally.[4] Notwithstanding the maternal function, women and mothers were commonly associated with child-rearing, house-work and husbands' caring. Gilman strongly criticized the role of women confined to the home, a limited environment that caused limited knowledge and, therefore, limited activity. No development in society would have been possible as long as that confinement was perpetrated:

> In our homes to-day the child grows up- when does not die- not at all in that state of riotous happiness we are so eager to assume as the condition of childhood. The mother loves the child, always and always; she does what she can, what she knows how; but the principal work of her day is the care of the house, not of the child; the construction of clothes, not of character (Gilman, *The Home* 72).

A mother, imprisoned in a house, could not raise her children properly and give them a good education because of her restricted mind. She herself could not have been able to develop her qualities and participate in a civilized society being her vision restricted only to the home.

The issue of work represented another important step in the struggle of women to reach equality with men. Work was important to establish the self. If women's work was limited to raising children and nurturing their husband, it would have never been enough in the process of women's achievement of dignity. To be part of society required a public work, like men. Isolation in the realm of the home would not have allowed women to achieve the necessary balance of gender: "A relation that is wrong at its base cannot work out right in any line. The health of the world is not ensured by making women the servants of men" (Gilman, *The Man-Made World* 68).

[4] On the importance of motherhood see Gilman's utopian novel *Herland.*

In Gilman's opinion, in fact, men and women were equal; they were not as different as masculine society had established. The gender was different, but this did not mean they differed in qualities or capacities; they both were "human" beings. The difference between them stood on a cultural basis, not a natural one. It was the masculine-oriented culture that had to be changed.[5]

As a matter of fact, around 1860, the year of Gilman's birth, women were excluded from the process that was permitting men to gain power and wealth. Nevertheless, at the same time, women's struggle towards equality was persistently moving forward. As Kraditor[6] points out, the Women's Movement was rooted in the "Declaration of Sentiments"[7], written in 1848 by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott, to protest against women's condition of inferiority, both political and economical. Prior to being active in women's rights they were, first of all, abolitionists and, when the Civil War broke out, they postponed their activities to contribute in the war effort. As soon as the war was finished, they returned to their demands for women's rights, including that of the vote, hoping that the war effort had helped them to be favourably recognized by the Republican party that, on the contrary, rejected them claiming that it was the "Negro's hour":

> The Republicans argued that an attempt to enfranchise women would jeopardize their plans to enfranchise Negro men in the South […] The party leaders informed them [women] that "this is the Negro's hour," and that the women must wait for their rights. The suffragists disagreed among themselves as to how they ought to view the Fourteenth Amendment, which inserted the word *male* into the United States Constitution for the first time. Some of them, including Miss Anthony and Mrs. Stanton,

[5] For the analysis of the male-oriented society see *The Man-Made World or Our Androcentric Culture,* Chapter I.

[6] See Kraditor, Chapter One "The History of Suffragist Organization".

[7] The "Declaration of Sentiments" was presented at the Seneca Falls Convention. It was modelled after the Declaration of Independence; it claimed for women's rights to be recognised by society and it was signed by sixty-eight women and thirty-two men.

> thought it would be better if the amendment were defeated, while others, including Mrs. Stone, argued that if women could not win their political freedom, it was well that Negro men could win theirs. On this and other issues the suffragist found they could not agree (Kraditor 3).

In 1869, that disagreement led to the foundation of two different associations: the "National Woman Suffrage Association", which was guided by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, and the "American Woman Suffrage Association", guided by Henry Ward Beecher and Lucy Stone. After twenty years of separate activity, the two movements finally joined into the "National American Woman Suffrage Association", in 1890[8].

Women were slowly acquiring growing self-awareness thanks to proliferating activities, such as joining in clubs, graduating from colleges or working in factories. However, the great transformation the United States underwent between the Civil War and 1900 was still lead by masculine authority. American economy was growing rapidly and industrial capitalism was being established, so that, the differentiation between a good deal of wealth and extreme poverty increased enormously.

The expansion of cities was an important aspect because of the significant immigration of people from the country to the city, hoping to find part in the process of industrial development. From enormous numbers of people living and working together, class differentiation begun, due to the economic disparity between rich people, who lead the economic system, and exploited workers. As Kraditor points out, the modern city was a "stronghold of industrialism, involved in problems like child labor, unsanitary housing, infant mortality, adulterated food" (70).

[8] For a thorough examination of this subject, see Kraditor Chapter One.

The new industrial era needed new political activities. Politics developed under the law of wealth and evolved into a wealth-oriented system, producing an enormous gap between the new industrial reality and the old rural ideals. The sense of collectivity and community that lead the pre-industrial moral code was fading away.

Such being the right context for an unconventional woman as Charlotte Perkins Gilman to express herself, thanks to the growing intellectual activity which was making its way in that "new" America.

A new type of woman was appearing, and education had an important part in that process. By the end of the Civil War, women were admitted in some universities and liberal art colleges. That generation of women was freer than the previous generation. Though the link with their natural field, the home[9], was as strong as before, they were slowly entering society with a renewed spirit and a positive attitude towards progress and change. According to Kraditor, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, was indeed the "most influential woman thinker in the pre-World War I generation in the United States" (97) but, the impact of her "systematic theory linking the demand for suffrage with the long sweep of history" (97) was "indirect, for only here and there did suffragist writings expound her theories" (97), in fact, Kraditor continues, her "chief task was to make people think, and in this regard she was a worthy successor to Mrs. Stanton, intellectual gadfly of the preceding generation" (97).

The great question concerning intellectual and cultivated women at the time, was the difficulty to make the desired intellectual career compatible with marriage, a duality that accompanied Gilman throughout her whole life and

[9] The theme of the home is deeply discussed in Kraditor's Chapter Five "Woman and The Home".

work.[10] The belief, and fear among men, that college and university education or social activities represented a danger for marriage, had indeed some true basis.

As Ann J. Lane points out:

> many college-educated women remained unmarried, with estimates ranging from 25 to 60 percent. Many such career women devised new and interesting ways of living in community with other women, some in settlements houses, some in women's colleges, some in smaller less structured communal arrangements. This new sense of gender solidarity was possible where women in significant numbers had options that allowed them self-supporting lives (Lane, *To Herland* 14).

Charlotte Perkins Gilman, undoubtedly, shared with the suffragists the opinion that women's rights should have been recognized and established, but, however, her ideas were quite different from the suffragists' arguments, and this is the reason why she never entered completely in the Women's Suffrage Movement and cannot be considered a suffragist. In this respect, Kraditor extensively illustrates the distinguishing characteristics between Gilman and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. They both based their theories on anthropology, but they had different opinions concerning women's condition of inferiority:

> With Mrs. Gilman she [Elizabeth Cady Stanton] believed that savage woman had been free and independent and the originator of civilization; care for her children had led to the development of love, altruism, and domesticity. Unlike Mrs. Gilman, however, she did not believe that the long ages of male dominance that followed this Golden Age had caused women to become genetically inferior to men. Woman's inferiority, she believed, was a cultural inheritance. What to Mrs. Gilman was a product of evolution, to be changed by further, consciously directed evolution, was to Mrs. Stanton a product of education, to be corrected by truer education and by educational devices such as the ballot (Kraditor 101).

[10] See Shulman, Introduction.

Even deeper was the contrast between Gilman and the suffragists on the economic question. According to Charlotte Perkins Gilman, the economic dependence of women upon men was one of the major causes that perpetrated women's condition of inferiority. An economic change was essential for women to achieve equality:

> The sexuo-economic relation serves to bring social development to a certain level. After that level is reached, a higher relation must be adopted, or the lifting process comes to an end; and either the race succumbs to the morbid action of its own forces or some fresher race comes in, and begins the course of social evolution anew.
>
> Under the stimulus of the sexuo-economic relation, one civilization after another has climbed up and fallen down in weary succession. It remains for us to develop a newer, better form of sex-relation and of economic relation therewith, and so to grasp the fruits of all previous civilizations, and grow on to the beautiful results of higher ones. The true and lasting social progress, beyond that which we have yet made, is based on a spirit of inner-human love, not merely the inter-sexual; and it requires an economic machinery organized and functional for human needs, not sexual ones (Gilman, *Women and Economics* 70, 71).

On the contrary, the suffragists did not believe that the economic relation between men and women should be changed, since women's suffrage did not hinge upon the economic question:

> According to the vast majority of suffragists, a husband did not support his wife. They could not eat or wear the money he brought home each payday; she must first transform the money into food, clothing, and a comfortable home. Since the final product had resulted from the labors of both husband and wife, neither support the other. It was only fair that the wife, an equal contributor to the support of the family, should be equal in political status. Here the suffragists clashed once again with Charlotte Perkins Gilman, who demanded the vote, among other things, for women precisely because they *were* supported, and the suffrage would be one step toward economic independence. (Kraditor 120).

The right to vote, finally acquired in 1920 when the Nineteenth Amendment was ratified, constituted for Charlotte Perkins Gilman and other women of the

last generation of suffragists, such as Jane Addams, a means to reform society although, according to them, "many rights were still to be won" (Kraditor 262).

I. 2

Charlotte Perkins Gilman: A Critical Biography

I. 2. 1

1860- 1887: Early life in New England and first marriage.

Not being strictly involved in the "Women's Suffrage Movement", it can be argued that Gilman's works are deeply autobiographical since the major part of the theories she exposed are drawn from her own experience. Thus, in approaching the study of Charlotte Perkins Gilman, it is necessary to briefly expose the interconnection between the most meaningful moments in her life and her most important writings.

Gilman was born in 1860 in Hartford, Connecticut, the child of Mary Westcott Perkins and Frederick Beecher Perkins. She descended from the Beecher family by her father's side, but she never had the advantage of the intense and fruitful cultural life of her relatives, especially of her aunts, the famous activists and writers, Isabel Beecher, Catherine Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe, author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, written in 1852.[11] Charlotte's father deserted family when she was a little child and became a very distant figure in her life. The contact she had with him was by infrequent meetings and some written

[11] For an analysis of the similarities and differences between Charlotte Perkins Gilman and her aunts see Shulman, Introduction pp. xii, xiii.

correspondence, in which he, as a librarian, suggested some readings on "evolution and history" (Shulman xxxviii). She became a voracious reader, being that one of the few possibilities of contact with her father.

As an adolescent, Charlotte became used to a reality of loneliness, both because of the conflicts with her older brother Thomas and of the several places in which she lived. Her family, in fact, moved nineteen times in eighteen years, between Connecticut, Massachusetts and Rhode Island, living in rented houses or with the Beecher's.[12] Considering her early childhood and adolescence it is reasonable to think that she did not have the possibility to develop an idea of parental love and family unity. As a matter of fact, "her immediate family experience was with a father who deserted his family soon after she was born and with a mother who none the less pined for her absent husband, withheld physical affection from her daughter, and was critical of her daughter's inner, imaginative life" (Shulman xiii).

The relation with her mother was probably the most difficult to handle. Mary Fitch Westcott represented, in Gilman's opinion, the typical woman of her time since she behaved in the appropriate ways required by society.

Mary Fitch Westcott was delicate and "beautiful, well educated, musical, and what was then termed «spiritual minded,» she was femininely attractive in the highest degree" (Gilman, *The Living* 7), but her life was described as "one of the most painfully thwarted I have ever known. After her idolized youth, she was left neglected. After her flood of lovers she became a deserted wife" (Gilman, *The Living* 8). According to Lane, Mary "became the model for

[12] See Lane, *To Herland,* Chapter "Father", p. 29.

Charlotte of precisely the kind of life women must learn to reject" (Lane, *To Herland* 35).

The education Charlotte received was rather discontinuous, in fact, she changed seven different schools and her formal education ended when she was fifteen. But there was a school, a private one, she deeply appreciated, which made her reflect upon her life. That school was kept by two women, Mrs. Fielding and Mrs. Chase; there, from a woman physician teacher, she was stimulated to study and put in practice physical culture, which was a "growing movement in late nineteenth-century America" (Lane, *To Herland* 59).

It was between the age of fifteen and sixteen that she began to develop her own personality and her own ideas, in spite of the discontinuous education she had had. Inspired by her teacher at school she "began a new mode of living that included dress reform and health reform, especially strenuous physical exercise, fresh air, and cold baths" (Lane, *To Herland* 57). She tried hard to achieve her idea of perfection, forcing herself to self-discipline and self-control. Not only did she perform physical activity to be a healthy woman, but she also had an active intellectual life, being a voracious reader and a girl with a highly developed imagination. She was beginning, at that early age, to shape herself following her strong will, and she herself said: "I never was vain of my looks, nor of any professional achievement", "but I am absurdly vain of my physical strength and agility" (Gilman, *The Living* 67).

Early at sixteen she was reflecting upon herself and seeking her own way to life: should she become a mother or should she develop a career? In her family experience the roles were strictly divided: "the private world of women, as exemplified by her mother, was stultifying and ungenerous and restrictive. The

public world of men, as exemplified by her father, was free but unkind, involving flight from responsibility and duty" (Lane, *To Herland* 50).

In 1882, Gilman fell in love with the artist Charles Walter Stetson, but, as Shulman affirms, marriage "was at odds with her ambitions" (Shulman x). As a matter of fact, when Stetson asked her to became his wife, she refused and wrote him: "Were I to marry, my thoughts, my acts, my whole life would be centered in husband and children. To do the work that I have planned I must be free" (Hill, *Endure* 32). However, in 1884, after two years, she accepted to marry him, but she was determined to pursue her career and be a mother as well; nevertheless, the inner struggle over the incompatibility of such duties, for a woman living in the late nineteenth-century, charged her with a deep inner conflict.

One year after her marriage, her daughter, Katharine Beecher Stetson, was born and, soon after her birth, Charlotte fell into a deep state of depression that lead her to be unable to take care of her little baby. Gilman's behaviour was extremely different inside and outside the house. Outside she felt free and stimulated by the world, while, inside the house she felt as if locked in a prison from where she could not escape, being extremely weak and depressed.

It was in 1885 when, under the advice of her doctor, Gilman accepted the offer of a friend, Grace Channing, to spend a period of rest in Pasadena, California. There, free from her burdening domestic duties, she recovered immediately. However, after that pleasant period, as soon as she came back home, depression and hysteria reappeared.

It was in that period of her life that she accepted the offer of Alice Stone Blackwell to write a woman suffrage column in a Providence paper called

People. She also wrote several poems and articles on the *Woman's Journal*, the official paper of the "American Woman Suffrage Association". Her work reflected her inner trouble; she wrote mainly about the condition of women locked inside the home and the strain between being a mother or choosing a career. She strongly affirmed that a woman had the same rights of a man to pursue a working career and to have a satisfying life.

In 1887, notwithstanding her working activity, she continued to suffer from nervous breakdowns and she decided to consult Silas Weir Mitchell, a famous doctor specialized in the diseases of the nervous system.

It was not rare for Victorian women to suffer from nervous diseases and the causes must be investigated taking on account the condition of women in the late nineteenth-century: "so common were debilitating diseases of the nerves among women in Victorian America that one inevitably seeks clues hidden in the collective life of the nineteenth century" (Lane, *To Herland* 108). In that historical period of transition, women's lives, and men's lives as well, were deeply changing. Industrial capitalism required a new attitude towards working activity. Agricultural work, where men and women, with different tasks, cooperated for a common result, was leaving its place to industrial work, that was no longer linked to the home and to the agricultural world, compelling men to work far from home, in offices and factories. The work performed in the private sphere was being replaced by a new type of work carried out in the public sphere. In that context, women, especially the ones pertaining to the middle and upper-classes, found themselves confined to the realm of their homes. The widespread sense of psychological and physical closure provoked

a feeling of inadequacy and inner torment, which often debouched into depression and nervous breakdowns.[13]

Dr. Mitchell's treatment[14], known as "rest cure", was based on the principle of absolute rest, that, for Charlotte Perkins Gilman, meant no writing, reading or lecturing activities for the rest of her life. She tried to follow the treatment but, after months of complete inactivity, she was psychologically and physically devastated. She consciously decided to interrupt the cure. Charlotte Perkins Gilman's case was not an isolated one, in fact, according to Robert Shulman, Mitchell's rest cure "did not work for intellectually active women like Gilman, Jane Addams, Alice James, Virginia Woolf, and two of Gilman's Beecher aunts" (Shulman ix).

That traumatic experience, however, enabled her to write her most famous and intense short story "The Yellow Wallpaper"[15], written in 1890 and published in 1892. Unlike all her other stories, this story is deeply introspective and produces a profound emotional impact on the reader. Born from a personal experience, "The Yellow Wallpaper" allowed Gilman to add "the crucial dimension of feminist anger and sensibility to dilemmas experienced by many middle-class women" (Shulman xv).

After the experience of the rest cure, Charlotte had the intention to bring about a new course in her life. In 1887 she decided to end her marriage and separated from her husband Charles Walter Stetson, a man who was unable to comprehend Gilman's inner personality and her needs. They lived together for another year until when Charlotte decided to leave for good for Pasadena with

[13] See Kraditor, pp. 108-112.
[14] See Mitchell, *Lectures on Diseases of the Nervous System, Especially in Women.*
[15] In 1913, Gilman wrote the essay *Why I Wrote "The Yellow Wall-Paper"*, where she clarifies the meaning of her story. See Appendix A.

Katherine and her friend Grace Channing. Stetson went to Pasadena hoping in a reconciliation that did not come. Having lived there for a year, he became close and then engaged to Grace. Charlotte and Walter's divorce was made official in 1894.

I. 2. 2

1888- 1900: Engaging intellectual life in California and second marriage.

Soon after Grace and Walter's engagement, Charlotte moved with her daughter first to Oakland and then to San Francisco, where they stayed from 1891 to 1895. Her life, in Northern California, changed significantly. As Shulman points out, her prominence as lecturer and writer increased considerably and she became a well-known figure[16] not only among the "Women's Suffrage Movement", but also in the Bellamy's Nationalism circles.[17]

Bellamy's *Looking Backward: 2000-1887*, published in 1888, was considered one of the major utopian novels of the time. Shulman recalls that "as a nineteenth-century cultural force it rivaled *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in sales and influence" (Shulman xxi) Through the voice of the protagonist Julian West, who fell asleep in 1887 and awoke after 113 years, Bellamy described a new political and social order that had eliminated inequalities and individualism to make way for a collective order. On the verge of the success of the book, Bellamy founded the Nationalist Reform Movement. Although being inspired

[16] See Shulman, Introduction pp. xxiv, xxv.
[17] See Bellamy, "Progress of Nationalism in the United States".

by the notion of socialism, it was not connected with other socialist movements and it came to identify itself with Americanism.[18]

The strength of Bellamy's theory stood in the concept of achieving a profound change both in the political world and in society, relying on the moral ethics of peace and cooperation, rather than following the Marxist theory of class struggle. Bellamy's ideas were not restricted to the realm of politics, but they addressed social topics as women's freedom and child-rearing as well: "Bellamy was the first popular novelist to identify economic independence with women's freedom" (Lane, *To Herland* 161).

In that climate of political and social turmoil, Northern California and San Francisco in particular, was the right place for Charlotte Perkins Gilman to join the reform movements and to make her ideas known. In that atmosphere Charlotte shared the ideas of the Bellamyite Nationalist Movement and of women activists movements as well.

"Similar Cases"[19], one of her most important poems, appeared just in the Bellamy's Movement journal, the *Nationalist*.[20]

It is interesting to report what Charles Walter Stetson commented about Charlotte's proximity with the Bellamy's Movement. In an interview, published in the *San Francisco Examiner* in 1892, he affirmed that their married life was gratifying before she "espoused the Bellamy doctrine and began contributing letters on dress reform, discarded corsets, heel boots and the like, and practiced daily in a public gymnasium. She thought it her duty to sacrifice the domestic and conjugal relations for what she felt she was called to

[18] See Bellamy, "Progress of Nationalism in the United States". p. 747.
[19] See Gilman, *In This Our World,* p. 95.
[20] See Lane, *To Herland,* p. 162.

do in the cause of women's rights, dress reform and nationalism" (qtd. in Lane, *To Herland* 170).

In the public sphere, however, Gilman's reputation as a writer and lecturer was beginning to grow significantly. The main idea that laid behind all her lectures was the faith she had in human reason, serving as active agent in the evolutionary process; human intelligence was the main instrument to give a new shape to the social environment.

In the summer of 1894 she sent Katharine to live with her father and Grace Channing, who were about to marry, and she left her home in Oakland for another one in San Francisco. There, along with Paul Tyner and Helen Campbell, she took over a project that lasted five months: the running of the *Impress*, which was the journal of the Pacific Coast Women's Press Association, and she turned it into a journal "for both men and women of wide aims and views" (Shulman xx). There, she wrote poems, articles and reviews, an activity she performed later in her own magazine, the *Forerunner*.

In Gilman's opinion, sending her daughter to live with Walter and Grace was the right thing to do for her daughter's sake. She had clear ideas in her mind concerning child-rearing. Children had to be reared by competent people, and Charlotte thought that Grace could be much more suitable than she for the proper education of Katherine. That decision made Gilman free from her domestic duties, which stressed her life so much. Her unconventional way of behaving brought down on Charlotte the public opinion's severe criticism; indeed, just two years before, the *San Francisco Examiner* had harshly condemned her ideas, and wrote about her: "there are not many women, fortunately for humanity, who agree with Mrs. Stetson that any "work",

literary, philanthropic, or political, is higher than that of being a good wife and mother" (qtd. in Lane, *To Herland* 170).

Gilman's conception of "fitting motherhood" was fully developed in her utopian novel *Herland*, where motherhood was not an individual fact, but a collective one, and children were raised among the community by certain women specialized in child-education.

After the crucial years spent in San Francisco, and being publicly recognized as a prominent lecturer, Gilman left California. In the summer of 1895, she accepted Jane Addams' invitation to spend the winter in Chicago, at the Hull House, which was an example of the community life Charlotte desired to participate in.

In Chicago she benefited from a period of stability. There, she met her cousin George Houghton Gilman, a man of high culture, who loved music, opera and languages. They developed a deep friendship that culminated in marriage in 1900. They had a long and frequent correspondence in which Charlotte showed him her deep and true self, so that he could have accepted her without any illusion. He appreciated her so much, and with him she felt free to be herself[21]. Their marriage lasted until Houghton's death in 1934.

In 1898, during her written correspondence with Houghton Gilman, she wrote her most famous non-fiction book: *Women and Economics: The Economic Relation Between Men and Women as a Factor in Social Evolution.*

The starting point of Gilman's analysis was the "sexuo-economic" dependence of women upon men:

> sex-distinction is so excessive as not only to affect injuriously its own purposes, but to check and pervert the progress of the race, it becomes a matter for most serious

[21] See Knight, Appendix A *From "Thoughts & Figgerings",* in particular p. 231.

> consideration. Nothing could be more inevitable, however, under our sexuo-economic relation. By the economic dependence of the human female upon the male, the balance of forces is altered. Natural selection no longer checks the action of sexual selection, but co-operates with it. Where both sexes obtain their food through the same exertions, from the same sources, under the same conditions, both sexes arte acted upon alike, and developed alike by their environment. Where the two sexes obtain their food under different conditions, and where that difference consists in one of them being fed by the other, then the feeding sex becomes the environment of the fed. Man, in supporting woman, has become her economic environment. (Gilman, *Women and Economics* 19).

As long as women were economically dependent on men, they would have never gained the freedom required by the social evolution. She drew examples from the animal world, affirming that only human females were supported by human males throughout their life; whereas in nature, no female depended on the male:

> In view of these facts, attention is now called to a certain marked and peculiar economic condition affecting the human race, and unparalleled in the organic world. We 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. With us an entire sex lives in a relation of economic dependence upon the other sex, and the economic relation is combined with the sex-relation. The economic status of the human female is relative to the sex-relation (Gilman, *Women and Economics* 3).

Thus, she located the sex relationship among the realm of economic relationship between men and women, where "the economic status of the human race in any nation, at any time, is governed mainly by the activities of the male: the female obtains her share in the racial advance only through him" (Gilman, *Women and Economics* 5).

Society identified women's work with motherhood but, Gilman argued, it was not the fact of being a mother that prevented women from working like men, outside the home, but it was house-work that took her whole time and energy. That huge amount of work, which concerned maternal tasks only partially,

could provide women's economic independence, that was denied because of the assumption that motherhood did not permit them to pursue a working activity.

As a matter of fact, Gilman made a clear distinction between being a mother and doing house-service, a distinction society seemed to have forgotten, since it persisted in identifying motherhood with house-work:

> Economic independence of women was necessary to produce better mothers: the economically independent mother, widened and freed, strengthened and developed, by her social service, will do better service as mother than it has been possible to her before. No one thing could do more to advance the interests of humanity than the wiser care and love of organized human motherhood around our babies. This nobler mother, bearing nobler children, and rearing them in nobler ways, would go far toward making possible the world which we want to see (Gilman, *Women and Economics* 145).

That type of relationship, based on women's sexuo-economic dependence on men, gave a misleading account of the necessary balance among the human race, an equilibrium that had been seriously altered.

Advocating women's economic independence, Gilman reassured, did not mean to endanger the institution of marriage, although:

> economic independence for women necessarily involves a change in the home and family relation. But, if that change is for the advantage of individual and race, we need not fear it. It does not involve a change in marriage relation except inn withdrawing the element of economic dependence, nor in the relation of mother to child save to improve it. But it does involve the exercise of human faculty in women, in social service and exchange rather than in domestic service solely (Gilman, *Women and Economics* 104).

Furthermore, Gilman's attention was focused on another important question concerning the reason why women were considered "the weaker sex" (Gilman, *Women and Economics* 23). She found that the delicacy women were praised

for, was actually physical weakness, and it was a characteristic which prevented them from being adequate mothers:

> Strong, free, active women, the sturdy, field-working peasant, the burden-bearing savage, are no less good mothers for their human strength. But our civilized "feminine delicacy", which appears somewhat less delicate when recognized as an expression of sexuality in excess, - makes us no better mothers, but worse. The relative weakness of women is a sex-distinction. It is apparent in her to a degree that injures motherhood, that injures wifehood, that injures the individual. The sex-usefulness and the human usefulness of women, their general duty to their kind, are greatly injured by this degree of distinction. In every way the over-sexed condition of the human female reacts unfavorably upon herself, her husband, her children, and the race. (Gilman, *Women and Economics* 24).

Work, as well, was equally important as motherhood was for women to affirm their personal dignity:

> The increasing specialization of the modern woman, acquired by inheritance from the ceaselessly specializing male, makes her growing racial faculties strain against the primitive restrictions of a purely sexual relation. The desire to produce- the distinctive human quality- is no longer satisfied with a status that allows only reproduction. In our present stage of social evolution it is increasingly difficult and painful for women to endure their condition of economic dependence, and therefore they are leaving it. This does not mean that at a given day all women will stand forth free together, but that in slowly gathering numbers, now so great that all the world can see, women in the most advanced races are so standing free. Great advances along social lines come slowly, like the many-waved progress of the tide: they are not sudden jumps over yawning chasms (Gilman, *Women and Economics* 70).

Proceeding in the analysis of motherhood and child-rearing, in 1900, she published *Concerning Children.* The main assumption in that study was that children were the major part of the population and they represented the society of the future:

> As conscious beings, able to modify our own acts, we have power to improve the species, to promote the development of the human race . This brings us to the children. Individuals may improve more or less at any time, though most largely and easily in

> youth; but race improvement must be made in youth, to be transmitted. The real progress of man is born in him (Gilman, *Concerning Children* 3,4)

As long as change was needed, children should have been properly educated; differences between boys and girls should have been eliminated, allowing girls to play out of the house as boys did, in order to eliminate the physical and psychological closure that girls, the future women, suffer from. The stress was on the adequacy of the mother as well. Gilman argued that, to raise children in a proper way, the condition of the mother needed to be changed. Women had little time to dedicate to the education of their children because they were absorbed by house-work and, being locked in the house, they were not a good example for their children to follow, especially for girls. Raising children in the private home was not the right way to operate, Gilman argued. Consequently, she theorized the practice of collective child-rearing, a practice she turned into fiction in *Herland.* Private child-rearing developed selfishness and individualism, while she advocated solidarity and "social responsibility" (Gilman, *Concerning Children* 280), which were characteristics that the child could have developed only beginning to appreciate the value of community since early childhood.

I. 2. 3

1901- 1935: Back to East and prolific writing activity.

During her stable married life with Houghton Gilman in Upper West Side Manhattan, Charlotte devoted her energies to a prolific writing activity. It was in that period, indeed, that she published most of her best-known works.

After her masterpiece *Women and Economics*, she came to analyse the theme of the home and its influence on women.

In *The Home: Its Work and Influence,* published in 1903, she extended the subjects she had already examined in *Women and Economics,* but focusing strictly on the relation woman-home and, as she affirmed, the "purpose of this book is to maintain and improve the home" (Gilman, *The Home* 3).

Gilman saw the home as "a human institution" and like all human institutions it was "open to change" (Gilman, *The Home* 3). She traced differences between men and women as derived from their different social condition, affirming that in "all this long period of progress the moving world has carried with it the unmoving home; the man free, the woman confined; the man specialising in a thousand industries, the woman still limited to her domestic functions. We have constantly believed that this was the true way to live, the natural way, the only way" (Gilman, *The Home* 6).

In explaining her critical position on this subject she asserted that the home had remained an unchanged institution:

> The sum of criticism in the following study is this: the home has not developed in proportion to our other institutions, and by its rudimentary condition it arrests development in other lines. Further, that the two main errors in the right adjustment of the home to our present life are these: the maintenance of primitive industries and their limited area of expression. No word is said against the real home, the true family life; but it is claimed that much we consider essential to that home and family life is not only unnecessary, but positively injurious (Gilman, *The Home* 10).

