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No Good Deed Goes *Unpunished*? Victims, Villains, and Vigilantes in Gilman's Detective Novel

Catherine J. Golden and Denise D. Knight

Charlotte Perkins Gilman completed *Unpunished*, her lone feminist detective novel,¹ in 1929 at the twilight of a long and enormously productive career. Fearing that the fast-changing world would simply forget her contributions, she labored through the last years of her life to ensure that her legacy would continue. In the final chapter of her posthumously published autobiography, she lamented that *Unpunished*, a playfully satirical work with a compelling message about domestic abuse, remained unpublished.

The novel's publication in 1997 by The Feminist Press would no doubt have pleased Gilman. The work, which she considered "a species of detective story, at least unique" (*Living* 332), both responds to and subverts the conventions of detective fiction, popular in the 1920s. Although it lacks the pulpit-pounding didacticism found in much of Gilman's oeuvre, it borrows and combines themes from her other fiction, particularly her early and best-known "The Yellow Wall-Paper" (1892) and *Herland* (1915), written at the peak of her career. While *Herland* portrays a utopian society run by females who reproduce parthenogenically, and "The Yellow Wall-Paper" depicts women restricted by patriarchy, *Unpunished* likewise encodes traditional gender stereotypes in its portrayals of female victims and male villains. Yet *Unpunished*, like *Herland*, is also forward looking: Gilman addresses the subjugation women face in their daily lives, she identifies and indicts domestic abuse and marital rape long before these phrases were assimilated into our language, and she allows characters who use vigilante justice against their abusers literally to go unpunished. Thus, Gilman not only exposes the rigid gender codes and prejudices of the 1920s but looks beyond that era to envision a better world for women.

The publication history of *Unpunished* is, in itself, revealing of the shifting literary tastes in America and the contemporary move by scholars to rescue lost works from literary obscurity. While the recovery of *Unpunished* reflects, in part, the resurgence of interest in Gilman's life

and work, its long road to publication, beginning in 1929, has been filled with bumps, turns, and more than a few dead ends. Extant records reveal that efforts to place *Unpunished* resulted in a protracted process spanning seventy years.

In her autobiography, Gilman briefly refers to *Unpunished* and complains that there were "No takers." "I find your characters interesting," said one 'reader.' 'That is not necessary in a detective story.' Evidently it is not, but I have often wished it was," she wrote with obvious disappointment (*Living* 332). Like much of her fiction, *Unpunished* was hurriedly written and never edited for publication. It also reveals the prejudices of early-twentieth-century Anglo-America evident in the work of other writers of her time; as much of her *Forerunner* fiction and journalism attests, Gilman was insensitive to the plight of racial minorities (as well as working-class and immigrant women) in her dream to build a better world for women and men.² But Gilman's inability to place the novel may have stemmed less from the quality of the manuscript than from her fusion of seemingly incongruous elements: she puts a satirical twist on the popular genre of detective fiction and embeds within it the darker themes of battered women's syndrome, domestic violence, and sexual abuse.³ It is not unlikely that editors reading the novel with an eye toward publication found the marriage of humor and pathos, packaged in the formula of detective fiction, to be disconcerting.

Correspondence reveals that Gilman sent her manuscript to Robert S. Tapley of the Macmillan Company in the fall of 1929. Tapley wrote to Gilman on 8 November 1929 that he had read *Unpunished* "with very great interest" and found it to be "exceptional" and "entertaining." At the same time, he was obliged to send it to other readers but promised to let Gilman know "as soon as there is anything definite to report."⁴ Although no readers' reports survive among the Gilman Papers at the Schlesinger Library at Radcliffe College, Charlotte A. Barbour at G. P. Putnam, Inc. confirmed in a letter dated 15 February 1930 that she had "received two copies of *Unpunished*." (She sent one to the Macmillan Company, per Gilman's request; the other was considered for serialization.) On 18 April 1930, Barbour informed Gilman by letter that there was "no luck yet with the book, but there are plenty of publishers to try."⁵ Any further attempts to place *Unpunished* during Gilman's lifetime were unsuccessful, and it remained "buried in manuscript heaps of some agent or publisher" (*Living* 332). Less than two weeks after her mother's death, Gilman's daughter, Katharine, began exploring the possibility of publishing *Unpunished*. She, too, was unsuccessful.⁶

Since the acquisition of the Gilman Papers by the Schlesinger Library in the early 1970s, numerous scholars have requested permission

to examine the manuscript of *Unpunished* (references to it are found in nearly all the major works on Gilman's life and literature).⁷ In 1980, Ann J. Lane included an excerpt from the novel, chapter VII—"The Record," in *The Charlotte Perkins Gilman Reader* (Pantheon). And as recently as 1991, three scholars announced their intention to publish *Unpunished*—a plan that never reached fruition.⁸ Finally, in 1997, the book appeared in print for the first time.⁹

