

INTRODUCTION

Charlotte J. Rich

CHARLOTTE PERKINS GILMAN'S first novel, *What Diantha Did*, charts its protagonist's rise from domestic servant to the head of a diversified business that includes maid service, cooked-food delivery, restaurants, and hotels, proving to the world the social and financial benefits of "organized housekeeping." Several feminist themes of this novel, serialized in the first volume of Gilman's *Forerunner* magazine (November 1909–December 1910) and published separately by her Charlton company in 1910, echo those of her best-known works, "The Yellow Wall-Paper" (1892) and *Herland* (1915). Although its unambiguous plot and narration differ distinctly from Gilman's famous short story, the novel's critique of Victorian marriage, particularly middle-class women's compulsory domesticity within that institution, reiterates a major theme of the earlier work. On the other hand, the depiction of homes and eventually whole communities revolutionized by the outsourcing of domestic tasks in *What Diantha Did*, as well as the concomitant empowerment of women, anticipates the feminist utopian novel that Gilman would publish five years later. Gilman's treatment of her heroine Diantha Bell, however, uniquely resists formidable cultural prescriptions of domesticity for middle-class women at the turn of the century when Gilman has her enter the public sphere and establish her corporate empire. Diantha is thus a fascinating example of the entrepreneurial spirit that pervaded American culture at the turn of the century, leading to the examples of the Rockefellers and Astors with whom she is compared in the novel, but with a significant feminist twist. Indeed, in theorizing the economic value of housework and proposing innovations to improve the material conditions of that labor, Gilman's first novel is a thought-provoking fictional articulation of the turn-of-the-century material feminist

movement.¹ Still neglected within Gilman's body of work, *What Diantha Did* offers an essential understanding of Gilman's important and complex legacy of social thought.²

Among the interrelated contemporary issues the novel treats are the "servant question," the rise of the discipline of domestic science, and efforts to uplift the working girl. By the first decade of the twentieth century, many middle- and upper-class households relied on domestic help; between 1870 and 1910, the number of female domestic servants in the United States rose from 960,000 to 1,830,000.³ Yet despite the ubiquity of servants and "hired girls," few employers were satisfied with their services, resulting in a veritable crisis in securing capable household help that was debated in magazines and treated fictionally in such works as Dorothy Canfield Fisher's *The Squirrel-cage* (1912). Through the house workers' union that Diantha creates, Gilman offers an answer to the servant question, one that optimistically gives her female laborers greater agency and protection than other domestics but tends to efface the racial and ethnic realities of household labor.

In 1910 many domestics in the United States were either African Americans or European immigrants such as Irishwomen, though homes on the West Coast also often relied on Chinese immigrant help.⁴ And as Barbara Ryan has observed, discussions of service

1. See Dolores Hayden, *The Grand Domestic Revolution: A History of Feminist Designs for American Homes, Neighborhoods, and Cities* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1981), for an insightful overview of the material feminist movement. For discussion of Gilman's relationship to and contributions within this movement, see pp. 183–205.

2. To date, only three critical examinations treat this novel at length: Judith Allen, "Reconfiguring Vice: Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Prostitution, and Frontier Sexual Contracts," in *Charlotte Perkins Gilman: Optimist Reformer*, ed. Jill Rudd and Val Gough (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1999), 173–99; Jill Bergman, "'Amazon of Industry': The Maternal Realism of Gilman's *What Diantha Did*," *Journal for the Association of Research on Mothering* 4, no. 2 (2002): 85–98; and Sharon Rambo, "What Diantha Did: The Authority of Experience," *Charlotte Perkins Gilman: The Woman and Her Work*, ed. Sheryl L. Meyering (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1989), 151–60.

3. David M. Katzman, *Seven Days a Week: Women and Domestic Service in Industrializing America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 46.

4. For example, in *The Grand Domestic Revolution* Hayden notes that in 1900 "two fifths of servants were native-born whites, a third were native-born blacks, and about

workers within industrial capitalism perforce dealt with questions of race as well.⁵ The ways in which these various ethnic groups were treated within or participated in the servant debate differed, especially when groups such as the Irish were often able to assimilate into “white” America by defining themselves in contrast to other groups, such as African Americans.⁶ However, a problem common to all groups was that their waged work as domestics often did not differ much from the paradigm of servants within slavery or indentured labor.

Although Gilman acknowledges these demographics of Progressive Era household labor when Diantha’s sister laments the heroine’s initial choice to “go out and work like a common Irish girl!” (76), Gilman’s vision of the carefully selected young women in Diantha’s employ who clean the homes of Orchardina does not seem to acknowledge such realities.⁷ She does provide a few stereo-

a quarter were immigrants” (170). However, the number of African American servants continued to grow rapidly; by 1920, just ten years after Gilman published *What Diantha Did*, 40 percent of American servants were African American (172). Ronald Takaki observes the preponderance of Irish American immigrant women in domestic service in *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1993), 154–58, as well as the presence of Chinese American immigrant domestic service on the West Coast (156).

5. Barbara Ryan has explored racial dimensions of the servant debate in “Uneasy Relation: Servants’ Place in the Nineteenth-Century American Home” (Ph.D. diss., University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1994); “Kitchen Testimony: Ex-Slaves’ Narratives in New Company,” *Callaloo* 22, no. 1 (1999): 141–56; and “Service After Slavery: ‘Talented Tenth’ Thoughts on African American Attendance,” *CLA Journal* 46, no. 2 (2002): 237–70.

6. This phenomenon is explored by Noel Ignatiev in *How the Irish Became White* (New York: Routledge, 1995) and by Matthew Frye Jacobsen in *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998).

