

## Elizabeth Nolan

### A LACK OF ENGAGEMENT? THE CONTAINMENT OF WAR IN CHARLOTTE PERKINS GILMAN'S *THE FORERUNNER*

*Although she produced a significant body of writing during the First World War, much of it engaged with social and political issues of the day, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, is rarely considered in debates about women's war writings. Through an analysis of her journalism, short fiction and utopian narratives, this article seeks to position Gilman's writings within the context of debates on war and gender. It argues that her work is informed by the conflict, but that her complex and contradictory framing, and sometimes obscuring, of the war within her periodical, The Forerunner, has led to her marginalisation in feminist considerations of the female war text.*

Scholarship on women's written responses to the First World War has recognized the varied contributions to this body of work by a range of American women. Edith Wharton's journalistic impressions of wartime France, collected as *Fighting France* (1915), and Mary Borden's *The Forbidden Zone* (1929), a fragmentary, modernist account of nursing at the front in Europe, are amongst those discussed most frequently. Significant critical attention is also paid to imaginative engagements with the conflict composed by women who remain in the USA during this period, including Willa Cather, whose novel *One of Ours* (1922) filters the conflict through the experience of a Nebraskan farming family.<sup>1</sup> A notable absence in such debates is Charlotte Perkins Gilman. Judith Allen identifies Gilman as "the most significant Western feminist theorist of the period 1890-1920", noting the international success of her political treatise, *Women and Economics: A Study of the Economic Relation Between Men and Women* (1898).<sup>2</sup> Gilman's broad-based and ambitious agenda called for radical dress reform, the building of kitchen-less homes, the professionalization of housework, and of childcare. She sought women's full and free entry into the workplace, which in turn would provide economic independence and ultimately lead to an equitable social system in which men no longer "make and distribute the wealth of the world" whilst "women labor as house servants".<sup>3</sup> However, despite her vigorous participation in social and political debates of the day and her prolific literary output at this time, Gilman is mentioned only occasionally in studies of war writing for her creation of an exclusively female peace-loving community in the utopian novel *Herland* (1915).

Gilman's marginalization in this field is surprising considering the ways her social reform agenda resonates with feminist readings of the female war text. As is

widely recognized, women's interventions into the recording of the war often interrogate traditional gender roles and identities and explore the possibility of women's entry into new spheres of activity. Wharton provides a subtle, yet insistent illustration of this in *Fighting France*; including a photograph of herself in the company of military officials at a frontline position, she asserts her presence in a traditionally male arena.<sup>4</sup> With none of the subtlety of Wharton, Gilman was forthright in her critique of the patriarchal social arrangements she felt to be limiting to women. She attributed the ills of society to an "excessive maleness" developed through a combination of nature and nurture - inherent male aggression exacerbated and encouraged by the values of a male dominated society. In *The Man Made World, or Our Androcentric Culture* (1911), she claims "the basic masculine impulse [is] to scatter, to disseminate, to destroy". In warfare she asserts, "we find maleness in its absurdist extremes".<sup>5</sup> When, just a few years later this "excessive maleness" is enacted to its bloody extreme before the eyes of the world, one might imagine she would capitalize on the circumstance of war to further her feminist cause. However, her literary engagement with the war is not so straightforward.

This article will consider a selection of Gilman's journalism, short fiction and utopian narratives to establish the significance of the Great War to her work and to position her within debates about women's war writing that largely exclude her. Much of the material discussed comes from *The Forerunner*, the periodical founded by Gilman in 1909. Although she was already a regular contributor to titles including the suffrage paper, the *Woman's Journal*, the creation of a magazine of her own provided her with a vehicle through which to promote her often controversial theories unchecked.<sup>6</sup> Gilman funded the magazine and personally wrote every single word that appeared within its pages. Each monthly issue typically consisted of a short story, the serialization of both a novel and a theoretical piece, poetry, editorial comment and review and a range of short articles – a diversity of form certainly, but with a single message; its author's revisionist policies can be read as a consistent theme across all sections of the publication. Gilman reinforces her message, layering her rhetoric across an array of genres informed by a similar polemic. As Mariela Méndez has noted, there is little critical attention to the ground breaking nature of *The Forerunner* and the ways that the complete editorial control Gilman assumes allows her to "flow from one genre to another" taking up "different enunciating positions to articulate different aspects of [...] the same dilemma[s]".<sup>7</sup>