Gilman was likely attracted to the detective formula because of its growing popularity and potential for marketability. She was familiar with the genre and particularly enjoyed the Sherlock Holmes stories by Arthur Conan Doyle.¹⁰ She opined, however, that in too many detective novels, "the Plot comes before the People," causing character to be subordinated to storyline (*Forerunner*, September 1913, 252).¹¹ But Gilman herself might rightly be accused of creating at least some stock characters: the evil villain; the innocent, fragile female victims; the missing servants; and the husband-wife detective team, common in detective fiction from 1913 to the 1970s, all make an appearance in *Unpunished*.¹² Many of the twists of the plot—overheard conversations, a secret hiding place, and the surprise ending—can also be seen as humorous exaggerations of the generic murder mystery. At the same time, Gilman acknowledged "that it takes some extremely vital incident, some strong personal interest, something sharply unusual to distinguish one Who Did It story from another" (*Forerunner*, September 1913, 252), and that is precisely what she attempted to accomplish in *Unpunished*.

The novel begins with the discovery of a murder, but it is not an ordinary murder. As Lillian Robinson notes, "So we begin with a corpse, as is not uncommon in a murder mystery, but such a corpse has not been seen since the day some enterprising child pasted all the cards in the 'Clue' game together" (277). Conniving New York attorney Wade Vaughn—a victim of overkill—has been shot, stabbed, choked, bludgeoned, and poisoned. The motives for the murder are as numerous as the methods of killing, for Gilman is quick to point out that her murder "victim" is really a villain deserving of death. Vaughn has abused his wife (Iris) and his badly disfigured and crippled sister-in-law (Jacqueline "Jack" Warner), driven Iris to suicide, blackmailed countless individuals, and attempted, through coercion, to arrange his step-daughter's (young Iris's) marriage to a brute. A wheelchair-bound invalid who is at Vaughn's mercy, Jack is the prime suspect in the murder though other suspects include his personal physician, Dr. Ross Akers, and three house servants who have mysteriously disappeared. The task of solving the crime falls to a husband-and-wife detective team, Jim and Bess Hunt, who launch an investigation replete with twists and turns. Gilman play-

fully ponders the order of the killings and wonders whether it is really a crime to kill a dead man since "A man can die but once!" (44). But the novel is more than a simple "Whodunit" or even a "Whodunit First." Gilman weaves into this tale a heavy strand of satire and black humor and a strong message about the consequences of marital rape and domestic abuse. She renders complex portraits of some characters, most notably Bess Hunt and Jack Warner. And Jack's motives, determinism, and resourcefulness lead to a brand of female vigilantism not often seen in women's writing in the early part of the twentieth century.¹³

Ever forward looking, Gilman exposed the abuse of wives and dependent women long before this taboo topic came to be recognized as a social problem that demanded political advocacy and redress. As Michele Bograd points out in a 1988 essay entitled "Feminist Perspectives on Wife Abuse": "Wife abuse is part of contemporary family life. This sentence doesn't surprise anyone anymore, but 15 years ago the physical abuse of wives was a hidden phenomenon. Starting at the grass roots level, feminists named its existence with terms such as *battering* and *marital rape* and began to put into place an underground network of shelters and safe houses for women and children" (11). Gilman indicted battered women's syndrome approximately five decades before the existence of these long-overdue advances to protect women like the fictional Iris Vaughn. The Women's Movement in the early twentieth century made great advances in women's suffrage, but it did not challenge the family or the sanctity of the home, as Gilman did in her fiction and her theoretical works including *Women and Economics* (1898) and *The Home: Its Work and Influence* (1903).¹⁴ Gilman was painfully aware that "Victim blaming is essential for a social order in which women are valued chiefly as wives and mothers," as Dorie Klein points out (91). *Unpunished*, daringly written during the quiescence of feminism, runs contrary to the Victorian sensibility still dominant at that time (Linda Gordon notes that women's complaints about abuse climbed in the 1930s). To Gilman, a woman's passive acceptance of victimization was not virtuous, as the Victorians contended; rather, Gilman openly challenged the popular opinion that "women must not 'rebel' against their owners and masters."¹⁵ In writing about the "hidden phenomenon" of wife abuse, a still underreported crime (Flowers 15), she refuses to condone the secrecy surrounding wife battering and marital rape by virtue of its commission in the private home, a social institution Gilman considered particularly crippling for women. In opening up a still-unexplored area of research on women (Flowers xv), in pinpointing the home as the site of battering, Gilman anticipates a perceptive insight made by M. D. A. Freeman in 1979: "The home is a very dangerous place and

we have more to fear from close members of our family than total strangers'” (qtd. in Flowers 13).