7. Gilman briefly introduces two female servants with Irish names—Catharine Kelly and Molly Connors—who participate in Diantha’s “Girls’ Club” early on in the novel (121). But while Gilman’s narrator praises the efficiency and professionalism of the young women who constitute Diantha’s house workers’ union, she consistently—and tellingly—refers to them as a group, never individualizing them or indicating their ethnic status.

typical references to individuals of distinct ethnicity engaged in domestic service: “black Sukey,” the Wardens’ cook; Julianna, the African American cook at Union House; Mrs. Thorald, the Danish immigrant laundress at Union House; and Wang Fu, the servant whom Diantha and Ross employ after their marriage. However, Gilman implies that these individuals do not reap the benefits of the idealized scheme she envisions, but rather exist to support it.

Although Gilman’s novel is historically significant in offering an admittedly vexed solution to the servant question, it also illuminates the Progressive Era’s evolution of domestic arts into “science” through new interest in scientific principles and in the professionalization of such pursuits. Furthermore, the novel fictionalizes efforts in this era to uplift the working girl, a well-intentioned enterprise that nonetheless reified middle-class anxieties about the threats posed by single working-class, and often immigrant, women. Indeed, the novel’s treatment of race and class contributes to the newly complex understanding of Gilman emerging in recent scholarship. Moreover, this text locates itself in the cultural backdrop of turn-of-the-century America by appropriating techniques from two pervasive literary genres of its time — capitalistic tales of men’s pursuit of success, seen in both Horatio Alger’s novels for youth and the writings of Gilman’s realist and naturalist contemporaries, and utopian narratives such as Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward* (1888) — though Gilman revises these fictive formulas for her own feminist purposes. In so doing, *What Diantha Did* illustrates Gilman’s abiding belief in the ideological importance of literature and offers a liberatory, if not unproblematic, vision of female entrepreneurship.

CHARLOTTE PERKINS GILMAN’S OWN life embodies many of the desires and convictions of the protagonist of her first novel. The narrative of Diantha Bell reflects Gilman’s resolve as a young woman to enter the public sphere and earn her living, as demonstrated in her activities and her autobiography. Born in 1860 in Connecticut to a family with genteel connections to the Beechers of literary and evangelical renown, Charlotte Perkins encountered hardship in her formative years, largely due to her father’s abandonment of the family shortly after Charlotte’s birth. Charlotte, her mother, and her brother were forced to move frequently be-

tween households in the humiliating role of dependent relations, and early on the young woman recognized the importance of economic and psychological self-sufficiency. While her formal education was transitory, she did study briefly at the Rhode Island School of Design and pursued an independent course of reading with long-distance guidance from her father. In her late teens, she began to earn money by painting illustrations for advertisements and greeting cards and by teaching. After a period of hesitation at the possible adverse consequences of matrimony, she married Walter Stetson at the age of twenty-three and attempted the domestic life of housewife and mother. Her resulting depression only reaffirmed Gilman's belief in the centrality of women's access to public professions and to domestic arrangements that allowed them time and freedom to pursue what she idealistically called "human work" (as opposed to the "woman-work" of the domestic sphere). When, in 1888, she parted from her husband and resettled with her daughter Katharine in California, she vowed, "I shall earn my own living."⁸ Her comment suggests how both a philosophical commitment and economic contingencies shaped Gilman and her work; these twin forces would influence much of her life and literature.

Growing out of these experiences, Gilman's abiding belief in the rights of middle-class women to break free from compulsory domesticity also informs *What Diantha Did*. Known more in her own day as a public intellectual on such subjects as women's equality and domestic reform than as an author of fiction, Gilman toured almost incessantly during the 1890s and the early decades of the twentieth century, giving lectures and attending suffrage conventions. She wrote prolifically, publishing over a dozen books, of which *Women and Economics* (1898) was the most famous, and writing the entire content of her own monthly magazine, *The Fore-runner*, which ran from 1909 through 1916. Throughout this prodigious output appears again and again the conviction that women's economic dependence on men and concomitant enforced domesticity — what she called their "sexuo-economic relation" — is

8. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman: An Autobiography*, with a foreword by Zona Gale (New York: Appleton-Century, 1935), 106.

damaging not only to women but also to men, children, and society as a whole. Gilman repeatedly advocated reforms such as children's day-care and kitchenless houses to release women from domestic duties and to allow them to pursue the professions for which they were most suited. In Diantha Bell's case, such "human work" comprises the multiple roles of housekeeping-service director, restaurateur, hotelier, and caterer.

Moreover, Gilman's own challenges in balancing career, marriage, and motherhood are reflected in the experiences of both the novel's titular heroine and another character, Isabel Porne. Walter Stetson's resistance to his wife's working after their marriage perhaps provided the source for Gilman's fictionalization of how Diantha's fiancé Ross Warden wishes her to renounce her career when they marry. Moreover, Isabel Porne is introduced early in the novel as a prime example of the type of professional woman for whom Diantha's domestic solutions are invaluable. A skilled architect, Isabel unsuccessfully tries to maintain a household, care for a baby, and pursue her profession; only after she hires Diantha to do the housework is she able to concentrate on her career again. Gilman faced similar challenges, particularly after she had moved to California following the failure of her first marriage. There, Gilman found the burdens of single motherhood increasingly incompatible with her growing professional duties and opportunities, and she eventually sent her nine-year-old daughter east to live with Walter and his new wife, her own friend Grace Channing, a decision for which Gilman was lambasted in the California newspapers as an "unnatural mother."⁹

Finally, *What Diantha Did* bears out in fiction Gilman's own interest in interrogating the notion of the "natural" arrangement of the home, as demonstrated by her own experiences of innovative domestic arrangements and utopian communities, including communal living and cooperative housekeeping. This interest is reflected in her many lectures and articles advocating domestic reforms, her 1895 stay at Jane Addams's Hull House settlement project in Chicago, and her practice of "boarding out" while living