For scholars of women's responses to conflict, this periodical is an important document; spanning as it does the period preceding the First World War, through its onset and intensification, to the end of 1916 when the journal closed, the publication traces the development of Gilman's writing as the conflict progresses. This study will begin by examining the relationship between the form and content of *The Forerunner* during the war years, focusing on the strategies Gilman employs to frame her presentation of the conflict. It will suggest that when it comes to the subject of war, rather than using the multi-genre voice for emphasis and amplification, Gilman, in fact, exerts her editorial control to manage and contain the implications of world events through careful placement of material. The article will also consider the ways in which distancing and displacement feature significantly in Gilman's engagement with the war as she repeatedly figures this as a European issue. In addition, it will explore Gilman's use of utopian narrative over the course of the war. Carol Farley Kessler has identified Gilman's long-standing relationship with the genre, identifying "utopian dimensions" across her entire oeuvre, dating back to childhood literary experimentations. Kessler suggests that Gilman's utopias "can be understood as but fragile surfaces covering painfully-lived experience, especially regarding her familial and marital relationships".<sup>8</sup> It will be suggested here that Gilman's use of the utopian frame extends beyond the personal context, and that, as the war progresses, there is an increasing recourse to the genre in order to mediate her response.

Key to understanding Gilman's carefully managed presentation of the conflict is the profound challenge that the onset of world war poses to the optimism that had infused Gilman's reformist vision up to this point. Labelled an "optimist reformer" by William Dean Howells, Gilman had made regular and bold assertions of social progress and change insisting that the USA and, indeed, the wider Western world were beginning to awaken to the socialist and feminist causes she promoted.<sup>9</sup> In her autobiography she notes: "I planned programs for the world, seeing clearly the gradual steps by which we might advance to an assured health, a growing happiness".<sup>10</sup> In the first years of its publication run, *The Forerunner*, informed by this optimism, unfailingly offered textual solutions to what Gilman saw as the problems facing US society - particularly those affecting women. Within its pages, she created an American ideal, tending towards a utopian vision of the possibilities of her native land, where democratic principles would ultimately provide a society based on inclusion and social justice. The war then, represents something of a double-edged sword for Gilman. The havoc being wreaked by what she classes as "male" behaviour offers her the opportunity to insist on the superiority of female values and

yet simultaneously this regression into base, “excessive masculinity” is a major blow to her dreams of reform and undermines her optimistic claims about the progress that has already been made. This duality is evident in her presentation of the conflict.

A significant indicator of this duality is her rather contradictory attitude towards pacifism. A founding member of the Woman’s Peace Party in 1915, in a *Forerunner* piece in 1916 Gilman asserts, “I am a pacifist of settled conviction”. However, she goes on to say that one may be “an extremely peaceful citizen” yet “fight valiantly if it becomes necessary”.<sup>11</sup> A factor in her ambiguous pacifism is likely to be the close, yet complex, relationship between feminist and pacifist activism. Indeed, during the war, Gilman resigned from the feminist debating society, The Heterodoxy Club, over differences with members who were staunch pacifists. As Jean Kennard notes, feminist-pacifist alliances are forged largely on the basis that woman suffrage will result in female influence in international politics, and ultimately lead to an end to war. Kennard also recognises the problems that much women’s peace movement discourse can pose, when the motherhood or biological argument is used “against feminist aims [...] to keep women in their traditional place”.<sup>12</sup> This represents a significant dilemma for Gilman who was particularly sensitive to the notion of “natural” maternal instincts, in part due to the debilitating postpartum depression she suffered after the birth of her daughter Katherine, and her vilification in the popular press when she relinquished care of the child to her former husband, Walter Charles Stetson.<sup>13</sup> Consistently outspoken in her refutation of the sanctifying of the mother-child relationship by a male-dominated ideology that she believed sought to contain the woman within prescribed boundaries, Gilman clearly struggles here to reconcile debates about the role of motherhood in war with her deeply held reformist convictions. Throughout the war years, *The Forerunner*, as Gilman’s personal mouthpiece, reflects the ambiguity of her position on maternity and peace-making, and on other aspects of the conflict, as it treads a careful path, negotiating between the feminist potential of the circumstance of war and the compromise the fighting poses to her optimistic vision of progress and reform.

#### *The Forerunner*: structure and containment

Central to the way in which Gilman seeks to manage and mediate this uncertainty is the structuring of the magazine, which appears to dilute potential threats and anxieties and downplay some of the more serious implications of the war. A tactic used repeatedly is the positioning of serious war-related articles alongside pieces of

a seemingly more trivial, everyday nature. One is likely to find some strange juxtapositions of material. An article entitled, "Dogs, Pigs and Cities" expressing concern about pets and hygiene in the close confines of city apartments, sits alongside the more sober "Pacifists, Militarists and Money", an attack on the profiteering of the armaments and munitions industry. A playful critique of the impracticality of women's fashions, "Women's Hair and Men's Whiskers", shares space with the war-based article "Patriotism and Humanism", a serious consideration of human values. From the onset of the war, Gilman tempers its presentation with a counter-balancing measure -- for each potentially negative and unsettling piece, she introduces an item that focuses on what she would consider an easy target for reform.