In Wade Vaughn, Gilman creates a character who fits the profile of the marital abuser appearing in contemporary sociology texts and research studies. The male batterer, like Vaughn, typically has a “dual personality” (Flowers 17). As Gordon points out in her research on battered women from 1880 to 1960, caseworkers in the early twentieth century often focused on the external and morally upstanding qualities of the abusive husband that jar with the profile he exhibited in the home; for example, in 1917, just twelve years before Gilman wrote *Unpunished*, one case worker praised an abusive husband for being “energetic, industrious, wanting to get ahead” (262). As Gordon concludes, “these qualities are valued and they serve to mitigate the condemnation of his violence” (262). In the abusive partner, we see both a disjunction between private and public behavior and a tendency to compensate for violence. Likewise, in the diary section of *Unpunished*, Jack tells us of Vaughn’s duality: “Any outsider sees nothing but a rather genial man, benevolently taking care of his wife’s relations” (91). Detective Bess Hunt further confirms Jack’s lack of legal redress and resulting powerlessness in saving herself and the children from this “genial man,” following Iris’s suicide: “‘Even if she could have escaped with them, any sort of court would have given them back to him—what could she bring against him—that would hold?’” (136). Sociology texts suggest isolation intensifies battering, and Wade—though well-respected as an attorney—has no family and only business acquaintances for friends. Iris, too, is cut off from all but her sister, daughter, and nephew, who are also under Vaughn’s control.

As criminologist Ronald B. Flowers notes, “the mistreatment of women is rooted in the subjugation and oppression of women through the male partner exercising his authority as head of the family” (15). In *Unpunished*, the exercise of patriarchal authority is passed from one generation to the next following the death of J. J. Smith, Jack and Iris’s father. In his thirst to enforce submissiveness and obedience in his household (82), Vaughn appropriates both the role and the power formerly held by Smith, himself a domineering patriarch. Vaughn inherits Smith’s fortune and moves into his home to become “master of the house, and of all the money” (71). As Jack remarks, “he sits in my father’s chair . . . at my father’s desk . . . drinking my father’s whiskey” (emphasis added, 71). In some ways, the two men are almost indistinguishable. Jack comments to Vaughn, for example, “You and father seem of one mind as to obedience” (82). In fact, Vaughn at times appears more of a father figure—albeit a controlling and tyrannical one—than a hus-

band and brother-in-law. He selects Iris's clothing, mercilessly teases her, mocks her, and orders her to bed (86-88). Vaughn abhors Iris's tendency to wear dark colors, suggestive of her mourning for her first husband, and he insists that she wear bright outfits and lacy nightdresses, which Jack dismisses as "foolish" (87). Similarly, he carries the crippled Jack in his arms as one would a small helpless child, not unlike John of "The Yellow Wall-Paper," who gathers the narrator "in his arms" and "carrie[s] [her] upstairs" (YWP 21). Thus, like John, Vaughn disempowers the women in his family through the constant exercise of control, coercion, and condescension.

In exploring the profile of a batterer, Dorie Klein cites disillusionment with work or family as a reason why men coerce and erupt into violence. As Gordon confirms, violence is but a means to increase the abuser's control over his wife. Part egomaniac, part sadist (*Unpunished* 96), Vaughn fits the profile of the domestic abuser by "resort[ing] to violence through brute strength and force as a means to maintain respect and domination over their wives and lovers" (Flowers 15). Wade Vaughn is uncomfortably aware that his wife Iris is still in love with her late husband (killed in the car accident that crippled Jack) when she has moments of clarity. Sexual jealousy and extreme possessiveness characterize Vaughn and men who batter and lead them to dominate. Vaughn is jealous of his wife's affections for her dead husband: as Gilman tells us, "he hated [Iris] because she did not love him and had loved Sydney Booth" (86). Unquestionably disillusioned when "The vague trouble in her eyes would change to sharp anguish" and "her gentle submissiveness . . . [would] turn to an irresistible shrinking from him" (86), Vaughn attempts to control his wife's body and her sexual conduct.

Iris's chronic cough, which Jack explains results from a "sensitive throat" (86), provokes Vaughn, and he "was always urging her to control it" (86). Blaming her for a physical weakness beyond her control, Vaughn demands that Iris carry cough drops at all times. Moreover, like men who batter, he justifies his sexual abuse in finding fault with his wife for not being sexually responsive or deferential (Ptacek 147). In forcing her to submit sexually, Vaughn has been guilty, in effect, of marital rape. In this respect, the misogynist Terry Nicholson of *Herland* offers a prototype for the evil Wade Vaughn of *Unpunished* (1929), who also harkens back to Doctor John in "The Yellow Wall-Paper" (1892). Believing that a woman "loves to be mastered" (132), Terry tries to "master" his *Herland* wife Alima: he is convicted of marital rape and banished from utopia. But banishment is not a suitable punishment for a non-utopian world or an abuser as corrupt as Vaughn.

When Iris rebuffs his sexual advances one night, Vaughn, resplendent in a "handsome bathrobe," resorts to verbal abuse and not-so-veiled threats: "'My dear wife . . . I think you are still intelligent enough to realize that your nervous condition has its dangers. If you care to remain at home with your sister and your child you must be calmer, more naturally affectionate, more obedient. If you make any noise or disturbance of any sort I am sure that an examining physician would quite agree with me that—restraint was necessary, and seclusion. You need sleep my dear. Come back to bed'" (88). In his mandate for rest and obedience, Vaughn further intensifies the role of John in "The Yellow Wall-Paper" (1892), who threatens to send his wife to Dr. S. Weir Mitchell if her health does not improve.¹⁶ Vaughn thus emerges as part paternalistic father figure, reminiscent of Doctor John, and part controlling rapist, akin to Terry Nicholson. Rather than succumb to madness, as Gilman's nameless narrator does in "The Yellow Wall-Paper,"¹⁷ Iris elects suicide.