9. See Gilman's account of this experience in *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman*, 163.

in New York City after her second marriage to Houghton Gilman in 1900. While her own brief stays in such communities—including a Brook Farm-like establishment in the Adirondacks in 1897 and a socialist commune in Ruskin, Tennessee, in 1899—showed her the practical problems of such arrangements and caused her to distinguish her own proposed reforms from the notion of “co-operative” living (as Diantha likewise does in addressing the Orchardina women’s club in the novel), Gilman nonetheless incorporated utopian elements in many of her fictional works, from the plausible communities of Bee Wise and Herways in her 1913 story “Bee Wise” to the highly idealistic Herland, in her utopian novel of the same name (1915). Gilman’s own challenges to carve out time for writing while housekeeping and caring for others justify her abiding fictive concern with innovative solutions to the ever-present demands of the home.

The Novel’s Significance within Gilman’s Canon

What Diantha Did engages with themes to which Gilman returned throughout her fiction and poetry, particularly the lesser-known works that she wrote for the *Forerunner*. As Catherine Golden has observed, Gilman’s poetry established her public reputation even as she criticized conventional notions of the home. Poems in her successful collection *In This Our World* (1893), including “To the Young Wife,” “The Mother’s Charge,” and “The Holy Stove,” lament women’s restriction to domestic toils through verses both poignant and satiric.¹⁰ Furthermore, *What Diantha Did* echoes the author’s treatment of the professionalization of housework or of revolutionary—and often profitable—domestic schemes in stories such as “Aunt Mary’s Pie Plant” (1908), “The Cottage” (1910), and “Her Memories” (1912), among others. One of her first articulations of such revolutionary schemes, “Aunt Mary’s Pie Plant” recounts one woman’s success in organizing her peers in the rural town of New Newton into several professional ventures based on

10. See Catherine Golden, “‘Written to Drive Nails With’: Recalling the Early Poetry of Charlotte Perkins Gilman,” in *Charlotte Perkins Gilman: Optimist Reformer*, ed. Rudd and Gough, 243–66.

their domestic skills, including a pie factory, a laundry, and a cooked-food delivery service.¹¹ The result is prosperity for the women entrepreneurs and the town as a whole, allowing the community to build first-rate schools and child-care facilities. The “prancing young utopia” that the initially skeptical frame narrator of the story finds on her visit so wins her over that she decides to marry one of its citizens and remain there, convinced of the potential for skillful domestic work to be profitable business. Like the naysayers in *What Diantha Did* who are soon convinced of the value of the protagonist’s schemes of cooked-food delivery and other services, the story enacts a pervasive theme in Gilman’s fiction: that of the skeptic brought to enthusiastic embrace of “revolutionary” changes in the affairs of the home, a process with which readers are intended to identify.

Other stories published in Gilman’s *Forerunner* more explicitly propose innovative domestic arrangements. “The Cottagette” emphasizes the benefits of kitchenless homes, describing the experiences of two professional women who live in a pastoral residential community where meals are taken at a central boardinghouse.¹² The narrator believes that in order to win the man she loves she must resume traditional cookery, even though the practice keeps her from her artistic work. However, her enlightened suitor proposes marriage on the condition that she not cook, since he is happy to “board out” and would rather she have time to pursue her profession. She enthusiastically assents to a matrimonial future without the demands of the kitchen. Gilman’s story “Her Memories” transposes such domestic innovations from a rural to an urban setting, describing a high-rise community in New York City with communal day-care facilities, kitchenless apartments, and meals delivered from a central facility, features that also appear in Diantha’s Hotel del las Casas.¹³ In other stories Gilman presents similar domestic reforms, including the kitchenless accommodations of “Maidstone Comfort” (1912) and “Bee Wise”

11. Gilman, “Aunt Mary’s Pie Plant,” *Woman’s Home Companion* 35 (June 1908): 14, 18–19.

12. Gilman, “The Cottagette,” *Forerunner* 1, no. 10 (1910): 1–5.

13. Gilman, “Her Memories,” *Forerunner* 3, no. 8 (1912): 197–201.

(1913) and the centralized child-care facilities proposed in “A Garden of Babies” (1909) and “Making a Change” (1911).

What Diantha Did also initiates Gilman’s fictional critique of the sexual exploitation of women, particularly domestic workers, which continued in such short works as “Turned” (1911) and “An Innocent Girl” (1912). In the first of these short stories, echoing the dynamics between the immigrant maid Ilda and her employer’s son Matthew Weatherstone in *What Diantha Did*, the protagonist discovers that her husband has seduced and impregnated a young servant in their home. Marion Marroner is angered but resolves to help the impressionable girl, leaving her husband and supporting them both by resuming her teaching career and taking in boarders. When the husband seeks Marion out with the hope of forgiveness, she simply challenges him, with the girl and her baby at her side, “‘What have you to say to us?’”¹⁴ Similarly critiquing the vulnerability of female domestics to their employers’ sexual advances but also exposing the hypocrisy of dichotomizing “good” and “bad” women, “An Innocent Girl” concerns a young maid who is harassed by the son of her employers. Vera Redwood’s history is yet more unfortunate: forced to turn to prostitution to support her father and sister after her mother’s death, she was disowned by her father. Her sister Blanche, complicit with her father’s lie that Vera died, was taken in by a wealthy aunt, and Vera has disguised herself and taken domestic employment in their home. She reveals her identity and confronts her sister, acknowledging Blanche’s status as an “innocent girl” who must be protected from women like her: “‘I can tell you one thing, my fascinating sister — you help to keep up the business of my other sisters.’”¹⁵ While the sexual “ruining” of women in general, as well as the means of recovering from or preventing it, remained an important theme for Gilman throughout her canon, from her early fable “An Extinct Angel” (1891) to her later story “The Girl in the Pink Hat” (1916), Gilman was particularly concerned by the socioeconomic power of employers over their domestics, who were often unskilled and uneducated young women with few employment options,

14. Gilman, “Turned,” *Forerunner* 2, no. 9 (1911): 232.

15. Gilman, “An Innocent Girl,” *Forerunner* 3, no. 3 (1912): 61.

thereby providing fertile grounds for such abuse. In *What Diantha Did*, the author demonstrates how the professionalization of housework—while being effective, efficient, and even lucrative—also significantly releases its practitioners from the position of being subject to their employers’ whims.