In addition to this positioning of seemingly incongruent material, Gilman also demonstrates a consistent unwillingness to compromise the customary make-up of the magazine to take account of the changing nature of the world and the USA's place within it. Throughout 1915, at the height of the war, when public debate about the European conflict abounded, the major theoretical piece chosen for serialization in *The Forerunner* was "The Dress of Women", an extended work promoting dress reform, which is very much a part of the typical Gilman message dating from pre-war times. In determinedly continuing, during such extraordinary circumstances, to pay attention to familiar issues, Gilman attempts to maintain a sense of "business as usual" in the magazine and thus avoid full acknowledgement of the possibly overwhelming nature of contemporary events. This editorial policy represents evidence of the inflexibility of her overall programme. The strict adherence to her original "obsessions" appears to preclude the possibility of her adapting her perceptions of the present state of society or her visionary projections of the future in order to accommodate either the war or the changing nature of the world.

Further examination of Gilman's structuring technique reveals that, as the war continues and escalates beyond initial expectations, she begins to effect an additional retreat from the full implications of the situation. As the war progresses, it is possible to identify a shift in the balance of material contained in *The Forerunner*. As time goes on with no sign of abatement and with US intervention becoming an increasing possibility, war-related articles diminish in number, matters more in tune with the familiar Gilman theories taking their place. Their absence, at a time of increasing tension indicates a refusal or an inability to engage with the continuing crisis and its increasingly serious implications. Gilman's near silence on war-related matters at this time is an uncomfortable one; her insistence on conducting "business

as usual” appears forced. A useful exercise in consideration of this shift is a comparison of the content of two issues of the magazine published two years apart - one in October 1914, a couple of months into the war, and one in October 1916 just prior to *The Forerunner's* demise.

The 1914 issue carries an article entitled “Masculinism at its Worst” lamenting the way in which the “men of Europe” are engaged in wholesale slaughter and calling on “the women of Europe” to exert their influence to bring the fighting to a stop.<sup>14</sup> This is followed by the poem, “For Power”, a further expression of Gilman’s desire for peace. In addition, this number of *The Forerunner* includes an article on the organisation of a world peace movement, and under the heading, “Feminism or Polygamy” there is a consideration of the plight of the “great number of women [who] will be left in Europe, manless, childless, homeless”, without any means of support.<sup>15</sup> Here, Gilman’s war writing intersects with her standard narrative as she suggests ways in which these women should take their opportunity to join the workforce and become self-sufficient. The comment and review section for this month features an indignant response to an article carried in *The Springfield Republican* on a woman’s “duty” to increase her rate of reproduction in order to replenish the depleted armies of Europe: “Men, who do all this wholesale murder, expect women to cheerfully reproduce more men – to do it over again. And that is called “Patriotism”<sup>16</sup>. Although this issue of the journal still carries content of a more frivolous nature, and maintains a focus on Gilman’s reformist vision, the war is a consistent thread.

In October 1916, the issues given prominence differ significantly. Here there is much more of a concentration on the staple features of the Gilman programme, and very little mention of the war. There is a clear return to the basic socialist theories, as the work of the American Social Hygiene Society is highlighted, and, in a piece entitled “Best for the Poorest”, the need for better housing for the socially disadvantaged is discussed. The comment and review section for this issue concentrates on the monotony of housework, a current railroad strike and on the merits of a text on socialism by a Floyd J. Melvyn. This edition does contain some discussion of the war. “Peace in Three Pieces” repeats the call for an immediate halt to the fighting stating plainly that, “Peace is the best thing for humanity. War is the worst thing for humanity”.<sup>17</sup> But, in “The Football Theory” which revisits themes addressed in “The Man-Made World”, such discussion is implicit, with no direct reference being made to current hostilities: “young males love physical combat, the more violent the better, and [...] colleges gain cash and glory through this part of the

curriculum".<sup>18</sup> Here, aggressive masculine behaviour is projected into the sporting rather than the battle arena. In this issue of the magazine, there is clear evidence of a withdrawal from direct engagement with the conflict. The October 1914 number had contained at least six pieces of war-related material, now there were a mere two references. Gilman's written engagement with the war would diminish significantly after this point, as only two more issues of *The Forerunner* would be published.