In the chapter "The evolution of the home", Gilman developed a key theme, which was the difference between the woman's sphere and the man's one. As she affirmed: "with the steadily widening gulf between the sexes which followed upon this arbitrary imprisonment of the woman in the home we have

come to regard "the world" as exclusively man's province and "the home" as exclusively woman's" (Gilman, *The Home* 22).

Proceeding on her take on what "motherhood" meant, in the central chapter "The home as a workshop", she gave a sharp and provocative example on five different mothers:

> Here are five mothers, equally loving. One is Hottentot. One is a Eskimo. One is a Hindoo. One is a German peasant woman. One is an American and successful physician. Which could do most for her children? All might compete on even terms if "love is enough", as poets have claimed; but *which could best provide for her children?* Neither overflowing heart nor overburdened hand sufficiently counts in the uplifting of the race; that rests on *what is done.* The position of the housewife is a final limitation and a continuous, increasing injury both to the specific industries of the place, and to her first great duty of motherhood. The human race, fathered only by house-husbands, would never have moved at all. The human race, mothered only by housewives, has moved only half as fast and as far as it rightly should have done, and the work the patient housewife spends her life on is pitiful behind the march of events. The home as a workshop is utterly insufficient to rightly serve the needs of the growing world (Gilman, *The Home* 102, 103).

From this passage it is clearly noticeable the faith Gilman had in the improvement of women condition thanks to their will.

She expanded her theory in *The Man-Made World; or, Our Androcentric Culture,* published in 1911, where she pointed out how society, and the world in general, had become men's "territory", confining women to the domestic realm.

She dedicated *The Man-Made World* to Lester F. Ward, honouring him for his "Gynaecocentric Theory" contained in his book "Pure Sociology"[22], in which "the Androcentric Theory of Life is fairly defined and contrasted with the Gynaecocentric Theory" (Gilman, *The Man-Made World* 5).

[22] See Chapter XIV "The Phylogenetic Forces", in particular "The Androcentric Theory" and "The Gynaecocentric Theory".

As a matter of fact, in the "Preface" to *The Man-Made World or Our Androcentric Culture*, Gilman pointed out that, the purpose of her study, started just from the fact that:

> assuming the Gynaecocentric Theory to be the true one- that the female is the race type, and the male, originally but a sex type, reaching a later equality with the female, and, in the human race, becoming the master for a considerable historic period- this book gives a series of studies of the effect upon our human development of the male, showing it to be by no means an unmixed good (Gilman, *The Man-Made World* 5,6).

The title comes from the assumption that only one sex has "monopolized all human activities", calling them " man's work," and "managed them as such"; this is what is meant by the phrase "Androcentric Culture" (Gilman, *The Man-Made World* 25).

In the first chapter, "As to Humanness", Gilman explained the premises of her work by asserting that there was no natural difference between men and women; that difference had been shaped by the course of history:

> Taken separately and physically, we are animals, *genus homo*; taken socially and psychically, we are, in varying degree, human; and our real history lies in the development of this human-ness.
>
> Our historic period is not very long. Real written history only goes back a few thousand years, beginning with the stone records of ancient Egypt. During this period we have had almost universally what is here called an Androcentric Culture. The history, such as it was, was made and written by men.
>
> The mental, the mechanical, the social development, was almost wholly theirs. We have, so far, lived and suffered and died in a man-made world (Gilman, *The Man-Made World* 17).

But what is most important to notice, and key of this rich study, is what she affirmed in the chapter "The Man-Made Family", where she traced the origins of industry as a female prerogative:

> Industry, as its base, is a feminine function. The surplus energy of the mother does not manifest itself in noise, or combat, or display, but in productive industry. Because of her

> mother-power she became the first inventor and laborer; being in truth the mother of all industry as well as all people.
>
> Man's entrance upon industry is late and reluctant; as will be shown later in treating his effect on economics. In this field of family life , his effect was as follows :
>
> Establishing the proprietary family at an age when the industry was primitive and domestic; and thereafter confining the woman solely to the domestic area, he thereby confined her to primitive industry.
>
> The domestic industries, in the hands of women, constitute a survival of our remotest past. Such work was "woman's work" as was all the work then known; such work is still considered woman's work because they [sic] have been prevented from doing any other.
>
> The term "domestic industry" does not define a certain kind of labor, but a certain grade of labor. Architecture was a domestic industry once- when every savage mother set up her own tepee. To be confined to domestic industry is no proper distinction of womanhood; it is an historic distinction, an economic distinction, it sets a date and limit to woman's industrial progress (Gilman, *The Man- Made World* 36,37).

Along with *Women and Economics, The Home: Its Work and Influence* and *The Man-Made World or Our Androcentric Culture,* are her best-known non-fiction works.

Nevertheless, back in 1904, she had written another important non-fiction book, entitled *Human Work.* However, it was never reprinted and it did not receive positive criticism, as she would have thought, since she considered it her masterpiece[23].

As *Human Work* did not receive the expected success, Gilman decided to divide the huge study in three separated books, thinking she had wanted to deal with too many issues in only one work. The first book, that appeared serialized monthly in the *Forerunner*[24] in 1912, was *Our Brains and What Ails Them.* In it, she analysed the brain as organ, pointing out the question: "is there any difference between the brain in a man and in a woman"?(Lane, *To Herland*

[23] See Lane, *To Herland* p. 278.
[24] Gilman wrote and edited the *Forerunner* between 1909 and 1916.

282). Her answer was negative. The difference stood in how human beings used their brain; women's brain was not less developed than men's brain, but it was the condition of women and their education that lead them to believe in the worthlessness of actively use their brain.

The other book derived from *Human Work*, is *Humanness*, serialized in the *Forerunner* in 1913. That work was focused on the force of solidarity to create a community in which every individual could feel part of a collective world, as the church, the army, the government were. Thus, Gilman advocated the principle of community to be applied to the economic world as well.

The last book that came from *Human Work,* was serialized in the 1914 issue of the *Forerunner* under the title of *Social Ethics*, where Gilman located the ethical system of values at the basis of every collective community. Previously, in *Women and Economics* she had already identified ethics as a "social science":

> No human distinction is more absolutely and exclusively social than the moral sense. Ethics is a social science. There is no ethics for the individual. Taken by himself, man is but an animal; and his conduct bears relation only to the needs of the animal, - self-preservation and race-preservation. Every virtue, and the power to see and strive for it, is a social quality. The highest virtues are those wherein we best serve the most people, and their development in us keeps pace with the development of society. It is the social relation which calls for our virtues, and which maintains them (Gilman, *Women and Economics* 157,158).

Parallel to her non-fiction works, she wrote hundreds of short stories, journal articles and three utopian books. In her fiction, she put in practice the theories she pointed out in her non-fiction works, dramatizing them. Some novels that were serialized in the *Forerunner, What Diantha Did* (1909-1910), *The Crux*

(1910) and *Moving the Mountain* (1911), were published separately later by the Charlton Company.[25]

She also wrote three utopian novels: *Moving the Mountain*, *Herland* and *With Her in Ourland.*

These three books are strongly connected because they constitute one story in evolution, but *Herland* is the one that had the most successful outcome.

Moving The Mountain, deals with an identifiable world in which people were deeply different because they lived under a socialist government that won the 1920's elections. It was not a proper utopia, but Gilman showed there how the power of ideas could have made a significant change if only people had wanted it.

Herland (1915), on the other hand, is actually a utopia, where Gilman imagined a world that could never have existed. It was a world populated only by women; strong, wise and handsome women who lived in a perfect close-knit community whose maximum expression was motherhood. In that book she really put in practice all her ideas about right motherhood, proper education and child-rearing.

With Her in Ourland (1916) is the sequel of *Herland.* It portrays the world in which we live in, seen by a woman from *Herland*, and arouses in the reader a deep and careful reflection.

In 1922, Charlotte and Houghton moved to Norwich Town in Connecticut, where they lived until Houghton's death in 1934.

[25] The Charlton Company was founded by Charlotte Perkins Gilman and her husband Houghton Gilman with the precise purpose to publish Gilman's own writings. *What Diantha Did* was published in 1910, *The Crux* and *Moving the Mountain* in 1911.

There, Gilman wrote her last non-fiction book, *His Religion and Hers: A Study of the Faith of Our Fathers and the Work of Our Mothers,* published in 1923, closed Gilman's intellectual journey asserting that religion could have been a positive force if it ceased "to worry about putting souls in heaven and concerns itself instead with this life. That we suffer so much on earth is not God's fault or the devil's but our own" (Lane, *To Herland* 284).

During the last years of her life, Charlotte Perkins Gilman wrote her autobiography, that was posthumously published under the title *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman* (1935).

Before closing this chapter I will report an excerpt from the book *To Herland and beyond: The Life and Work of Charlotte Perkins Gilman,* written by Ann J. Lane, a book I am indebted to, thanks to Lane's deep analysis of Gilman's life. This is a precious work, that could not have been a better starting point in approaching the study of a writer such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman.

This is the description of Gilman through Ann J. Lane's words:

> She is known today as a feminist. She saw herself as a humanist. She was both. She was a nineteenth-century intellectual woman. Although she lived on the margin of intellectual life- she was never an accepted member of the intellectual establishment except through some personal contact with those who were- she was part of the international currents and movements that shaped the new ideas of her time. Because she is less well known today than she was in her heyday, because the full range of her scope and vision and soaring imagination was inadequately understood even in her own time, […] That was also her goal: to draw upon anthropology, biology, history, sociology, ethics, and philosophy to comprehend the contours of human evolution and human society in order to create a humane social order. She, along with other intellectuals of her time, sought to understand the world in order to change it.
>
> She suffered, as all outsiders do, from lack of engagement with the trained, critical intelligentsia of her day. She did not have access to the active, dynamic, exciting university world. […] Her poverty, her idiosyncratic radical politics, her gender, her own psychological needs- all joined to keep her on the margin of mainstream American cultural and intellectual life. She found no place in the center. […] By placing women at

the center of her intellectual inquiry, she separated herself from radical women within socialist circles. […] She was also on the margin of the women's movement, […] To the extent that the women in the complex of groups, clubs, and organizations called "the women's movement" were concerned primarily with contemporary aspects of politics, trade unions, social or literary activities, Charlotte's central interests were not theirs. […] Only rarely have intellectuals sought a place in a political community. Such a separation between intellectuals and activists has its roots in a distinctly American past, for in much of the rest of the world that separation, sometimes antagonism, does not exist in the same way. But here and at that time there was not a place in the women's movement for a person whose activity was primarily intellectual. The lecture circuit was Charlotte's place, if she had any, but the lecture circuit provided the mechanics of her endeavours, it did not provide a community. […] For Charlotte the emancipation of women was a step towards human emancipation, not an ultimate goal in itself. Socialist women, too, sought full human liberation, but in general, they felt that women's liberation would come as a product of a socialist triumph. A victory of the working class would carry with it the emancipation of women. To Charlotte, the opposite was true: the emancipation of women would lead to freedom for all (Lane, *To Herland* 230-232).

CHAPTER TWO

II. 1

Women's clothing in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's non-fiction study *The Dress of Women*

In this section I will take into consideration a fundamental book on women's clothing, where Gilman theorized the principles she had put in practice in her works of fiction.

Its title is *The Dress of Women* and it was serialized in 1915 on the *Forerunner*. It was reissued in book form in 2002 by the Greenwood Press, with the subtitle *A Critical Introduction to the Symbolism and Sociology of Clothing,* edited with an introduction by Michael R. Hill and Mary Jo Deegan.

The Dress of Women[26], was not the first work Gilman dedicated to the question of women's clothes. The necessity to deeply modify the dress of women according to the new social and individual demands, was one of the main subjects of the first lectures she delivered across the United States as well as of her fiction, where the references to the matter of fashion are constant.

In *The Dress of Women,* Charlotte Perkins Gilman fully examined the deconstruction of the traditional thought concerning male and female identity, exposing what was considered the natural difference between men and women, according to ideological reasons that pertained to the world of economics, as well as of history and society. The book is focused on the inappropriateness of

[26] I will quote from the Greenwood Press edition.

the common clothes of the time, which, not only were not suitable to represent the subject's identity, but they distorted it.

II. 1. 1

Sociological and symbolical aspects in feminine fashion.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman opened her "Prefatory Note" to *The Dress of Women* pointing out the close relationship between fashion and society.

According to her:

> CLOTH [sic] is a social tissue.
>
> By means of its convenient sheathing we move among one another freely, smoothly, and in peace, when without it such association would be impossible. The more solitary we live, the less we think of clothing; the more we crowd and mingle in "society," the more we think of it.
>
> The evolution of textile manufacture is as long as and interesting as any chapter of our social growth.
>
> From braided hair, perhaps, or thongs, to the plaiting of reeds and grasses and stripped bark, up to the fine tissues of cotton and flax, wool and silk; from the coarse accidental felt of matted camel's hair to the finest of laces; it is as vivid a picture of natural growth as human life can show.
>
> Other creatures grow their clothing on the individual bodies; scales, or bristles, fur or feathers- they have but one suit, self-replenished. They may clean it perhaps, but cannot change it- save indeed for the seasonal changes, the difference between youth and age and- the chameleon.
>
> The human animal shows in its clothing as conspicuously as in many other ways, the peculiar power of extra-physical expression (Gilman, *The Dress* 3).

Gilman fiercely criticized every detail of women's clothing. Women's dress appeared as one of the means by which the identity of women—an identity forged according to the rules of an 'Androcentric' culture—was imposed on

them since childhood, to the extent that clothes sometimes actually modified their own bodies.[27]

Such way of clothing impeded little girls to play, the normal activity a child should not only be permitted, but encouraged to, forcing them to static activities and lowering their vitality. As a result, sex-distinction was forced upon little girls since childhood:

> The girl is still in starched white muslin, or in soft light wool or silk, while the boy is wearing heavier, darker, stronger goods. The girl's clothes are thus more liable to wear and tear, and also to appear mussed and soiled, so making work for the mother […]The shape of her garments exerts a similar influence. Because of our profound conviction that skirts are inseparable from femininity, we insist on clothing our girl children in skirts, although their constant tendency to be active has induced us to shorten them until sometimes they are absolutely broader than they are long—a mere waist-ruffle. Because of this shape come the limits in management. […] Add to this our antique convictions of the extreme immodesty of the human body, and you have a steady pressure exerted on the little girl, calling upon her to "sit still," to "pull your skirt down," and generally to refrain from any action which might invert those brief hangings and expose her unexhibitable legs. […] Because of her clothing and the attitudes and habits which go with it, the woman is comparatively crippled in action. Look at her getting on or off a street car, climbing up on anything, or jumping down. She may achieve it, in a determined scramble; she has the anatomical capacity, but is awkward and inefficient for lack of full exercise. We have always assumed that this was due to the physical limitations of women. It is not. It is solely due to the limitations of their clothes and of the conduct supposed to belong to them (Gilman, *The Dress* 38,39).

The extremely thick and uncomfortable garments could be seen as symbols of women's repressed identity in a society dominated by men; their personality was limited by the condition of inferiority both physical and psychological. Women were not only forbidden the access to the world of culture, society and education, but they were physically 'locked in' their clothes, according to the rules of a male-oriented society. Women's movements were restricted because

[27] See Anna Scacchi's essay "L'Abito a Utopia: Il Sogno di Charlotte Perkins Gilman", in *Abito e Identità,* p.110.

of the clothes they were compelled to wear: high heels that crippled their feet, their backs bended by the use of corsets, arms made useless by awkward sleeves and extremely long and cumbersome skirts.

Thus, women's clothes, in Gilman's opinion, were the logical demonstration of women's dependence upon men, as symbolized by the foot-wear, that limited their dominance of space, and the absence of pockets,[28] which exemplified the fact that women did not possess money to keep in and were, therefore, compelled to rely on their husbands or fathers.[29]

Gilman's way of thinking had been certainly influenced by the utilitarian theory of dress formulated by Thorstein Veblen in his 1899 book *The Theory of the Leisure Class,* which is mentioned several times in *The Dress of Women.* The title of the seventh chapter of Veblen's work, clearly exposes its subject: "Dress as an Expression of the Pecuniary Culture". According to Veblen, "no line of consumption affords a more apt illustration than expenditure on dress. It is especially the rule of the conspicuous waste of goods that finds expression in dress" (Veblen, *The Theory* 112).

The main benefit the leisure class obtained by investing money in buying fine clothes was that the dress, always in evidence, became a symbol of a person's social and pecuniary status. Appearance, more than the self or the fact being comfortable, was what counted the most.[30] The reason for buying

[28] On the importance of pockets see Gilman's utopian novel *Herland,* where man's pockets are "magazines of small necessities" (Gilman, *Herland* 11) and, on the contrary of Victorian feminine clothes, in Herland women's garments "had pockets in surprising number and variety" (Gilman, *Herland* 41).

[29] See in particular Gilman's article "Why These Clothes", Chapter Three of this thesis.

[30] Cristina Giorcelli, in her preface to *Abito e Identità: Ricerche di Storia Letteraria e Culturale, vol. I,* places the dialectic dress/identity in a metaphysical dimension: "se l'abito è *apparenza* (superficie), di un'*essenza* (contenuto), che si maschera, l'abito può essere visto anche come epifenomeno di una mancanza di essenza, di un vuoto di essere. La dialettica tra abito e identità sfiora, quindi, le categorie del pensiero metafisico", p. 6.

"conspicuously wasteful apparel", Veblen continues, was the will to submit one's own way of clothing to the conventional rules established by the conventional taste:

> Without reflection or analysis, we feel that what is inexpensive is unworthy. "A cheap coat makes a cheap man." "Cheap and nasty" is recognized to hold true in dress with even less mitigation than in other lines of consumption. On the ground both of taste and serviceability, an inexpensive article of apparel is held to be inferior, under the maxim "cheap and nasty." We find things beautiful, as well as serviceable, somewhat in proportion as they are costly (Veblen, *The Theory* 113).

Besides attesting that the person who bought fine clothes was not in the condition of needing to earn money to live, clothes were also evidence of the fact that the person who wore them was not involved in any kind of productive labor.

After the general considerations involving both men and women, Veblen restricts his perspective to women's dress:

> The dress of women goes even farther than that of men in the way of demonstrating the wearer's abstinence from productive employment. It needs no argument to enforce the generalization that the more elegant styles of feminine bonnets go even farther towards making work impossible than does the man's high hat. The woman's shoe adds the so-called French heel to the evidence of enforced leisure afforded by its polish; because this high heel obviously makes any, even the simplest and most necessary manual work extremely difficult. The like is true even in a higher degree of the skirt and the rest of the drapery which characterizes woman's dress. The substantial reason for our tenacious attachment to the skirt is just this; it is expensive and it hampers the wearer at every turn and incapacitates her for all useful exertion (Veblen, *The Theory* 114, 115).

The corset, a garment to which Gilman as well paid careful attention, is defined as a "mutilation" (Veblen, *The Theory* 124), that inevitably became an impediment for the free capacity of movement required in every aspect of life, both work and health. The corset was an extremely important garment in late nineteenth-century fashion: it represented the differentiation of classes, since it

marked the distinction between rich and poor women. For the women of the leisure class it was a garment used in everyday life, but for the working women of the poorer classes, it represented a "holiday luxury" to imitate a higher-class "canon of decency" (Veblen, *The Theory* 123).

Considering another important aspect involving women's clothes, Veblen comes to analyse the question of proper fashion, the fact of being "up to date", affirming "with perfect consistency and truthfulness, that this principle of novelty is another corollary under the law of conspicuous waste" (Veblen, *The Theory* 116). That harshly condemned aspect of fashion, was mainly seen in women's dress rather than in men's, and it introduces the theme of women's condition of economical dependence upon men:

> Propriety requires respectable women to abstain more consistently from useful effort and to make more of a show of leisure than the men of the same social classes. It grates painfully on our nerves to contemplate the necessity of any well-bred woman's earning a livelihood by useful work. It is not "woman's sphere." Her sphere is within the household, which she should "beautify," and of which she should be the "chief ornament." The male head of the household is not currently spoken of as its ornament.
>
> This feature taken in conjunction with the other fact that propriety requires more unremitting attention to expensive display in the dress and other paraphernalia of women, goes to enforce the view already implied in what has gone before. By virtue of its descent from a patriarchal past, our social system makes it the woman's function in an especial degree to put in evidence her household's ability to pay. According to the modern civilized scheme of life, the good name of the household to which she belongs should be the special care of the woman; and the system of honorific expenditure and conspicuous leisure by which this good name is chiefly sustained is therefore the woman's sphere (Veblen, *The Theory* 120).

Therefore, the more uneconomical, ineffectual and vain women were, the more their husbands, or fathers, gained a valuable reputation.

As a matter of fact, Veblen defines, in severe terms, the woman as being both the "man's chattel" and "the chief menial of the household":

> The high heel, the skirt, the impracticable bonnet, the corset, and the general disregard of the wearer's comfort which is an obvious feature of all civilized women's apparel, are so many items of evidence to the effect that in the modern civilized scheme of life the woman is still, in theory, the economic dependent of the man — that, perhaps in a highly idealized sense, she still is the man's chattel. […]
>
> There is a marked similarity in these respects between the apparel of women and that of domestic servants, especially liveried servants. In both there is a very elaborate show of unnecessary expensiveness, and in both cases there is also a notable disregard of the physical comfort of the wearer. But the attire of the lady goes farther in its elaborate insistence on the idleness, if not on the physical infirmity of the wearer, than does that of the domestic. And this is as it should be; for in theory, according to the ideal scheme of the pecuniary culture, the lady of the house is the chief menial of the household (Veblen, *The Theory* 121,122).

Veblen's judgement is remarked in "The Barbarian Status of Women".

In this article he draws parallels from the condition of women in a primitive world, which did not differ so much from a late nineteenth-century marriage, where the man of the household represented the owner of the woman, his wife:

> All the women in the group will share in the class repression and depreciation that belongs to them as women, but the status of women taken from hostile groups has an additional feature. Such a woman not only belongs to a subservient and low class, but she also stands in a special relation to her captor. She is a trophy of the raid, and therefore an evidence of exploit, and on this ground it is to her captor's interest to maintain a peculiarly obvious relation of mastery toward her. And since, in the early culture, it does not detract from her subservience to the life of the group, this peculiar relation of the captive to her captor will meet but slight, if any, objection from the other members of the group. At the same time, since his peculiar coercive relation to the woman serves to mark her as a trophy of his exploit, he will somewhat jealously resent any similar freedom taken by other men, or any attempt on their part to parade a similar coercive authority over her, and so usurp the laurels of his prowess, very much as a warrior would under like circumstances resent a usurpation or an abuse of the scalps or skulls which he had taken from the enemy (Veblen, "The Barbarian Status" n.pag.).

To demonstrate how much fashion constituted a prolific subject to write about at the time, I will briefly analyse an excerpt from Veblen's "The Economic

theory of Woman's Dress", written in 1894, five years before *The Theory of the Leisure Class.*

In this article, Veblen locates the origins of clothing in the principle of adornment, whose development led it to have the task of rendering "the person pleasing, or of an enviable presence" (Veblen, *The Economic Theory* 199). His theory concerning women's clothes is articulated on three main principles: "expensiveness", according to which the dress had to be expensive in order to demonstrate the possibility of the wearer or, in the case of women, of the household to maintain a high living standard; "novelty", that forced women to follow the canons of continual change, according to which only the leisure class could afford to buy a new dress every season; and "ineptitude", the last principle, in proportion to which the dress served the purpose to prevent the wearer from doing any useful occupation.

Hence, according to Veblen, the governing force behind the fashion industry, was the "conspicuous expensiveness" (Veblen, *The Economic Theory* 202), whose main evidence was the skirt:

> Herein lies the secret of the persistence, in modern dress, of the skirt and of all them cumbrous and otherwise meaningless drapery which the skirt typifies. The skirt persists because it is cumbrous. It hampers the movements of the wearer and disables her, in great measure, for any useful occupation. So it serves as an advertisement (often disingenuous) that the wearer is backed by sufficient means to be able to afford the idleness, or impaired efficiency, which the skirt implies. The like is true of the high heel, and in less degree of several other features of modern dress (Veblen, *The Economic Theory* 203).

Gilman's ideas concerning the androcentric society were mostly associated with Veblen's notion of "conspicuous consumption"[31], meaning the principle

[31] See *The Theory of the Leisure Class, C*hapter Four, where Veblen associated the concept of "conspicuous consumption" with the "conspicuous leisure": "high-bred manners and ways of

of consumption used by the leading social class as a means to establish and exhibit its social status.

What Gilman shared with Veblen was, in particular, the hypothesis that the woman, as 'property' of the middle-class man, displayed a key role in the ritual of the time: that of showing the family's patrimony. The dress, thus, displayed its symbolic function. The opulence and sumptuousness of a woman's clothing came to symbolize the economic condition of the family or of the husband, and the fact that the woman did not need to work confirmed the logics that the man performed the duties of being the only economical support for the family:

> The gradual development of our present economic era, where work and manhood are almost coterminous; and where, as with us, it is a point of masculine pride to maintain women in idleness, or at least in domestic industry without pay, shows us the original characteristics completely changed. The man now, instead of laboriously developing crest and wattle, mane and tail-feathers on himself, or their equivalent in gorgeous raiment, now exhibits them on his woman (Gilman, *The Dress* 55).

According to Gilman, the pleasure in adornment and narcissistic care are male characteristics, and by making parallels with the animal world, she asserts:

> It is pathetically amusing to see the struggle between a man's human common sense, expressed in his opinions about women's clothes, and his masculine instinct, expressed in his actions. His critical human judgement loudly complains of the vanity of women, the extravagance of women, the women's silly submission to fashion, but his male instinct leads him straight to the most vain, extravagant and fashionable of them all.
>
> Women are not fools, nor are they so vain as is supposed. Vanity, from prancing stag to strutting cock is inherently male. Never a female creature do you find that can be called "vain" till you come to woman, and her so-called "feminine vanity" is by no means inherent, but acquired under the pressure of economic necessity (Gilman, *The Dress* 55).

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living are items of conformity to the norm of conspicuous leisure and conspicuous consumption. Conspicuous consumption of valuable goods is a means of reputability to the gentleman of leisure. As wealth accumulates on his hands, his own unaided effort will not avail to sufficiently put his opulence in evidence by this method. The aid of friends and competitors is therefore brought in by resorting to the giving of valuable presents and expensive feasts and entertainments", p. 51,52.

From this point of view, it was not the woman whose behaviour was driven by vanity and desire to appear, but the man's own wish to show off. Thus, a woman's care for outward appearance represented another instance of masculine reflection that came to conceal and betray the real feminine identity:

> The woman's dress, her sex-specialized, highly decorative dress, has been identified with her womanhood, and she is condemned for falling short in this supposedly "womanly" attribute; whereas in fact this extra decorative effort is essentially masculine. Our women, in their "war-paint, beads and feathers," have become so far male; and our men, in their contented serviceable obscurity, have become so far female. […] When women have freed themselves from their false and ignominious position of economic dependence on men, then they can develop in themselves and their clothing, true beauty. They will then recognize that since the human body does not change in its proportions and activities from day to day, neither should its clothing; that if the eye of the observer craves variety, or the mood of the wearer, this may be found legitimately in color and decoration, without the silly variations which make of that noble instrument, the body, a mere dummy, for exhibition purposes. (Gilman, *The Dress* 54, 57).

Emphasizing the professional side of work, the optimisation of resources, the efficiency and the reduction of the waste of materials and energies, Gilman's discourse critically highlights the dangers due to the existing divergence between the modern historical conditions, that required an active participation of women in society, and an outdated ideology, that still imposed a way of clothing that did not meet the demands of a new society.

Gilman's description of women's clothes clearly demonstrates not only their irrationality and lack of functionality, but also the dangers they were likely to provoke for the health and strength of the body:

> Without reference to any specific injury from a given article of woman's dress, it may be clearly shown that her clothing as a whole limits action, and so limits both health and beauty. We, as a race, live at a very low rate of activity, and of that physical beauty proper to our species. This is by no means exclusively due to our clothing, but, as

> distinguished from that of men, the dress of women does materially interfere with their full human development (Gilman, *The Dress* 39).

Modern times required a new way of clothing, especially for women; a more reasonable dress, fitting new needs and new duties, that could differentiate itself from the old one which was meant to emphasize sex-distinction and led women's personality to be unspoken. Gilman was convinced that a sensible dress was still possible. She did not propose a pattern though, precisely because she was confident in independent and autonomous women and in their capacity to decide by themselves as free and self-confident individuals.

The dress, according to Gilman, was supposed to be a natural extension of the body, not an imposition:

> We shall have clean consciences, artistic and economic; healthier and more beautiful bodies, stronger and cleaner minds—all this is our comfort and our hope.
>
> Just what is it that we hope for? Many have asked me: "What do you want us to wear? What costume do you propose?"
>
> Here is seen an instant proof, if more proof were needed, of the effect of long submission. We do not find an eager desire to be free, and to be able, at last, to follow one's own taste and preference. There is no demand at all from personal choice, only the meek turning from one master to another: "What do *you* say we should wear?"
>
> One hears women, feebly remonstrating against "the tyranny of fashion," wish that someone would design "a perfect costume." There is no perfect costume for everyone to wear all the time. Even an individual, unless spending an entire life in doing one kind of work, would not find any costume permanently perfect. No, the hope of the world in this matter of clothing is not in some revelation of A Perfect Dress; it is in the development of a personal taste, an educated taste; and, with it, a strong effective will. Clothes must differ as people differ, else they fail of one great function, that of personal expression (Gilman, *The Dress* 133).