In its critique of the sexual double standard and women’s victimization thereby, *What Diantha Did* also interestingly anticipates Gilman’s second novel, *The Crux* (1911), which has recently been brought back into print.¹⁶ *The Crux* takes as its central focus venereal disease, particularly the ignorance of it that most young women had due to cultural constraints and the resulting danger of marriage to diseased men. Again avowedly didactic, this novel traces how its heroine, Vivian Lane, narrowly avoids making such a tragic mistake and instead establishes an independent existence as a kindergarten teacher, later marrying a man who supports her convictions. Although the topical focus of *The Crux* differs from that of Gilman’s first novel, the trajectories of the novels are quite similar, tracing the rise of a resourceful heroine who, aided by a female mentor, successfully resists societal expectations for women and becomes an inspiration to others. Furthermore, *The Crux* also imitates *What Diantha Did* in making use of other typical Gilman themes such as innovative and profitable domestic arrangements, for Vivian moves west with several other women who together establish a successful boardinghouse that has positive effects on the community.

Finally, Gilman’s first novel demonstrates her preoccupation with creating narratives about “self-made women” of various types, including female entrepreneurs, both in long works such as her novel *Mag-Marjorie* (1912) and in many pieces of short fiction in the *Forerunner*. *Mag-Marjorie* traces the upward progress of its protagonist from an ignorant country girl, who is seduced, impregnated, and abandoned by a selfish rake, to an eminent surgeon. While Diantha Bell’s ascent does not begin from as precarious a social position as *Mag-Marjorie*’s, these two works, along with *The Crux*, share a recurrent feature of Gilman’s female success stories: the

16. *The Crux*, introduction by Dana Seitler (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002).

serendipitous appearance of benevolent female patrons who mentor the young women in their professional pursuits. The story of the woman entrepreneur, on the other hand, appears in various manifestations throughout the entire sequence of *Forerunner* stories, from “According to Solomon” (December 1909) to “A Growing Heart” (December 1916). A few of these tales merit particular mention for their striking similarities to *What Diantha Did*. The ironically titled “Old Mrs. Crosley” (November 1911) recounts how its protagonist, a middle-aged woman whose children are grown, establishes a business that, like Diantha’s, trains and supplies housekeeping services. Similarly diversifying her venture, Mrs. Crosley also successfully initiates a laundry service and cooked-food enterprise.¹⁷ “A Cleared Path” (October 1912) features a conflict very similar to that of Diantha and her unsupportive fiancé Ross Warden. The heroine of this tale establishes a profitable group of businesses in California, including a laundry, a sewing shop, and a children’s clothing store. She falls in love with a Montana rancher who, despite his affection for her, stubbornly expects her to give up her career and relocate for him. The suitor, however, finally sees the error of his ways, acknowledging that he has been “‘a plain pig,’” and they happily marry.¹⁸ These two tales are indicative of other similar *Forerunner* stories that might be mentioned, but at base all contain the message developed at greater length in *What Diantha Did*: that any woman — young or old, married, single, or widowed — can rely on her own skills to establish economic independence and a corresponding sense of self-worth, ideally in the American West that Gilman so often portrayed as a liberatory environment.¹⁹

17. Gilman, “Old Mrs. Crosley,” *Forerunner* 2, no. 11 (1911): 283–87.

18. Gilman, “A Cleared Path,” *Forerunner* 3, no. 10 (1912): 258.

19. For discussion of Gilman’s interest in the West, see Allen, “Reconfiguring Vice”; Jennifer Tuttle, “Rewriting the West Cure: Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Owen Wister, and the Sexual Politics of Neurasthenia,” *The Mixed Legacy of Charlotte Perkins Gilman* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2000), 103–21; and Jennifer Tuttle, introduction to *The Crux: A Novel by Charlotte Perkins Gilman*, ed. Jennifer Tuttle (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2002), esp. 36–56.

The Novel's Significance to Its Historical and Cultural Moment

The Progressive Era in America (1900 to 1920) was characterized by an ethos of optimism, with strong beliefs in the attainability of civic reform, peace, and prosperity. This era witnessed faith in both the Protestant social gospel and the increasing specialization and professionalization of various disciplines, from medicine to social work.²⁰ Important among these disciplines was domestic science. David M. Katzman recounts the rise of this field at the turn of the century in America, claiming that “principles of professional management. . . [and] the cult of efficiency so prevalent in American industry had entered the household.”²¹ Principles of scientific management, at their most extreme in the Taylorism famous for its division of labor and minimizing of production time, were to be transposed to the home. Katzman observes that in an article for *Good Housekeeping* in 1892, “Josephine E. Martin used the vocabulary of business, manufacturing, and commerce to describe the ideal structure of the household. . . . A similar approach emphasizing the need for systematic management principles was to treat the servant question as part of the general question of capital and labor” (250). For example, one business practice to be adopted to the domestic situation was the contractual relationship between employer and employee, an element that Gilman includes in her novel through Diantha’s requirement of a contract for her work in the Porne household, specifying her hours, duties, and pay. Katzman also notes of this period that

the domestic economy movement and its goal of professionalizing the role of housekeeper stimulated the research and publication of articles and books on women’s work as well as on the household, the family, and domestic servants. . . . From the 1890s through World War I, more investigations of domestic service were undertaken than had ever been be-

20. These keynotes of progressivism appear in Dorothy Schneider and Carl J. Schneider, *American Women in the Progressive Era, 1900–1920* (New York: Facts on File, 1993), 11–13.