#### Displacing/distancing the war

Gilman's projection of masculine aggression from the battlefield to the sports field in "The Football Theory" resonates with another of her key strategies for addressing the war whilst managing to avoid its full implications – that is, the use of distancing and displacement. Displacement of the reality or the horror of war is widely recognised as a common theme in women's war writings. Dorothy Goldman, for example, discusses the common practice of women writers employing masculine characters to articulate the most disturbing descriptions of warfare. She argues that this, "carries the clear implication that war is not a sphere which women writers can inhabit imaginatively, which in turn is developed into a generally implicit attack on warfare as an alien, masculine activity".<sup>19</sup> There are obvious resonances here with Gilman's discussions of gender difference – she clearly identifies aggression as a masculine trait - but she also engages repeatedly in geographical and temporal distancing - associating the regression into violent warfare as a facet of European rather than American culture.

Announcing the war in the apocalyptically named, "The Beginning of the End", Gilman frames the conflict in the language of catastrophe as a "hideous [...] immeasurable horror". However, she is careful to create the calamity at a remove, identifying the unfolding events as a European tragedy: "Those striving, crowding European powers [...] are now all at one another's throats. Europe is aflame in universal war".<sup>20</sup> Two paragraphs into the article, Gilman reverts to optimistic form, envisioning the war as a catalyst to social change in Europe, with the potential to strengthen labour and women's movements. The only correlation between the USA and war that Gilman is willing to concede at this stage is a historical one. She is keen to establish that the USA *has* experienced this painful process of conflict effecting social change, but it is a conflict of the past, long resolved, the resultant new social order seemingly well established. She claims here that what she terms "our own devastating civil war of half a century ago", has been a major factor in women's emergence from the domestic sphere and their movement towards full

enfranchisement. There is something of a contradiction here, since her forthright reform agenda is driven by a sense of ongoing gender inequality in the USA, but this is, perhaps, further evidence of her dogged optimism and insistence on American progress. Here, the beginning of the end of the title turns out to be not as pessimistic as it first appears, but instead relates to the beginning of the end of an old Europe riven by conflict and gender inequality. The USA is cited as a progressive example that can be “repeated in Europe”. And Gilman carefully frames the war as an opportunity for European women to benefit from the freedoms that she and her fellow countrywomen already enjoy courtesy of their unique cultural history.

In common with Gilman’s tendency to layer her rhetoric and restate her message, these ideas are revisited in fictional form, in the guise of the short story, “A Surplus Woman”, which appeared in the May 1916 issue. In this tale, Gilman reworks one of her recurrent themes -- that of the single woman or widow, who in a society where women outnumber men, finds that, contrary to social expectation, she is capable of living a fulfilling life outside of a traditional dependent, domestic framework. Unusually for stories from this period, “A Surplus Woman” engages directly with the contemporary conflict. The expected life pattern of Susan Page, the story’s protagonist - namely marriage and motherhood - is disrupted when her fiancé is killed in the war. She explores various alternatives, including competing for one of the few available young men or seeking security from a much older male provider. Susan, however, whose wartime nursing experience has taken her beyond the confines of the home, is content with neither option, and instead embarks on a particularly Gilmanesque alternative. She joins up with a group of like-minded women, who have been “brought out by the war, out from their previous limitations, aspirations, and contentments. Everyone of them was larger and stronger, abler, more open to idea and to action, because of that cataclysmic experience”.<sup>21</sup> Together they develop programmes of education and training in order to transform women into active and fully contributing members of society. As one would expect from the Gilman text, the project is a resounding success, the speed with which it is accomplished attributed to the extraordinary circumstances of the period. Gilman writes:

In ordinary times a plan like this would have had a hard time in reaching the consciousness of people; a harder time in rousing action. But this period was one of wide social upheaval, of hearts exalted, of eyes opened to large issues.<sup>22</sup>

In her wartime rendering of the superfluous woman story, Gilman clearly acknowledges the opportunities the conflict presents in facilitating women's emergence into the public arena. But the events recounted in "A Surplus Woman" take place at a distance - in Britain. The emphasis on setting is very deliberate in indicating that we are firmly outside the USA. The protagonist, who lives in England, has "Irish", "Scotch" and "a strain of Welsh blood".<sup>23</sup> In addition, although written in 1916, the war here is already over. Within the realms of this fictional, post-war European setting Gilman appears to create enough distance to enable her to explore more boldly the possibilities for women in a world where male numbers are depleted by violence. The story opens with three stark statements, issued in a business-like fashion: "Her father was killed in the war [...] Her brother was killed in the war [...] Her lover was killed in the war".<sup>24</sup> Several years earlier, in *The Man Made World*, she had taken issue with the fact that women have traditionally been defined in terms of their relationships with men, expected to live what she describes as a "wholly relative existence", through dominant male figures.<sup>25</sup> Whereas elsewhere in her writing she appears unable to do so, here the distance she has created allows her to exploit the feminist possibilities of war. Writing from the perspective of the European woman, she simply removes three significant male relationships, along with the attendant pressures and expectations which she identifies as being in conflict with women's interests.