In *The Dress of Women,* Gilman dedicates the whole of chapter six to "The Hat", testifying the extreme importance of that garment in her theories on the unsuitability of women's clothes; in fact, according to her, "in no one article of

dress is the ultra-feminine psychology more apparent than in the hat" (Gilman, *The Dress* 61).

First of all, she marks a definite difference between a man's hat and a woman's hat. Men used hats to establish their economical position, their 'purchaising power'; their hats were supposed to be of good make, with fine material and usually hand-made.

However, from Gilman's point of view, men's hats were far more reasonable than women's hats, and, with her usual ironic humor, she affirms:

> When a woman puts on her husband's silk hat or "derby," soft felt or stiff straw, she may look "mannish," but she does not become a laughing stock. When a man puts on his wife's "Easter bonnet," big hat with flowers and ribbons, or small hat with some out-squirt of stiff or waggling decoration, he looks contemptible or foolish (Gilman, *The Dress* 62, 63).

The reason she gives for that distinction stood primarily in the different ways of wearing a hat: while men used it to cover their head, women wore it as an ostentation of the "eternal feminine" (Gilman, *The Dress* 63), lacking the aspect of "racial dignity" (63) proper of men's hat.

Gilman considered the hat as a means of "applied beauty" (Gilman, *The Dress* 67) that changed continually according to the rules of fashion. Notwithstanding the type of hats in vogue in Victorian society, she confided in future times when that garment would have become more and more sensible, year after year, responding to the practical needs of socially active women.

As a matter of fact, some few years before writing *The Dress of Women,* the practice of wearing useless and unfit hats was so widespread that they are defined as "monstrosities":

> Five years ago it was customary for women to wear hats not only so large in brim circumference as to necessitate tipping the head to get through a car door, but so large in crown circumference as to descend over the eyebrows, and down to the shoulders. These monstrosities were not "worn"; they were simply hung over the bearer as a bucket might be hung over a bedpost. And the peering extinguished ignominious creatures beneath never for one moment realized the piteous absurdity of their appearance (Gilman, *The Dress* 65-66).

To testify her hope for the future she concluded her book with a chapter entitled "Hope and Comfort", where she demonstrated to be confident in a world in which women would have been able and strong enough to oppose themselves to the codes of fashion, choosing the more suitable dress according to their own taste and personality, rather than obeying to what social canons required from them.

According to Gilman, a deep renewal in women's way of clothing would have been a highly meaningful act to achieve freedom, to "lower sex-distinction" (136) and to "heighten race-distinction" (136):

> The results would be these:
>
> The elimination of all injurious articles of clothing, like high heels and corsets, and of all unnecessary and false articles of clothing, such as pads and bustles; also the reduction in volume of the trade in clothing to normal dimensions, thus assuring an immense saving of money, of time, of human labor.
>
> A great increase in physical health and beauty, affecting not only the women but the whole race.
>
> A beautiful development of the real textile art, and of the allied arts of design and construction of clothing.
>
> A new world of loveliness and honor in dress, replacing the present one, in which the costumes of women are so often things to laugh at, to condemn, and to despise (Gilman, *The Dress* 134).

II. 2

Women's clothing in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's fiction.

While in her non-fiction books Gilman critically exposed her theories, in her works of fiction she created worlds in which these theories were applied to everyday life.

First of all, I will analyse four short stories that are useful to exemplify her ideas applied in fiction: "Her Beauty", "The Girl with the Pink Hat", "A Council of War" and "If I Were a Man." In these stories, feminine clothing and the women-lead fashion industry, more in general, represent a chance for women to affirm themselves in society.

Finally, I will take into consideration her utopian novel *Herland,* where Gilman imagined an alternative world inhabited only by women, who reveal themselves to be a symbol of "humanity", in the highest meaning of the term.

II. 2. 1

Women's fashion industry and the symbolism of feminine clothing in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short-stories "Her Beauty", "The Girl with the Pink Hat" and "A Council of War."

"Her Beauty"[32], which appeared for the first time in the February 1913 issue of the *Forerunner*, tells the story of Amaryllis Delong, a "congenitally discontented" young girl longing for beauty:

[32] For "Her Beauty" I will quote from Shulman's edition, *The Yellow Wall-Paper and Other Stories.*

> She was 'congenitally discontented' her school teacher said […] She was 'rebellious against Providence' her minister said. She was 'a hard child to bring up' her mother said. She was the most miserable girl alive, she said of herself, lowering into her little glass, which lowered back at her.
>
> It was no use. She had tried every arrangement of that mirror, every angle, every sort of light, from the pink dawn to the pale moon radiance, with two candles and a kerosene lamp as a special experiment. She had arranged her hair in every way she knew how; she had tried every costume and combination of costumes she possessed, and as much lack of costume as her conscience permitted—and it was no use. Never once could bring into that mirror the thing she longed for—beauty. (Gilman, "Her Beauty" 210).

Notwithstanding her lack of self-confidence, Amaryllis had attracted the attention of Weldon Thomas, "the only time of soul-stirring happiness she had ever known" (210). They had their first date out together on a summer evening, during which she felt 'protected' and self-confident under her "wide hat" (Gilman, "Her Beauty" 211).

The "wide" hat, thus, represents a device for the protagonist to stand in the background, thanks to its comforting shadow. In this story, the characteristic the hat has of protecting and hiding someone's personality, is due to the protagonist's lack of self-confidence, but, in another interesting story, "The Girl in the Pink Hat"[33], the hat functions as a real mask to conceal the protagonist's identity in order to get away from the man that would have been her future husband.

This story, which appeared in the February 1916 issue of the *Forerunner*, presents a "pretty, eager-looking girl in a soft pink hat" (Gilman, "The Girl" 40), who was travelling on a train with a man that, we later understand, was supposed to become her future husband, but turning out to be a liar. An elderly woman, a common figure in Gilman's fiction whose providential help is often

[33] For "The Girl in the Pink Hat", I will quote from Lane, *The Charlotte Perkins Gilman Reader: The Yellow Wallpaper & Other Fiction.*

fundamental in solving young girls' problems, was travelling with her sister Polly, described with "a squushy hat dropping over the whole" (Gilman, "The Girl" 39), accidentally overheard a conversation between the girl and the man. Thinking the man to be a villain, she decided to help the girl to escape from him. She eventually managed to communicate with the girl, far from the man's sight, and took her in the stateroom where she and her sister stayed, suggesting the girl to take her hat off and hide it under her dress. Furthermore, to make disguise come into effect, she persuaded the girl to wear her sister's clothes. The man, in the meantime, having realised that the girl had disappeared, wandered across the train looking for 'a girl in a pink hat'.

However, it was impossible for him to find her, because, as the elderly woman lets the reader know:

> […] as naturally, he would not know my sister, or what certainly appeared to be my sister, wearing that long red switch of which my sister was so proud, her squushy hat, her long duster, her yellow glasses, and her veil. She sat reading as before, and when our friend came through the train again, this time accompanied by the conductor, she barely looked up from her page (Gilman, "The Girl" 45).

Therefore, in these two stories, the hat is a means through which the protagonists protect themselves, but in two different ways: while Amaryllis uses a wide hat to conceal her true identity because of her sense of uneasiness, the use of the hat in "The Girl in the Pink Hat" is pushed to extremes; so much so that it becomes a means to disguise the girl's real identity in order to avoid a potential danger.

Turning back to the "Her Beauty", Amaryllis and Weldon had a pleasing conversation during their first meeting on that summer evening, and she was

happy, also thanks to the "close-blinded parlor" (Gilman, "Her Beauty" 211) and the "shaded lamp" (211) which helped her to feel at ease.

But then, came the moment in which Amaryllis should have ceased to conceal herself in the shadow and show her real self in the daylight: Weldon asked her to a picnic. There, she met "not only the full daylight, but competition" (211), since she was surrounded by girls that were "round and rosy, soft, alluring and dressed with prompt submission to the prevailing style" (211).

After that meeting, Weldon and Amaryllis never met each other again but we, as readers, are not given an explanation; the author, only lets us know that Weldon married a beautiful woman, Myra Hall, of whom Gilman gives an illuminating description:

> Myra was undeniably handsome. No one denied it, least of all beauty-worshipping Amaryllis. Myra was smooth and plump; Myra had bright hair that fluffed and curled and blew about her face bewitchingly; Myra had white, regular, shiny teeth, and a round little chin, dimpled hands, small feet in smaller shoes whose high heels captivated the eye (Gilman, "Her Beauty" 211).

The repetition of the name here, functions like a stressed comparison between what Myra was and what Amaryllis would have liked to be: highly feminine.

Amaryllis was decided to find her way in search of beauty; she took a summer course in dressmaking and helped girls with their wardrobes and, after college, she took a position in a good dressmaking establishment and gained experience. After ten long years, in which she established her dressmaking business, gaining success and economic independence, very interestingly the community would point at her as an "old maid" (Gilman, "Her Beauty" 212) who had found her way, not only in beauty but also in the business world:

> The dressmaking business, rightly handled, is a gold mine. With garments well made and effective, with a ten per cent. discount for cash and prepayment for all materials required, she had lost no sleep nor cash income from unpaid bills, and her bank account had grown with reputation (Gilman, "Her Beauty" 212, 213).

She was so highly self-confident then, that she decided to leave for Paris:

> Her trained eye, her business experience, enabled her to send to the home shop its share of Parisian novelties and triumphs […] From year to year her business steadied and grew, not a great business, but a well-established one, with its full time, its regular patrons, and its waiting list of transient customers. She was able to travel, to study to her heart's content, to meet people to hear lectures, to read books, to see pictures to attend plays, to feed her soul with knowledge, and to enjoy as far as it exists in the modern world, the beauty she desired (Gilman, "Her Beauty" 213).

The reader assists at a transformation of the protagonist thanks to the business world she had benefited from.

Amaryllis' job had enabled her to travel, to be economically independent, to live a rich life, as a man could do, not confined to domestic duties. Therefore, she is a proper example of the new type of woman Gilman hoped for, beside being quite an autobiographical character, not so much in her working activity, but in her independent attitude towards life.

Another important aspect, is the physical description of Myra Hall, whom Amaryllis met again in one of her voyages, and who represented the perfect example of the common shared sense of feminine beauty.

The first meeting between Amaryllis and Myra had highlighted their difference in favour of Myra, the "real" woman. This time, instead, we assist at a reversal of role:

> A woman's face it was, large, over-blown, like a La France rose a day too old; a woman's form, strenuously conventionalised by the last violence of corsets. It was Myra Hall […]

> She smiled archly. The round little chin was rounder, larger, manifold; it was, in fact, two chins, and might have been more but the for the uncompromising pressure of an ear-lifting lace stock, with 'stiffeners' full four inches long. The small white teeth were much the worse for wear. Her hands were dimpled still conspicuously so, as the soft tissues expanded; her small feet not so small (Gilman, "Her Beauty" 213, 214).

Myra's beauty had vanished, but what is worth noting is the importance feet assume. As a matter of fact, as Myra told Amaryllis, she had a "bad case of dropped arch" (Gilman, "Her Beauty" 214) and she exhibited a pair of those "fearsome shoes with which modern science seeks to improve on nature and force reluctant toes to curve and straddle as the never intended" (214).

Myra's beautiful "small feet in smaller shoes that captivated the eye" (Gilman, "Her Beauty" 211), no longer existed. In fact, with Gilman's emphasis on physical strength and health, high heels, which were one of the main symbols of femininity, compelled Myra to wear those "fearful shoes" (214).

A further important change to notice in Myra's description is her hair:

> The bright flying hair was mostly gone, but in its place come seven other devils worse than the first; a swelling mattress effect, puffs suggestive of upholstery—abundance certainly, but never again the golden shine. (Gilman, "Her Beauty" 214).

Therefore, it is clear how a standardized beauty as that of Myra, but more in general the canons of feminine beauty of the time, vanished with age and, above all, with the physical problems connected to the social imposition to wear unreasonable garments as exposed in the *The Dress of Women.*

Natural beauty instead, is represented by Amaryllis, a self-sufficient, intelligent and capable woman, whose path to conquer beauty had come thanks to a socially active, busy and rich life, such life as every woman should have.

During a meeting with Weldon Thomas after many years, he turned to her "with a start of pleased surprise" (216):

> Her kind, clear-cut face glowed with hospitable warmth, perhaps with something more. She reached white hands to him, delicate but strong. Her soft robe swept down from the straight shoulders full of a gentle womanly grace and a discerning color sense; it suited not only her, but the room. She spoke harmony in every tint and line, in the grace of her movements, the stately repose of her quiet beauty, the well-modulated tones of her voice (Gilman, "Her Beauty" 216).

The issue of women-lead business in dress commerce is also the subject of another short story entitled "A Council of War"[34], a story which appeared in the August 1913 issue of the *Forerunner.*

This story is played on the "satiric role of the necktie, that emblem of male confinement, as part of the female-run industry" (Shulman, xxix).

In "A Council of War", Gilman, as she had done in "Her Beauty", turns fashion industry to her own uses, enabling her female characters "to establish a free and conscious womanhood for the right service of the world." ("A Council of War" 237).

The description of the necktie trade, which the group of women wanted to establish, is proficiently built like a syllogism and it is just an instance of the innate intelligence and capability all women should have been allowed to develop:

> 'Now, for instance-' Miss Waltress turned over a few notes she held in a neat package- 'here is- let us say- the necktie trade. Now neckties are not laborious to make- as a matter of fact women do make them to-day. Neckties are not difficult to sell. As a matter of fact women frequently sell them. Silk itself was first made use of by a woman, and the whole silk industry might be largely in their hands. Designing, spinning, weaving, dyeing, we might do it all. But in the mere matters of making and selling the

[34] For "A Council of War", I will quote from Robert Shulman, *The Yellow Wall-Paper and Other Stories*.

present day necktie of mankind, there is absolutely nothing to prevent our stretching out a slow soft hand, and gathering the business. We might begin in the usual spectacular "feminine" way. A dainty shop in a good street, some fine girls, level-headed ones, who are working for the cause, to sell neckties, or- here is an advertising suggestion- we might call it "The Widows' Shop" and employ only widows. There are always enough of poor things needing employment.

'Anyhow we establish a trade in neckties, fine neckties, good taste, excellent materials, reliable workmanship. When it is sufficiently prosperous, it branches- both in town and in the provinces- little by little we could build up such a reputation that "Widow Shop Neckties" would have a definite market value the world over. Meanwhile we could have our own workrooms, regular show places- patrons could see the neckties made, short hours, good wages, low prices (Gilman, "A Council of War" 241).

II. 2. 2

A woman in a man's shoes: "If I Were a Man".

"If I Were a Man"[35], which was published in the July 1914 issue of *Physical Culture*, is another important story from the point of view of dress description, but, above all, it is worth noting the way in which women are seen through a man's perspective.

Molly Mathewson, Gerald's wife, had always desired to be a man, to experience what it felt like to be a man. She was, however, in Gilman's words, a beautiful instance of what was reverentially called "a true woman":

> Little, of course- no true woman may be big. Pretty, of course- no true woman could possibly be plain. Whimsical, capricious, charming, changeable, devoted to pretty clothes and always ' wearing them well,' as the esoteric phrase has it. (This does not refer to the clothes- they do not wear well in the least; but to some special grace of putting them on and carrying them about, granted to but few, it appears.)

[35] For "If I Were a Man" I will quote from Robert Shulman, *The Yellow Wall-Paper and Other Stories*.

> She was also a loving wife and a devoted mother; possessed of 'the social gift' and the love of 'society' that goes with it, and, with all these was fond and proud of her home and managed it as capably as- well, as most women do.
> If ever there was a true woman it was Molly Mathewson, yet she was wishing heart and soul she was a man.
> And all of a sudden she was! (Gilman, "If I Were a Man" 262).

Molly, in her husband's shoes experienced sensations she would never have been able to think of. With her husband's trousers she had "free legs" (Gilman, "If I Were a Man" 263) and sensed, for the first time, the "delightful feeling of being *the right size"* (263).

But the most striking element for her was that of possessing pockets: a true "revelation" (263). In fact she never had "dreamed of how it *felt* to have pockets" (263). Thus, pockets were not only a facility element, but they assumed a deeper value: they became the symbol of her economic independence, since "all at once, with a deep rushing sense of power and pride, she felt what she had never felt before in her life—the possession of money, of her own earned money" (263).

The feet, as we have seen before, are a key element in the difference between men and women. Man's footwear, on the contrary of women's shoes, allowed them to have a real freedom of movement, which Molly had the opportunity to experience:

> Everything fitted now. […] her feet comfortably on the floor. Her feet?…His feet! She studied them carefully. Never before, since her school days, had she felt such freedom and comfort as to feet- they were firm and solid on the ground when she walked; quick, springy, safe- as when, moved by an unrecognizable impulse, she had run after, caught and swung aboard the car (Gilman, "If I Were a Man" 263).

Having experienced all those new sensations, she begun to speak and behave like a man; consequently, she commented on women, on how they dressed, on how they behaved, on how they spoke.

Particularly harsh on hats and trimmings, she spoke through a man's eyes:

> 'Women have no business sense!' she found herself saying, 'and all that money just for hats- idiotic, useless, ugly things!'
>
> With that she began to see hat of women in the car as she had never seen hats before. The men's seemed normal, dignified, becoming with enough variety for personal taste, and with distinction in style and in age, such as she had never noticed before. But the women's—
>
> With the eyes of a man and the brain of a man; with the memory of a whole lifetime of free action wherein the hat, close-fitting on cropped hair, had been no handicap; she now perceived the hats of women.
>
> Their massed fluffed hair was at once attractive and foolish, and on that hair, at every angle, in all colors, tipped, twisted, tortured into every crooked shape, made of any substance chance might offer, perched these formless objects. Then, on their formless trimmings- these squirts of stiff feathers, these violent outstanding bows of glistening ribbon, these swaying, projecting masses of plumage which tormented the faces of the bystanders.
>
> Never in all her life had she imagined that this idolized millinery could look, to those who paid for it, like the decorations of an insane monkey (Gilman, "If I Were a Man" 264).

The image of women locked into their clothes as a consequence of what a man-lead fashion industry imposed on them was a fundamental aspect of Gilman's severe criticism towards the society in which she lived in.

Through her short-stories she tried to envision a new type of society in which women could actively participate in, giving their contribution in a wide range of activities as exemplified by the protagonists of "Her Beauty" and of "A Council of War." But it is also important to note the slyness and promptness personified by the elderly woman in "The Girl with the Pink Hat", who, by means of a hat, helped the young girl to disguise her real identity in a

dangerous situation. Through “If I Were a Man” instead, Gilman points out the absurdity of women’s clothes, which lacked of functionality and were uselessly decorated, to the extent of being absurd.

The impulse of rebellion that the reader perceives through the protagonist’s words was intentionally and strongly advocated by the author. Furthermore, according to Gilman, only through rebellion could women have been able to achieve a high degree of self-consciousness and to conquer freedom.

Still, to men’s eyes, that rebellion attempt transformed women’s femininity into a masculine attitude. In Gilman’s opinion, men should have been able to accept and recognize what it really meant to be feminine. Femininity did not mean wearing “the decoration of an insane monkey” or “idiotic” hats, but being physically strong and healthy, and wearing sensible and comfortable clothes.

Notwithstanding her ironical and satirical way of treating the subject, she affronted questions that went beyond the mere portrait of women’s clothing in her time. What she declared, through the dress, was women’s necessity to impose their freedom and independence in a developed civilization, and, through her stories she often tried to give women the chance to affirm themselves as individuals.

If her stories are to be taken as an exhortation for women to stand up for their rights, then we can find also several invitation for men to carefully reflect on their role.

The last lines of “If I Were a Man” perfectly exemplify this concept:

> ‘It’s time we woke up,’ pursued Gerald, still inwardly urged to unfamiliar speech. ‘Women are pretty much *people,* seems to me. I know they dress like fools- but who’s to blame for that? We invent all those idiotic hats of theirs, and design their crazy

> fashions, and what's more, if a woman is courageous enough to wear common sense clothes- and shoes- which of us wants to dance with her?
>
> 'Yes, we blame them for grafting on us, but we are willing to let our wives work? We are not. It hurts our pride, that's all. We are always criticizing them for making mercenary marriages, but what do we call a girl who marries a chump with no money? Just a poor fool, that's all. And they know it (Gilman, "If I Were a Man" 268).

II. 2. 3

Herland: The right and reasonable dress for a true womanhood.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's concern with reasonable clothes was deeply developed also in her most famous utopian novel *Herland*[36], where Gilman imagined a world populated only by women whose highest value was motherhood.

The world described in *Herland* represents an extremely evolved society where differences of gender no longer exist, leaving plenty of space for women to affirm themselves as individuals, since they are the only human beings living there. Every single activity is the result of a close cooperation between the inhabitants, who never enter into competition, but on the contrary, rely on friendship and peace to constantly improve their society.

Evolution is the core concept of *Herland* and, consequently, motherhood is its higher expression. As Vittoria Franco noted, this utopian novel can be considered a mythological tale of the origins of the feminine society.[37]

Through this novel, the reader assists to a reversal of roles within society. As a matter of fact, women hold the power to govern themselves and their own

[36] I will quote from *Herland,* edited by Denise D. Knight.

[37] On the mythological aspects in *Herland,* see Vittoria Franco, Preface to *La Terra delle Donne*, edited by Anna Scacchi: "Con la sua costruzione utopica Charlotte crea a suo modo un *mito* dell'origine della società femminile", p. xiii.

world. Gilman, thus, opposed the 'women-made world' to the 'man-made world' she strongly criticized. It can be said that *Herland* is her own answer to the 'Androcentric' society which confined women to the realm of the home. To testify women's achievement of power, they are completely self-sufficient, to the extent that they give birth by parthenogenesis.[38] Since birth is a natural gift, education is another fundamental value to preserve their society and, mainly, their race: womanhood.

Women's high-mindedness immediately emerged when three men managed to reach Herland, thanks to an expedition. These women, eager to know something about the world outside, warmly welcomed the explorers Van, Terry and Jeff. Since the first pages of the novel, clothes represent a key theme. They symbolize a civilized world, as Van, the narrator, acknowledges:

> We scrambled along the steep banks and got close to the pool that foamed and boiled beneath the falling water. Here we searched the boarder and found traces of color beyond dispute. More—Jeff suddenly held up an unlooked-for trophy.
> It was only a rag, a long, raveled fragment of cloth. But it was well-woven fabric, with a pattern, and of a clear scarlet that the water had not faded. No savage tribes that we had heard of made such fabrics (Gilman, *Herland* 5,6).

Men realized that they were confronting no savage tribes but a high-civilized society, though this community seemed to be deeply different from their own. They could not accept the idea that women could have wisely developed such abilities and they limited themselves to consider women's activity of clothes-making simply a feminine duty:

> "No sir—they'll scrap," agreed Terry. "Also we mustn't look for inventions and progress; it'll be awfully primitive."
> "How about that cloth mill?" Jeff suggested.

[38] See Anna Scacchi'essay in *La Terra delle Donne,* pp. xxv, xxvi.

> "Oh, cloth! Women have always been spinsters. But there they stop—you'll see" (Gilman, *Herland* 10).

As a matter of fact, at first, they were reluctant to attribute women that "practical intelligence, coupled with fine artistic feeling" (Gilman, *Herland* 78) of which these women give evidence.

Since in the community of *Herland* clothes do not visibly represent sexual identity, clothing does not function as a means to identify gender.[39]

From men's point of view, these women could not be considered feminine just because they lacked the typical signs of feminine beauty which pertained to Victorian women. On the contrary, the women of *Herland* attributed a different meaning to clothes: being practical. Functionality and comfort were the main characteristics of their clothes; however, to the explorers' eyes, this absence of ornaments led these girls resemble to boys:

> They were girls, of course, no boys could ever have shown that sparkling beauty, and yet none of us was certain at first.
>
> We saw short hair, hatless, loose, and shining; a suit of some light firm stuff, the closest of tunics and kneebreeches, met by trim gaiters. As bright and smooth as parrots and as unaware of danger, they swung there before us, wholly at ease, staring as we stared, till first one, and then all of them burst into peals of delighted laughter.
>
> Then there was a torrent of soft talk tossed back and forth; no savage sing-song, but clear musical fluent speech.
>
> We met their laughter cordially, and doffed our hats to them, at which laughed again, delightedly (Gilman, *Herland* 17).

After the first meeting, the three explorers were captured by the women of Herland. But these women had the only intention to investigate and learn how people lived outside *Herland.*

[39] This concept is deeply analysed in Anna Scacchi "L'abito a Utopia: Il sogno di Charlotte Perkins Gilman", p. 94.

Being part of that community signified a change of clothes as well, so that men received new clothes to wear, obviously very different from theirs. The change of clothing is a fundamental passage, since it symbolizes the invitation, for men, to free themselves from the old habits and to embrace a new way to life, namely to merge identity with outer appearance[40]:

> The most prominent sensation was of absolute physical comfort.
> I was lying in a perfect bed: long, broad, smooth; firmly soft and level; with the finest linen, some warm light quilt of blanket, and a counterpane that was a joy to the eye […] Terry swung his legs out of the bed, stood up, stretched himself mightily. He was in a long nightrobe, a sort of seamless garment, undoubtedly comfortable—we all found ourselves so covered. Shoes were beside each bed, also quite comfortable and goodlooking though by no means our own (Gilman, *Herland* 27,28).

The stress is on comfort and simplicity, though the difference between Herland and the outside world is always in the foreground. As a matter of fact, the explorers finally appreciated that way of clothing, but, at the same time, they felt like "supes in the theatre":

> The garments were simple in the extreme, and absolutely comfortable, physically, though of course we all felt like supes in the theatre. There was a one-piece cotton undergarment, thin and soft, that reached over the knees and shoulders, something like the one-piece pajamas some fellows wear, and a kind of half-hose, that came up to just under the knee and stayed there—had elastic tops of their own, and covered the edges of the first.
> Then there was a thicker variety of union suit, a lot of them in the closet, of varying weight and somewhat a sturdier material—evidently they would do at a pinch with nothing further. Then there were tunics, knee-length, and some long robes. Needles to say, we took tunics.
> We bathed and dressed quite cheerfully.
> "Not half bad," said Terry, surveying himself in a long mirror. His hair was somewhat longer than when we left the last barber, and the hats provided were much like those seen on the prince in the fairy tale, lacking the plume.

[40] Anna Scacchi defined this change of costume precisely as "ritual," p. 106.

> The costume was similar to what which we had seen on all the women, though some of them , those working in the fields, glimpsed by our glasses when we first flew over, wore only the first two.
>
> I settled my shoulders and stretched my arms, remarking: "They have worked out a mighty sensible dress, I'll say that for them." With which we all agreed (Gilman, *Herland* 29).

Clothes symbolize the marked sign of the profound difference between the old world and the new world, where even male clothing seemed to assume feminine characteristic in front of those women, so sensibly dressed.

The description of Terry clearly exemplifies this concept. Being a proud upholder of the Victorian canons of feminine beauty, he embodies all the characteristics of the typical Victorian man:

> I remember the first time—and how careful we were about our clothes, and our amateur barbering. Terry, in particular, was fussy to a degree about the cut of his beard, and so critical of our combined efforts, that we handed him the shears and told him to please himself. We began to rather prize those beards of our; they were almost our sole distinction among those tall and sturdy women, with their cropped hair and sexless costume. Being offered a wide selection of garments, we had chosen according to our personal taste, and were surprised to find, on meeting large audiences, that we were the most highly decorated, especially Terry.
>
> He was a very impressive figure, his strong features softened by the somewhat longer hair—though he made me trim it as closely as I knew how; and he wore his richly embroidered tunic with its broad, loose girdle with quite a Henry V air. Jeff looked more like—well, like a Huguenot Lover; and I don't know what I looked like, only that I felt very comfortable. When I got back to our padded armor and its starched borders I realized with acute regret how comfortable were those Herland clothes (Gilman, *Herland* 90).

As the narrator remarks, these women had invented a "sensible dress" (29) and he admits that it was much more "better-looking" (35) than their usual one. Simplicity and fine materials not only permitted clothes to fulfill their primary

function of physical protection, but also left the body free to move without being a useless burden.

Another interesting aspect to point out is the question of hats. As we have seen, hats were indispensable for Victorian women and they did not perform a practical function but merely a symbolical one. In the world of Herland instead, hats were used only as a proper head covering; decorations and ornaments were not contemplated:

> Terry asked them if they used feathers for their hats, and they seemed amused at the idea. He made a few sketches of our women's hat, with plumes and quills and those various tickling things that stick out so far; and they were eagerly interested, as at everything about our women.
>
> As for them, they said they only wore hats for shade when working in the sun; and those were big light straw hats, something like those used in China and Japan. In cold weather they wore caps or hoods.
>
> "But for decorative purposes—don't you think they would be becoming?" pursued Terry, making as pretty a picture as he could of a lady with a plumed hat.
>
> They by no means agreed to that, asking quite simply if the men wore the same kind. We hastened to assure her that they did no—drew for them our kind of headgear.
>
> "And do men wear feathers in their hats?"
>
> "Only Indians," Jeff explained. "Savages, you know." And he sketched a war bonnet to show them.
>
> "And soldiers," I added, drawing a military hat with plumes.
>
> They never expressed horror or disapproval, nor indeed much surprise—just a keen interest. And the notes they made!--miles of them! (Gilman, *Herland* 53,54).

A striking evidence of the "practical intelligence" in clothes-making were pockets. As we have seen in the short-story "If I Were a Man", this element was merely men's prerogative.