21. Katzman, *Seven Days a Week*, 250. Hereafter citations are given parenthetically in the text.

fore or have ever been since, and more publications on household labor were put out than had been or would ever be printed again. (254)

Thus was the field of domestic science established, which was soon added to the curricula of American colleges and universities. Domestic science fostered intellectual debates about the future of homes and household work in which Gilman herself took part, first in her groundbreaking text *Women and Economics* (1898) and most notably in her 1903 publication *The Home: Its Work and Influence*. For example, Katzman cites one thinker, Martha Bruère (incidentally a friend of Gilman's and one of the individuals to whom she dedicated her autobiography), who "predicted that domestic technology and industrial advances would make it possible to forgo servants. . . . Bruère also predicted that household chores would be transferred to agencies outside the home, citing as examples the assumption by industry of such chores as dressmaking, baking, and laundry" (256). On the other hand, Dolores Hayden has noted that other material feminist thinkers, from Florence Kelley in 1885 to Jane Addams in 1893 to Ellen Richards and Mary Hinman Abel in 1903, either proposed or carried out projects to provide housing, better labor conditions, and even mediation services for domestic servants.²² Gilman was hardly alone, then, in proposing the solutions to the "servant question" repeatedly outlined in her works and for which she makes Diantha Bell her mouthpiece in this text.

Gilman's dedication, added to the 1910 Charlton edition of the novel, employs the rhetoric of this nascent discipline of domestic science: "With earnest love and a warm wish to help; with the highest respect for her great work and the desire to see it done more easily, pleasantly, scientifically, economically, hygienically, and beautifully; hoping for her a happier life, a larger income, better health, and full success in living: this book is affectionately dedicated to THE HOUSEWIFE." Other instances throughout the novel appropriate the optimistic, and often capitalistic, discourse of domestic economy. Characteristic is Diantha's "heretical" lec-

22. See Hayden, *The Grand Domestic Revolution*, 170–71.

ture to the Orchardina Home and Culture Club, advocating centralized domestic services:

“We are rapidly approaching an improved system of living in which the private home will no more want a cookshop on the premises than a blacksmith’s shop or a soap-factory. The necessary work of the kitchenless house will be done by the hour, with skilled labor; and we shall order our food cooked instead of raw. This will give to the employees a respectable well-paid profession . . . and to the employers a saving of about two-thirds of the expense of living, as well as an end of all our difficulties with the servant question. That is the way to elevate — to ennoble domestic service. It must cease to be domestic service — and become world service.” (99–100)

Later in the novel, Diantha echoes the economic and scientific objectives of the domestic economy movement — with her own entrepreneurial spin — when she reminds her mother of the motives for her project: “‘You know what I’m after — to get “housework” on a business basis. That’s all; and prove, *prove*, PROVE what a good business it is. . . . [Food preparation] is an art, a science, a business, and a handicraft. I had the handicraft to start with; I’m learning the business; but I’ve got a lot to learn yet in the science and art of it’ ” (161–62). And near the conclusion we learn that Diantha’s patron, Mrs. Weatherstone, “supplied the Orchardina library with a special bibliography on the subject [of organized house service], and induced the new Woman’s Club to take up a course of reading in it, so that there gradually filtered into the Orchardina mind a faint perception that this was not the freak of an eccentric individual, but part of an inevitable business development, going on in various ways in many nations” (172–73). Thus Gilman invests her heroine’s schemes with the authority of the early-twentieth-century movement of domestic science and its offshoot, professionalized housekeeping.

Gilman’s first novel also reflects Progressive initiatives to “uplift” and supervise the working girl, including domestic servants. As Dorothy Schneider and Carl J. Schneider have noted, many middle-class women at the turn of the century were concerned by both the vulnerability and the freedom of their laboring peers and

began to establish organizations, from Working Girls' Clubs to the Young Women's Christian Association, to protect and mentor them. However, as Schneider and Schneider observe, "these reformers did not escape the rampant nativism of the population. . . . The looks, clothes, speech, heritage, and way of life of the young working women often struck them as outrageously foreign and wrong-headed. Reformers, not revolutionaries, the middle-class women tried to teach workers their own values."²³ Indeed, the line between sheltering the working girl against her own environment and *assimilating* her into "respectable" middle-class values was often tenuous.

Such concerns emerge early on in Gilman's novel; while Diantha is employed as a domestic in Isabel Porne's household, she soon learns of her peers' need for protection and moral guidance: "They brought her their poor confidences, painfully similar. Always ignorance, or they would not stay there. Then either incompetence in the work, or inability to hold their little earnings — or both, and further the Tale of the Other Side. . . . cases, common enough to be horrible, or insult they could only escape by leaving" (89). In a move similar to Vivian Lane's lectures on syphilis in *The Crux*, Diantha counters her peers' ignorance by initiating a series of edifying talks that the girls eagerly attend. Later on, when Diantha gives her controversial speech to the Orchardina Home and Culture Club, she notes the unique dilemma of the live-in maidservant who has "neither the freedom nor the privileges of a home; and as to shelter and safety — the domestic worker, owing to her peculiarly defenceless position, furnishes a terrible percentage of the unfortunate" (98). When Diantha launches her first enterprise, supplying a housekeeping service for beach cottages, she is careful to install a married older woman as the girls' "rigorous" chaperone (122); later, when Diantha establishes the Union House operations of maid service, restaurant, and catering, she provides "honest leisure" for the young female workers in wholesome activities such as sewing, reading, and dancing (138). When her adversary, the arrogant and wealthy Mrs. Thaddler, attempts to destroy Diantha's project by publicly insinuating the moral loose-