The "surplus woman" of Europe is a recurrent figure in much of Gilman's wartime writing, and, invariably, such women are urged to make capital out of violent social upheaval. In a piece entitled "War-Maids and War-Widows" Gilman urges her European sisters to: "accept the glorious opportunity made possible by their bereavement [...] political power shall give them their full share in public action".<sup>26</sup> Although the concept of a distanced Europe is clearly an important literary device employed by Gilman to retain a sense of control over her presentation of the war, I would suggest that it has a further, implicit function. Whilst purporting to examine social conditions and change abroad, Gilman is able to explore subtly the feminist possibilities offered to American women, by a wartime situation. The activism towards which she urges her European counterparts goes beyond the rights and political influence enjoyed by American women at this time. She appears drawn repeatedly to the idea of war as a catalyst to social change, and whilst referring specifically to Europe, the opportunities she envisions arising from the devastation echo those she has long sought for her home country, not all of which have been achieved. In suggesting that crisis will facilitate a rebirth in Europe, particularly in

terms of the advancement of women's causes, I would suggest that, although she does not say so, Gilman recognizes the added momentum such a significant social upheaval would add to her reform programme at home. Exploring the potential of war to further the feminist agendas of American women, albeit obliquely by talking about Europe, implies that despite her adamant public assertions of a dawning social evolution in the USA, Gilman had private doubts and insecurities about the degree of progress already made at home.

### The utopian narrative in war

Kessler suggests that the recurrent conceptualization of utopian realms enables Gilman to develop "fictional solutions" to troubling personal issues and unsatisfactory social arrangements.<sup>27</sup> In this respect, *Herland* can be read as a direct response to "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892). Here, the disabling and restrictive environment, presided over by the oppressive male figure in the early story, with its "hedges and walls and gates that lock",<sup>28</sup> is later erased, rewritten as the idyllic, all-female land where the isolated home is rejected in favour of, "comfortable [...] beautiful" spaces where women "can mingle freely in common human expression".<sup>29</sup> Kessler traces the development of such a utopian imagination throughout Gilman's career, and claims that the First World War had little impact and "did not dampen [her] expectation of human progress".<sup>30</sup> I would suggest, however, that it is possible to map a shift in Gilman's use of the genre across the war years. It would appear that, ultimately, in the face of ongoing conflict, even the utopian narrative loses its therapeutic function for Gilman and that, by 1916, she is demonstrating a progressive loss of utopian vision.

That Gilman continues to engage with the utopian genre during this period is significant in itself. In identifying Inez Haynes Gillmore's *Angel Island* (1914) as a possible source text for *Herland*, Charlotte Rich has suggested that, in their imaginative creation of all-female communities, both Gilman and Gillmore are working "against the literary grain of the time". She suggests that, in turning to speculative modes to express feminist ideas, these women fall between the two prevailing literary modes of the period – literary naturalism and an emerging modernist movement. They are, she argues: "caught between the rock and the hard place of what were often masculine-gendered imperatives in the existing naturalist movement and the fledgling Modernist one".<sup>31</sup> Rich figures this use of speculative fiction as an innovative transcendence of limiting literary paradigms that may not be

sufficient to articulate female-centred visions. In the case of Gilman, however, it is possible to read the consistent recourse to the utopian narrative in wartime - when the dominant impulse is to modernist forms of expression – as her drawing on a familiar framework in uncertain times and seeking to bring order to the chaotic. However, as the war continues, the potential of the form to contain and overwrite disorder is diminished, and there is a distinct shift from the utopian possibilities of earlier narratives towards a dystopian-inflected vision.