The clothes of *Herland,* on the contrary, had plenty of pockets, though, not connected with the idea of possessing money, they represented a true instance of highly skilled women:

> We had become well used to the clothes. They were quite as comfortable as our own—in some ways more so—and undeniably better looking. As to pockets they left nothing to be desired. That second garment was fairly quilted with pockets. They were most ingeniously arranged, so as to be convenient to the hand and not inconvenient to the body, and we were so placed as at once to strengthen the garment and add decorative lines of stitching.
>
> In this, as in so many other points we had now to observe, there was shown the action of a practical intelligence, coupled with fine artistic feeling, and, apparently, untrammelled by any injurious influences (Gilman, *Herland* 78,79).

Without men, women are not 'feminine', in the way the word was used in Victorian society, but they are human beings, left free to develop their human side, which in an 'androcentric' culture could not emerge since women, being "oversexed"[41] creatures, were supposed to show only their feminine side.

As Anna Scacchi pointed out, the connection between clothes, gender and identity was problematic in Gilman's ideas. Women's femininity, which did not correspond to their real identity, represented a mask women had to wear to survive in a man-made society, since women had to dress up as female to draw the attention of men, according to a mechanism produced for men by men themselves, a "reflected masculinity" (63).

At the same time, as it is demonstrated by the women living in *Herland*, there was a deep sense of identity in women which had nothing to do with the male representation of femininity; this identity was deeply linked to motherhood, meaning constant evolution, progress and change[42]:

> These women, whose essential distinction of motherhood was the dominant note of their whole culture, were strikingly deficient in what we call "femininity." This led me very promptly to the conviction that those "feminine charms" we are so fond of are not feminine at all, but mere reflected masculinity—developed to please us because they

[41] See Vittoria Franco, "Una donna alla ricerca della libertà" in *La Terra delle Donne*, p. xiii.
[42] See Anna Scacchi, "L'Abito a Utopia: Il sogno di Charlotte Perkins Gilman", p. 105.

> had to please us, and in no way essential to the real fulfilment [sic] of their great process (Gilman, *Herland* 63).

Clothing, consequently, became a means to support the process of evolution, or even, clothes should not prevent women from bringing to an end their process of liberation from the 'androcentric' world. What Gilman hoped for, is clearly explained from the narrator's point of view, a man, who had finally understood how much society could have benefited from the potential development of a new type of woman:

> I found, after my ideas of what was essential had changed, that my feelings changed also. And more than all I found this—a factor of enormous weight—these women were not provocative. That made an immense difference.
>
> The thing that Terry had so complained of when we first came—that they weren't "feminine," they lacked "charm," now became a great comfort. Their vigorous beauty was an aesthetic pleasure, not an irritant. Their dress and ornaments had not a touch of the "come-and-find-me" element. […] They were women, PLUS, and so much plus that when they did not choose to let the womannes appear, you could not find it anywhere (Gilman, *Herland* 135).

CHAPTER THREE

III. 1

Charlotte Perkins Gilman: Critical Reception

In approaching the analysis of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's critical reception, a distinction has to be made. It is necessary to distinguish between the criticism her work received in the United States and abroad. In this section, I will take into consideration, first of all, the critical reception in the United States, and, secondarily, I will examine the critical reception of her writings in Italy.

For what concerns the criticism in the United States I based my analysis on a bibliographical research I made using the OCLC WorldCat and on the critical studies I have consulted, particularly the work of Aileen Kraditor, Ann J. Lane and Robert Shulman, who respectively represent the three main critical currents concerning the critical reception of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's writings; that is to say, the feminist critical interpretation of Gilman's writings during the Sixties and the Seventies, the critical biographies, and the collections of her works.

Finally, I will consider the Italian translations of Gilman's writings as a distinctive and clear example of her impact in Italy, relying on my research on the Italian National Collective Catalogue, the ICCU/SBN and on two significant essays written by Vittoria Franco and Anna Scacchi. According to my study on the bibliographical catalogues, I will point out the enormous gap

between Italian criticism and American criticism, relying on the three critical currents I have previously exposed.

III. 1. 1

Criticism in United States

During her whole life, Charlotte Perkins Gilman's written output was prodigious, especially in the years between 1898 and 1923, when she published her most important books of fiction and non-fiction, apart from her most famous short-story "The Yellow Wall-Paper" which was written in 1890 and published in 1892.

Starting from the year 1898 Gilman wrote and published *Women and Economics* which is considered her non-fiction masterpiece.[43] After this work, *Concerning Children* was published, by Small, Maynard & Co. in 1900 and it was reprinted by the same editor in 1901.

At the time of its publication, the critical reception of *Concerning Children* was not so wide as that of *Women and Economics*, but, however, it received positive comments on the *Ladies' Home Journal,* the *Dial,* the *New York Times Saturday Review of Books*, and others.[44]

In 1903, McClure, Phillips & Co. published the first edition of *The Home: Its Work and Influence*. This work as well received positive criticism, as it developed the theme of the home, already examined in *Women and Economics*.

[43] The critical reception of *Women and Economics* will be discussed in the following pages.
[44] See Lane, *To Herland* p. 263.

Gilman's last two non-fiction books that received positive criticism were *The Man-Made World; or, Our Androcentric Culture* and *His Religion and Hers: A Study of the Faith of Our Fathers and the Work of Our Mothers.*

The Man-Made World was originally written in 1909 and serialized in the *Forerunner;* it was published in book form in 1911 by the Charlton Co.

His Religion and Hers was published in 1923 by the Century Company (New York); it was then reprinted in London in 1924.

Moving the Mountain, *Herland* and *With Her in Ourland* constitute Gilman's utopian trilogy. The first volume was published in book form in 1911, *Herland* was serialized in the *Forerunner* in 1915 and it was published in book form only in 1979, and *With Her in Ourland* was published in 1916.

In 1935, few month after Gilman's death, her autobiography *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman: An Autobiography* was published with a foreword by Zona Gale.

Notwithstanding the positive criticism of Gilman's writings I pointed out so far, it is to be noted that her contemporary critical reception was rather controversial, above all due to her strong personality and to the 'new' type of woman she represented. Being a woman ahead of her time and expressing progressive ideas, Gilman met positive and negative criticism at the same time.

"The Yellow Wall-Paper,"[45] which is nowadays her most famous short-story and commonly recognized as a work of extreme value, is the best example of the controversial criticism her work received at the time of its publication. This story, written in 1890, appeared for the first time "in the *New England Magazine* in 1892, a little later in booklet form in1899" (Shulman vii) and

[45] For the spelling of "Wall-Paper"/"Wallpaper" see Shulman, Introduction p. xviii.

again "in William Dean Howells's *The Great Modern American Stories* in 1920" (Shulman vii). Yet, it has not been easy for Gilman to make it publish the first time. In fact, as she wrote in her autobiography, she had sent the story to William Dean Howells and he tried to publish it on the *Atlantic Monthly,* but the editor, Horace E. Scudder, refused to print it and wrote to her:

> "Dear Madame,
> Mr. Howells has handed me the story.
> I could not forgive myself if I made others as miserable as I have made myself!
> Sincerely Yours,
> H. E. Scudder." (Gilman, *The Living* 119).

Notwithstanding Scudder's disapproval, Gilman succeeded in publishing it and since its first appearance on the *New England Magazine* it has always been considered a fundamental work in Gilman's literature.

Consulting the bibliographic catalogue it is possible to note that for more than thirty years after her death, her books were never reprinted, except for "The Yellow Wall-Paper" which was included in a collection of horror stories, entitled *The Midnight Reader: Great Stories of Haunting and Horror* edited by Philip Van Doren Stern in 1942 and reprinted in two other editions in 1949 and 1962[46].

During the Sixties, after this long period of neglect, the critical attention concerning Gilman strongly emerged on the verge of feminists movements.

In 1962 Aileen S. Kraditor, who attended the Columbia University, wrote her thesis *The Ideas of the Woman Suffrage Movement, 1890-1920,* which was edited in book form in 1965. As the title suggests, Kraditor examined the main

[46] See OCLC WorldCat.

currents of thought within the "Woman Suffrage Movement" and Gilman was included, even though, as I pointed out in the first chapter, Kraditor acknowledged the enormous difference between Gilman and suffragists on certain questions, mainly the economic question. Kraditor focused her attention on the critical reception of *Women and Economics* and she noted that its critical impact was enormous. At Vassar College, for instance, according to Harriot Stanton Blatch it was "the Bible of the student body" (qtd. in Kraditor 97) and in *The American Philosophy of Equality,* T. V. Smith defined it "not only one of the great classics on woman's rights [sic] but a rich mine of insight on social relations in general" (qtd. in Kraditor 97). After its initial impact, however, its importance began to decline:

> But recognition of the importance of her ideas, especially those in Women and Economics, her best-known book, did not last beyond the first two decades of this century. This book did not have the kind of long term impact on the world of ideas it deserves. Part of the explanation lies with the beginning of a retreat into conservatism in America in the period following World War I, when ideas about socialism and radical change of any kind were no longer tolerated as they had been earlier.
>
> But even when Women and Economics was at the height of its influence, there was no serious effort within any part of the intellectual world, in the universities or in the radical communities, to grapple with the kinds of issues Gilman addressed. Gender was too new a category (Lane, *To Herland* 253).

In 1966, when Carl Degler wrote the introduction to a new edition of *Women and Economics,* criticism considerably changed in a positive way and several edition continued to be printed after 1966.

Proceeding in my research on the bibliographic catalogue, I noticed that between 1967 and 1979, the critical attention concerning Gilman's writings reached its highest point. In effect, examining this time span, I recorded more than twenty-five reprints of Gilman's works, that, compared with the reprints I

recorded between the year of her death and the early-Sixties is a considerable number.

During these years it is possible to recall a reprint of the *Forerunner* by the Greenwood Reprint Corporation in 1968 which is linked to key words such as 'feminist' and 'women's question'.

Furthermore, there are three publishing houses in particular, which dedicated at least two editions to Gilman's books. The first is the Source Book Press, which reprinted both *Women and Economics* and *The Man-Made World* in the same year, 1970. The Arno Press as well, published a reprint of *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman: An Autobiography,* in 1972 as part of a series with the title *American Women: Images and Realities*. In 1974, the same publishing house reprinted the 1899 edition of *In This Our World,* a collection of poems. Finally it is important to cite The Feminist Press that, from 1973 reprinted three editions of "The Yellow Wall-Paper", relying on the version that appeared in 1899 published by Small, Maynard & Co.

It is important to notice how the common ground for these editions stands in the feminist reinterpretation of Gilman's ideas. One example is "The Yellow Wall-Paper," which, in the edition of the Feminist Press is inserted in the genre of feminine and psychological fiction, while, as I previously pointed out, in 1942 it was collected in the volume of haunting and horror stories edited by Philip Van Doren Stern.

As a matter of fact, in the Afterword by Elaine R. Hedges to the 1973 edition of the short-story we read:

> "The Yellow Wallpaper" is a small literary masterpiece. For almost fifty years it has been overlooked, as has its author, one of the most commanding feminists of her time. Now, with the new growth of the feminist movement, Charlotte Perkins Gilman is being

> rediscovered, and "The Yellow Wallpaper" should share in that rediscovery.[…] The recent acquisition of her personal papers by the Schlesinger Library of Radcliffe College is bound to lead to further research and publication. Even "The Yellow Wallpaper" has resurfaced in several anthologies. However, tucked away among many other selections and frequently with only brief biographical information about its author, the story will not necessarily find in these anthologies the wide audience it deserves.
>
> Yet it does deserve the widest possible audience. For aside from the light it throws on the personal despairs, and the artistic triumph over them, of one of America's foremost feminists, the story is one of the rare pieces of literature we have by a nineteenth-century woman which directly confronts the sexual politics of the male-female, husband-wife relationship. […] It is a feminist document, dealing with sexual politics at a time when few writers felt free to do so, at least so candidly.[47]

Not only so, Gilman was also included in the book of Wendy Martin *The American Sisterhood: Writings of the Feminist Movement from Colonial Times to the Present.* This work, published in 1972, collects writings of Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Jane Addams, Susan B. Anthony, Lucretia Mott and Amelia Bloomer among others, and Gilman's *As To Humannes* is present.

Another extremely important edition to mention here, is Ann J. Lane's edition of *Herland* of 1979, being this the very first time the novel was printed in book form, after the serialized episodes on the *Forerunner* in 1915.

In the decade between 1970 and 1980, the first critical biographies on Charlotte Perkins Gilman began to appear and they still followed the feminist canon of interpretation of Gilman's writings. In effect, in 1976 and 1977, two thesis on Gilman's life appeared. The first was written by Helen Jo Potts, with the title *Charlotte Perkins Gilman: A Humanist Approach to Feminism*[48] and the second was written by Mary Jane Capozzoli, with the title *Charlotte Perkins Gilman: A Woman's Struggle to Live her Ideas*.[49] Both these two thesis reveal a

[47] See *The Yellow Wallpaper,* Afterword by Elaine R. Hedges, pp. 37, 39.
[48] Thesis, North Texas State University, December, 1976. See OCLC WorldCat.
[49] M.A. Thesis, Adelphi University, 1977. See OCLC WorldCat.

clear feminist approach to the study of Gilman's writings and this tendency can also be noted in one of Gilman's main scholars, Mary Armfield Hill, who wrote *Charlotte Perkins Gilman: The Making of a Radical Feminist* in 1980, which is a biography that takes into consideration the years between 1860 and 1896, that is to say, the period in which she was highly engaged with feminist circles, lectures and travels from California to Chicago.

From 1980, more than six critical biographies have been published, and it is possible to note that the criticism on Gilman slowly abandoned the feminist ground to evaluate the writer's works from a wider perspective. The most important critical biographies to recall are Gary Scharnhorst's *Charlotte Perkins Gilman,* published in 1985, Ann J. Lane's *To Herland and beyond : the life and work of Charlotte Perkins Gilman,* published in 1990, Larry Ceplair's *Charlotte Perkins Gilman: A Nonfiction Reader,* published in 1991, Cynthia J. Davis' *Charlotte Perkins Gilman: A Biography,* published in 2010 and, finally, published in the same year, Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz's *Wild Unrest: Charlotte Perkins Gilman and the Making of "The Yellow Wall-Paper."*

While the biographies written by Scharnhorst and Ceplair are structured and divided on Gilman's works in relation with her early, middle and last years, the biographies written by Davis, Horowitz and Lane are focused on other aspects. Cynthia Davis' work is structured on the several important places in which Gilman lived and where the most significant events of her life took place; Helen Horowitz focuses her book on the real circumstances from where "The Yellow Wall-Paper" was born and on Gilman's views on the real aim and significance of the drama.

Ann J. Lane, instead, constructs her biography on the most important people of Gilman's life, and with whom the writer had a strong relationship. Beside her father, her mother, her two husbands and her daughter, she recalled Silas Weir Mitchell, Grace Channing and also Martha Luther and Adeline Knapp, two women who were fundamental figures in Gilman's life. Moreover, she takes into consideration the writer's non-fiction works and book-length writings. She focuses primarily on Gilman's life interconnected with her writing activity: "I have chosen the life as my subject, not just the life in general, but the way in which Charlotte's inner life developed. And the way I understand her inner growing personality. Charlotte made this task easy by writing so much about herself" (Lane, *To Herland* xii), to which she adds that Gilman's autobiography constitutes "wonderful material for a biographer" (Lane, *To Herland* xiii).

But, what primarily attracted Lane's attention was, in her own words, "the power and originality of her ideas" (Lane, *To Herland* xiv) and she found herself "increasingly caught up in the way she lived her life, the way she was in the world, particularly how she managed her terrifying and unending fear of insanity and the gnawing poverty that always plagued her" (Lane, *To Herland* xiv).

According to Lane, Gilman's works did not receive the careful attention they would have deserved. In fact, even *Women and Economics,* the book that made her famous worldwide, was received with "enthusiasm and respect but not serious examination" (Lane, *To Herland* 8).

As a matter of fact, Lane wrote about a review the book received:

> The *New York Times* in a lengthy review in November 1898, mostly a summary, said *Women and Economics* was written "in a temperate and admirable spirit" and offered radical suggestions for change that "deserve consideration", but the author of the review argued that " like many theoretic measures of reform," Charlotte Stetson's "presuppose an exceptionally high ideal of human conduct" , making one wonder how much of *Women and Economics* he had read. (Lane, *To Herland* 8).

Nevertheless, since *Women and Economics* had a strong influence on reform and radical circles, it received positive criticism as well in important magazines, such as the *Independent,* the *American Fabian,* the *Nation,* the *Woman's Journal* and others.[50] Yet, Lane argues, the criticism about Gilman is still insufficient:

> It is still inadequate for she is still seen as a commentator concerned only with issues of women's emancipation and women's social role. Her scope and creative imagination are as yet unappreciated even by today's admirers and supporters. A careful reading of the full body of her work demonstrates the immense breadth of her vision and the enormously ambitious character of the project she set for herself (Lane, *To Herland* 8).

Within the biographical genre, most important to recall are also the collections of Gilman's letters and diaries, which definitely throw light into her biography. Concerning the letters, two significant collections have been published. The first one, entitled *A Journey from Within: The Love Letters of Charlotte Perkins Gilman, 1897-1900,* was edited by Mary Armifield Hill in 1995. It contains biographical details as well as historical events in which Gilman was involved, and Hill provides introductory notes to every single chapter.[51]

The second collection of letters was edited in 2009 by Denise D. Knight and Jennifer S. Tuttle, under the title *The Selected Letters of Charlotte Perkins Gilman.* It offers an interesting correspondence between Gilman and the most

[50] See Lane, *To Herland* p. 253.
[51] It is to be noted that Mary Armifield Hill also edited *Endure: The Diaries of Charles Walter Stetson*, which was published in 1985.

important people in her life, which recall the parameters Lane had chosen in her biography.

Denise D. Knight edited two collections of Gilman's diaries as well. The first one, published in 1994 with the title *The Diaries of Charlotte Perkins Gilman*, is the complete collection of Gilman's diaries and it consists of two volumes; the first volume collects the diaries from 1879 to 1887, the second volume contains the diaries from 1890 to 1935. The second collection is a condensed version of the first one. It was published in 1998 under the title *The Abridged Diaries of Charlotte Perkins Gilman* and it documents "the highs and lows in the life of a brave and intelligent woman. The selections included in this edition chronicle the experiences that marked turning points through nearly twenty years of Charlotte's life" (Knight, *The Abridged* xvi).

The diaries are an invaluable source to approach the reading of Gilman's works, since they not only reflect the subject's personality and feelings, but they also represent the life of a woman living in the late nineteenth-century.

As a matter of fact, according to the editor of this volume:

> The diaries that Charlotte Perkins Gilman kept throughout much of her life are not characterized by any kind of conscious literary style. She was not in the least concerned with producing a set of documents that could be lauded for their sophisticated eloquence or artistic effect […] the diaries offer a revealing look at the day-to-day activities of a woman who struggled against overwhelming odds to attain a respect and popularity as an author and lecturer. At times confessional, at times startling, at times mundane, Charlotte's "old friend" or "beloved journal" offers a rare opportunity for the readers simultaneously to study nineteenth-century domestic life in general and to witness the consequences of one woman's rebellious rejection of the exclusionary limitations imposed by the "cult of domesticity" in particular. […] From an early age it was apparent that Charlotte Perkins Gilman would not conform to societal expectations of appropriate roles and vocations.
>
> On the whole Charlotte Perkins Gilman's diaries serve as a barometer of her state of mind: when she was feeling well, the entries are bright, animated and often humorous;

> when she was experiencing her low "grey" periods, the entries are stark, eclipsed, sometimes cryptic. Charlotte's emotions, as presented on the pages of her diaries, are often understated. As she noted in *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman,* the decision to withhold some of the most personal details of her interior world was a conscious one (Knight, *The Abridged* xv,xvi).

After 1980, and parallel to her critical biographies, a significant number of books on Gilman's collected writings began to appear.

In analysing the editions published during the decade between 1980 and 1990 it is worth noting that there is no unique current of thought as it had been in the previous decade, with the feminist interpretation of Gilman's writings. As a matter of fact, The Feminist Press continued the publication of "The Yellow Wall-Paper" (1980) and of another collection of short-stories of various women's writers (1984), with the title *The Other Woman: Stories of Two Women and A Man,* which contained Gilman's short-story "Turned" of 1911. But, on the other hand, in same year 1984, Marcia Muller and Bill Pronzini edited a volume of collected short-stories *Witches' Brew: Horror and Supernatural Stories by Women,* in which "The Yellow Wall-Paper" represented a gothic story.

Yet, in 1980, the current towards Gilman's writings collection started with Ann J. Lane, who published *The Charlotte Perkins Gilman Reader: The Yellow Wallpaper, and Other Fiction:*

> In this volume one can see "The Yellow Wallpaper" for the first time in the context of a wide selection of Gilman's fiction in general, and it becomes of a piece with them, while remaining at the same time special and different. […] Many Gilman enthusiasts do not much like her fiction. They consider it too ideological, too didactic. Gilman mischievously used the commonly shared forms and structures of her day—farces, domestic novels, mysteries, adventure stories—and infused them with her own brand of feminism and socialism. Her work is ideological, but she implies that all literature is

> ideological, only its familiarity, its "naturalness" to us, makes it appear to reflect all possible world views (Lane, *The Charlotte* xvii, xviii).

Consequently, in this decade we see three main coexisting tendencies in the editions of Gilman's works: the gothic perspective, the feminist point of view, and the rise of the current which would have been engaged in editing collections of Gilman's writings during the following years. As a matter of fact, Ann J. Lane, in her essay "The Fictional World of Charlotte Perkins Gilman"[52], asserts:

> "The Yellow Wallpaper" has often been reprinted as a horror story; its most famous appearance in that genre is in William Dean Howells's *Great Modern American Stories,* in 1920, in which Howells described its chilling qualities. […] Not until 1973, in the Feminist Press edition introduced by Elaine R. Hedges, was it read from a feminist perspective" (Lane, *The Charlotte* xvii).

Taking into consideration the period which goes from the early Nineties to the present it is possible to recall several editions of Gilman's collected writings. The subject of these collections are primarily Gilman's short-stories, her utopian novels and her poems.

Starting from 1992, Barbara Solomon edited *Herland and Selected Stories,* followed by Denise D. Knight's editions *"The Yellow Wall-Paper" and Selected stories* (1994) and *The Later Poetry of Charlotte Perkins Gilman* (1996). Minna Doksow, in 1999, edited a volume wholly dedicated to Gilman's three utopian novels, entitled *Charlotte Perkins Gilman's Utopian Novels* and, the most recent edition of collected poems, was edited in 2012 by Gary Scharnhorst and Denise D. Knight under the title *In This Our World and Uncollected Poems.*

[52] This is an introductory essay to Lane's edition *The Charlotte Perkins Gilman Reader: The Yellow Wallpaper and Other Fiction.*

However, there is another edition of collected short-stories I haven't yet mentioned, but which is considered one of the most complete collections[53], and it is *Charlotte Perkins Gilman: The Yellow Wall-Paper and Other Stories,* edited in 1995 by Robert Shulman, and reprinted in 1998; it includes a critical introduction with textual notes, a bibliography, a chronology and two appendices.

This edition consists of a considerable list of less-known short stories that, as Shulman points out in his "Note on the Text", were reprinted "from their first (and usually only) magazine appearance" (Shulman xxxiii), such as the *Woman's Journal,* the *Kate Field's Washington,* the *San Francisco Call Impress.* For the stories written between 1909 and 1916 he reprinted the editions of Gilman's own magazine, the *Forerunner,* except for the story "If I Were a Man" written in 1914 and which he reprinted from *Physical Culture.* The story "An Unnatural Mother" is another exception because Shulman reprinted it from the *Forerunner 7* version (1916) and not from the first one that originally appeared on the *Impress*, 16 February 1895.

According to Robert Shulman's analysis of Gilman's critical reception, her best reviewed works nowadays are the short-story "The Yellow Wall-Paper" and the non-fiction study *Women and Economics.*[54] Contemporary critics have acknowledged the modernity and the poignancy of her theories. He recognizes the importance of the feminist current of criticism about Gilman, in fact he asserts that "The Yellow Wall-Paper" received its best criticism after 1973, when Elaine Hedges and the Feminist Press made it "available for

[53] See Kim Wells, *A Guide to Research Materials: Charlotte Perkins Gilman* on line, http://www.womenwriters.net/domesticgoddess/CPGguide.html

[54] See Shulman, p. xiv.

contemporary readers" (Shulman xviii) and a series of notable reviews and essays were published.

Shulman acknowledges the importance of Gilman's biographies as well, in order to fully comprehend her writings:

> Another persistent interest in Gilman criticism is her biography, a revealing approach as long as we recognize that in 'The Yellow Wall-Paper' the narrator and her text are not identical with the Charlotte Perkins Gilman (or Charlotte Perkins Stetson) who created them. The wallpaper itself, for example is Gilman's invention, not part of her breakdown. In even more basic ways the narrator, action, and imagery of the story are independent of Gilman, who puts them to complex uses.
>
> For all its depths 'The Yellow Wall-Paper' is accessible, it responds to close analysis, and it invites and rewards active interpretation. 'The Yellow Wall-Paper' has opened up to critics sensitive to the issues of textuality as well as to Freudian and Lacanian psychology. It has been illuminated and transformed as autobiography, as female Gothic, and, in multiple ways as critique of gender relations. As a result, we now have a sense of Gilman's craft, intuition, and understanding, of her success in showing that each stage of her narrator's covert rebellion and gradual descent into madness is precipitated by the control, excessive oversight, and essential neglect of representatives of a conventional order the narrator cannot stand or overtly stand against. Recent critics have rightly stressed the tensions and ambiguities, particularly at the end and in the merging of narrator and alter ego, all of which defy the definitiveness of closure. To what extent is the narrator's madness a triumph, to what extent a painful, qualified liberation revealing her continuing resistance and ties to the pattern she can neither or completely escape? To what extent and on what grounds is the narrator a reliable narrator? Far from exhausting the implication of the story, the varying approaches to it remind us that 'The Yellow Wall-Paper' is open to reinterpretation, particularly to the interpretation of readers who are enjoining Gilman for the first time (Shulman xviii, xix).

With his volume *Charlotte Perkins Gilman: The Yellow Wall-Paper and Other Stories,* Shulman wants to stimulate in the reader a deep and careful attention, above all, on Gilman's "other stories", so that he offers the reader the possibility to explore a wide range of the writer's short-stories, which, although being completely different from "The Yellow Wall-Paper", "deserve and

respond to our attention" (Shulman xix). He selects a body of short-stories between 1890 and 1895, giving the reader an easy access to "a body of fiction that has previously been available- or, more properly, unavailable- only in hard-to-find magazines" (Shulman xix).

He concludes the introduction to his edition with a highly positive account of Gilman's fiction:

> Gilman's optimism and her persistent, provocative suggestions for workable change are central parts of her legacy to readers in our own period of post-modern suspicion of hopeful grand designs. 'The Yellow Wall-Paper', for its part, has a particular and contrasting appeal because of its depth, openness, and sense of the painful, qualified liberation of its narrator (Shulman xxxii).

Yet, according to him:

> The main body of Gilman's subsequent short fiction may put off some readers precisely because the works are positive and feature the closure of practical solutions. On the same grounds, however, this significant reform fiction also offers a new generation of readers a reminder of lost possibilities and an incentive to renewed effort (Shulman xxxii).

III. 1. 2

Criticism in Italy

Relying on the same parameters I used to analyse Charlotte Perkins Gilman's critical reception in the United States, a substantial difference emerges when considering the attention her writings received in Italy.

As already pointed out, *Women and Economics,* at the time of its publication, made her internationally known. Eight editions were reprinted between 1898

and 1915 and, as Casalini noted, it was translated into seven different languages.[55]

The first, and only, Italian edition of *Women and Economics* was published in 1902 under the title *La donna e l'economia sociale. Studio delle relazioni economiche fra uomini e donne e della loro azione nell'evoluzione sociale*, and it was translated by Carolina Pironti.

Relying on the Italian National Collective Catalogue and taking into account the years between 1967 and 1979, which in the United States were the years of the feminist interpretation of her works and, as previously noted, more than twenty-five reprints of Gilman's books appeared, in Italy only two books were published.

The first one is the translation of "The Yellow Wall-Paper," which was edited by Bibi Tomasi and Laura McMurphy in 1976, entitled *La Carta Gialla.*[56] The second is the translation of *Herland* by Angela Campana and it was published with the title *Terradilei* in 1980; it also contains *La Carta Gialla.* Both editions were published by La Tartaruga, which is the first publishing house that undertook the project of translating Gilman's works, after the 1902 edition of *La donna e l'economia sociale* published in Florence by G. Barbera.

Laura McMurphy praises "The Yellow Wall-Paper" for its protagonist's quest for truth and freedom which culminates in a condition of sorrow pushed to the extreme but which is, at the same time, ironic thanks to the final scene:

> La protagonista di questa storia, che è in parte autobiografica, mi avrebbe aiutato a capire. Come possa capitare che una donna non voglia più corrispondere alle aspettative e alle premure degli altri. La protagonista è una donna intelligente e ragionevole che si sforza di fare quello che dicono anche quando non è d'accordo, tanto più che a dire è un

[55] See Brunella Casalini, *Costruzione della nazione e «riproduzione della razza» negli Stati Uniti d'America.*

[56] This edition was reprinted in 1996.