23. Schneider and Schneider, *American Women in the Progressive Era*, 61.

ness of the Union House girls, Diantha counters all suspicion by installing her own mother as “matron” of the house (144). In so doing, Gilman makes literal the symbolic maternalism of such establishments that Kathy Peiss has documented.²⁴

Gilman’s protagonist thus shows herself to be part of a broad Progressive Era movement to supervise the lives of young working women, one that may have begun in the earnest desire to protect them from sexual predators but that also suggested anxieties about the social threats posed by these individuals — from “stealing their men” to assimilating *too* well and therefore blurring class boundaries. In keeping with the ideological drive of her *Forerunner* fiction, Gilman presents a whitewashed view of such efforts, implying that Diantha’s are both welcomed and successful. Other early-twentieth-century authors show another side to this picture. The fiction of the Jewish American immigrant Anzia Yezierska, for example, repeatedly demonstrates the complex tensions between middle-class female employers or philanthropic workers and the working-class women whose lives they were attempting to “uplift” and, more simply, direct.²⁵ Such a juxtaposition underscores the bias in Gilman’s treatment of class issues that Gilman scholars now acknowledge.

Not only depicting “honest” amusement for working girls but also drawing upon the popular genres of fiction written to entertain them, Gilman’s text appropriates and revises techniques from two widespread novelistic forms at the turn of the century. First are the capitalistic narratives of men’s pursuit of financial success, appearing optimistically in the tales of Horatio Alger Jr. and with more mixed results in the writings of Gilman’s realist and naturalist contemporaries. Indeed, Gilman’s writing shares several similarities with that of Horatio Alger, a fellow New Englander and one-time Unitarian minister who wrote more than a hundred tales of young men’s rise to success between 1867, the year *Ragged Dick* was

24. See Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986), 166.

25. For example, Yezierska’s novels *Salome of the Tenements* (1923) and *Arrogant Beggar* (1927) both treat this theme as do several of her short stories, particularly those in the collection *Hungry Hearts* (1921).

published, and 1899. Like Gilman in the *Forerunner*, Alger was both prolific and formulaic, mass-producing repeated variations on the same theme. Like many of Gilman's stories, his were openly didactic, weakly characterized, and thinly plotted, relying on coincidences that strained the reader's credulity. In particular, in *What Diantha Did* Gilman copied Alger's use of stock devices such as the serendipitous appearance of benevolent patrons and the hero's eventual victory over naysaying antagonists. But to their credit, the works of both authors espoused an earnest doctrine of honesty, frugality, hard work, and self-reliance, presenting optimistic examples of how a person of meager circumstances could, with "pluck and luck" in Alger's phrase, achieve socioeconomic success and a sense of personal achievement. While it is probable that the voracious young reader Charlotte Perkins had already been exposed to the best-selling Alger tales during the 1860s and 1870s, his novels enjoyed a resurgence in popularity in the years just before World War I, when they sold even more abundantly than they had during his lifetime, so Gilman was likely well aware of his popular fictive formulas.²⁶

With her narrative of the rise of Diantha Bell, Gilman also echoes the recurring interest of realist and naturalist writers in the individual striving for—and even obsessed with—corporate success or wealth. This focus may be seen as early as 1885 with the publication of Howells's *The Rise of Silas Lapham* and continued through such works as Abraham Cahan's *The Rise of David Levinsky* (1917). Perhaps the epitome of such figures is Frank Cowperwood, hero of the "trilogy of desire" consisting of *The Financier* (1912), *The Titan* (1914), and *The Stoic* (posthumously published in 1947) by Theodore Dreiser, with whom Gilman had professional contact.²⁷ While the grim demise of McTeague in Frank Norris's novel of the same name (1890) and of George Hurstwood in Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* (1900) imply that the allure of the almighty dollar can be fatally destructive, Gilman's female entrepre-

26. Carl Bode, introduction to Horatio Alger, Jr., *Ragged Dick and Struggling Upward* (1867 and 1890, respectively), ed. Carl Bode (New York: Penguin, 1985), xxi.

27. Gilman discusses a meeting she had with Dreiser, then editor of the *Delineator* (where she published one essay), in *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman*, 304.

neurs maintain a healthful balance between turning profits and such higher motives as improving the lives of others.

The other popular literary form of this time influencing *What Diantha Did*, and indeed much of Gilman's work, is the utopian narrative, perhaps the most notable one by an American, *Looking Backward, 2000–1887* (1888) by Edward Bellamy. Several Gilman scholars have explored the influence of this work and other utopian writing on Gilman's fiction.²⁸ As these critics have observed, Gilman was quickly attracted to Bellamy's enormously popular utopian romance and to the resulting Nationalist movement that began on the West Coast soon after her move there. Envisioning a society of political, social, economic, and sexual equality largely based on socialist premises, Bellamy offered a scenario of life in the United States in the year 2000 that appealed to many Americans concerned by the economic abysses and social injustices that divided their society in 1888—indeed, his bestseller prompted the publication of forty-six other utopian novels in the United States between 1889 and 1900.²⁹

Although utopian writing in general was a vibrant genre in the period preceding the publication of *What Diantha Did*, Gilman was particularly interested in the economic equality of *women* in Bellamy's future world as well as in his specific proposals for domestic reforms. Indeed, David M. Katzman notes that for an article in *Good Housekeeping* in 1889, "Bellamy proposed cooperative laundries and kitchens as the means by which to eliminate household washing and meal tasks and reduce demand for servants. . . .