Gilman was aware that outside of the utopian world depicted in *Herland* Iris has no legal leg to stand on against her marital rapist and paternalistic jailer. Rape and the plight of the married woman has traditionally been the most difficult sexual abuse crime to prove since marriage makes sex licit. The historical rooting of "conjugal rights," dating to Sir Matthew Hale's 1678 common law doctrine, led British and American courts to sanction "the so-called marital exception rule for forcible rape, according to which a husband cannot rape his wife for the same reason that he cannot burglarize his own house and land; namely, that a man cannot steal that to which he has a right" (Tong 94). When Iris submits to Vaughn, who exerts his "right" over Iris's mind and body, Gilman tells us, "she was 'gone' again, that dull patient look, very submissive, and all dressed out in gay stylish things. She followed him to the door and kissed him when he left for the day" (88). But Iris cannot live with her passivity and comply with Vaughn's sexual demands. Ultimately, she elects to hang herself with a black-and-white scarf.

The symbolism in the scarf is striking. It signifies Iris's choices, which were, indeed, black and white. She could continue to be subjected to the tyranny of a man she did not love, risking institutionalization, or she could "escape from life," as Jack characterizes the suicide. It seems logical to question why Iris, who was able to withstand her patriarchal father's orders to marry Vaughn, should ultimately succumb to the man she detested following the death of her husband. It would appear, however, that Gilman is suggesting that Iris's economic and psychological vulnerability following her beloved husband's death made her particularly susceptible to Vaughn's coercion and subsequent victimization. As

a result of the accident, Iris's "mind was a blank with irregular patches of memory, all unrelated" (76), leaving her defenseless against Vaughn's manipulation and psychological battering.

Tong distinguishes psychological battering from emotional abuse by the atmosphere of intimidation that accompanies that abuse. Gilman takes pains to tell us that following the accident that killed both Iris's and Jack's husbands, Vaughn lied to the emotionally fragile Iris, saying her husband had been dead for years, not barely a fortnight. Vaughn manipulated her, telling her he would support her now scarred and disfigured sister and young Hal and Iris only if she married him. Gilman assures her readers that "Iris [was] no more responsible than a baby" (76); she "did not know at all what she had done" (77). Today, we might classify Iris's "crushed condition" (77) as post-traumatic stress. Iris conforms to the primary stereotype of women in criminal justice. Specifically, she fits the profile of the psychologically battered woman, who is "confused, bewildered, and otherwise disoriented" (Tong 126). As Gilman confirms, she "sometimes talked as if Sydney was still alive" (77).

Quintessentially a victim first of a controlling father, then of circumstance (the fatal car crash), and finally of an abusive and paternalistic husband, Iris appears to be vulnerable, dependent, and in need of protection. Gordon looks deeper, however, into the dynamic between batterer and battered, lending insight into the relationship between Iris and Vaughn that Gilman exposes: spousal abuse "is the chronic battering of a person of inferior power who for that reason cannot effectively resist" (251). Iris emerges as "inferior" to Vaughn in a number of ways that Gordon suggests leads to male dominance. "The basis of wife-beating is male dominance," Gordon argues, "not superior physical strength or violent temperament (both of which may well have been effects rather than causes of male dominance), but social, economic, political, and psychological power" (251). Gilman plays up Iris's (and Jack's) economic dependence and Vaughn's psychological superiority, strengthening the basis for the abuse. Marrying against their father's wishes, Iris and Jack are disinherited. There are no other relatives to support them, and, unlike her sister Jack, Iris has no skills or resources of her own to support herself without her batterer. Jack, possessing self-taught clerical skills, is too disfigured to flee and support Iris since Vaughn refuses to pay for her surgery.¹⁸ Iris is also the less-intelligent sister, making her a pawn for Vaughn's psychological warfare. Vaughn plays upon Iris's low self-esteem (a dominant trait in the battered woman's profile). He tells Jack, "'you are more intelligent than Iris, even when she is quite herself'" (77). And he is quick to point this out to Iris; he cruelly taunts her: "'My dear wife . . . I think you are still intelligent enough to realize that your

nervous condition has its dangers'" (88). Adhering to the profile of the battered woman, Iris—who is dependent on her abuser and her sister, regrettably under Vaughn's control—lacks the psychic strength to retaliate. Ever the victim, Iris cannot change the unequal power relationship of her marriage, and her quiet suicide emerges as her only act of strength. "Most batterers' greatest fear is that their women will leave them," Flowers notes (17); when Iris "leaves" Vaughn by taking her life, Vaughn "tore her down" from where she was hanging, "tried to rouse her, [and] sent for the nearest doctor" (88-89). Showing her insight into the personality of the male batterer, Gilman reveals that Vaughn showed not only grief but a "sort of puzzled disappointment—did you ever take a mouse away from a cat, kill it, and give it back again?" (89).