> marito sinceramente preoccupato per lei, sofferente e bisognosa d'aiuto. Mentre si cura, come le dicono di fare, cioè con un assoluto riposo, le si presenta però un compito nuovo, comandato non più dalla famiglia, ma da un'interna necessità: studiare la carta da parati che copre i muri della sua camera di malata. Vi si applica con pazienza e acume, arrivando ad una importante scoperta. Come certe che si trovano al basso della scala sociale, nella soggezione senza scampo, anche lei, moglie adorata d'un medico affermato, conosce la spogliazione totale dei desideri e la distinzione sistematica di ogni autonomo punto di vista. Non c'è, in queste situazioni, sbocco nella isteria che caratterizzava le pazienti piccolo-borghesi del dott. Freud. Qui s'instaura il rigoroso ascetismo di una pura ricerca della verità e della libertà. La storia che ne risulta è tristissima nel suo breve rigore, eppure divertente perché la sproporzione tra i pochi e la grande invenzione secerne ironia, che dilaga nel finale, quando lei passa strisciando sopra l'amorosa sollecitudine e la rispettabilità professionale, atterrate.[57]

As for Charlotte Perkins Gilman's critical biographies, while in the United States since 1980 more than six monographs on the writer's life have been published, in Italy the first and only critical biography in book form appeared in 2006, written by Laura Moschini and entitled *Charlotte Perkins Gilman: La straordinaria vita di una femminista vittoriana.* As the title suggests, this biography inserts Gilman in the feminist current.

Between 1980 and 2000, three important essays have been written, but, however, no monographs on Gilman were published.

The first essay was written by Roberta Mazzanti in 1988 and it is entitled "Dalla 'Stanza gialla' alla 'Terra di lei': Tappe del viaggio di costruzione di sé di Charlotte Perkins Gilman", published in *Studi & Ricerche*. While this study investigates Gilman's life through her short-story "The Yellow Wall-Paper" and the novel *Herland,* the essay written by Anna Scacchi in 1998, with the title "Oltre le mura domestiche. La donna, la casa e la città nell'opera di Charlotte Perkins Gilman", which was published in *Città reali e immaginarie*

[57] See Tomasi Bibi and McMurphy Laura, *Charlotte Perkins Gilman: La Carta Gialla.*

del continente americano, takes into account the theme of domesticity in Gilman's writings. Anna Scacchi wrote another interesting essay in 1999, which is collected in the third volume of *Abito e Identità* edited by Cristina Giorcelli. Its title is "L'abito a Utopia. Il sogno americano di Charlotte Perkins Gilman" and it points out the characteristics of the reasonable clothes of women in the novel Herland, which should be a perfect example of how women's clothing could improve under the rules of comfort and health.

Examining the third current in the criticism about Gilman, namely the editions which collect her writings, it is possible to note that Italian collections were mainly published between 2008 and 2011. One collection of Gilman's essays and three collections of fictional works appeared during these years.

The collection of essays is entitled *Famiglie, matrimoni e figli: Note sociologiche* and it was published in 2011. This book is Raffaele Rauty's translation of the volume *Families, Marriages, and Children* published by Michael R. Hill, which collects a series of essays Gilman wrote on the topics of the home, the family and children.

The three collections of fictional works were published respectively in 2008, 2010 and 2011. The first volume, entitled *Racconti di silenzi e di anarchie,* consists of a series of short-stories translated by Angela Romero. The second book collects five short-stories translated by Ilaria Police; it is entitled *La governante e altri problemi domestici* and it deals with the stories of five women who struggle to obtain their independence both within the field of the home and in society.

The last book, edited by Anna Scacchi and published in 2011 under the title *La Terra delle Donne: Herland e altri racconti (1891-1916),* is the most complete

Italian edition of Gilman's collected writings. It contains a new translation of *Herland*, of "The Yellow Wall-Paper" and of nine short-stories, as well as two introductory essays, by Anna Scacchi and Vittoria Franco. This volume represents the most recent Italian research that focuses on Charlotte Perkins Gilman's literary legacy. Vittoria Franco wrote the Preface, entitled "Una donna alla ricerca della libertà" and, Anna Scacchi's essay "Una donna vittoriana a Utopia", follows the Preface.

According to Vittoria Franco, Charlotte Perkins Gilman's farsighted work, particularly *Women and Economics,* was the first significant contribution written by a woman to the economic science.[58]

"The Yellow Wall-Paper", a short story that has become a literary masterpiece, is reckoned, nowadays, as an inspiring work for feminism all over the world.

Gilman has been considered an "anti-Freud" (Scacchi, *La Terra delle Donne* xi) thanks to her analysis of women's psychic problems which could not be defined merely as hysteria. Gilman came to understand that the cause of women's psychic and nervous problems originated from men's supremacy over their bodies and their minds, which were considered weak and inadequate. The theme of women's inadequacy and subordination was developed and examined in depth by contemporary feminists who criticize Freudian theories.

Vittoria Franco focused her attention on *Herland* as well, defining it as a unique work of its kind[59]. It was not its utopian nature that defined its originality, since utopian theories had been often formulated in the social and

[58] Vittoria Franco asserts: "Si trattava dunque del primo, rilevante contributo di una donna alla scienza economica. Le teorie che Charlotte Perkins Gilman vi esponeva erano difficili da confutare e anche chi non le condivideva del tutto non poteva fare a meno di apprezzarne la forza culturale. Qualcuno lo accostò al fortunato *The Subjection of Women* di John Stuart Mill (1869)", p. x.

[59] See Scacchi, *La Terra delle Donne,* p. xii.

literary history of thought, but its goal was the formulation of a feminine utopia, the first ever imagined. No one, before Charlotte Perkins Gilman, had ever dared to conceive a world populated only by women. She used the utopian technique to show, by means of practical examples, what women's emancipation would have meant in the creation of a new social order. And, possibly, Franco affirms, this is why it is not mentioned in the several histories of the utopian thinking. Through *Herland,* thus, Gilman created a myth of the origins of society—a feminine society—according to her own vision.

The reinterpretation of the founding myths, namely the perpetual bond between nature and motherhood, was a way to understand the history of women and gender relations, and a means to create a gender identity.

Nowadays, perhaps even more than in 1915 when the novel appeared on the *Forerunner*, it inspires the contemporary feminist panorama and bears links with it.[60]

According to Vittoria Franco, Gilman's deep desire was to make women understand that they deserved to be free:

> Con i suoi scritti e la sua esperienza di vita, con scelte tanto coraggiose quanto dolorose, come divorziare dal primo marito o separarsi dalla figlia in piena epoca vittoriana, Charlotte testimonia questa nuova femminilità.
>
> In fondo, che altro fu se non una donna alla ricerca della libertà? […] E' un rapporto senza dominio quello che Charlotte cerca, liberato da quella idea di *possesso* […] E dunque, la sfida che già nei primi anni del secolo scorso Charlotte lanciava era: come essere libere *nella* relazione? E' la sfida della costruzione di un mondo comune che

[60] Vittoria Franco mentioned Luce Irigaray and Luisa Muraro, who pointed out the concepts of "maternal genealogy" and "motherhood's power". Franco recalled that, according to Irigaray, "la genealogia materna è la condizione per poter costruire l'identità femminile e un ordine sociale fondato sui due generi e non più sull'uno maschile" (Scacchi, *La Terra delle Donne* xiv) and, according to Luisa Muraro, a new social order should have had its origins in the sentiment of love for the mother: "Ho imparato che per la sua esistenza libera una donna ha bisogno, simbolicamente, della potenza materna, così come ne ha avuto bisogno per venire al mondo" (qtd. in Scacchi, *La Terra delle Donne* xiv).

> coinvolge anche gli uomini, i quali però ancora stentano a raccoglierla (Scacchi, *La Terra delle Donne* xiv,xv)

According to Anna Scacchi, Charlotte Perkins Gilman was the most important American feminist between the late nineteenth-century and the early twentieth-century. As a matter of fact, Gilman was named as one of the most influential women of the 20th century according to a research published by the Siena Research Institute in 1993[61], and she was included in the National Women's Hall of Fame, an institution founded in 1969[62] with the aim of honouring the memory of American women who have significantly contributed in the development of the country.

"The Yellow Wall-Paper" is now considered a fundamental text in women's literary panorama. So much so that, as Scacchi pointed out, the 1973 edition by Elaine Hedges of the Feminist Press paved the way for the publication of almost the whole of her most important writings.[63]

The power of Gilman's ideas stood in the effort to use literature as a means to suggest new possible patterns to improve women's lives:

> *Scrivere con uno scopo.* Lo scopo di Gilman è, come ho detto, quello di trasformare il mondo, e la letteratura ne è uno dei mezzi, anzi un mezzo tra i più potenti, grazie alla sua capacità di rendere le idee astratte carne, di produrre nuove possibili trame per le vite dei lettori, di liberare le donne dalle trappole narrative che confinano il loro essere nel mondo. Anche la letteratura si inserisce, infatti, nel modo utopico di Gilman. Non la letteratura così come l'abbiamo ricevuta, perché subordinata anch'essa, come ogni espressione culturale, all'androcentrismo della società non può servire a cambiare il mondo. Il suo scopo è invece una letteratura che faccia delle donne il suo soggetto, e si dedichi a proporre continuamente ciò che ancora non c'è come possibile. Che offra alle lettrici strutture narrative diverse sulle quali immaginare le proprie vite, storie non

[61] See Scacchi, *La Terra delle Donne,* p. xviii.
[62] Ibidem.
[63] Ibidem.

ancora “reali” , ma *realizzabili,* come modelli per cambiare la condizione femminile (Scacchi, *La Terra delle Donne* xxxi).

CHAPTER FOUR

VI. 1

Italian translation of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's articles concerning women's clothing

VI. 1. 1

Notes on translation.

Chapter Four is focused on the Italian translation of five articles written by Charlotte Perkins Gilman between 1886 and 1915. The original texts are located in the Charlotte Perkins Gilman Collection at the Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute[64].

In approaching the translation of Gilman's writings, I tried to use a contemporary language to convey the modernity of her ideas. One of the main characteristics of the English language is its immediacy, while Italian is a more articulated language; this difference was the main problem I faced in my translations, being Gilman's way of writing rather linear and logical. I tried to be true to her writing, aiming at maintaining the same structure of the sentence, whenever possible, and to use a direct and linear language; though, initially, I found it quite difficult to maintain the English immediacy in Italian and I tended to enrich Gilman's sentences too much. But I realised that this way of

[64] In the "Works Cited" list I will give the complete references of the articles.

proceeding misrepresented the writer's style, therefore I stopped my translation and started it over again keeping in mind that I had to stick more to the original text.

The writing style of Charlotte Perkins Gilman is rich in everyday images, which her contemporary audience was immediately able to recognize. As a matter of fact, her articles were addressed both to intellectuals and to common people, but what is worth noting is the fact her writing style is strongly linked to reality just because her main purpose was to reach a wide audience and to make people think about practical issues and problems affecting society.

While reading Gilman's articles, the reader will find certain words that have assumed a negative meaning nowadays, such as "race" (Gilman, "Symbolism") and "primitive" (Gilman, "Symbolism") but it is important to keep in mind that Gilman used these words with no negative implications. She employs the term "primitive" to indicate the societies which were not as advanced as United States were at the time, primarily in the technological and medical field, or to describe primitive communities; the word "race" and the adjective "racial" are used to indicate the whole human race, or specific populations, but they are not associated to the meaning they have today.

The articles I selected represent, mainly, two quite different styles of writing. In "Why Women Do Not Reform Their Dress", "Short Dress Fatal to Man" and "Teaching Beauty" the language is rather sharp and telegraphic, exactly the type of language that suits a journalistic article. On the contrary, the language employed in "Why These Clothes?" and in "Symbolism in Dress" is more articulated, with rather long sentences and rich in examples and references to several different cultures and traditions; rather than being a journalistic

language, it reflected more the writing style of the essay. The terminology and the grammar of the articles is reflected by their length as well, in fact the first three articles I mentioned are considerably shorter than the other two.

In briefly explaining the subject of each article, I will point out certain specific key words and key concepts[65], that are functional in showing Gilman's point of view concerning women's clothing, but also precise references regarding men's clothing compared to women's. I will analyse the articles following a chronological order.

"Why Women Do Not Reform Their Dress" appeared on the 23th October 1886 issue of the *Woman's Journal*; this article is quite concise, it takes one column, and the language is extremely direct and condensed. Here, Gilman explains why, according to her, women persisted in wearing unreasonable clothes without showing the will to adopt more reasonable and comfortable clothes, which could have permitted them to carry out their everyday activities without being an impediment to their freedom of movement.

In Gilman's opinion women's clothes were "unhealthful, unbeautiful, immoral" (Gilman, "Why Women"*)* and the ostensible explanation to this was that women were "fools" (Gilman, "Why Women"). Clearly, this couldn't but be a superficial reason. As a matter of fact, Gilman proceeds in her analysis by proposing her own answer. She starts her argument affirming that a woman, as each human being, instinctively chooses pleasure rather than pain; but, Victorian women in particular, found pleasure in "the satisfaction of the social conscience"(Gilman, "Why Women") and in the "gratification of the pride" (Gilman, "Why Women") rather than pursuing real inner comfort. Satisfaction

[65] The sentences I will quote are strictly referred to each article taken into consideration. The complete text of the articles can be found in the following pages.

of the social conscience allowed women to feel at ease in a society which required them to wear unreasonable clothes. On the contrary, the "true and reasonable dress" (Gilman, "Why Women") meant real beauty and health of the body, but it also required women to openly defy the rules imposed by society concerning feminine fashion. According to Gilman's own explanation to the problem, it meant "long combat with one's own miseducated sense of beauty" (Gilman, "Why Women"), and the majority of women was not disposed to break the society's demands and to meet criticism, "opposition" and "contempt" (Gilman, "Why Women").

The following article, "Why These Clothes?", appeared on the 2nd March 1905 issue of the *Independent.* Taking eight columns, this article is considerably longer than the first one and the language is more articulated.

Gilman, by means of concrete examples, shows the reader the physical injuries which women's clothing was likely to provoke on their bodies, comparing it with men's. She sharply criticised ancient habits that still survived in the Victorian society. Furthermore, she points out how women, and men as well, did not make a conscious choice concerning clothing, but they "smoothly" (Gilman, "Why These") and passively accepted the dictates of fashion. Consequently, their choices concerning clothes, drifted away from the "expensive field of decision" (Gilman, "Why These") and were made into "habits" (Gilman, "Why These"), often making them seem "ridiculous" (Gilman, "Why These").

The key term of this article is the verb "to bow" (Gilman, "Why These"), with which Gilman points out people's widespread attitude to submit to the "stream of cloth", without carefully thinking about it. She constantly juxtaposed the

governing forces behind our clothing and the ones behind the clothing of animals, which follow simple and rational rules. Some garments are described throughout the article. First of all, shoes, whose shape changed year after year following the rules of fashion, but which were supposed to fit the unchanging shape of the human feet. Then, hats, defined as "conspicuous" (Gilman, "Why These") objects which were no longer useful items, but only served the purposes of ostentation and display. Gilman, however, does not restrict her perspective to women's clothing, but she criticises men's clothing too, which was "none so perfect" (Gilman, "Why These") to be imitated. She makes the example of trousers, defining them "the mark of manly freedom" (Gilman, "Why These"), but their shape was so artificial to make them seem unreasonable and ridiculous.

Yet, men's clothes had an important advantage: they had pockets. This was an extremely important element which was absent in women's clothes, compelling them to be even more dependent upon men. The concrete example of the "pocket handkerchief" (Gilman, "Why These") clarifies the concept. The handkerchief was an indispensable element both for women and for men; though, it had lost its original function of "nose-cloth", becoming the symbol of the ineffectiveness of women's dress, since they did not have a place to keep it. The same idea is applied to money. In this case as well, women did not have a safe place to hold it and, according to Gilman, "the pocketless woman" (Gilman, "Why These") was so the "more dependent on the pocketed man" (Gilman, "Why These").

The article closes, once again, with the verb "to bow" (Gilman, "Why These") . As a matter of fact, Gilman advocated the serious necessity to study the

clothing question in depth so as to understand the real governing forces behind it, in the hope that people could cease to "bow" (Gilman, "Why These") to their "dictators" (Gilman, "Why These") and wear what "they" (Gilman, "Why These") told them, and free themselves from the "dwindling rudiments of clothing customs pertaining to the ancient dead" (Gilman, "Why These").

"Symbolism in Dress" appeared on the 3rd June 1905 issue of the *Independent.* Being quite a long and articulated article, it follows, in language and style, the same characteristics of "Why These Clothes?"

Here, Gilman takes into consideration the symbolic meaning of clothes; in fact, every single garment, according to her, was a symbol. She fully examined the shirt believing it to be the perfect garment to exemplify her theory, along with which, the whole human clothing had its origins in the shirt. Outlining its history, Gilman points out the symbolic aspects of this garment in the Victorian society. Far from the governing forces that should have determined its use, such as "protection" (Gilman, "Symbolism") and "modesty" (Gilman, "Symbolism"), the shirt became the real symbol of the economic and social position of the wearer. Specifically, the starched shirt made of fine cloth came to represent the "signboard and visiting card far more than a garment" (Gilman, "Symbolism"). Therefore, it was no longer an indispensable article of clothing and it symbolized "the mark of a gentleman" (Gilman, "Symbolism"); however, its most important aspect were the "exhibitable parts" (Gilman, "Symbolism"), such as the "ivory shirtfront" (Gilman, "Symbolism"), which represented the high social position of the wearer. The "starch" (Gilman, "Symbolism") itself, according to Gilman, had a symbolic meaning, since it made the shirt seem clean, being "cleanness" (Gilman, "Symbolism") an

extremely important distinguishing mark which indicated a man who could "afford to wash seven shirts a week" (Gilman, "Symbolism").

From Gilman's point of view, originally, in the savage tribes, men's clothing was far more symbolic than women's; while, in the modern society symbolism strongly prevailed in women's clothes, with the purpose to glorify femininity. Yet, according to Gilman, this practice was likely to "out-feminize femininity by exaggerating" (Gilman, "Symbolism") lines and proportions of women's bodies and, since society considered "flowing raiment as symbolic of femininity" (Gilman, "Symbolism"), women, "unresisting" (Gilman, "Symbolism"), according to the reasons explained in the first article, persisted in wearing that kind of clothes "from the less-filled cradle to the more-filled grave" (Gilman, "Symbolism").

"Short Dress Fatal To Man" is a typescript article written around 1915. In this rather short and provocative article, Gilman fully showed her ironic approach by pointing out a reflection on an case reported in a newspaper whose title addressed the episode of a man's death caused by a short dress.

The entire article is played on the meaning of the verb "fatal" (Gilman, "Short Dress"). According to Gilman, the verb fatal is "unmistakable" (Gilman, "Short Dress") and induces the reader to think that "the event chronicled is the slaughter of a Man by a Dress" (Gilman, "Short Dress"). Obviously, that was not possible, and reading the whole article the real facts emerged. A woman wore a short dress, her brother-in-law criticised her, and the woman's husband, hurt by the criticism, killed the man, namely his brother. As Gilman pointed out, there were other factors to be taken into account, but, inevitably, in an Androcentric society how could men be considered the responsible parties?

Her answer is: “If there is a woman within a thousand miles, blame her, or at least her clothes” (Gilman, “Short Dress”).

The last article I examined is entitled “Teaching Beauty.” As well as the previous article, it is typescript and dated around 1915. Here, Gilman analyses the concept of beauty, exposing its fundamental principles, and suggests a factual method to teach beauty as a school subject.

The article opens with the sentence: “Everyone loves beauty, but few can recognize it” (Gilman, “Teaching Beauty”). With this statement, Gilman points out that people were no longer accustomed to appreciate and honour beauty in itself and, therefore, there was the real necessity to “deliberately” (Gilman, “Teaching Beauty”) teach it at school, showing children concrete instances of beauty, especially the perfect beauty of the human body. She exemplifies this concept through the human feet, precisely the feminine feet, suggesting a teaching method to make little girls learn to appreciate the perfect shape of their feet, so that they could possibly refuse to wear “improper shoes” only because fashion required it. The stress in this article stands on the will to create self-awareness in children and to make them able to recognize what real beauty is, in order to improve the future society.

In the five articles taken into consideration, it is possible to note Gilman’s desire to make people, especially women, reflect upon the real meaning of their clothes and the true reasons why they persisted in wearing them. In these articles, there are some key words which are useful to make Gilman’s own hopes for the future clearly emerge. First of all, the verb “to reform” (Gilman, “Why Women”); this term suggests the need to change, improve and progress the society in which Gilman herself lived. Improving women’s way of clothing

meant not only a mere innovation in clothes, but also a deep change in women's minds, which involved a serious thinking to gain self-consciousness, self-respect and to fight for their process of liberation to be completed. Moreover, the verb "to bow" is very important in the article "Why These Clothes?", but it is a concept which emerges indirectly from the other articles as well. It is the symbol of the common attitude of both men and women to conform to what society, as well as fashion industry, required them to wear. On the contrary, people should be able to choose "deliberately" (Gilman, "Teaching Beauty") reasonable clothes which could fit their own bodies better. In women's specific case, they had to free themselves from their cumbrous dresses, which impeded the right growth of their bodies and their freedom of movement. Being able to overcome their "unhealthful, unbeautiful, immoral" (Gilman, "Why Women") clothes represented one the first steps, both literally and symbolically, to the make their way in the future society.

IV. 2 Articles in translation.

VI. 2. 1

Why Women Do Not Reform Their Dress.

WHY WOMEN DO NOT REFORM THEIR DRESS.[66]

By

Charlotte Perkins Gilman

It would seem at first sight that there was but one answer to this question namely, that women are fools.

When you can plainly prove a woman that her dress is unhealthful, unbeautiful, immoral, and yet she persist in wearing it, there seems no possible reason but the above. But there is a very simple explanation. A physician complained to me that women came to her actually wearing mechanical appliances to counteract diseases which were caused and fostered by the mechanical weight and pressure of their dress. She could see no reason why a woman should deliberately chose pain and weakness. Here is the reason.

Let us take and average woman, with a home, family, and social circle. Like every living organism, she is capable of receiving pain and pleasure. As a human being, she receives these sensations both through mind and body. Now this woman, apart from what she considers duty, will pursue always that course

[66] Charlotte Perkins Gilman Collection, Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College. *Woman's Journal*, 23 Oct. 1886.

of action which seems to her to bring the most pleasure, or the least pain. This is a law of life, as right and natural as for a plant to grow towards the light. This woman's life as a human being is far more mental than physical; the pleasures and pains of the heart and mind are far more important to her than those of the body. Therefore, if a thing give pain to her body but pleasure to her heart and mind, she will certainly choose it. Let us see now how this question of dress affects mind, heart, and body.

The present style of dress means, with varying limits, backache, sideache, headache, and many another ache; corns, lame, tender, or swollen feet, weak clumsy, and useless compared to what they should be; a crowd of diseases, heavy and light; a general condition of feebleness and awkwardness and total inferiority as an animal organism; with a thousand attendant inconveniences and restrictions and unnatural distortions amounting to hideousness.

But it also means the satisfaction of the social conscience; gratification of pride, legitimate and illegitimate; approbation of those loved and admiration of those unknown; satisfaction of a sense of beauty, however false; and a general ease and peace of mind.

The true and reasonable dress means perfect ease and health and beauty of body, with the freedom of motion and increase of power and skill resultant therefrom. But it also means long combat with one's own miseducated sense of beauty, and fitness, and with all one's friends' constant disapprobation; ridicule, opposition, an uneasy sense of isolation and disagreeable noticeability, loss of social position, constant mortification and shame.

Now, to the average woman, these pains and penalties of the home and social life are infinitely more to be dreaded than the physical ones; and the

physical comfort and strength infinitely less to be desired than the mental satisfaction and peace. Physical suffering has been so long considered an integral part of woman's nature, and is still so generally borne, that a little or more or less is no great matter. But to offend and grieve instead of pleasing, to meet opposition and contempt instead of praise and flattery, to change pride for shame,—this is suffering which no woman will accept unless it is proved her duty.

And this is why women do not reform their dress.

IV. 2. 2

Perché le donne non cambiano il loro modo di vestire.

PERCHE' LE DONNE NON CAMBIANO IL LORO MODO DI VESTIRE.

Di

Charlotte Perkins Gilman

Ad una prima valutazione, la risposta a questa domanda potrebbe sembrare soltanto una, ossia, che le donne siano sciocche.

Quando si può inconfutabilmente dimostrare ad una donna che il suo abito è inelegante, sconveniente, non giova alla salute e, nonostante questo, lei si ostini ad indossarlo, sembra non ci possa essere altra ragione plausibile. Ma la spiegazione è molto semplice. Una dottoressa si lamentò con me del fatto che le donne si rivolgessero a lei indossando veri e propri apparecchi meccanici per contrastare le patologie causate e alimentate dal peso e dalla pressione dei loro

abiti. Non riusciva proprio a capire il motivo per cui una donna potesse scegliere di proposito il dolore e la debolezza. Eccone la ragione.

Prendiamo una donna nella media, con una casa, una famiglia, e una vita sociale. Come qualsiasi altro essere vivente, può sentire dolore o provare piacere. Come essere umano, percepisce queste sensazioni sia intellettualmente che fisicamente. Ora, questa donna, a parte ciò che considera un dovere, perseguirà sempre la via che le sembra possa darle il massimo del piacere, o farle percepire il minimo del dolore. Questa è una legge di vita, tanto giusta e naturale quanto lo è per una pianta crescere verso la luce. La vita di questa donna, quindi, sarà determinata più dalle ragioni della mente che da quelle fisiche; i piaceri e i dolori del cuore e della mente saranno infinitamente più importanti per lei di quelli fisici. Di conseguenza, se una cosa le provocasse dolore fisico ma piacere mentale lei, sicuramente, la sceglierebbe. Vediamo ora, come questo problema nel modo di vestire si ripercuota sulla mente, sul cuore e sul corpo.

L'abbigliamento attuale implica, con limiti variabili, dolore alla schiena, dolore ai fianchi, mal di testa, e molti altri disturbi come calli, zoppicamento, piedi doloranti, deboli e inefficaci rispetto a come dovrebbero essere; insomma, una serie di dolori, più o meno gravi, una condizione di debolezza e goffaggine generale, e una totale inferiorità per un organismo animale, con numerosissimi problemi, limitazioni e deformazioni innaturali pressoché esecrabili.

Allo stesso tempo, tutto ciò significa anche appagamento sociale, orgoglio personale, più o meno legittimo, l'approvazione dei propri cari, l'ammirazione degli sconosciuti, il soddisfacimento del senso del bello, per quanto innaturale, nonché tranquillità e serenità mentale.

L’abito giusto e ragionevole, invece, permette non solo disinvoltura, ma anche benessere e bellezza del corpo, grazie alla libertà di movimento e all’aumento di potere e capacità che ne derivano. Ma, altrettanto, implica una dura lotta interiore con la propria diseducazione al bello e al benessere fisico, la costante disapprovazione degli amici, scherno, ostilità, una sensazione di disagio, isolamento, visibilità negativa, perdita di prestigio sociale, costante vergogna e mortificazione.

Ora, per una donna in generale, questi dolori e queste punizioni afferenti la sfera casalinga e sociale rappresentano maggior pericolo che il malessere fisico; e la salute e la forza fisica risultano molto meno ambiti rispetto alla tranquillità e soddisfazione mentale. La sofferenza fisica è stata considerata così a lungo, ed è tuttora considerata, come parte integrante della natura femminile, che un dolore in più o in meno non cambia molto la situazione. Ma, il fatto di trasgredire le regole e sfidare la morale comune anziché essere amabile, incontrare resistenza e sdegno invece di elogio e adulazione, trasformare l’orgoglio in vergogna, è una sofferenza che nessuna donna accetterebbe mai a meno che non fosse suo dovere.

Ed è proprio questo il motivo per cui le donne non cambiano il proprio modo di vestire.

IV. 2 .3

Why These Clothes?

WHY THESE CLOTHES?[67]

By

Charlotte Perkins Gilman

The economy of nature in brain action is gratifying and instructive. Never an ion of cerebral energy does she waste; nothing goes to the supreme court for decision if the lower courts can be made to serve; swiftly and smoothly our chosen acts are swept from that expensive field of decision and made into habits—which cost much less.

Not only so, but this busy lower court of ours adopts and carries on many a habit which never was brought up before us for conscious choice at all; and we may find, on suddenly overhauling this delegated government, as many unlooked for evils and as much clutter of useless tradition as in a neglected satrapy of the ancient East.

This delegating of habit is a wise and beneficient [sic] process, without which we could scarce live a day in the complicated and endless activities of modern life; but it needs occasional review by the real governor lest an irresponsible deputy make us ridiculous in our own eyes or do us and others a worse injury.

[67] Charlotte Perkins Gilman Collection, Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College. Collection 177, folder 250, seq. 63.

If we were required, even yearly, wholly to think out for ourselves what we should wear, to measure and balance all the conflicting lines of tendency which culminate in a coat or skirt or pair of shoes, it would be a heavy draft on the yet slender stock of cerebral power we so slowly accumulate.

Better, perhaps, that we continue to bow like river grass to the stream of cloth that comes from we know not where, enwraps our bodies for a while and disappears as mysteriously. We must be clothed as a social necessity; even that first demand is not personal. An isolated individual needs no clothing and cannot make it, but the collective group calls for it, evolves it, and distributes it, with scarcely more than a murmur from the most rebellious.

To-day we wear this, to-morrow that, yesterday it was quite otherwise, and the most of free will exhibited in this mighty flood of textile foreordination is a half-hearted pleading with some clothes maker as to details of cut and color.

Some people from time to time have made spurts of revolt on special lines. Now and then a woman cries out against the back-breaking drag of skirts, or a man against the ugliness of trousers; and a little school of esthetes maintains with patient heroism the claim that a woman's raiment must trail from her shoulderblades.

Here and there in the broad, unchecked current may be seen, skating like water-bugs on the surface, the individuals who wear what they please, and an occasional ring of ripples caused by skirt-shorteners or shoulder-hangers, or those who abhor starched shirts. But mainly it flows on, and the majority, flowing with it, never waken to inquire *why*—why in the name of health, comfort, beauty and economy they should wear what they do wear.