28. For example, see Ann J. Lane, *To Herland and Beyond: The Life and Work of Charlotte Perkins Gilman* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1990), 161–62; Carol Farley Kessler, *Charlotte Perkins Gilman: Her Progress Toward Utopia with Selected Writings* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1995), 23; Denise D. Knight, *Charlotte Perkins Gilman: A Study of the Short Fiction* (Boston: Twayne, 1997), 5, 78; and Gary Scharnhorst, *Charlotte Perkins Gilman* (Boston: Twayne, 1985), 20–24. Also see Denise D. Knight and Gary Scharnhorst, "Charlotte Perkins Gilman's Library: A Reconstruction," *Resources for American Literary Study* 23, no. 2 (1997): 181–219, which notes her interest in reading utopian romances by Ignatius Donnelly, W. D. Howells, and William Morris, in addition to Bellamy (182).

29. Erich Fromm, introduction to Edward Bellamy, *Looking Backward* (1888; repr., New York: Signet, 1960), v.

Where household labor was still thought essential, Bellamy outlined the organization of a cooperative agency that would hire out household workers by the hour. The laborers would be employees, not servants, and they would work for the agency, not the individual household” (257). With the enterprises that Diantha pursues in this novel, then, Gilman’s debt to Bellamy is clear.

Distinctly her own invention, however, is Gilman’s tale of the rise of an “Amazon of Industry” (*What Diantha Did* 176). As Gilman’s phrase implies, she revises gendered associations with the notion of capitalistic competition and struggle in a post-Darwinian social environment. Heralding the emerging presence of middle-class women in the public sphere, American literature at the turn of the century contains several female protagonists who achieve success in varied disciplines, including the performing arts in Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie* and Willa Cather’s *The Song of the Lark* (1915), and medicine in Sarah Orne Jewett’s *A Country Doctor* (1881) and Annie Nathan Meyer’s *Helen Brent, M.D.: A Social Study* (1892); indeed, even a half-century before, Fanny Fern’s largely autobiographical *Ruth Hall* (1855) suggested the potential for women to succeed professionally and become financially independent. However, with the exception of a few novels featuring businesswomen, such as Edna Ferber’s *Emma McChesney and Co.* (1915) and *Fanny Herself* (1917), American literature in the early twentieth century depicted men rather than women attempting to rise in the entrepreneurial or corporate world; only Edith Wharton’s Undine Spragg could use divorce—the “custom of the country”—to advance her interests. Just two of Alger’s dozens of juvenile tales feature a female protagonist, while literature written for older audiences by the realists and naturalists similarly tends to feature male characters. Particularly in the case of Dreiser’s Frank Cowperwood, the ability to survive and win in the competitive environment of the corporate world is linked to masculine strength and a cool objectivity of mind. Gilman’s female capitalist, however, triumphs not by following the ruthless Darwinian law of nature that Dreiser’s hero has imbibed; rather, she prevails by hard work, wits, kindness, and a bit of luck. This prescription for success resembles that of Horatio Alger’s plucky young men, and indeed, throughout Gilman’s stories, the material and psychological benefits of estab-

lishing oneself financially are as substantial as those in Alger's tales. However, an essential outcome for Gilman's female protagonists is the economic independence that frees them from the humiliations of relying on begrudging relatives or marrying out of necessity, as Fern documented earlier in *Ruth Hall*. Not only does Diantha Bell avoid these pitfalls, but she becomes a highly successful woman entrepreneur, one whose business itself has a liberatory effect on countless other women by releasing them from the burdens of conventional housekeeping.³⁰

Moreover, although a few elements of *What Diantha Did* coincide with the utopian tradition, Gilman's novel is one of social realism rather than fantasy, suggesting how certain traits of ideal communities might be incorporated into contemporary urban realities. The design of Diantha's final enterprise, the Hotel del las Casas, includes several of Gilman's characteristic utopian features; indeed, its grounds are "one rich garden, more picturesque, more dreamily beautiful, than the American commercial mind was usually able to compass" (183). However, the setting of this magnificent compound is not the sanitized and indeed disturbingly homogenous world of Herland. Rather, Diantha's ambitious project occupies a downtown block in the city of Orchardina, initially stirring the interest and admiration of local residents and later, after its overwhelming success, providing the model for similar establishments in other cities. In this way, Gilman brings together the idealism of utopian communities with the pragmatic concerns of a commercial enterprise in the "human world."

WHAT DIANTHA DID merits renewed attention for its passionate argument against women's invisible work and the privatization of domesticity. As with much of Gilman's hurriedly written — but no less politically driven — fiction, questions could be raised regarding the novel's literary value; after all, the author herself made few claims to the artistic strengths of her fiction, preferring social pur-

30. See Bergman, "The Amazon of Industry," especially pp. 93–94, for further discussion of how Gilman responds to the Darwinian worldview represented in some realist and naturalist texts with "a new kind of realism that dramatizes the altruistic aspects of evolutionary progress" (94).

pose to aesthetics. But for this reason Gilman's admittedly didactic text may be argued to possess a merit beyond that which the canon traditionally measures. *What Diantha Did*, like much of Gilman's as yet underrepresented fiction, offers provocative ideological visions that compel us to entertain the notion of divergent systems of cultural value.³¹

At the same time, while claims of the novel's aesthetic weaknesses may thus be countered, Gilman's first novel hardly eases recent critical concerns over the author's treatment of race and class. Gilman's portraits of Wang Fu, the polite and efficient Chinese manservant, and the Union House laundress Mrs. Thorald, the "melancholy Dane — a big rawboned red-faced woman" (129) whom the narrator, in a telling moment, also refers to as "Swedish" (129), reveal anxieties over rising immigration and the possibility of race suicide, as the Progressive sociologist E. A. Ross suggested, that occur elsewhere in Gilman's writing.³² Furthermore, her rendering of the African American cook Julianna demonstrates Gilman's apparent complicity with assumptions of the intellectual inferiority of African Americans: despite the narrator's avowal that she is "not the jovial and sloppy personage usually figuring in this character" (129), Julianna admits in heavy dialect her difficulty remembering her last name because of many marriages, and her

31. I am indebted here to Barbara Herrnstein Smith's argument in "Contingencies of Value," *Critical Inquiry* 10 (1983): 1–35.