Jack, of course, is also subjected to Vaughn's abuses, and, like Iris, fits the definition of a domestically violated woman.¹⁹ While the sexual coercion is not as pronounced as in Iris's case—there is no evidence that Jack is raped by Vaughn—she is still forced to submit to his crude sexual advances. Because of her limited mobility, she is particularly vulnerable: "He knows I hate to have him touch me, and [he] insists on carrying me upstairs and downstairs in his arms, and kissing me!" (95). Another time he insists that she give him "'a nice crooked kiss'" (82). He refuses to pay for Jack's reconstructive facial surgery: "[H]e said I was sufficiently useful to him as I was, and more likely to stay! Like the Chinese women" (71). In addition, many of the psychological abuses previously directed toward Iris—threats, intimidation, humiliation—are transferred onto Jack following Iris's suicide. And as Gilman was well aware, the psychological abuse of women "can be as devastating . . . as physical violence, if not more so" (Flowers 14). Gilman writes that Vaughn "grew more hateful than ever," after Iris's death, "having no wife to dominate" (91). Like many batterers, Vaughn thrives on power and the ability to control others. "[H]e loved power better than money. It was tyrannizing over us that he loved," Jack remarks (85).

The psychological abuses that Jack undergoes, in fact, are a more likely catalyst than are the sexual degradations in shaping her resolve to seek a form of vigilante justice against Vaughn. Jack's vigilantism is actually a nonviolent, though premeditated, crime—a form of psychological terrorism designed to make the ruthless Vaughn "*feel for once!*" (207). Donning a painted death mask made from Iris's face after her suicide, and wearing a scarf identical to the one Iris used to end her life, Jack succeeds in frightening Vaughn to death. In the final chapter of *Unpunished*, Jacqueline Warner discloses this well-guarded secret; it is she who has caused his fatal heart attack. The scene in which Jack describes appearing before Vaughn in her sister's death mask is particu-

larly dramatic: she crawls downstairs on her hands and knees. In pain, she stands on her deformed feet and terrifies Vaughn. By appropriating Iris's identity, even briefly, Jack is showing that the familial bond of sisterhood can transcend even death. The retaliation is as much an acknowledgment of Iris's suffering as it is a victory for Jack and the children. In a strictly symbolic sense, it is not Jack who kills Vaughn, in fact, but the ghost of Iris, seeking vengeance from the grave. As Flowers reports, "the motive most often associated with . . . familial homicide is self-defense or desperation culminating from a period of abuse from a husband or father" (108); Iris, however, chose to "escape from life" (89) rather than face her tormenter any longer. But Jack symbolically resurrects Iris, and, by wearing Iris's death mask, has her "face" Vaughn one last time.

Gilman was not the first American woman writer to address vigilante justice in her fiction. The scene in which Vaughn is frightened to death is, in fact, reminiscent of "An Authentic Ghost Story," a famous chapter from *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Gilman's great-aunt Harriet Beecher Stowe. Cassie, an abused but strong-willed slave, dresses up as a ghost to frighten Simon Legree, her evil master. The goal for both Jack and Cassie is identical—each wants to escape the clutches of her oppressor and to exact vengeance at the same time. While Gilman's Vaughn dies from fright, Stowe's Legree collapses into a swoon (as does John in "The Yellow Wall-Paper"). The parallels between Simon Legree and Wade Vaughn are striking. Legree is a "short, broad" man with a "large, coarse mouth" and "glaring" eyes (*Uncle Tom's Cabin* 289, 293); Vaughn is "stout" with "a thick red mouth and small hard eyes" (73). But even more significant is each man's insistence that those who are under his tyrannical rule be, in Vaughn's words, "submissive and obedient" (82). As Hal testifies at the inquest into Vaughn's murder, "'He was tyrannical—and enjoyed it. . . . we couldn't call our souls our own'" (164). Likewise, Legree purports to own his slaves both "body and soul" (309). While *Unpunished* undeniably lacks the power of Stowe's popular antislavery novel, Gilman forcefully alludes to "slavery" several times, most notably in the "diary" chapters in which images of entrapment, enslavement, and disempowerment figure prominently. "We were in slavery, pure and simple!" (81), Jack remarks in her journal, particularly in light of Vaughn's "passion for power" (86).

One might argue that even in the absence of Iris's suicide, the culmination of Jack's own suffering—combined with her knowledge of Vaughn's abuses toward others (female clients, Doctor Ross Akers, Jack's own niece Iris)—was sufficient in itself to lead Jack to exact vengeance. Either way, Gilman condones Jack's behavior. Not only is

revenge sweet, but even those who learn of Jack's guilt sanction her vigilantism: "I am on my knees to you," says detective Jim Hunt. "If you had boiled him in oil, I would still be on my knees to you" (206).