Of any beast or bird, fish, reptile or insect, we may tell the reason he wears

fur, scales or feathers—any or all of them. The habitat of the creature, what he does for his living, the kind of enemies he has, and the critical taste of the female—these explain his clothing fully and rationally. But no such simple suggestions explain ours.

As to habitat—we carry with us a broadcloth evening suit to tropics, arctics and all between. Kipling tells of a worthy Englishman engaged in forestry, living alone at a remote Himalayan station, who used religiously to dress for dinner, "to maintain his self-respect!"

That respect for kings or policemen should require some symbolism or regalia to keep it up is within bounds of reason; but that a man's respect for his own self—that innermost personality known to none besides, and not fully known perhaps to him—should be sustained by so remote an objectivity as this is wondrous strange.

The processes of labor have some modifying force upon our garments, but not much, for we see the weaker bodies of women more cumbrously dressed, and man's proud coat good only to be taken off as soon as he has anything to do. As for our enemies—man's only animal enemies worth counting to-day are vermin and microbes—and his clothes give a premium to both.

The unwashed woolens, in which we flock together, elbow to elbow, shoulder to shoulder, or hip to haunch, as Browning has it, are tangled forests, warm and fertile, for the reception, culture and free exchange of all manner of teeming bacilli. One may come home from car or ferry boat with a lively assortment of virulent diseases—diphtheria germs and pneumonia, measles, scarlet fever or la grippe—and distribute the same to one's loving family by means of these clothes of ours, which seem built to foster our enemies.

And as to the esthetic discrimination of the female—that power which has filled the animal world with beauty, which gives us the glory of the peacock and pheasant and bird of paradise—to what strange depths has this fine influence sunk that the human male should slouch in indiscrimate [sic] uniform of black and its mongrel shades, and hide his vigorous outlines in stiff sheathing that fits scarce better than a caddice worm's? So far from following the simple laws which clothe the lower animals we seem to dress ourselves in direct defiance of their dictates.

Is there one law of life going deeper than that of reproduction?

Whatever else may change and rebel, would it not seem that to this primal function all superficial things must bow? Yet human clothing not only ignores motherhood, but militates against it seriously. The mother should be of all things strong—a full, fine type of species, that the race may steadily improve.

Yet we so dress as to impede and injure the activities of ours, to check her growth, to make her a soft, awkward, disproportionate thing, a constant detriment to the upbuilding of the race.

What fools would farmers be who so corseted their cows as to check the milk supply, or so weighed down the hen with saddleclothes that she laid scant, dwindling eggs! How, then, has it come to pass that the human mother is so swaddled and weighted that the balanced dignity of the noblest of all animals is made a hobbling mockery, short-legged, thick-hipped, over-fleshed and feeble-bodied!

Take the one article of shoes, and marvel more than elsewhere, perhaps, at the footwear of the world.

Feet may vary as between individuals, and vary individually from youth to age, but they do not vary, in given individuals, from year to year; yet shoes vary in shape from year to year, and we are politely offered a different kind of shoe from that which fitted us the year before, on the ground that this shape is "the style" to-day.

That hats should change is not remarkable—most conspicuous objects, under no limitation but the power of the wearer to carry them; but shoes—shoes, which are least visible and most useful, on which our comfort and free action depends more than on any other one garment—that any power should force on rational men a fluctuating shoe for an unchanging foot is a thing to wonder at. Yet so sodden are we in our indifference, so mentally supine, so accustomed to a submission as of Russian serfs, that we force our unwilling feet into unyielding compresses of leather, now this shape and now that, as fashion changes; and add bills of the chiropodist and seller of liniments to those of the overruling shoemaker.

In medieval ghettos the shamed Jew must wear a yellow robe, willy-nilly, to mark him as a thing apart. In modern cities the proud lady wears robes of brown and burnt orange, or of green, blue, violet, indigo, and all additions to our fabricated rainbow, because "this year they are wearing it"! And there is no more to be said. You may hear complaint, many voiced, from the sufferers. When tight sleeves restricted us or big sleeves inflated us, when the tape-tied "pull-back" showed every line of the body in front, or the intentional pull forward of the recent skin-tight skirt showed every line in the rear, when hats hang over our noses or block the vision of all behind us, many there [sic] be who complain with bitterness, but there is no deliverer.

Those who most strenuously rebel against women's clothes fly for relief to those of men ; but the clothing of men is none so perfect that we should imitate it.

That mark of manly freedom, the trouser, is so constructed that the wearer cannot so much as sit down without straining it at the knees, and if he squat sharply there is likely to be work for the job tailor. Moreover, these ugly garments, hiding the natural shape, must needs have a conventional outline of their own and be laboriously pressed and hung up by the heels in pincers to keep this artificial shape. Now, why should it be held beautiful to have the front of a man's leg seem to call for a paper cutter? Men's clothing is heavy and hot, and so confessedly uncomfortable that in the free-mannered West the coat comes off with the hat on entering the home. "Dressing gown and slippers" the tired man puts on when sitting down to lounge and rest, his coat and shoes being a weariness to the flesh.

One supremacy there is in man's clothing, the importance of which has been often noted, but never sufficiently—namely, its adaptation to pockets.

Women have from time to time carried bags, sometimes sewn in, sometimes tied on, sometimes brandished in the hand; but a bag is not a pocket.

If your bag be small and holds but a few things it is of little use; if it be large and holds many things there is much trouble in finding the article wanted. Pockets, in the masculine sense, are trim, flat, vertical pouches, keeping their shape and place so that the accustomed hand can fly to them instinctively. There was a time some years ago when women were allowed a rearward pocket at the closing of the skirt, and the way their hands "flew to them" and soared and hovered and swooped in vain was a subject of much mirth.

The man's pockets remain alike in size, shape and position, while the clothes change around them. In their number and variety comes that easy carriage of small articles which adds so much to the preparedness of men as compared to women.

A human being is not finished off with its own teeth and claws, as are the lesser creatures. Our efficaciousness, happiness and comfort depend on the instant presence of various small objects.

The one personal necessity that no one can omit is the pocket handkerchief. By the way, will not some practical philologist make us a new name, less German and cumbrous, for this object? If it must be a clumsy, compound word, why not frankly call it "nose-cloth," which it is. From what dark ages of coif and wimple, when the headcover was snatched off to dry tears withal, and that so frequently in the sad lives of women that an extra one was carried in the hand, has this inadequate term come down! Language as well as costume is saddled with age-old habits, and both will be easier to carry when they throw them off.

To call a piece of linen used to wipe the nose a pocket-hand-head-cover is no credit to our intelligence ; neither is it that the woman has no place to put even this essential, but tucks it up her sleeve, in her blouse, or belt, and drops it everywhere for men to gallantly pick up. A glove is prettier for this purpose.

Possibly as necessary as this is one other thing—money; but for this, too, the woman has no place. She may tuck her carfare in her glove, or tie it in the corner of her handkerchief, or swing it boldly from the hand in an ornamental little bag, but she has no place to put it, safe and convenient. The man has place for dozens of things, pencils, pens, knives, pocketbooks, and the easy assurance

of all these small articles is a larger advantage than we realize.

I have heard coquettish ladies boast that they did not need to cumber themselves with these things—that a man should be at hand to carry such for them.

The point is whether these objects are of real use and necessity. I should hate to have a man, however devoted, carry my teeth for me.

As it is, the pocketless woman is so the more dependent on the pocketed man; and he, easily assuming that pockets are a masculine characteristic, is pleased to have it so. Whereas, if you come down to real pockets as a distinguishing characteristic of sex, why, it is Mrs. Kangaroo who has the pocket, and Mrs. Cirripede, too—she carries her husbands in them. We are a long way from that, and our pockets are quite otherwise derived.

The reason men need them is because of the more varied nature of their industry; and the reason they can have them is because of the strong substance and uniform character of their clothes. As to why their clothes are thus and so this article does but inquire.

One would think, using plain reason superficially, that the sex considered weaker would dress lighter; the more sensitive, dress warmer; the more widely varying, more diversely, and so on. But the instant contradiction of these assumptions by the facts shows that there is need for far deeper study. Why again, since the hair of women is held a crown and ornament, should she by way of decoration cover it? And [sic] since the hair of men cropped like a convict's can never do better than to reveal a well shaped head, and often cannot do that—why should they, by way of devotion, uncover it?

Why is “divine service” especially held to require that the bald man exhibit his baldness and the crowned woman hide her crown?

And, further, since men wear hats so much more than women, and cannot stir out of doors without them, while women freely stroll and chat, hatless, in all weathers, what is the reason that these same women will sit solemnly through an indoor function with hats on—to the grievous incommoding of one another?

And as to glories—much poetry has been written about the beauty of a woman’s hand ; much time and care is spent to keep that hand in proper shape and color—from the henna of the ancients to the manicure of to-day—and jewels of price are placed upon it in decoration and symbolic display; why, then, should we slay a young goat, skin it, make of its hide a little leather bag, many fingered, and carefully conceal our hands in it? One would almost as much expect a complete mask as the last touch of a toilet as this swathed and muffled hand.

These are but questions.

The subject, tho simple enough if we abjectly bow to our dictators and wear what “they” tell us, is so complex when studied as to call for most serious treatment.

Surely the modern American, the revolter from tradition and elect leader of progress, might be justified in rebellion against this hoary pile of ancient custom. The vermiform appendix shrinks slowly away within us, and we cannot hasten its departure ; but we might refuse to carry on our persons the dwindling rudiments of clothing customs pertaining to the ancient dead.

New York City.

IV. 2. 4

Perché questi abiti?

PERCHE' QUESTI ABITI?

Di

Charlotte Perkins Gilman

L'efficienza del cervello nel suo agire è premiante e illuminante. Non spreca neanche una cellula della sua energia cerebrale; non serve ricorrere alla Corte Suprema se i tribunali sono efficienti. Le nostre scelte, rapidamente ed inavvertitamente, si liberano dall'oneroso campo delle decisioni per ridursi ad abitudini—il che richiede molto meno sforzo.

Ma non è tutto. Questi nostri tribunali così impegnati, adottano e portano avanti più di un'abitudine che non è mai stata sottoposta alla nostra attenzione per una scelta consapevole; potremmo scoprire, soffermandoci per caso su questo governo delegato, quanto la mole di danni inaspettati e il caos di inutili tradizioni somiglino ad un'obsoleta satrapia[68] dell'antico Oriente.

Quest'abitudine di delegare è un processo saggio e vantaggioso, senza il quale potremmo a mala pena sopravvivere un giorno tra le infinite e complicate attività della vita moderna; ma necessita di un controllo periodico da parte del governatore nel caso che un sostituto irresponsabile cerchi di prendersi gioco di noi o provochi, a noi e ad altri, danni ancor peggiori.

[68] Il termine "satrapia" si riferisce al nome delle circoscrizioni amministrative (venti in origine), ciascuna governata da un satrapo investito anche di funzioni militari, in cui fu diviso l'impero persiano dal re Dario I verso la fine del 6° sec. a. C.; pur con mutamenti territoriali, furono conservate sia dopo la conquista dell'Asia per opera di Alessandro Magno (333 a. C.), sia in epoca posteriore.

Se ci venisse richiesto, anche una volta all'anno, di decidere da soli cosa dovremmo indossare, di valutare e trovare un equilibrio tra le tendenze contrastanti che culminano in un cappotto, in una gonna, o in un paio di scarpe, ciò si rivelerebbe un impegno troppo oneroso per le nostre già esigue riserve di energia cerebrale che accumuliamo così lentamente.

Meglio, probabilmente, continuare ad inchinarci, come l'erba sulle sponde dei fiumi, alla corrente della moda che viene, non si sa bene da dove, avvolge i nostri corpi per un attimo e scompare misteriosamente come è venuta. Il vestire è una necessità sociale, non un bisogno personale. Una persona isolata non ha bisogno di abiti e non può nemmeno crearli, ma la collettività li richiede, li crea e li distribuisce, con poco più che un borbottio da parte dei più ribelli.

Oggi indossiamo questo, domani quello, ieri quell'altro, e, la massima espressione del libero arbitrio in questa marea di tessuti preordinati, è una timida richiesta, rivolta a qualche sarto, riguardante minuzie di taglio e colore.

Di tanto in tanto, qualcuno ha manifestato accenni di rivolta su questioni specifiche. Capita, talvolta, che una donna si lamenti del dolore alla schiena provocatole dallo strascico della gonna, o che un uomo si lamenti di quanto siano brutti i pantaloni; eppure, una ristretta cerchia di esteti continua a sostenere, con perseverante eroismo, che gli abiti femminili debbano trascinarsi dalle scapole in giù.

Qua e là, nell'ampia ed incontrollata corrente, si possono vedere, fluttuanti come insetti a pelo d'acqua, le persone che indossano ciò che più gli piace, e sporadiche increspature causate da chi porta gonne più corte, da chi appende le spalline al chiodo, o da chi detesta le camicie inamidate. Ma nel complesso la corrente continua a scorrere e, la maggior parte delle persone scorre con essa,

senza mai destarsi e chiedersi *perché*—perché in nome della salute, del benessere, della bellezza e dell'efficienza, debbano indossare ciò che indossano.

Di qualsiasi animale, volatile, pesce, rettile o insetto, potremmo spiegare il perché questi abbiano il pelo, le squame, o le piume—di tutti o di alcuni almeno. L'habitat di ogni creatura, ciò che fa per sopravvivere, il tipo di nemici che ha e il gusto esigente della femmina—ciò, spiega il suo abito in modo esaustivo e razionale. Ma non vi è ragione così semplice che spieghi il nostro.

A proposito dell'habitat—noi ci portiamo dietro pregiati abiti da sera ai tropici, ai poli, e in tutti i paesi che ci stanno in mezzo. Kipling racconta di un nobile gentiluomo inglese impegnato nella salvaguardia delle foreste e ritiratosi a vivere solo nella remota Himalaya, il quale era solito indossare, quasi religiosamente, abiti eleganti a cena per "mantenere alta la sua autostima!"[69]

Che il rispetto per i re o gli agenti di polizia richieda un qualche simbolo o paramento per mantenersi alto è comprensibile; ma che il rispetto di un uomo per se stesso—quel lato profondo della personalità che nessuno conosce e del quale forse nemmeno lui stesso è pienamente consapevole—debba essere confermato da un'oggettività così remota, è sorprendentemente strano.

Le attività quotidiane hanno un discreto potere nel modificare i nostri abiti; ma non molto, dal momento che vediamo i deboli corpi femminili avvolti in abiti ingombranti e il bel cappotto di un uomo, buono solo per essere tolto non appena egli abbia qualcosa da fare. A proposito dei nostri nemici—gli unici nemici animali dell'uomo che valga la pena nominare al giorno d'oggi sono microbi e parassiti—e gli abiti li superano di gran lunga entrambi.

[69] Si noti che l'intero passaggio è riportato anche in "The Christian Work and The Evangelist", volume 78 (1905), conservato alla Yale Library.

Gli indumenti di lana non lavati, con i quali ci accalchiamo l'uno addosso all'altro, gomito a gomito, spalla a spalla, o fianco a fianco[70], come scrive Browning, sono foreste aggrovigliate, terreno caldo e fertile per l'accoglienza, la proliferazione e il libero scambio di bacilli di ogni sorta. Ognuno di noi potrebbe tornare a casa, dopo essere stato in tram o in traghetto, con un vivace assortimento di malattie virali—microbi della difterite, polmonite, morbillo, o influenza—e contagiare la sua amata famiglia attraverso questi nostri abiti, che sembrano creati apposta per accogliere i nostri nemici.

Per quanto riguarda la discriminazione estetica della femmina—quel potere che ha reso il mondo animale così bello, che ci regala lo splendore del pavone, del fagiano, e dell'uccello del paradiso—quanto in profondità è caduta quest' influenza positiva che il maschio umano debba ciondolarsi in indiscriminate uniformi nella tonalità del nero e tutte le sue sfumature, e nascondere il suo profilo vigoroso in una guaina rigida che gli dona poco più di quanto donerebbe ad una larva? Ben lontani dal seguire le semplici regole che seguono gli animali, sembra che i nostri abiti siano una vera e propria sfida alle loro norme.

Esiste una legge vitale più importante della riproduzione?

Per quanto tutto il resto possa cambiare e ribellarsi, non sembra che tutte le cose superficiali debbano inchinarsi davanti a questa funzione primaria? Eppure, l'abbigliamento umano non solo ignora la maternità, ma le fa davvero la guerra. La madre innanzitutto deve essere forte—un assoluto buon esempio, in modo che la specie possa migliorarsi costantemente.

[70] Questa espressione è tratta da *Fra Lippo Lippi* di Robert Browning. Il passaggio originale è: "Tell you, I liked your looks at very first. / Let's sit and set things straight now, hip to haunch." Francesco Rognoni traduce: "Ve lo dico, mi siete sempre piaciuto. / Mettiamoci a sedere, fianco a fianco, e sistemiamo tutto ora."

Eppure ci vestiamo come se dovessimo ostacolare e danneggiare le nostre attività, e tenere sotto controllo la crescita della donna, vestendola come una cosa delicata, strana e sproporzionata, un danno costante per lo sviluppo della specie. Quanto ottusi sarebbero i contadini che costringessero così le loro vacche, come in un corsetto, per controllare la produzione di latte, o che appesantissero le loro galline con gualdrappe, causando la diminuzione della produzione di uova! Com'è stato possibile, quindi, che la madre sia stata così fasciata e appesantita tanto che l'equilibrata dignità della più nobile degli animali sia diventata una storpiata caricatura con le gambe corte, i fianchi larghi, un fisico debole e troppo in carne!

Prendiamo le scarpe, e, forse, rimarremo stupefatti più che mai di fronte alle calzature di oggi.

Il piede varia da persona a persona, cambia individualmente dalla giovinezza all'età adulta, ma non varia nella stessa persona di anno in anno; eppure, la forma della scarpa cambia ogni anno, e ci viene proposto un tipo di calzatura diverso da quello che ci andava bene l'anno prima, in base a ciò che "va di moda" oggi.

Che i cappelli cambino non è un fatto strano—sono oggetti più vistosi e non sono soggetti a limitazioni, se non alla capacità di chi li indossa di portarli; ma le scarpe—le scarpe, che sono meno visibili e più utili, dalle quali dipende, più che da ogni altro indumento, la nostra comodità e libertà di movimento—che un qualsiasi fattore debba imporre a un uomo razionale una scarpa che cambia per un piede che rimane invariato, è un fatto su cui riflettere. Eppure, siamo così pregni nella nostra indifferenza, così mentalmente passivi, così abituati a sottometterci come fossimo servi della gleba russi, che forziamo i nostri poveri

piedi in compresse di cuoio rigido, ora di una forma ora di un'altra, a seconda di come cambia la moda; si aggiungano poi, oltre al conto del calzolaio, il conto del callista e delle pomate che usiamo per alleviare il dolore.

Nei ghetti medievali gli ebrei peccatori, volenti o nolenti, erano costretti a portare una veste gialla per distinguersi dagli altri. Nelle città moderne, le signore, orgogliose, indossano abiti nei toni del marrone e arancione scuro, del verde, del blu, del viola, dell'indaco e di tutti i colori che l'arcobaleno tessile ci può offrire, perché "quest'anno vanno"! E non c'è altro da aggiungere. Talvolta si possono udire lamenti e mormorii dai sofferenti. Quando le maniche aderenti ci stringevano o quelle larghe ci gonfiavano, quando il nastro in vita "stretto stretto" mostrava ogni dettaglio della nostra figura anteriore, oppure quando, quel nuovo tipo di gonne così attillate e che tirano in avanti, mostravano ogni dettaglio della nostra figura posteriore, quando i cappelli ci pendono sul naso o impediscono la visuale a tutti coloro che si trovano dietro di noi; allora, saranno in molti a lamentarsi duramente, ma non c'è chi li possa salvare.

Tutte coloro che si battono strenuamente contro gli abiti femminili corrono a cercare riparo negli abiti maschili; ma l'abito maschile non è poi così perfetto da essere imitato.

Il pantalone, simbolo della libertà maschile, viene cucito in modo tale che chi lo indossa, non può sedersi se non sollevandolo leggermente all'altezza del ginocchio e, nel caso si accovacciasse bruscamente, darebbe al sarto un gran lavoro da fare. Inoltre, questo brutto indumento, nasconde la forma naturale del corpo perché segue forme convenzionali, richiede una grande attenzione nel ripiegarlo, e va appeso dai talloni con delle pinze perché mantenga la sua forma

artificiale. Ora, perché dovrebbe essere bello vedere il davanti della gamba di un uomo che sembra necessitare immediatamente di un taglia carte? Gli abiti maschili sono pesanti, caldi e così dichiaratamente scomodi che nell'Ovest, libero dai dettami dell'etichetta, il cappotto viene tolto insieme al cappello non appena si entra in casa. L'uomo stanco, quando si riposa in salotto, indossa "vestaglia e pantofole" e non cappotto e scarpe, che sono causa di affaticamento.

Un primato c'è, nell'abbigliamento maschile, la cui importanza è stata spesso, ma non sufficientemente, presa in considerazione—ossia, che si adatta ad avere le tasche.

Le donne, di tanto in tanto, hanno portato le borse, talvolta cucite, talvolta legate, talvolta a mano; ma una borsa non è una tasca.

Se la borsa è piccola e può contenere soltanto pochi oggetti, è pressoché inutile; se invece è grande e ne può contenere molti, ci renderà difficile trovare quello che vogliamo. Le tasche da uomo, piatte, sagomate e tagliate verticalmente, mantengono la loro forma e il loro posto in modo che, la mano abituata, ci si possa infilare dentro istintivamente. Anni fa, alle donne era concesso avere una tasca posteriore sulla chiusura della gonna e, il modo in cui le loro mani "la cercavano" e vi rovistavano e frugavano invano, era motivo di assoluta ilarità.

Le tasche degli uomini rimangono inalterate nella misura, nella forma e nella posizione, mentre l'abito cambia attorno a loro. Grazie alla loro quantità e varietà, è facile portare con sé piccoli oggetti che danno un valore aggiunto alla prontezza maschile rispetto a quella femminile.

Un essere umano non si può considerare completo, come lo è un animale, soltanto con la dentatura e gli artigli. La nostra efficienza, la nostra felicità e il nostro benessere, dipendono dall'immediata presenza di molti piccoli oggetti.

L'unica necessità personale di cui nessuno può fare a meno è il fazzoletto.[71] A proposito, un filologo pratico non potrebbe crearci un nome nuovo, meno tedesco[72] e gravoso, per quest'oggetto? Se deve essere per forza una parola composta e un po' goffa, perché non chiamarlo schiettamente "pezza da naso", quale è. E' dai tempi antichi della papalina e del soggolo, quando il copricapo era usato anche per asciugare le lacrime, cosa che avveniva così spesso nelle misere vite delle donne che ne serviva uno in più da tenere in mano, che questo termine inadatto è arrivato fino a noi! Il linguaggio,come il costume, è appesantito da abitudini secolari, ed entrambi saranno più leggeri da portare quando se ne sbarazzeranno.

Chiamare un pezzo di lino, usato per soffiarsi il naso, un copri-testa-mano da tasca[73] non è un vanto per la nostra intelligenza; e non lo è nemmeno il fatto che la donna non abbia un posto in cui mettere perfino quest'oggetto indispensabile, ma se lo infili nella manica, nella camicetta, o nella cintura, e lo lasci cadere ovunque per gli uomini che, per galanteria, lo devono raccogliere. Un guanto è più grazioso per questo scopo.

[71] In inglese "handkerchief". E' da questo termine che deriva la riflessione seguente di Gilman sulla complessità della parola.

[72] In realtà il termine, composto da "hand" e "kerchief", deriva dal francese antico "cuevrechief", formato da "covrir" che significa "coprire" e "chief" che significa "testa". Originariamente "kerchief" indicava un tessuto per coprire la testa, al quale, in inglese, è stato aggiunto "hand" per indicare il fazzoletto per soffiarsi il naso. E' possibile che Gilman scrivendo "tedesco" si riferisca al suono della parola.

[73] Nell'originale: "pocket-hand-head-cover"; in inglese la parola, così scomposta, rispecchia la struttura di "pocket handkerchief", ossia "pocket-hand-ker-chief". Ho cercato di mantenere la stessa struttura anche in italiano.

Probabilmente un'altra cosa è altrettanto necessaria—il denaro; ma, anche per questo la donna non ha posto. Potrebbe infilarsi il denaro necessario per la tariffa del tram nel guanto, o legarlo ad un angolo del fazzoletto, o lasciarlo intravedere sfacciatamente dalla piccola borsetta che tiene in mano, ma non ha un posto, sicuro e conveniente, in cui riporlo. L'uomo ha spazio per almeno una dozzina di oggetti, matite, penne, coltellini, libretti tascabili e, la sicurezza che gli danno tutte queste piccole cose, è un vantaggio molto più significativo di quanto possiamo immaginare.

Ho sentito delle signore civettuole vantarsi del fatto che non avevano bisogno di appesantirsi con questi oggetti—che ci deve essere un uomo a portata di mano che se ne accolli il peso.

Il punto è se questi oggetti siano davvero utili e necessari. Io odierei avere un uomo, per quanto devoto, che si portasse dietro i miei denti al posto mio.

Per come stanno le cose, la donna senza tasche è quindi più dipendente dall'uomo che ha le tasche; egli, quindi, convinto che le tasche siano una prerogativa maschile, se ne compiace. Al contrario, se si arriva alla conclusione che le tasche siano una caratteristica distintiva di genere, perché, è la signora Canguro che possiede le tasche, come anche la signora Cirripede—e ci porta il marito dentro?[74] Noi siamo molto lontani da tutto ciò e, le nostre tasche ,sono molto diverse dalle loro.

La ragione per cui gli uomini ne hanno bisogno dipende dalla natura più variegata del loro lavoro; e il motivo per cui loro le possono avere dipende dalla concreta sostanza e dall'uniformità dei loro abiti. Per quanto riguarda il perché i loro abiti, e quindi le loro tasche, siano così, è ancora da chiarire.

[74] Il punto interrogativo è stato aggiunto da me. La frase originale non è in forma interrogativa, ma in italiano la struttura della frase è resa meglio in questa forma.

Qualcuno potrebbe pensare, ragionando superficialmente, che il sesso considerato più debole debba indossare abiti più leggeri; le più delicate abiti più caldi, quelle che si cambiano più spesso, abiti sempre diversi, e così via. Ma l'immediata contraddizione in questo ragionamento, dimostrata dai fatti, mostra la necessità di una riflessione molto più profonda. Inoltre, dal momento che i capelli della donna sono considerati come una corona e un ornamento, perché dovrebbe ella, per motivi di decoro, coprirli? E, dal momento che i capelli degli uomini, tagliati corti come quelli di un di un detenuto, non possono fare di meglio che mostrare un capo ben formato, cosa che spesso non avviene—perché dovrebbero essi, per motivi di osservanza religiosa, scoprirli?

Perché il "servizio divino" appositamente richiede all'uomo calvo di esibire la sua calvizie e alla donna, incoronata, di coprire la sua corona?

E ancora, siccome gli uomini portano il cappello molto più spesso delle donne, e non possono uscire senza indossarlo, mentre le donne passeggiano e conversano liberamente, all'aperto con qualsiasi tempo, senza cappello, qual è la ragione per cui queste stesse donne debbano stare solennemente composte ad una funzione che si svolge al chiuso, tenendo il cappello addosso—terribilmente fastidioso sia per lei che per gli altri?

Quanto agli onori—molta poesia è stata scritta sulla bellezza della mano femminile; molto tempo e cura sono stati spesi per mantenere la perfezione di quella mano nella forma e nel colore—dall'henné dei popoli antichi alla manicure di oggi—e gioielli di valore la adornano per motivi ornamentali e di simbolica ostentazione; dunque, perché mai uccidiamo una capretta, la scuoiamo, dalla sua pelle ricaviamo un manicotto e ci nascondiamo accuratamente le mani dentro? Parallelamente al modo in cui questa mano è

avvolta e fasciata, ci si aspetterebbe d'indossare quasi una vera e propria maschera come fosse questo il tocco finale di una toilette.[75]

Queste non sono altro che domande.

La questione, per quanto abbastanza semplice se ci inchiniamo sommessamente di fronte ai nostri dittatori e indossiamo ciò che "loro" ci dicono di indossare, diventa molto complessa quando la si studia, richiamandoci ad un esame più accurato.

Senza dubbio, l'Americano moderno, che insorge contro la tradizione e si elegge a leader del progresso, potrebbe essere giustificato nel ribellarsi contro questa miriade di abitudini antiche e obsolete. L'appendice vermiforme[76] si restringe lentamente dentro di noi, e noi non possiamo accelerarne la partenza; però potremmo rifiutare di portarci addosso gli affievoliti rudimenti degli antichi abiti dei morti.

New York City.

[75] Il termine deriva dal francese e indica, con riferimento ad una donna, il complesso di operazioni necessarie per l'igiene del corpo, l'abbigliamento, l'acconciatura e il trucco. In una accezione più specifica indica un abito e un'acconciatura femminile molto elegante.

[76] L'appendice vermiforme, detta anche appendice cecale, è un termine usato in anatomia per indicare il prolungamento cilindrico dell'intestino cieco. E' conosciuta comunemente come appendice.

IV. 2. 5

Symbolism in Dress.

SYMBOLISM IN DRESS[77]

By

Charlotte Perkins Gilman

There are many elements combined in the most ordinary article of clothing; long-drawn strains of slowly dying influence from ancient times, young shoots born of new conditions, a body of persistent commonplace necessities, and, over it all, a kinetoscope flicker of evanescent "style."