32. Acknowledgment of the racism and xenophobia within Gilman's published and private writing is now widespread among Gilman scholars. For example, see Lisa Ganobesik-Williams, "The Intellectualism of Charlotte Perkins Gilman: Evolutionary Perspectives on Race, Ethnicity, Class," in *Charlotte Perkins Gilman: Optimist Reformer*, ed. Rudd and Gough, 16–41; Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, "Fecundate! Discriminate! Charlotte Perkins Gilman and the Theologizing of Maternity," in *Charlotte Perkins Gilman: Optimist Reformer*, ed. Rudd and Gough, 200–218; Catherine J. Golden and Joanna Schneider Zangrando, introduction to *The Mixed Legacy of Charlotte Perkins Gilman*, 11–22; Denise D. Knight, "Charlotte Perkins Gilman and the Shadow of Racism," *American Literary Realism* 32, no. 2 (2000): 159–69; Susan Lanser, "Feminist Criticism, 'The Yellow Wallpaper,' and the Politics of Color in America," *Feminist Studies* 15, no. 3 (1989): 415–41; and Gary Scharnhorst, "Historicizing Gilman: A Bibliographer's View," in Golden and Zangrando, *The Mixed Legacy of Charlotte Perkins Gilman*, 65–73.

young son Hector “[rolls] large adoring eyes” at Diantha.³³ However, such depictions of ethnic characters, no matter how uncomfortable to today’s audience, would unfortunately have raised few eyebrows in 1909, as Progressive Era thought had substantial, if faulty, “evidence” in the form of scientific racism to support its often socially conservative agenda. Catherine Golden and Joanna Zangrando, in their aptly titled volume *The Mixed Legacy of Charlotte Perkins Gilman*, recognize Gilman’s “amazing ability . . . to synthesize and express for a general public audience many of the cutting edge social and economic arguments of the leading critics of her era,” theories which for all their ameliorative potential were often based on eugenicist or xenophobic premises.³⁴

Moreover, Diantha’s unabashedly capitalistic scheme is even more difficult to rationalize in light of Gilman’s emphasis on the value of domestic labor. Despite her ennobling rhetoric of elevating domestic service to “world service,” as well as the fact that her workers are supposedly paid better than their maid-of-all-work precursors and are accorded “professional” status for such work as scrubbing floors, at bottom Diantha’s project is a profitable scheme based on others performing tasks that are unavoidably menial—a fact all the more discomfiting in an era in which hierarchies of “mental” versus “menial” labor coalesced. Furthermore, the heroine’s success is clearly aided by the advantages of her own race, her middle-class origin, and the patronage of a rich woman. Thus, while *What Diantha Did* embodies a major theme of Gilman’s revolutionary fiction, elevating the undervalued work traditionally performed by women, it also affirms capitalist class structure, suggesting the value of rising to the top and having others undertake such menial duties. Such concerns make it all the more essential that Gilman’s readers have full access to the author’s canon, including *What Diantha Did*, in order to explore her participation in

33. In *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman*, Gilman recounts visiting a “colored lunatic asylum” and notes, “I was told that insanity had greatly increased among the Negroes since they were freed, probably owing to the strain of having to look out for themselves in a civilization far beyond them” (245).

34. Golden and Zangrando, introduction to *The Mixed Legacy of Charlotte Perkins Gilman*, 12.

vexed dialogues about race and class in Progressive Era America, as well as those about the home and gender roles.

In an essay published in *Forerunner* magazine in 1915 entitled “Coming Changes in Literature,” Gilman observed that the subject of the woman in literature — “just the woman as a human creature” — had previously been grossly underrepresented:

No wonder she has no place in art — she has had no existence before. Women as persons, human beings, treated in their social relation solely, are quite new to us. We persist in measuring them by the marital or maternal possibility alone. We have stories about men . . . in which no woman enters, no love-motive is used, but they are regarded and exhibited in their relation to one another and to society. . . . We have long since seen that there were other interests than those of sex, for men. We must learn that these exist for women as well.³⁵

The American literary landscape in 1910, despite the work of peers such as Edith Wharton, Kate Chopin, and Mary Wilkins Freeman, still suggests this representational bias. Gilman’s first novel offers readers today a thought-provoking example of the new kind of narrative that she believed should be written, diverging from an androcentric literary past to portray a woman self-reliantly meeting challenges beyond those within the marriage plot, and moreover implementing innovative, if not perfect, solutions to the domestic burdens that American homes still face. Previous texts such as Fern’s *Ruth Hall* and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps’s *The Silent Partner* (1871) may have set a precedent in portraying women in business environments, but their focus on female community and social gospel reform links them to an earlier, sentimental tradition. Gilman’s tale of the rise of an individualistic female “captain of industry” who achieves the American dream, such as it is, offers us a vision of womanhood that is indeed unique for its time.

35. Gilman, “Coming Changes in Literature,” *Forerunner* 6, no. 9 (1915): 234; repr. in Knight, *Charlotte Perkins Gilman: A Study of the Short Fiction*, 129.