We come to see Vaughn's death as a justifiable homicide,²⁰ not unlike the case of Minnie Wright's apparent murder of her abusive husband John in Susan Glaspell's one-act play *Trifles* (produced 1916, published 1920).²¹ As *Trifles* unfolds, Minnie's women neighbors, who enter her home following the murder, are quick to recognize Minnie's victimization far more readily than the men who investigate the crime. Although we never question that it is Minnie who has killed her husband, Glaspell exonerates her because of the years of abuse she has suffered. Acting as judge and jury, Minnie's neighbors withhold from authorities crucial evidence that is needed to implicate Minnie in the murder, so she, like Jack, goes unpunished. Through their respective presentations of Jack Warner and Minnie Wright, Gilman and Glaspell were instrumental in exploring a ground-breaking concept central to court cases today: women, at times, must take extreme measures to fight back against the males who abuse them. Both works illustrate the chilling effects of domestic violence and battered women's syndrome long before the phrases were introduced into our vocabulary.

Significantly, four other characters in *Unpunished* participate in a form of vigilantism as well; none of them shows remorse, and, like Jack, each goes unpunished. In the later chapters of the novel, we learn that three disappearing servants have perpetrated four of the attacks on Vaughn (strangulation, bludgeoning, stabbing, and poisoning). Later, Dr. Akers reveals he is responsible for the fifth "murder" by shooting Vaughn. The common psychological thread for all five of the characters who retaliate against Vaughn is their view that they have little control over threats of blackmail, exposure, or, in Jack's case, an eviction that would result in homelessness and an uncertain future for her son Hal and young Iris.

Gilman, in fact, exonerates all of those who sought vigilante justice against Vaughn. "If ever a man deserved to be executed it was that man," Jack assures the guilty servants. "You mustn't think me a heartless monster . . . condoning murder and casual homicide," she confesses, "But you know something of what I had to bear at the hands of that—unspeakable man!" (199). As Gilman once argued in *Forerunner*, the journal she single-handedly wrote and edited from 1909-16, "Justice is not angry, even though it kills. The wise, strong, modern man need not fly at the throat of whomsoever offends him, but should set calmly to work to prevent repetition of such an offense. . . . To be angry, and do nothing, is worse than waste."²² And, indeed, Jack's crime is an extreme

form of passive resistance—her intention is to produce psychological retaliation against Vaughn rather than cause his physical death. Gilman also conceded, however, that oppressed and violated women could be moved to use violence against their tormenter, and, while she stopped short of condoning it, she certainly understood the cause and effect. In a 1912 article, she argued “that women, as much as any other creature, have a right to use violence—when necessary”; moreover, a woman is “expected to put up with whatever is done to” her, because she has been conditioned to believe that “it is not ‘her place’ to ‘answer back.’”²¹

Some of what Jack is “expected to put up with” recalls the entrapment of “The Yellow Wall-Paper”’s narrator, but Gilman allows Jack to escape from her fate and transforms her from victim to vigilante. Like the nameless narrator of “The Yellow Wall-Paper,” Jack—living under Vaughn’s rule for much of the story—keeps a diary, not only so it may prove “legally useful” (71), but because she, more importantly, finds writing a “‘release’” (71). In chapters 7 through 10, Gilman invokes two of the devices she used skillfully in “The Yellow Wall-Paper”—the first-person narrative account, presented in the form of a journal, and the idea of writing as therapy. Defeated by the rigid gender codes prescribed to women in her patriarchal world, the nameless narrator of “The Yellow Wall-Paper” creeps in endless circles over her controlling physician/husband, who faints in despair as she declares “‘you can’t put me back!’” (36). But Gilman allows Jack to rise from an infantile crawl, symbolically elevating her above the seated patriarchal Vaughn. In doing so, Jack is both literally and figuratively taking a stand against her abuser, Wade Vaughn. While John of “The Yellow Wall-Paper” is momentarily paralyzed, and Terry of *Herland* is banished from utopia, “‘That man [Vaughn] had been killed four times over. Or four ways at once. Possibly five’” (16). In fact, Vaughn is killed six ways: Gilman saves the ultimate spoof for the end when she reveals that Vaughn actually died from natural causes so that all vigilantes who retaliate can go “unpunished.”

Vaughn’s multiple murders occur because he is the product of a sexist society that breeds and tolerates injustice to women. As Robinson observes, “the patriarch is done in, but patriarchy is not” (282). But the “doing in” of the patriarch seems not only significant but symbolic. In overkilling her evil villain, whom she labels “‘worse than Jack the Ripper’” (135), Gilman is consciously playing with something as deadly as murder in order to advance a message that was radical for her time. Perhaps her act of overkilling Vaughn and so grossly mutilating his body might best be read as an attempt to wipe out all the crimes against women that Vaughn himself embodies.