As a typical garment for this study none is more perfect than the shirt. The shirt is indeed the typical garment ; from it in its first vague forms have been evolved all clothing for the body except what has crept up from the feet, as moccasins, leggings and trousers. Our remote ancestors, wrapping themselves in the hides of their prey, found a large piece of leather, however daintily "dressed" by the patiently chewing women, a clumsy thing to keep on the body. They tied it with thongs and pinned it with thorns, and some bright genius finally cut a hole in it and stuck his head through. This was a great step and introduced the poncho, still in fashion in South America, and an excellent garment for horseback riding in the rain.

[77] Charlotte Perkins Gilman Collection, Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College. Collection 177, folder 250, seq. 74.

There remained much unnecessary bulk about the waist, even when tied in; so another fertile mind, holding his arms out straight sideways, while the flat hide fell before and behind him, had large pieces cut out from the space between arms and side, sewed up the edges of what remained, and the shirt was born.

This body-garment put on over the head is liable to innumerable varieties of development and may be traced through them in the history of dress.

It grew longer and longer, under influences of luxury and idleness, and the symbolism of dignity and display, forming the robe and gown in all their myriad shapes ; and was cut in two to make the petticoat. Its sleeves have trailed voluminously, pinched and bagged and puffed stiffly out, shrunk and shortened and disappeared to a shadowy shoulder strap, and the upper part has been cut away well nigh to the waist in women's exhibition clothes; but the shirt is still the parent type for all this variation. It has survived through all the ages; fashion again and again has left man “stripped to his shirt,” but always left him that. There is no lesser garment unless it is a pair of bathing tights. This venerable article, still useful, even indispensable, one would suppose to be as free from casual influences as any, as legitimately governed by the practical necessities of human clothing. These are obvious :

First, protection, as against cold, wet and friction or worse attack, and second, modesty. These, with economic limitations and changes to suit local needs, would seem to be enough to govern a shirt, and where the shirt is wholly invisible they are. An undershirt is a purely personal garment, giving a soft, warm, decorous covering, comfortable to the wearer, and blameless—save sometimes for its price. This, like the inner lining of the chestnut burr or the

soft skin of an egg, is delicately suited to its uses. Where it is the only shirt, or at least the principal one and often visible, as in some classes of labor, it becomes somewhat heavier and more resisting—outside wear being now a condition as well as inside warmth—but in general it is a gentle and satisfying garment.

Not so the shirt proper, the shirt of commerce, the shirt which is a signboard and visiting card far more than a garment.

Since the undershirt was adopted and became the legitimate garment, doing the shirt's work perfectly, the cotton or linen simulacrum outside was exempt from the pressure of legitimate needs, and left free to vary under the force of quite different influences.

There are several strong modifying forces constantly playing upon our garments, and only a strict obedience to necessity saves any of them for normal use. Once absolved, even partially, from that use, and there are no limits to the freaks of our clothing. There is the decorative impulse, apparently earlier than even modesty in savage tribes, and the instinct of display, the "conspicuous consumption" of Veblen; besides the real symbolism which is neither one nor the other.

As symbolism pure and simple we wear mourning, or at least women do. That men do not is because their clothes are so much more directly governed by use and they are so much more important members of society. We could not afford to have our motormen wear long crape veils. Fancy a court room with the judge covered as if about to be hanged! Fancy a railroad conductor coming down the aisle with a heavy black veil on! Fancy your butcher cutting chops with this somber drapery over his extremely necessary white apron! Fancy any

human being of any sort of use cumbering his necessary activities with “the trappings of wo”! He could not afford it. We could not afford to have it. He reduces his symbolic grief to a hatband and strip about the sleeve, black gloves and tie, if he is well-to-do and punctilious, and his grief is just as real as if he were an ancient Hebrew rending his garments and defiling his hair with ashes.

But women, who are not generally members of society at all, but only members of the family, preserve in that primitive status the primitive habits which belong to its heydey, the patriarchal era, and change the questionable reason of their usual clothes into the unquestionable folly of symbolic mourning.

If they feel the need of advertising their distress, why not do it in the papers : “Mrs. A. A. Johnsmith, widow, wishes to announce that she is prostrated with grief to the extent of $3 a yard—and 27 yards. Ohio papers please copy.” The reign of symbolism even in our age of airships is still strong.

To return to our shirt, our “boiled shirt,” deputizing its primal use to the undershirt, and becoming not a necessary garment, but “the mark of a gentleman.”

Its first essential, cleanness, especially cleanness of the exhibitable parts, is far more a proof of good taste and ability to pay laundry bills than any personal delicacy, for these same exhibitable parts are not, like the undershirt, in contact with the body, nor, like the coat, in contact with all manner of outside dirt.

A woolen coat, thick, heavy, dark colored, is worn for a year, two years, three years—a good overcoat for many years—without washing. The dust falls on it, the rain wets it and the dirt soaks in; it is rubbed against the coats of other

men equally long-suffering; if it was white at first it would look as foul as a mujik's sheepskin. Little care we. It does not "show."

Neither does the undershirt. That is the garment that cries for washing. But there are two or three or more outer for one under in the average wash. The white shirt with its snowy collar and cuffs symbolizes cleanliness—as the crape veil symbolizes grief. And what does the starch symbolize?

Starch has nothing to do with modesty and little with protection. A starched fabric would resist light friction, as a cotton skirt among bushes, for instance, better than when unstarched; but a man's shirt front meets no friction whatever. It may be a trifle warmer, serving as a chest protector of a sort.

But our friend the motorman and natives of the North in general make no use of starch for warming purposes.

"It keeps clean longer," the wash-woman will tell you. This is true of an apron or petticoat, of the cuff and collar edges also, but has no bearing on the shirtfront.

That gleaming shield is also purely symbolic, giving an effect of metallic crispness far removed from the soft finish of textile fabrics, and helping to cry aloud the real song of the shirt, "I am clean!" The fineness of the linen—in a garment that does not touch the body—is but an evidence of delicate breeding and ability to pay; whereas the detachable collar and cuffs are a piece of "protective mimicry," to give the same effect of superiority in these points attained by the man who can afford to wash seven shirts a week.

There must be a noble satisfaction in the soul of the highminded and wealthy in wearing the self-collared and selfcuffed shirt ; noble but incommunicable— save in the confidence of private friendship.

The clothes of men originally were more symbolic than those of women. Among savages the “ceremonial costumes,” as the dress of the war dancer or the medicine man, are mostly confined to men's wear. In all the regalia still remaining to us, royal, legal, academic, military and official of any sort, we still find men wearing, with every appearance of satisfaction, a strictly symbolic costume. See the police officers of New York; their very bodies symbolic of a plethora of power, tho it is to be doubted if such gross weight adds to efficiency in service. The costume of these men is purely an official convention, almost as much so as that of soldiers.

“ The men that fought at Minden

They 'ad stocks beneath their chins

Six inches 'igh and more”;

and [sic] such throttling could in no way add to martial valor or activity, save spiritually.

If a given article of dress is held by a given tribe of savages or body of officials as indicative of something valuable they will proudly wear it, at any physical inconvenience. The tall hat of our times is as perfect an expression of this fact as could be given. Searching the history of costume, we find proud man forever seeking to add cubits to his stature. Priest and pope, king and emperor, all manner of magnates, looming large in their own minds and wishing to express this grandeur to the popular eye, they one and all erect a totem pole upon their heads as best they may.

There is hardly a race or time where this impulse does not find some expression; and we, who have lost so much—who may no longer glory in plumed helmets and towering crests of horsehair, who have left off crown,

coronet and tiara, cling desperately to the one dear remnant of former glories—the tall hat.

In general shape it follows an endless tradition. The Egyptian Pharaohs, Assyrian and Persian kings thus piled their heads.

And good Mr. Johnsmith, walking proudly in his shining “tile,” transmits a race impulse thousands of years old, with never a brain throb of criticism.

The monotony of men's hats is almost as unbroken as that of turbaned Moslems, and this in proportion to the degree of their civilization. As we revert to wilder earlier stages of social growth; or as some rebellious soul in himself demands a change, we find “soft hats” of various shapes: but in our greatest cities we wear a type of hat that would make a composite photograph nearly as clear as a single one. Perhaps some lingering echo of the armor period, when men's clothing was as of turtles and hedgehogs, still makes itself heard in this stiff headgear. Even the ivory shirtfront may be a faint reminiscence of the days when the steel corselet shone in the sunlight.

The racial mind is one unbroken current of transmitted impulse, and old feelings live long in it.

But if men's clothes are thus symbolic, what shall we say of women's?

If his life of a thousand activities has not yet eliminated many ancient dress-tendencies, what may we expect of hers, stationary and unvarying from the beginning of history?

We may look for symbolism nearly as dominant as in savagery; and we shall not be disappointed. The primitive instinct of decoration, once so dominant in men's clothes, is still dominant in women's and is sadly lacking in such civilized sense of beauty as should have long since elevated it. There is no

lower grade of this savage decorative instinct than that which mutilates and deforms the body, yet this is a custom still maintained among women.

Men, some men, sometimes compress the feet in an effort to symbolize gentility, and in the oldest masculine order—the military—in older countries than ours men actually wear corsets and "lace." Men's corsets are advertised in European newspapers. Also in low ranks of life men still tattoo and wear earrings. But women deliberately alter the shape of the body under the conviction that it is thus beautified; as some tribes make Dutch cheeses of their "calves," and other slit the nose or file the teeth.

It is a subtle and singular study, quite apart from any questions of hygiene, this using the body as a conventional shape to convey a feeling or idea, making a sort of ideograph of it ; a conventionalized symbol of a living form!

Seizing upon certain lines and proportions as distinctively feminine, they would out-feminize femininity by exaggerating them. Exactly the same principle is shown in the tailor who gives to the man a pair of stuffed epaulets to broaden his shoulders. It is masculine to have a broad chest and square shoulders—typically masculine. If the customer chance to lack these distinctions, tho he be as masculine as Marshal Saxe, the tailor sees to it that his garments shall symbolize his sex beyond dispute. So the dressmaker, not some one personally responsible dressmaker, but the too complacent exponent of the racial mind, as shown in dress, sees to it that the woman shall have a small waist and large hips, quite regardless of her protesting bones and body, because she must not only be, but symbolize, femininity. This tassel of tablecloths in which we walk, yards upon yards of varied materials—cotton, woolen and silk—a mass of folds inconvenient, uncomfortable, expensive,

laborious, and in every way interfering with bodily freedom and right growth; this dragging weight which makes women short-legged and thick-hipped, feeble as walkers and unable to run ; which adds to the effort of every step they take and handicaps them in every danger—almost sure death in accidents by fire or water—why do women wear these graveclothes-skirts ?

Absolutely and only as a matter of symbolism.

Local symbolism at that—for in Turkey and China, where women are nothing if not feminine, the skirt is not worn.

It has nothing to do with maternity, Charles Reade to the contrary notwithstanding; for the naked savage and the trousered Oriental are quite as competent in childbearing as we.

But we in our infinite wisdom have chosen to consider flowing raiment as symbolic of femininity, and, therefore, women wear it unresisting, from the less-filled cradle to the more-filled grave. As a matter of artistic symbolism it is true that lovely flowing robes do indicate leisure and dignity, and are so suitable for kings, priests and the learned professions.

Under this head both men and women will always be justified, on proper occasions, in draping the light, swift, mobile grace of the human body in the fluent folds of cloth, as we caparison a horse for proud processions.

This is no reason under heaven that she who is neither king, priest nor doctor in most cases, but mainly a hard-working house servant, should be so cruelly hampered.

At entertainments, in quiet evenings, when no exertion is required ; in the pulpit, on the platform, at the desk, wherever no physical action is needed and an effect of dignity is desired, long robes are beautiful.

But to trail on dirty streets or carry painfully in the hand, making one wish for a little cart like those tied to the fattailed sheep; to wear behind a counter, where every ounce of weight drags heavily on the aching back, or in the kitchen to catch grease and slop and scorch, or as we see them on poor draggled scrubwomen—dirty and unwholesome work made dirtier and more unwholesome by these wet trappings—in any sort of action skirts are a hindrance and an injury.

Yet as symbols we reverence and uphold them, as the Forty-niners raised their hats and hurrahed at sight of a woman's washing on a clothesline.

New York City.

IV. 2. 6

Il carattere simbolico dell'abito.

IL CARATTERE SIMBOLICO DELL'ABITO.

Di

Charlotte Perkins Gilman

Sono molti gli elementi che si combinano nel più comune articolo d'abbigliamento; eterni strascichi di influenze passate lente a morire, novità che sbocciano da nuove condizioni, un insieme di persistenti bisogni quotidiani e, oltre a questo, un guizzo cinetoscopico di "stile" evanescente.

Un articolo d'abbigliamento tipico, perfetto per questa riflessione, non può che essere la camicia. La camicia è l'indumento tipico nel vero senso della

parola; è dalle sue prime forme indefinite che si è evoluto tutto l'abbigliamento, tranne ciò che ha preso forma dai piedi, come i mocassini, le calze[78] e i pantaloni. I nostri antichi antenati, che si avvolgevano nelle pelli delle loro prede, ritenevano che un ampio lembo di cuoio, seppur finemente "lavorato" con pazienza dalle donne che lo masticavano[79], fosse piuttosto scomodo da indossare. Lo legavano con lacci di cuoio e lo fissavano con spine, finché una qualche mente geniale fece un buco e vi infilò la testa dentro. Questo fu un grande passo avanti che portò all'introduzione del poncho, ancora di moda in Sud-America, e perfetto per andare a cavallo sotto la pioggia.

Anche nei casi in cui il poncho fosse legato ai lati, rimaneva tessuto in eccesso sui fianchi; cosicché, un'altra mente fertile, tenendo le braccia aperte ai lati, e lasciando che la pelle gli cadesse piatta davanti e dietro, fece tagliare i grandi lembi tra le braccia e i fianchi e cucì i bordi del tessuto che rimaneva, dando così vita alla camicia.

Questo indumento che si indossa infilandoci la testa, è soggetto a innumerevoli trasformazioni e, attraverso di esse, lo si può ritrovare ripercorrendo la storia del costume.

[78] Il termine usato da Gilman è "leggings". I leggings erano un indumento originariamente maschile, usato soprattutto dai soldati in guerra come protezione sotto i pantaloni. Tra la fine dell'Ottocento e l'inizio del Novecento, nell'abbigliamento femminile si diffuse la calza da giorno, solitamente di pizzo o di maglia ricamata a mano o a macchina, da indossare sotto le voluminose gonne. Una variante dei leggings furono i "bloomers", destinati alle donne. I bloomers furono inventati da Amelia Bloomer attorno al 1850, ma non riuscirono ad imporsi nell'immaginario collettivo a causa della loro funzione: contrapponendosi alla tradizionale gonna, erano associati al movimento di riforma femminile in atto tra la metà dell'Ottocento e l'inizio del Novecento. Il leggins, come lo conosciamo oggi, si affermò definitivamente nella moda femminile negli anni Cinquanta, con il nome di fuseaux.

[79] Le donne, soprattutto nella tribù degli Inuit, masticavano le pelli prima di lavorarle e cucirle per renderle più morbide. Inoltre, a causa delle basse temperature che provocavano l'irrigidimento del cuoio, masticavano stivali e altri indumenti per renderli utilizzabili dall'uomo in procinto di partire per la caccia.

Divenne sempre più lungo, influenzato dal lusso, dall'ozio e dagli echi simbolici del privilegio e dell'ostentazione[80], dando vita ad abiti e vestiti in tutte le loro forme; fu poi tagliato a metà per creare il sottogonna. Le maniche sono diventate voluminose, a sbuffo, larghe e rigidamente gonfie, poi ristrette e accorciate fino a scomparire in una impercettibile spallina, e la parte superiore è stata rimossa all'altezza del busto negli abiti femminili da mettere in mostra; ma la camicia è sempre l'elemento base di tutte queste varianti. E' sopravvissuta a tutte le epoche; la moda, gira e rigira, "ha ridotto l'uomo in camicia"[81], ma quella non gliel'ha mai tolta. Non esiste indumento più basilare, a meno che non si tratti di calzoni da bagno. Si potrebbe supporre che questo rispettabile indumento, tuttora utile, perfino indispensabile, sia tanto esente da qualunque influenza superficiale, quanto legittimamente determinato dalle ragioni pratiche dell'abbigliamento umano, che sono ovvie:

In primo luogo, come protezione contro freddo, umidità, sfregamento o fattori peggiori e, in secondo luogo, semplicità. Queste, secondo limiti di natura economica e modifiche a seconda delle esigenze locali, sembrerebbero sufficienti a determinare l'uso della camicia, e lo sono quando la camicia è completamente invisibile. Una canottiera è un indumento strettamente personale e comodo per chi lo indossa, essendo morbida, calda e decorosa, ed è innocente—tranne talvolta per il prezzo. Questa, come il rivestimento interno del nocciolo della castagna o il guscio morbido di un uovo, si adatta

[80] Nell'originale: "the symbolism of dignity and display." Ho scelto di tradurre "echi simbolici del privilegio e dell'ostentazione" per rendere esplicito il concetto secondo cui tradizioni antiche e ormai sorpassate continuano ad influenzare l'abbigliamento, che dovrebbe invece conformarsi alle nuove necessità della vita moderna. Inoltre, si noti il legame tra questa espressione il concetto di "conspicuous consumption" di Veblen esposto nel secondo capitolo.
[81] Gilman scrive "stripped to his shirt". Questa frase potrebbe essere una citazione dal capitolo XXIII, intitolato "The Bishop Stripped to His Shirt" tratto da *The Irish in America*, scritto nel 1868 da John Francis Maguire.

delicatamente ad ogni suo uso. Quando è l'unico indumento, o quantomeno l'indumento principale e spesso in vista, come in certe classi operaie, diventa più pesante e resistente—essendo, qui, l'abbigliamento esterno tanto importante quanto il tepore interiore—ma generalmente è un indumento delicato e piacevole.

Ciò non vale per la camicia vera e propria, quella che si usa in ambito professionale[82]: la camicia che diventa l'esibizione di un marchio, e un biglietto da visita piuttosto che un capo d'abbigliamento.

Dal momento in cui fu introdotta la canottiera, che divenne l'indumento legittimo, svolgendo perfettamente il lavoro della camicia, il simulacro esterno di cotone o lino non fu più soggetto alla pressione delle necessità pratiche e si rese libero di cambiare secondo influenze piuttosto diverse.

Vi sono numerosi fattori che influiscono costantemente sui nostri indumenti e, soltanto una stretta obbedienza a ragioni di necessità, può rendere ragionevole il loro utilizzo. Una volta assolti, almeno parzialmente, da quell'uso, non vi è limite alla stravaganza del nostro abbigliamento. C'è l'impulso decorativo, apparentemente più importante perfino della semplicità nelle tribù selvagge, e l'istinto di ostentazione, il "consumo vistoso"[83] di Veblen; oltre al vero e proprio simbolismo che non è né l'uno né l'altro.

[82] Nell'originale: "the shirt of commerce." Ho tradotto "ambito professionale" perchè, dal mio punto di vista, Gilman non si riferisce alla camicia che si trova in commercio, ma proprio alla camicia usata dall'uomo nelle occasioni formali e professionali in quanto, come spiegato nel secondo capitolo, è lui che deve provvedere al mantenimento della famiglia. Infatti, la frase che segue è: "the shirt which is a signboard"; io ho tradotto: "esibizione di un marchio". Non ho tradotto "signboard" con "insegna pubblicitaria" perchè, mentre nella cultura americana il concetto di insegna pubblicitaria è immediatamente comprensibile, in italiano ho preferito rendere il concetto con la frase "esibizione di un marchio" per rafforzare il concetto di formalità, eleganza e professionalità di cui la camicia maschile doveva essere simbolo.

[83] Per un'analisi della teoria del "consumo vistoso", ossia "conspicuous consumption", vedere il capitolo secondo.

Come elemento simbolico puro e semplice indossiamo le gramaglie da lutto, o meglio, le donne le portano. Gli uomini non le indossano perché i loro abiti sono molto più direttamente governati da ragioni pratiche di utilizzo, e inoltre ricoprono posizioni di maggior rilievo in società. Non potremmo permettere che i nostri conducenti indossassero lunghe velette nere. Immaginatevi un'aula di tribunale con un giudice a volto coperto come se stesse per essere impiccato! Immaginatevi un controllore ferroviario che passa attraverso i sedili della carrozza con uno spesso velo nero addosso! Immaginatevi il vostro macellaio che taglia costolette con queste austere stoffe sopra il suo indispensabile grembiule bianco! Immaginatevi un qualsiasi essere umano, di qualsiasi utilità, impacciato nelle sue mansioni essenziali a causa di questi "drappi funerari"![84] Non se lo potrebbe permettere. Noi, non possiamo permettercelo. Egli limita il suo cordoglio simbolico ad una fettuccia sul cappello e un nastro sulla manica, guanti e cravatta nera, se è un uomo benestante e meticoloso, eppure il suo cordoglio è sentito esattamente come se fosse un antico Ebreo che lacera le sue vesti e si cosparge il capo di cenere.

Ma le donne, che generalmente non sono affatto membri della società, ma soltanto componenti della famiglia, mantengono quella condizione primitiva con abitudini primitive legate al passato glorioso, l'era patriarcale, e scambiano il discutibile buon senso dei loro abiti consueti, con l'indiscutibile follia del lutto simbolico.

[84] Nell'originale l'espressione usata è "the trappings of wo". Potrebbe essere una citazione da "Boyuca" di Robert Charles Sands: "long trails of seemingly charred weeds and creepers hung downwards, with the melancholy effect produced by the trappings of wo, used to decorate some antique chamber where dead pride was laid out in state, when revisited at long periods after the name of him in whose honor the mockery of mourning had been got up and passed into oblivion", p. 91

Se sentono il bisogno di manifestare la loro afflizione, perché non farlo sui giornali: "La signora A. A., vedova Johnsmith, desidera annunciare di essere prostrata dal dolore per 27 metri a 3 dollari al metro. Che i giornali dell'Ohio diffondano, per cortesia." Il potere dei simboli è ancora molto forte perfino nella nostra era del dirigibile.

Tornando alla camicia, la nostra "camicia inamidata"[85], che viene sostituita nel suo utilizzo originario dalla canottiera, diventa un indumento non indispensabile, ma "la firma del gentiluomo."

La sua caratteristica principale, la pulizia, specialmente la pulizia delle parti in vista, è molto più una prova di buon gusto e possibilità di pagare il conto della lavanderia, piuttosto che una qualsiasi delicatezza personale, in quanto, queste parti in vista non sono, come la canottiera, a diretto contatto con il corpo, ma nemmeno, come il cappotto, a contatto con la sporcizia esterna.

Un cappotto di lana resistente, spesso e scuro, si indossa per un anno, due anni, tre anni – un buon soprabito per molti anni – senza lavarlo. La polvere vi cade sopra, la pioggia lo bagna e la sporcizia vi penetra dentro; si strofina contro i cappotti, ugualmente mal ridotti, degli altri uomini; se all'inizio era bianco, sarà sozzo come le pelli di montone di un mujik[86]. Poco importa. Non si "vede."

Nemmeno la canottiera si vede. Quello, è l'indumento che supplica di essere lavato. In un lavaggio medio vi sono due, tre o più indumenti esterni per uno intimo. La camicia bianca, con colletto e polsini bianchi come la neve,

[85] Nell'originale "boiled shirt." Nella prima metà del XIX secolo comincia l'era della camicia lavabile, che, per ragioni igieniche si faceva bollire nel bucato.
[86] Il termine "mujik", o "muzhik", indica i contadini russi, generalmente prima del 1917, che non possedevano alcuna proprietà. E' usato per riferirsi a uomini molto poveri, talvolta anche con accezione dispregiativa.

simboleggia la pulizia – come il velo nero è simbolo di lutto. E l'amido, cosa simboleggia?

L'amido non ha niente a che vedere con la semplicità o la protezione. Un tessuto inamidato resisterebbe ad un leggero sfregamento, come una gonna di cotone tra i cespugli, ad esempio, meglio di quando non è inamidato; ma lo sparato[87] della camicia di un uomo non è sottoposto a sfregamenti di nessun genere. Potrà essere leggermente più caldo, in quanto serve come una specie di protezione per il petto.

Ma il nostro caro conducente e i nativi del Nord generalmente non utilizzano l'amido per riscaldarsi.

"Rimane pulita più a lungo," vi dirà la lavandaia. Questo è vero per un grembiule o un sottogonna, anche per i polsini e il colletto, ma ciò non vale per lo sparato.

Anche quello scudo lucente è puramente simbolico, perché da un effetto di freschezza artificiale ben lontano dalla morbida finitura delle stoffe, aiutando la camicia a gridare il suo inno: "Sono pulita!" La finezza del lino – in un indumento che non è a contatto con la pelle – non è altro che una prova di buone maniere e possibilità economica; mentre, i polsini ed il colletto rimovibili sono utili alla "mimetizzazione," per dare lo stesso effetto di superiorità dell'uomo che può permettersi di lavare sette camicie alla settimana.

Ci deve essere una nobile soddisfazione nell'animo dell'uomo retto e benestante che indossa la camicia con colletto e polsini su misura; nobile ma incomunicabile, se non fra amici fidati.

[87] Lo sparato della camicia, soprattutto in riferimento ad abiti da sera, è la parte anteriore della camicia da uomo, di solito inamidata, che si intravede dallo scollo della giacca.

Gli abiti maschili, in origine, erano più simbolici di quelli femminili. Nelle popolazioni selvagge, gli "abiti cerimoniali," come l'abito per la danza della guerra o quello dello sciamano, erano prettamente confinati all'abbigliamento maschile. In tutti gli abiti formali che ci rimangono, come quelli in ambito regale, legale, accademico, militare e ufficiale di ogni sorta, ancora vediamo uomini che indossano, con tutta parvenza di soddisfazione, un tipo di abito strettamente simbolico. Prendiamo gli agenti di polizia di New York; i loro stessi corpi sono simbolo di un eccesso di potere, tuttavia, bisogna dubitare del fatto che un tal peso possa essere d'aiuto all'efficienza in servizio. La divisa di questi uomini è soltanto una convenzione ufficiale, quasi quanto quella dei soldati.

"The men that fought at Minden

They 'ad stocks beneath their chins

Six inches 'igh and more"[88]

e un tale peso al collo non poteva in alcun modo giovare all'attività o al valore militare, se non spiritualmente.

Se un dato articolo d'abbigliamento è considerato, da una specifica tribù o da un corpo di ufficiali, come indicativo di qualcosa che ha un grande valore, essi lo indosseranno con orgoglio, a costo di qualsiasi disagio fisico. Il cappello a cilindro dei giorni nostri è il miglior esempio che si possa fornire. Cercando nella storia del costume, troviamo uomini fieri che tentano incessantemente di aggiungere centimetri alla loro altezza. Papi e sacerdoti, re ed imperatori, uomini ricchi di ogni sorta, con grande considerazione di se stessi e desiderosi

[88] Questi versi sono tratti dalla poesia di Rudyard Kipling "The Men that Fought at Minden", pubblicata nella raccolta *The Seven Seas* nel 1897. La traduzione è: "Gli uomini che combatterono a Minden / portavano le provviste sotto il mento / alte sei pollici e anche più".

di dimostrare la loro magnificenza all'occhio comune, decidono di erigere, al meglio delle loro possibilità, un bel totem che troneggi sulle loro teste.

E' quasi impossibile individuare un popolo o un periodo storico in cui questo impulso non trovi una qualche espressione; e noi, che abbiamo perso molto—noi che non possiamo più vantarci nei nostri elmi piumati e nelle imponenti creste di crine di cavallo, noi che abbiamo abbandonato la corona, il diadema e la tiara, noi che ci aggrappiamo disperatamente alle vestigia di glorie passate—portiamo il cilindro.

Questo, nella sua forma più generalizzata, segue tradizioni antichissime. I faraoni Egiziani, i re Assiri e Persiani adornavano così i loro capi.

E il buon signor Johnsmith, ritratto mentre cammina con atteggiamento fiero,[89] trasmette istintivamente il senso di appartenenza alla specie[90] vecchio di millenni, senza mai un barlume di incertezza.

La monotonia dei cappelli maschili rimane tanto invariata quanto quella dei turbanti musulmani, e ciò in proporzione al grado di civilizzazione. Se torniamo indietro a precedenti stadi di sviluppo sociale, o come qualche anima ribelle che rivendica un cambiamento, troviamo i "cappelli di feltro" di varie forme: ma nelle nostre grandi città indossiamo un tipo di cappello che renderebbe un collage di fotografie quasi tanto nitido quanto una singola foto. Forse una prolungata eco dei tempi della corazza, quando l'abbigliamento maschile era simile alle tartarughe e ai ricci, si fa ancora sentire in questo

[89] La frase origininale è <<And good Mr. Johnsmith, walking proudly in his shining "tile">>. Potrebbe essere un riferimento ad una raffigurazione su pietra o mattone.

[90] Nell'originale: "race impulse." Il concetto di "race" è fondamentale in questo articolo. Non ho tradotto "razziale" o "della razza" perché in italiano sarebbe fuorviante. Ho scelto di tradurre "senso di appartenenza alla specie" perché penso che Gilman intenda la specie umana nella sua totalità, in quanto nella frase precedente si riferisce alle antiche tradizioni dei faraoni Egiziani, re Assiri e Persiani.

rigido copricapo. Perfino lo sparato color avorio potrebbe essere una fievole reminiscenza dei giorni in cui la corazza d'acciaio splendeva alla luce del sole.

Gli stereotipi culturali intrinsechi nella mentalità[91] di ogni popolo sono una corrente ininterrotta di tendenze via via tramandate, e in essa antiche usanze continuano a sopravvivere.