Gilman's first utopian novel, *Moving the Mountain* (1911), is set in the USA in the 1940s, where a successful socialist system is in operation and where men and women co-operate fully to the benefit of all. In her analysis of the narrative, Val Gough notes Gilman's absolute belief in her ability to realize such a vision in her own society: "That she located her fictional utopia not 'elsewhere' but in an American 'here and now' only thirty years distant, testifies to her optimism and faith in the utopian potentialities which she believed to be latent within American social reality".<sup>32</sup> In the early years of the war, this utopian optimism persists and, as is typical with Gilman, elements of the genre infuse a wide range of writings, including the non-fiction, where the conflict is often posited as a catalyst to effect similar social change. For example, the *Forerunner* article "Constructive Internationalism" offers a vision of a "World City" that is distinctly utopian, a place of order and peace, calm and co-operative endeavour. This would be "a city so calmly lovely in its ordered spaces, its noble adornments, its majestic buildings, and its wide waterways, that one visit to it would bring Heaven into possibility".<sup>33</sup> And, to Gilman, the city is a realizable prospect: "there is nothing impossible about it", she claims. In fact, she identifies Hedrick Anderson as a suitable architect for the project and provides detailed financial costings for its construction: "out of one billion citizens of the earth, a tax of *twenty cents a year* each would give \$200,000,000. Our country alone, paying \$1.00 a year for each of the adult population could furnish about \$40,000,000".<sup>34</sup> Gilman returns again and again to the notion of the World City in *Forerunner* articles as well as expressing hopes for the emergence of "World Federations", "World Citizenship" and new international socialist movements out of the turmoil of war; the treatment of all of these concepts is utopian in nature.

By 1916 however, a more pessimistic tone enters into the utopian narrative. *With Her in Ourland*, a sequel to *Herland* serialised during this year, sees Herlander Ellador leave the female idyll with her new American husband, Van, to travel back to the outside world. In this novel, Ellador functions as the observer of an unfamiliar

land, her reactions highlighting the significant shortcomings of the lifestyles she witnesses. In this text there is little sense of progressiveness and promise:

[...] going about with Ellador among familiar conditions, and seeing things I had never dreamed were there, was always interesting, though sometimes painful. It was like carrying a high-powered light into dark places. As she turned her mind upon this or that feature of American life it straightway stood out sharply from the surrounding gloom.<sup>35</sup>

Where *Herland* celebrates the possibilities of an advancing society, *Ourland* is negative in focus. Where *Herland* exists in peace and harmony, in *Ourland* ongoing war and destruction play a pivotal role; Utopia, in effect, is transposed into dystopia. The couple embark on a flight over the military hospitals and battlefields of France, witnessing “the battle lines of trenches [...] the dead men [...] the men not dead [...] the ruins, ruins everywhere”.<sup>36</sup> Again, European locations are emphasised, but in this novel, Gilman, for the first time, allows events in Europe to infiltrate and taint her positive vision of the USA. Having completed their survey of the world of *Ourland* in its present chaotic and disordered state, Van and Ellador return to the isolated idyll of *Herland*. In what marks a significant development in Gilman’s writing, she has reached a stage at which she can no longer create the USA as a neutral and safe space from which threat and retrograde steps in the process of advancement can be rebuffed and denied. Ellador’s perspective revises Van’s positive perception of the USA:

Not only the war horrors, not only the miseries of more backward nations and of our painful past, but even here in my America [...] instead of the breezy pride I used to feel in my young nation I now began to get an unceasing sense of what she had called “an idiot child”<sup>37</sup>.

Her choice of language here is significant. There is a sense of the loss of innocence of her once “young nation”, which is now aligned with the turmoil of “old” Europe. However, the reference to America as “an idiot child” is more profound and resonates with the problematic eugenicist rhetoric which Gilman’s biographer, Anne Lane, has described as the “dreadful” ideas that “seriously mar her contribution as a social analyst and theorist”.<sup>38</sup> The utopian possibility of the USA that has permeated all areas of Gilman’s multigenre address is fatally undermined here and, as the couple

retreat from an unsatisfactory and seemingly hopeless USA, Gilman fails to impose order, even in fiction.

## Conclusion

The longer-term effects of the war on Gilman's writing career can be assessed by considering the writings that follow this turn towards a dystopian view of American culture. An important factor in this is the timing of her decision to cease publication of *The Forerunner*, which has greater significance than she seems prepared to admit. Gilman provides a rationale for the closure of the magazine which is largely financial. In an address "To My Real Readers" in the closing number she says: "The magazine has never paid for itself".<sup>39</sup> She also notes that the significant output represented by the seven-year publication run has "relieved the pressure of what [she] had to say".<sup>40</sup> Despite her protestations to the contrary, however, I would suggest that timing is a key factor in her decision to bring *The Forerunner* to a close. The final issue of the magazine appeared in December 1916, significantly, just four months before the USA's entry into the First World War. This article has demonstrated the inflexibility of Gilman's reform agenda. Had *The Forerunner* continued throughout a period of direct US involvement, it is difficult to imagine how Gilman could have reconciled such a "regression" with her determinedly optimistic vision of the nation. Comments in the autobiography, published posthumously in 1935, provide further evidence that the withdrawal from expressing herself in print in the post-*Forerunner* period does indeed have greater significance. In *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman*, the subject of war receives perfunctory treatment in a single comment: "The War came and passed".<sup>41</sup> This glossing over of what is clearly a transformational moment in terms of Gilman's work is accompanied by the telling statement, "I had no impulse to write for some time".<sup>42</sup>