Vaughn is a sadist, a misogynist, a blackmailer, and a villain. His gruesome murder fits his manifold crimes against women and society at large. Gilman describes the mutilated corpse, the only vestige of Vaughn in this novel, which begins with paperboys chanting about his death: "There was a bullet hole in his right temple. There was a long bruise on his head from front to back; he was bald enough to show it. There was a knife sunk in his neck, inside the collar bone, sunk to the hilt. And, if you'll believe it there was a cord around his neck too'" (17). The "long bruise" and the knife and bullet holes are gory revenge against a man who battered, psychologically abused, blackmailed, and terrorized men and women and who refused to pay for his sister-in-law's surgery to repair her own disfigurement. But the wounds go further, deeper. The poison, found in a shot glass alongside the corpse, entered Vaughn's bloodstream; the heart attack that Jack engenders stopped his very breath. However, the cord around Vaughn's neck seems the most symbolic. If Vaughn "killed" Iris as Jack insists—"We stayed two years in Wade's house, during which time he killed my sister" (86)—then this blow rekindles Iris's suicide by hanging and makes his punishment fit his crime. Gilman takes delight in making Vaughn's multiple wounds fit his multiple crimes against women and society. And in suggesting that the murder of someone as repugnant as Vaughn is not only permissible but a cause for celebration, Gilman makes clear that some good deeds go unpunished and no true villain can remain "unpunished" forever.

Notes

1. Gilman's only other fictional work featuring a woman detective was the short story, "His Mother," originally published in the July 1914 issue of *Fore-runner*, 169-73 and reprinted in *The Yellow Wall-Paper and Selected Stories of Charlotte Perkins Gilman*, ed. Denise D. Knight (Newark: U of Delaware P, 1994), 73-80. In "His Mother," detective Ellen Burrell Martin investigates her son, whom she discovers is involved in the white slave trade.

2. Gilman's word play with Italian names in chapter 12 of *Unpunished*, surrounding the minor murder plot of Carlos's brother, becomes increasingly irreverent, merciless, and racist by today's standards. Contemporary readers are no doubt disturbed that the Italian manservant becomes an unimportant casualty of the Vaughn murder and is "apparently not missed" (152). Bess and Jim refer to Carlos's brother with a series of decidedly ethnic names all ending in "o" (130-34). Joe White briefly laments killing "'that little dago in the alley'" (199), who is earlier referred to as a "'Wop'" (29), but Jack concludes: "that was no loss after all!" (202). Bess arranges for "'little black Jenny'" (63) to

come as laundress to the Vaughn household; after leaving her undercover work as a maid in the Vaughn household, Bess secures an "amiable colored helper" (167) to take her place.

3. Other late-in-life projects that Gilman was unable to place include an edition of poetry titled *Here Also*, a premise for a motion picture named "The Chosen Master," a non-fiction edition titled *A Study in Ethics*, and a theatrical version of "The Yellow Wall-Paper."

4. Gilman Papers, folder 129, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College.

5. Gilman Papers, folder 129, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College. Several months later, Gilman confided to her long-time friend Alice Stone Blackwell her increasing difficulty in securing publishers: "I'm not writing much now. Have failed to place my last three books. . . . These very young readers, editors, & critics have no use for writers over thirty." Letter to Alice Stone Blackwell dated 24 Oct. 1930. Quoted in Gary Scharnhorst, *Charlotte Perkins Gilman* (Boston: Twayne, 1985), 116.

6. Katharine requested that literary agent Willis Kingsley Wing locate the manuscript "in the hands of agents and publishers in New York." Letter from Katharine Beecher Stetson Chamberlin to Willis Kingsley Wing dated 30 Aug. 1935. Wing's response on 5 Sept. 1935 held little hope of recovering that copy of the manuscript. Wing writes: "I have no idea what agent she might have been using and I am sure no reputable publisher would hold any book manuscript for a period of years." See Gilman Papers, folder 127, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College.

7. There are two copies of the manuscript in the Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library at Radcliffe College. The Feminist Press edition has been taken from Gilman's revised and unpublished typescript in box XIX, folder 232. Another copy with penciled corrections is located in folder 231; those changes have been incorporated into the version in folder 232.

8. A note in a 1991 article reported that an edition of *Unpunished*, "edited by Shelley Fisher Fishkin, Julien Murphy, and Lillian S. Robinson is currently in preparation." That edition was never published. See Lillian S. Robinson's article, "Killing Patriarchy: Charlotte Perkins Gilman, the Murder Mystery, and Post-Feminist Propaganda," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 10.2 (1991): 273-85, n 3.

9. Gilman, *Unpunished*. Edited and with an Afterword by Catherine J. Golden and Denise D. Knight (New York: Feminist, 1997).

10. Pleased by his partnership with wife and part-time secretary Bess, Jim Hunt humorously confesses: "'I'm mighty glad I've got you Bess, instead of a sheep like my dear Watson'" (6). Her allusion invites us to consider further the relationship between the Hunts of *Unpunished* and the male detective-assistant partnership of Conan Doyle's *Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*. It goes without saying that Jim's Bess is far more clever than Holmes's Watson, his "sheep-like" companion. Moreover, through her decision to go undercover as a servant in the

Vaughn household, Bess, in fact, plays the role of Sherlock Holmes himself, the master of disguise. For example, in "A Scandal in Bohemia," Sherlock Holmes adopts the guise of "a drunken-looking groom, ill-kempt and side-whiskered" (14) to gain quick information to solve his case. He admits his reasoning to Watson: "Be one of them, and you will know all there is to know" (14). In the case of *Unpunished*, it is Bess's handiwork that leads to the discovery of "all there is to know" about the Vaughn household: she finds the secret diary in which Jack Warner has carefully documented the cruelties of her brother-in-law. And it is Jack who draws an even more forceful comparison to Sherlock Holmes himself. An actor, just as Holmes is, as well as an expert at disguise, Jack masquerades as her own sister and is so convincing that she literally frightens Vaughn to death.