Ma se gli abiti maschili sono così simbolici, cosa dovremmo dire di quelli femminili?

Se neppure lo stile di vita di un uomo, ricco di impegni, non è riuscito ad eliminare antiche tendenze nel modo di vestire, cosa ci si può aspettare da quello di una donna, che è statico ed immutato dai secoli dei secoli?

Potremmo cercare un simbolismo quasi tanto dominante quanto quello dei popoli primitivi; e non ne rimarremmo delusi. L'istinto ornamentale primitivo, un tempo così dominante nell'abito maschile, è tuttora predominante in quello femminile ed è tristemente privo di quell'evoluto senso del bello che avrebbe dovuto sublimarlo già da tempo. Non vi è istinto ornamentale primitivo di più basso livello di quello che deforma e mutila un corpo, eppure questa usanza sopravvive ancora nelle donne.

Gli uomini, alcuni uomini, talvolta comprimono i loro piedi nel tentativo di essere simbolo di raffinatezza e, nell'ordine maschile più antico—l'esercito—in paesi più antichi dei nostri, gli uomini indossano veri e propri busti e "canutiglie." I corsetti maschili sono pubblicizzati sui giornali europei. Anche

[91] Nell'originale: "racial mind." Ho tradotto "stereotipi culturali intrinsechi nella mentalità di ogni popolo." Anche in questo caso ho scelto di usare una perifrasi per tradurre il concetto di "racial mind." La parola "stereotipo" indica precisamente un modello convenzionale di comportamento e l'aggettivo "intrinseco" rafforza il concetto di stereotipo. Inizialmente avevo tradotto "retaggio culturale", ma poi rivedendo l'articolo nel suo insieme ho notato che la parola "retaggio" era troppo neutra e, anzi, tendeva ad essere un giudizio positivo, quindi l'ho sostituita con "stereotipo" perché le tradizioni che si tramandano e le antiche usanze che sopravvivono nell'abbigliamento, dal punto di vista di Gilman, sono estremamente negative.

gli uomini di basso rango ancora si tatuano e portano orecchini. Ma le donne alterano di proposito la forma del loro corpo nella convinzione di renderlo più bello, come alcune tribù fanno formaggi olandesi con i loro vitelli, e altre si praticano un foro nel naso o si limano i denti.

E' uno studio acuto e singolare, piuttosto lontano da questioni igieniche, quello che concerne il modo di usare il corpo come fosse una forma convenzionale per trasmettere una sensazione o un'idea, facendone una sorta di ideogramma; un simbolo convenzionale di una sagoma vivente!

Adottando determinate linee e proporzioni come distintamente femminili, e portandole all'esagerazione, si andrebbe a defemminilizzare la femminilità. Esattamente lo stesso principio è evidente nel sarto che fornisce all'uomo un paio di spalline imbottite per far sembrare le spalle più larghe. E' virile avere il torace ampio e le spalle quadrate – tipicamente virile. Se il cliente non ha la fortuna di avere queste caratteristiche, pur essendo virile quanto Marshal Saxe[92], il sarto provvederà a far sì che i suoi abiti simboleggino il suo sesso oltre ogni ragionevole dubbio. Allo stesso modo, un sarto che confeziona abiti femminili, un sarto non particolarmente cosciente, ma un compiacente esponente degli stereotipi culturali[93], come mostrato nell'abito, deciderà che la donna deve avere vita stretta e fianchi larghi, senza tener conto del suo corpo e delle sue ossa che protestano, perché lei deve, non solo essere, ma simboleggiare la femminilità. Questa specie di drappi in cui camminiamo, metro dopo metro, fatti di svariati materiali – cotone, lana, seta – una massa indistinta di balze inopportune, scomode, costose ed eccessivamente lavorate,

[92] Marshal Saxe (1696-1750) fu un valoroso generale che condusse vittoriosamente le armate francesi durante la guerra di successione austriaca svoltasi tra il 1740 e il 1748.
[93] Nell'originale: "racial mind." Per la scelta di traduzione, si veda la nota precedente riferita al concetto di "racial mind."

interferiscono in tutto e per tutto con la libertà di movimento e un adeguato sviluppo fisico; questo peso che ci trasciniamo dietro, fa sembrare che le donne abbiano gambe corte e fianchi larghi, che fatichino a camminare e siano incapaci di correre; ciò si aggiunge allo sforzo compiuto ad ogni singolo passo e le ostacola in caso di pericolo – quasi morte sicura in caso d'incendio o annegamento – ma quindi, perché le donne indossano queste gonne funerarie?

Solo ed esclusivamente per una questione simbolica.

Simbolismo locale chiaramente – perché in Cina o in Turchia, dove le donne sono il nulla se non sono femminili , la gonna non si indossa.

Ciò non ha niente a che vedere con la maternità, malgrado Charles Reade[94] la pensasse diversamente, perché le selvagge nude e le orientali con i pantaloni, sono competenti quanto noi per quanto riguarda la gravidanza.

Ma noi, nella nostra infinita saggezza, abbiamo scelto di considerare abiti lunghi e fluenti come simbolo di femminilità e, di conseguenza, le donne li indossano senza opporre resistenza, dalla culla alla bara. Dal punto di vista del simbolismo artistico è vero che vesti belle e fluenti rappresentano agiatezza e privilegio, e sono quindi adatte a sovrani, sacerdoti e a chi pratica professioni erudite.

Da questa prospettiva, sia uomini che donne saranno sempre giustificati, in occasioni appropriate, ad avvolgere la leggiadra ed energica grazia del corpo umano in fluenti balze di tessuto, allo stesso modo in cui si barda un cavallo per importanti processioni.

[94] Charles Reade (1814-1884) fu uno scrittore inglese che nei suoi romanzi criticava severamente le ingiustizie sociali della sua epoca.

Questa non è assolutamente una buona ragione per cui lei, che non è un re, né un prete, né un dottore nella maggior parte dei casi, ma di solito un'operosa domestica, debba essere così crudelmente ostacolata nel suo lavoro.

Alle feste, in tranquille serate, quando non è richiesto sforzo alcuno; in chiesa, a teatro, seduta allo scrittoio, ovunque non sia necessaria alcuna azione fisica ed una certa compostezza sia alquanto desiderabile; lì, gli abiti lunghi sono meravigliosi.

Ma farli strisciare sulle strade sporche, o tenerli faticosamente sollevati con la mano, fino a desiderare di avere un carretto come quelli che si legano alle pecore a coda grassa; indossarli dietro ad un bancone, dove ogni centimetro di stoffa pesa gravemente sulla schiena dolorante, o in cucina a contatto con il grasso, le brodaglia e le bruciacchiature, o come li vediamo addosso a povere donne inzaccherate, intente a sfregare pavimenti – un lavoro malsano e dannoso che lo diventa ancor di più a causa di questi drappi bagnati – in ogni tipo di attività, le gonne sono un impedimento ed un'ingiuria.

Eppure, come simboli, le veneriamo e sosteniamo, come i Forty-niners[95] che con un "urrà" alzavano i cappelli alla vista del bucato di una donna appeso ad una corda.

New York City.

[95] I Forty-niners erano i cercatori d'oro che presero parte alla Corsa all'Oro in California nel 1849.

IV. 2. 7

Short Dress Fatal To Man.

SHORT DRESS FATAL TO MAN[96]

By

Charlotte Perkins Gilman

This is one of those specimens of the engaging art of the Headliner.

What does it suggest? Visibly a man was killed – "fatal to man" is unmistakable; unless indeed there is a still larger implication, and we are to believe that the short dress – or a short dress – is fatal to the human race. That seems a little extreme, even to a Headliner's imagination. It is safe to assume that the event chronicled is the slaughter of a Man by a Dress.

Of course it may still be suggested that the short dress is general, though the victim is particular – fatally particular; that the man was destroyed by contemplation of Short Dress in the abstract, or Short Dress as applied to the women of this immediate day.

But no; as we glance at the paragraph we see that it was a short dress belonging to a woman which did the deadly work.

How could it have happened? A short dress, a feminine frock of limited dimensions, seems so ineffective as a lethal weapon. Did the man wear it, perhaps, an catch cold about the ankles, dying thereafter of pneumonia or acute

[96] Charlotte Perkins Gilman Collection, Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College. Collection 177, folder 176, seq. 38.

bronchitis? Did he try to eat it, and did it choke him? Did he make a tea of it, which poisoned him? Was the mere sight of its shortness such a horror to his sensitive nature, all unaccustomed to see the boot-tops of ladies, that he dies of the shock? Or was he a ruffian perhaps, attacking a short-dressed lady with the basest of intentions, and she, unusually agile, slipped out of her frock, tore it from his hands, and smothered him with it?

How could [sic] a short dress be fatal to a man?

Ceasing our meditation on the headline we read the paragraph.

The facts as alleged were these:

A woman wore a short dress.

Her brother-in-law disapproved of it.

He, being a person who spoke his mind, expressed this disapproval to, or in the hearing of his brother, the woman's husband.

The husband, apparently as sensitive to adverse criticism of his wife as the critic was to short dresses, became enraged and shot said critic to death.

There was a short dress, there was a fatality, but surely there are other points to stop at between these.

There was the gun, for instance: "Pistol shot fatal to man."

There was the husband rage: "Bad temper fatal to man."

There was the husband himself, as a responsible party: "Brother fatal to man."

Then there was the ill-advised and apparently impertinent criticism of the brother-in-law: "Speech fatal to man", or "Tongue fatal to man." That last would been a catchy headline, too.

But no – one man may be foolishly sensitive, and impolitely outspoken in a matter which was none of his business; another man may be so violent and uncontrollable of temper that a mere criticism drives him to commit a peculiarly awful crime, fratricide – but do not blame them; do not attribute this fatality to anything either of them did – it was no fault of theirs.

"Cherchez la femme." If there is a woman within a thousand miles, blame her, or at least her clothes.

IV. 2. 8

L'abito corto che fu fatale per l'uomo.

L'ABITO CORTO CHE FU FATALE PER L'UOMO

Di

Charlotte Perkins Gilman

Ecco un esempio dell'impegnativa arte del Titolista.

Cosa suggerisce questo titolo? Ovviamente un uomo è stato ucciso - "fatale per l'uomo" è inequivocabile, a meno che non esista davvero un significato più ampio del termine che ci porti a credere che l'abito corto - o un abito corto - possa essere fatale per il genere umano. Tutto ciò sembra leggermente eccessivo, perfino per l'immaginazione di un Titolista. Si può ragionevolmente presumere che, l'episodio riportato, tratti del massacro di un Uomo per mano di un Abito.

Naturalmente, può darsi che si parli di un abito corto in generale, mentre la vittima è una in particolare - fatalmente particolare; può darsi che l'uomo sia

stato colpito dalla contemplazione di un Abito Corto in astratto, oppure che si associ l'Abito Corto proprio alle donne d'oggi.

Ma no; se diamo un'occhiata al paragrafo, ci accorgiamo che era un abito corto che apparteneva ad una donna, la quale ha commesso l'azione letale.

Come può essere accaduto? Un abito corto, un vestito femminile di ridotte dimensioni, sembrerebbe un'arma letale alquanto impropria. Può essere che l'uomo l'abbia indossato e abbia preso un colpo di freddo agli arti inferiori, morendo poco dopo di polmonite o bronchite acuta? Che abbia provato a mangiarlo e sia rimasto soffocato? Che l'abbia usato per farsi un tè e si sia avvelenato? Che la semplice vista di quest'abito, eccessivamente corto, abbia generato tale disgusto nel suo animo sensibile e non avvezzo alla vista del bordo dello stivale delle signore, da provocargli una sincope? Oppure quest'uomo era un mascalzone, che, con le più vili intenzioni, cercò di aggredire una donna che indossava un abito corto e quest'ultima, insolitamente agile, riuscì a sfilarsi l'abito, strapparlo dalle mani dell'aggressore per poi strozzarlo proprio con il vestito?

Come potrebbe un abito corto essere fatale per un uomo?

Una volta finite le nostre riflessioni sul titolo, procediamo con la lettura del paragrafo.

I fatti presunti erano questi:

Una donna indossava un abito corto.

Suo cognato non approvava.

Egli, essendo una persona che esprimeva sempre il proprio parere, manifestò, o quantomeno fece arrivare all'orecchio del fratello, marito della donna, la sua disapprovazione.

Il marito, evidentemente tanto sensibile alle critiche rivolte alla moglie quanto lo era colui che criticava verso gli abiti corti, andò su tutte le furie e sparò all'uomo, colpendolo a morte.

Dunque: il vestito corto c'era, la fatalità c'è stata, ma sicuramente ci sono anche altri fattori, oltre questi, su cui soffermarsi.

C'era una pistola, per esempio: "Colpo di pistola fatale per l'uomo."

C'era la collera del marito: "Brutto carattere fatale per l'uomo."

C'era il marito stesso come persona responsabile del fatto: "Fratello fatale per l'uomo."

C'erano inoltre le critiche imprudenti e apparentemente impertinenti del cognato della donna: "Una parola fatale per l'uomo" oppure "Lingua fatale per l'uomo." Anche quest'ultimo titolo avrebbe attirato molto l'attenzione del lettore.

Ma invece no - può capitare che un uomo sia così stupidamente sensibile e maleducatamente sfacciato da intromettersi in una questione che non è affar suo; può capitare che un altro possa avere un carattere così violento ed incontrollabile che una piccola critica lo spinga a commettere un crimine così orribile come il fratricidio – ma non biasimateli; non attribuite questo terribile incidente alle loro azioni - non è colpa loro.

"Cherchez la femme."[97] Se vedete una donna nel raggio di un migliaio di chilometri, incolpate lei, o per lo meno i suoi abiti.

[97] L'espressione "Cherchez la femme" deriva dal romanzo di Alexandre Dumas (padre) *Les Mohicans de Paris,* scritto nel 1864. Il passaggio originale è: «Il y a une femme dans toute les affaires; aussitôt qu'on me fait un rapport, je dis: 'Cherchez la femme'.»

IV. 2. 9

Teaching Beauty.

TEACHING BEAUTY.[98]

By

Charlotte Perkins Gilman.

Everyone loves beauty, but few can recognize it. We are so uncertain about it that most of us give up in despair and say, "Beauty is only a question of taste." Yet taste may be educated, may be changed – we know that. Does beauty change with it?

We are born into a beautiful world, a place "where every prospect pleases, and only man is vile," as the old hymn has it. Yet man, far from being "vile", can himself add to the beauty of nature by the beauty of art. He can delight the eye with the work of his hands. He can – why is it that he does not?

It is because our inborn love of beauty is so neglected, so crushed and hurt by the ugliness about us, that we cease to demand or even to miss, consciously, the lovely surroundings we might have.

We ought to set ourselves deliberately to teach beauty; teach it in the public schools, lecture on it, write on it, have it presented to daily millions on the films. From the kindergarten up, schoolhouses should be beautiful, as an important part of their educational value. This does not mean just hanging pictures on the walls, or putting flowers in the windows. It means beauty of

[98] Charlotte Perkins Gilman Collection, Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College. Collection 177, folder 176, seq. 40.

architecture, of mass and line, and proportion. It means that the building as a whole shall be noble and attractive, and each room a joy in itself, with lovely decoration.

Then should be added direct instruction, mainly by example, of beauty in furniture, in pottery, in cloth and clothing, and in humanity itself. Casts of statues of splendid human beings should be in every schoolhouse, and photographs, paintings, mural decorations, showing the noble beauty of humanity.

Children should grow up in daily atmosphere of refined taste and among lovely surroundings, with enough well-handled instruction to make it understood as well as felt. If we cannot ensure this separately in a thousand homes, we can at least ensure it to the children, by thousands, in our schools.

Children like to be beautiful themselves, and eagerly admire it [sic] beauty in others. They should be encouraged in this feeling , but taught to discriminate, to admire [sic] wisely.

If girls in school were carefully taught the true beauty of the human foot, for instance, they could never again be quite comfortable in the artificial two-pronged ugliness of our modern shoes. No mere lecture on bones would do it. It needs statue and picture, and, best of all, real dancing, with stories, as of "Trilby", and poetry, such as "The White Feet of Athys" [sic] If we want our children to recognize beauty, they must see it, and hear about it.

A whole class of girls could have their foot-prints taken, careful measurements made, and learn which of them really had the most nearly perfect feet. That would be something to be honestly glad of, and the proud possessor of those feet might refuse to ruin them by improper shoes.

In spite of our differences in “taste” and the flickering change of “fashion”, there is such a thing as beauty, and we need to know it.

IV. 2. 10

Insegnare la bellezza.

INSEGNARE LA BELLEZZA.

Di

Charlotte Perkins Gilman.

Tutti amano la bellezza, ma pochi la sanno riconoscere. Siamo così incerti a riguardo che gran parte di noi si rassegna passivamente dicendo: “La bellezza è solo una questione di buon gusto.” Tuttavia, il gusto può essere coltivato e, come ben sappiamo, può essere rivisto. E, con esso, può dunque cambiare anche la bellezza?

Siamo nati in un mondo meraviglioso, un luogo dove, come afferma l’antico inno, “every prospect pleases and only man is vile.”[99] Eppure l’uomo, lungi dall’essere “vile”[100], è in grado di arricchire la bellezza della natura grazie alla bellezza dell’arte; può deliziare l’occhio con le sue stesse mani. Ne è senz’altro capace. Ma allora perché non lo fa?

Ciò accade perché il nostro innato amore per la bellezza è così trascurato, stroncato e offeso dalla bruttezza attorno a noi, che, consapevolmente, smettiamo di desiderarla e perfino di sentirne la mancanza.

[99] Citazione tratta dall’inno di Reginald Heber *From Greenland’s Icy Mountains,* scritto nel 1819 e musicato da Lowell Mason nel 1823. La traduzione è: “ogni prospettiva è piacevole e soltanto l’uomo è mediocre”.
[100] Traduco “vile” nell'accezione di persona “incapace”, “inetta”, “mediocre”.

Dovremmo assolutamente porci l'obiettivo di insegnare la bellezza; insegnarla nelle scuole pubbliche, tenere lezioni e scrivere su di essa, proiettarne quotidianamente le immagini a milioni di persone. Fin dall'asilo, gli edifici scolastici dovrebbero essere belli, come parte fondamentale del loro valore educativo. Ciò non significa solamente appendere quadri alle pareti o mettere fiori alle finestre. Significa bellezza nell'architettura, con giochi di linee e proporzioni. L'edificio, nel complesso, dovrà essere signorile e gradevole, ed ogni stanza, finemente decorata, un vero piacere.

Poi devono aggiungersi precisi insegnamenti, in primo luogo con esempi di bellezza nei mobili, nelle ceramiche, nei tessuti, nell'abbigliamento e, non ultimo, nell'umanità stessa. In ogni scuola dovrebbero essere presenti calchi di statue di esseri umani splendidi, ma anche fotografie, quadri e pitture murali che mostrino la nobile bellezza dell'umanità.

I bambini dovrebbero crescere, quotidianamente, in un'atmosfera di gusto raffinato e circondati dalla bellezza, con una giusta dose di insegnamenti ben calibrati affinché imparino a riconoscerla, non solo a percepirla. Se non possiamo garantire ciò, singolarmente, in un migliaio di case, dobbiamo almeno assicurarlo a migliaia di bambini nelle scuole.

Ai bambini piace essere belli e ammirare attentamente la bellezza negli altri. Dovrebbero essere incoraggiati in questo loro sentire, ma bisogna insegnargli a discernere e apprezzare il bello in modo intelligente.

Se, ad esempio, alle bambine a scuola venisse scrupolosamente insegnata la vera bellezza del piede umano, non potrebbero mai, poi, sentirsi a proprio agio nella brutta forma artificiale delle nostre calzature moderne. Nessuna lezione sulle ossa sarebbe abbastanza efficace. Servono statue e quadri, o meglio

ancora, spettacoli di danza, accompagnati da storie come quella di "Trilby"[101], o poesie come "The White Feet of Athys [sic]."[102] Se vogliamo che i nostri figli riconoscano la bellezza, devono vederla, e sentirne parlare.

In una intera classe di ragazze, si potrebbero prendere tutte le impronte dei piedi, misurarle attentamente, e capire chi di loro ha il piede che si avvicina di più alla forma perfetta. Ciò costituirebbe motivo di felicità e orgoglio, e colei che possiede questi piedi perfetti, potrebbe rifiutare di rovinarseli indossando calzature inadatte.

Aldilà delle nostre diversità in fatto di "gusto" e dei repentini cambiamenti della "moda", esiste una cosa che si chiama bellezza, e dobbiamo imparare a conoscerla.

[101] *Trilby* è un romanzo scritto da George du Maurier e pubblicato sulla rivista *Harper's Monthly* nel 1894. Fu pubblicato poi sottoforma di libro nel 1895. Si noti che il "trilby" è anche un modello di copricapo maschile, il cui nome deriva dalla prima produzione teatrale di *Trilby* messa in scena a Londra.

[102] "The White Feet of Atthis" è una poesia scritta da Henry Anderson Lafler e pubblicata nel marzo 1912 sulla rivista *The Century Magazine,* con illustrazioni di Oliver Herford. La poesia descrive la perfezione dei piedi di Atthis: nudi, esili, perfetti nella forma e dal colore etereo. Nella mitologia greca, da Atthis, figlia di Craneus, deriva il nome della regione Attica.

APPENDIX A

Charlotte Perkins Gilman:

'Why I Wrote "The Yellow Wallpaper"?'

Many and many a reader has asked that. When the story first came out, in the *New England Magazine* about 1891, a Boston physician made protest in *The Transcript*. Such a story ought not to be written, he said; it was enough to drive anyone mad to read it.

Another physician, in Kansas I think, wrote to say that it was the best description of incipient insanity he had ever seen, and—begging my pardon—had I been there?

Now the story of the story is this:

For many years I suffered from a severe and continuous nervous breakdown tending to melancholia—and beyond. During about the third year of this trouble I went, in devout faith and some faint stir of hope, to a noted specialist in nervous diseases, the best known in the country. This wise man put me to bed and applied the rest cure, to which a still good physique responded so promptly that he concluded there was nothing much the matter with me, and sent me home with solemn advice to 'live as domestic a life as far as possible,' to 'have but two hours' intellectual life a day,' and 'never to touch pen, brush, or pencil again' as long as I lived. This was in 1887.

I went home and obeyed those directions for some three months, and came so near the borderline of utter mental ruin that I could see over.

Then, using the remnants of intelligence that remained, and helped by a wise friend, I cast the noted specialist's advice to the winds and went to work again —work, the normal life of every human being; work, in which is joy and growth and service, without which one is a pauper and a parasite; ultimately recovering some measure of power.

Being naturally moved to rejoicing by this narrow escape, I wrote *The Yellow Wallpaper*, with its embellishments and additions, to carry out the ideal (I never had hallucinations or objections to my mural decorations) and sent a copy to the physician who so nearly drove me mad. He never acknowledged it.

The little book is valued by alienists and as a good specimen of one kind of literature. It has, to my knowledge, saved one woman from a similar fate—so terrifying her family that they let her out into normal activity and she recovered.

But the best result is this. Many years later I was told that the great specialist had admitted to friends of his that he had altered his treatment of neurasthenia since reading *The Yellow Wallpaper*.

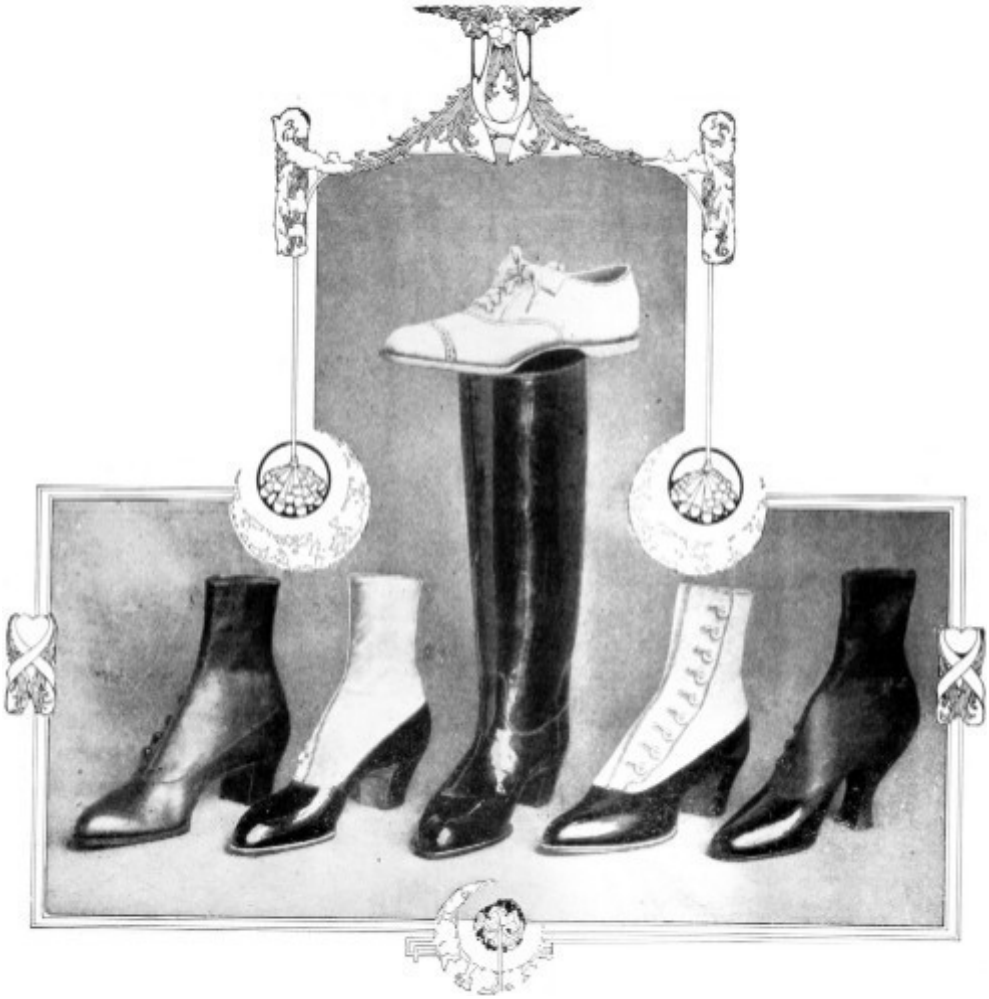
It was not intended to drive people crazy, but to save people from being driven crazy, and it worked.

Forerunner, 4 (October 1913), 271.

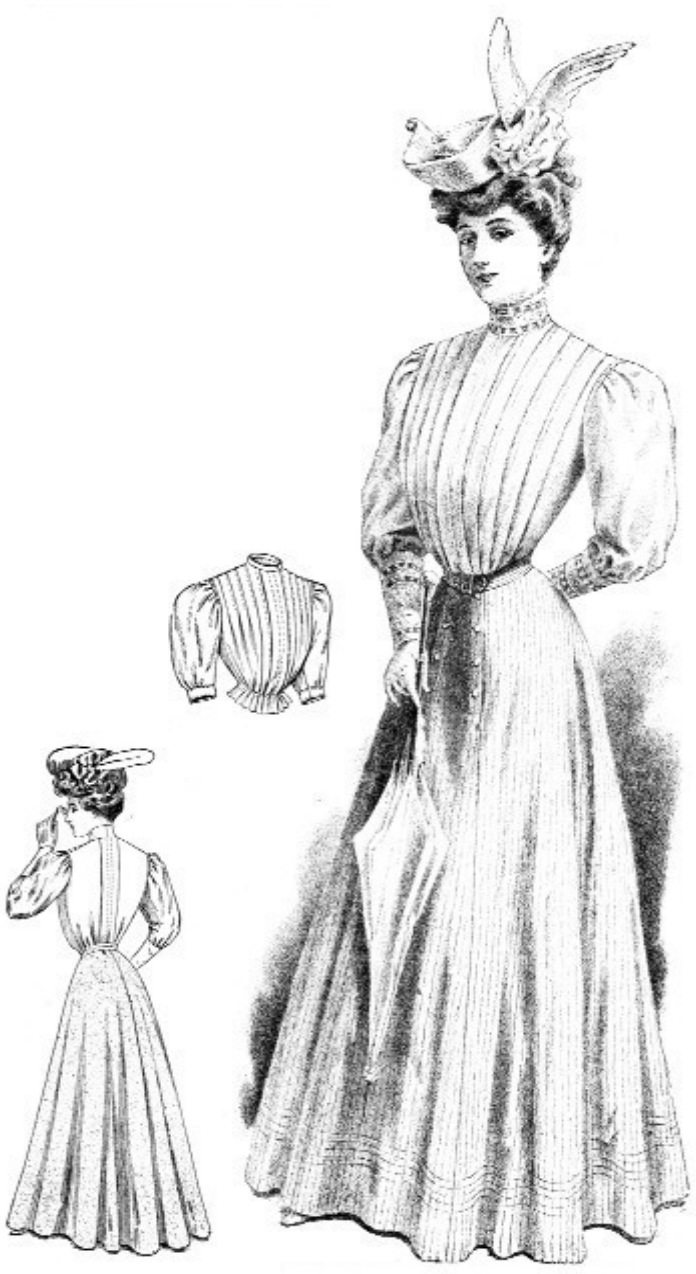
APPENDIX B

Illustrations

1. Shoes for Walking Costumes, *The Delineator*, June 1906.



2. Tucked Shirt-Waist and Circular Skirt, *The Delineator*, June 1906.



3. Shirt-Waists, *The Delineator*, June 1906.

4. Victorian Hats, ca. 1878.

5. Late Victorian hats, ca. 1899

6. Accessorizes, ca. 1905.

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LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

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