

## Topic Page: [Gilman, Charlotte \(Anna\) \(1860 - 1935\)](#)

Summary Article: **Gilman, Charlotte Perkins**

From *Encyclopedia of American Studies*

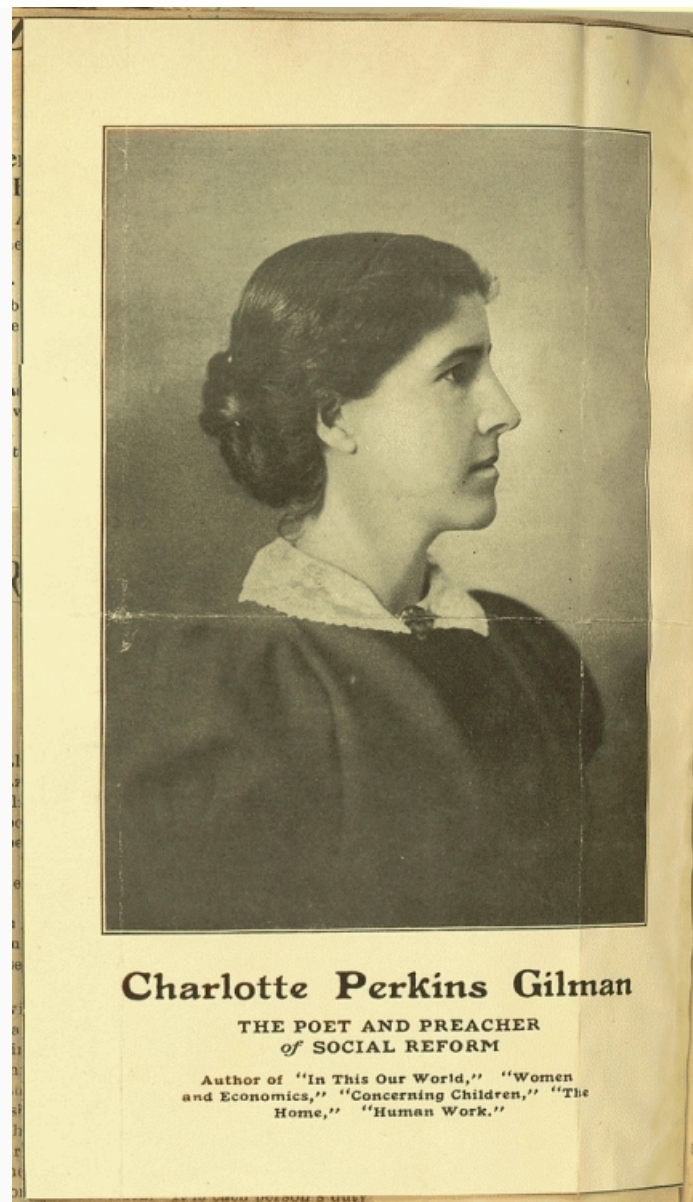
A lifelong activist for liberal causes such as women's rights, Christian socialism, and improved forms of domesticity, Charlotte Perkins Gilman was a scion of the illustrious Beecher family. Born in Hartford, Connecticut, in 1860, she sometimes found the pressure of her heritage enervating. Yet as the twentieth century dawned, this indefatigable writer and editor was acclaimed as one of America's most impressive women.

Soon after Charlotte's birth, her bookish father left the family. With his support uncertain Charlotte's mother was forced to move the two Perkins children from relatives to boardinghouses to communitarian households and back to relatives again. In almost two decades of constant change, Charlotte's most extended formal education was art training at the Rhode Island School of Design. There she learned the benefits of strenuous exercise and loose, unfashionable garments. In 1884 she married artist Charles Stetson; a year later she bore a daughter, Katharine. A victim of depression, the young mother underwent therapy with S. Weir Mitchell, whose methods she critiqued in a short story titled "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892).

In 1888 Charlotte Stetson formally separated from her husband and moved to California (an amicable divorce was made final six years later). There she became involved with the nationalist politics popularized by Edward Bellamy. Gaining a reputation as an essayist and club speaker, Charlotte was able to publish a book of satiric verse; edit a Progressive periodical, the *Impress*; lecture on social topics; and participate in the California Women's Congress. In 1896 she attended a labor congress in London and the National American Woman's Suffrage Association Convention in Washington, D.C. Two years later she argued in *Women and Economics* that women's financial dependence on men slowed the amelioration of society. *The Home: Its Work and Influence* (1903) extended this challenge.

Marriage to a first cousin, George Houghton Gilman, whose last name Charlotte took, did not slow a busy writing and lecturing career. The first few years of the twentieth century saw Gilman publish almost a book a year on topics such as trained childcare, the professionalization of housework, and the inefficiency of the single-family home. Gilman also edited a monthly magazine, the *Forerunner*, and produced nonfiction studies of religion and gender, which were complemented by novellas such as *Herland* (1915). In one busy year Gilman published a nonfiction book, *The Man-Made World, or Our Androcentric Culture* (1911); the fictional *Moving the Mountain*; a tract opposing marriage between a man with syphilis and a virginal woman; and a host of essays and poems. Before her death in 1935 Gilman's activities included a syndicated column for the *New York Tribune*, lectures on the chautauqua circuit, opposition to Freud and support for nativism, and an autobiography, which was published posthumously. Diagnosed with cancer in 1932 and widowed in 1934, Gilman committed suicide in 1935 to spare her daughter the burden of nursing responsibilities.

Gilman's interest for scholars began with her feminism, which has been thought aberrant because she put little faith in women's suffrage. Scholars have also studied Gilman's utopian fiction and her thoughts on labor. Later her distaste for "fecund foreigners" was found to be inextricable from the theories that she promoted tirelessly in lecture, essay, and novel form.



*Charlotte Perkins Gilman. 1904. Miller NAWSA Suffrage Scrapbooks, 1897-1911, Library of Congress.*

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## Chicago

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## MLA

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