11. In a Sept. 1913 review of Ernest W. Hornung's detective novel, *The Shadow of the Rope* (*Forerunner* 252), Gilman wrote that "The very best detective story I know is called 'The Summit House Mystery,' an old book by L. Dougall. It has the elements of a good story, attractive character and background, before the mystery begins to gather. And then you care, you care intensely because you know the place and like the people."

12. Critics Patricia Craig and Mary Cadogan, in their historical examination of the genre, point out that auxiliary women detectives were common in American and British detective fiction from 1913 to the 1970s. Had *Unpunished* been published, it could easily have been incorporated into Craig and Cadogan's chapter entitled "Spouses, Secretaries, and Sparring Partners" alongside Agatha Christie's and Dashiell Hammett's detective fiction featuring husband-wife detective teams (e.g. Christie's Prudence ['Tuppence'] and Tommy Beresford of *Partners in Crime* [1929] and Hammett's Nick and Nora Charles of *The Thin Man* [1932]).

13. Her characterizations of Jack and Bess anticipate the development of the professional (hard-boiled) (e.g. Sara Paretsky's V. I. Warshawski) and the amateur (soft-boiled) female detective (e.g. Amanda Cross' Kate Fansler), increasingly acceptable as a character in her own right following World War II. Moreover, as Anne Cranny-Francis notes, in contemporary women-centered texts, the amateur woman sleuth may be married and in charge of her own life, such as Amanda Cross' Kate Fansler. See Cranny-Francis, *Feminist Fiction: Feminist Uses of Generic Fiction* (New York: St. Martin's, 1990), 161. She also gives examples of some amateur female sleuths of contemporary woman-centered detective fiction who are single but in a committed heterosexual relationship; who are single, heterosexual, but unattached; and who are lesbians.

14. In the late-nineteenth century, Lucy Stone, Henry Blackwell, and English suffragist Frances Power Cobbe rallied against what Cobbe called "wife torture," but their respective efforts to achieve legislation to protect women were not successful; even after women gained the vote, battered wives did not take legal action as Stone and Blackwell had hoped (Pleck 103-07).

15. Gilman, "Should Women Use Violence?" *Pictorial Review* 14 (Nov. 1912): 11.

16. In her introduction to *The Charlotte Perkins Gilman Reader* (New York: Pantheon, 1980), Lane suggests that *Unpunished* harkens back to "The Yellow Wall-Paper" but does not develop the allusion (xxxii).

17. Gilman herself entered Mitchell's Philadelphia sanitarium in the spring of 1887, when she was twenty-six, and agreed to undergo a one-month "rest cure" treatment. Mitchell diagnosed her condition as "neurasthenia" or "nervous prostration," a breakdown of the nervous system. When Gilman left his sanitarium, Mitchell provided this much quoted advice: "'Live as domestic a life as possible. Have your child with you all the time. . . . Lie down an hour after each meal. Have but two hours' intellectual life a day. And never touch pen, brush or pencil as long as you live'" (*Living* 96). Following this regimen, Gilman found herself on the brink of a total breakdown.

18. While feminist critics might reject Jack's decision to undergo facial surgery near the end of the novel as a shallow attempt to adhere to the cultural imperative that women must be "beautiful" to be valuable, one might also argue that the procedure symbolically restores the identity that was effectively "effaced" not only by the accident, but by Vaughn's abusive conduct. Rather than a mere exercise in personal vanity, Jack's "amazing renewal of beauty" (202) can be seen as a crucial step in the symbolic rebirth of the former, independent identity that she enjoyed prior to the accident and Vaughn's subsequent reign of tyranny.

19. Iris's daughter, young Iris, is also a victim of Vaughn, who wants to force her to marry a man she "can't bear" (109). There are at least two things, however, that save her from being rendered merely a pathetic figure. First, although only eighteen years of age, Iris makes a conscious decision to abide by her stepfather's wishes "rather than bring pain and loss on the people she loves" (110), namely her aunt Jack and cousin Hal. The decision to forsake her own happiness reveals a level of maturity that allows her to trade short-term sacrifice for long-term gain. Second, she does not hesitate to reveal her stepfather's coercion to Hal, the man she does love, who, with his mother, effects an escape plan that will save all three. Iris's disclosure of Vaughn's demands actually sets the wheels of freedom in motion.

20. As Lane notes, Gilman's *Unpunished*, like Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express* (1934), focuses more on justifying a homicide than unraveling the murder (xxx1).

21. The short story version of *Trifles* is entitled "A Jury of Her Peers" [1917].

22. "Anger and the Enemy," *Forerunner* (Mar. 1911): 65-66.

23. Gilman, "Should Women Use Violence?" 11.

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