There was, in fact, a very early indication that the war would pose a significant challenge to Gilman's literary imagination. In the December 1914 issue of *The Forerunner*, when the full implications of the war were just becoming apparent, Gilman replaced her usual short story with a single page item headed, "Instead of a Story". This piece is strikingly postmodern and represents an unusual departure from the regular short-story pattern that pertained throughout the whole of the seven years of publication. "Instead of a Story" refuses to provide the expected and comfortable reading experience in which a central tension is resolved and solutions to problems are offered. Instead, it unsettles and disconcerts its readers, offering them only a

template to create their own fiction: a basic cast of characters, a simple plotline, and an exhortation to create their own tale using, “that blessed resource of last century writers - the imagination”.<sup>43</sup> What it represents is a literary reflection of the breakdown of order and the inability to unproblematically make meaning in what is revealing itself to be a chaotic world. Gilman acknowledges that this disruption to the norm is attributable to the war: “there seems to be no room for stories now [...] the nightmare of Europe [...] is upon us all”.<sup>44</sup>

In withdrawing, albeit temporarily, from providing the story herself, and in invoking a pre-war era in which the imagination is not hampered by present horrors, Gilman acknowledges the impact that the war is having on her own writing process. Together with her comments in the autobiography about her loss of motivation, this serves as evidence of the war’s deleterious effect on Gilman’s writing career. Indeed, she wrote very little after this time - a few newspaper articles, a study entitled *His Religion and Hers* and the detective novel, *Unpunished*. Her withdrawal from writing marks the end of a process which begins with the onset of the First World War. Yvonne Klein has suggested that a common theme in women’s narratives during the war is one of loss: the loss of loved ones, the loss of certainty in their identities, the loss of hope and possibilities for the future.<sup>45</sup> As this analysis of *The Forerunner* has demonstrated, Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s journalism, fiction and utopian narratives from this time share this sense of loss, but it is a loss of vision - a loss of confidence in her plans for a golden future. Her initial uncertainty of response, the uncharacteristic ambiguity of this usually forthright activist, moves through a period in which she apparently attempts to control threatening events, presenting them through the use of distance and an insistence on the positivity of the future. Her determination to assume a “business as usual” tone for her magazine is superseded by a series of retreats – retreats from direct engagement with the conflict and the ultimate retreat from the articulation of her ideas. Gilman’s protestations of optimism, right up to the end - to her closing *Forerunner* address where she insists that “Humanity is moving on; doing well” – are, in reality, a refusal to acknowledge the check to human progress that the conflict represents.<sup>46</sup> This bold assertion constitutes another attempt to mask a real sense of doubt and disillusionment. Ironically, whilst the war is often interpreted as an opportunity for many of those engaged in the call for women’s rights, it effectively silenced one of the movement’s most vociferous advocates.

## Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> See, for example: Julie Olin-Ammentorp, *Edith Wharton's Writings from the Great War* (Gainesville: UP of Florida, 2004); Margaret Randolph Higonnet, *Nurses at the Front: Writing the Wounds of the Great War* (Boston: Northeastern UP, 2001); Steven Trout, *Memorial Fictions: Willa Cather and the First World War* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002); and Dorothy Goldman, "'Eagles of the West'? American Women Writers and World War I", *Women and World War I: The Written Response*, ed. Dorothy Goldman (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1993), pp. 188-208.
- <sup>2</sup> Judith A. Allen, *The Feminism of Charlotte Perkins Gilman: Sexualities, Histories, Progressivism* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2009), p. 1.
- <sup>3</sup> Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *Women and Economics: A Study of the Economic Relation Between Women and Men* (1898; New York: Prometheus Books, 1994), pp. 10, 17.
- <sup>4</sup> Edith Wharton, *Fighting France: From Dunkerque to Belpport* (1915; New York: Scribner's, 1918).
- <sup>5</sup> Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Man-Made World or Our Androcentric Culture* (1911; London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1912), pp. 117, 188, 189.
- <sup>6</sup> Aleta Feinsod Cane, and Susan Alves, *The Only Efficient Instrument: American Women Writers and the Periodical, 1837-1916* (Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 2001).
- <sup>7</sup> Mariela E. Méndez, "Disorientating the Furniture: the Transgressive Journalism of Alfonsina Storni and Charlotte Perkins Gilman," *Journal of Transnational American Studies*, 2.1 (2010), 20 Apr. 2016 <http://escholarship.org/uc/item/1m64j7dt>
- <sup>8</sup> Carol Farley Kessler, "'Dreaming Always of Lovely Things Beyond': Living Toward *Herland*, Experiential Foregrounding", *The Mixed Legacy of Charlotte Perkins Gilman* ed. Catherine J. Golden and Joanna Schneider Zangrando (Newark: U of Delaware P, 2000), pp. 89-102 (99).
- <sup>9</sup> Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman* (1935; Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1990), p.182.
- <sup>10</sup> Gilman, *Living*, p. 121.
- <sup>11</sup> "Peace in Three Pieces", *The Forerunner*, 7. 10 (1916): 270-71.
- <sup>12</sup> Jean E. Kennard, "Feminism, Pacifism and World War I", *Turn of the Century Women*, 2.2 (1985): 10-21 (17).
- <sup>13</sup> See Denise D. Knight, "Charlotte Perkins Gilman, William Randolph Hearst, and the Practice of Ethical Journalism", *Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Her Contemporaries: Literary and Intellectual Contexts*, ed. Cynthia J. Davis and Denise D. Knight (Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama P, 2004), pp. 46-58.
- <sup>14</sup> "Masculinism at Its Worst", *The Forerunner*, 5.10 (1914): 257-58.
- <sup>15</sup> "Feminism or Polygamy", *The Forerunner*, 5.10 (1914): 260-1 (260).
- <sup>16</sup> "Comment and Review", *The Forerunner*, 5.10 (1914) 277.
- <sup>17</sup> "Peace in Three Pieces", *The Forerunner*, 7:10, (1916): 270-1 (270).
- <sup>18</sup> "The Football Theory", *The Forerunner*, 7:10, (1916): 269-70 (269).
- <sup>19</sup> Goldman, pp. 195-6.
- <sup>20</sup> "The Beginning of the End", *The Forerunner*, 5: 9 (1914): 250-1.
- <sup>21</sup> "A Surplus Woman", *The Forerunner*, 7: 5 (1916): 113-118 (115).
- <sup>22</sup> "Surplus Woman", 118.
- <sup>23</sup> "Surplus Woman", 114.
- <sup>24</sup> "Surplus Woman", 113.
- <sup>25</sup> Gilman, *Man-Made World*, p.23.
- <sup>26</sup> "War-Maids and War-Widows", *The Forerunner*, 6: 3 (1915): 63-65 (63).
- <sup>27</sup> Carol Farley Kessler, *Charlotte Perkins Gilman: Her Progress toward Utopia with Selected Writings* (Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 1995), p. 44.
- <sup>28</sup> Charlotte Perkins Gilman, "The Yellow Wallpaper", *The Charlotte Perkins Gilman Reader*, ed. Ann J. Lane (London: Women's P, 1981), pp. 3-20 (4).
- <sup>29</sup> Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *Herland* (1915; New York: Dover, 1998), p. 31.
- <sup>30</sup> Kessler, *Charlotte*, p. 44.
- <sup>31</sup> Charlotte Rich, "From Near-Dystopia to Utopia: A Source for *Herland* in Inez Haynes Gillmore's *Angel Island*", Davis and Knight, pp. 154-70 (168).
- <sup>32</sup> Val Gough, "In the Twinkling of an Eye: Gilman's Utopian Imagination", *A Very Different Story*, ed. Val Gough and Jill Rudd (Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 1998), pp. 129-143 (134).
- <sup>33</sup> "Constructive Internationalism", *The Forerunner*, 5.11 (1914): 286-89 (287).
- <sup>34</sup> "Constructive Internationalism", 287.

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- <sup>35</sup> Minna Doskow, *Charlotte Perkins Gilman's Utopian Novels: Moving the Mountain, Herland, and With Her in Ourland*, ed. Minna Doskow (London: Associated UP, 1999), p. 356.
- <sup>36</sup> Doskow, p. 282.
- <sup>37</sup> Doskow, p. 375-76.
- <sup>38</sup> Ann J. Lane ed., *The Charlotte Perkins Gilman Reader* (London: Women's P, 1981), p. 201.
- <sup>39</sup> "To My Real Readers", *The Forerunner*, 7.12 (1916): 326-8 (326).
- <sup>40</sup> "Announcement to All my Readers and Friends", *The Forerunner*, 7:2 (1916): 56.
- <sup>41</sup> Gilman, *Living*, p. 96.
- <sup>42</sup> Gilman, *Living*, p. 327.
- <sup>43</sup> "Instead of a Story", *The Forerunner*, 5.12 (1914): 309.
- <sup>44</sup> "Instead".
- <sup>45</sup> Yvonne M. Klein, *Beyond the Home Front: Women's Autobiographical Writing of the Two World Wars* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997), pp. 7-8.
- <sup>46</sup> "Real Readers", 326.