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Feminism in *Herland*:  
a Utopian Vision of Charlotte Perkins Gilman

Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860-1935) produced a large body of literary works that include poetry, short stories, novels, criticism, reviews, and feminist non-fiction. Her commentary about the position of women in turn of the century America appears in most of her writings, and, as a result, she was widely criticized for her theories as well as some of her life-choices. Gilman's feminist utopian novel *Herland* attempts to paint a portrait of an all-female society and its resulting accomplishments. The women of *Herland* continually defy the expected norms of female behavior in both the turn of the century and present day United States. They have short hair, their manner of dress is based on comfort and function, they are naturally athletic and physically strong, they are all highly educated and have specialized jobs in the community, their self-esteem is not dependent on validation by men, and they are assertive in setting and maintaining boundaries.

First appearing as serial installments in her own *Forerunner* magazine in 1915, *Herland* was not published as a single volume until the feminist movement revived it in the 1970s (Lane, "Introduction" v). In this book, Gilman comments on a set of themes that are instrumental in shaping women's identity and thus inherently a part of in feminist study. These themes include

language and education; sexuality and motherhood; and power structures and religion. Though it was written close to a century ago, *Herland* depicts a utopian vision that successfully incorporates a feminist philosophy and critique. In spite of certain cultural stereotypes that persist in the novel, *Herland* is still a relevant and powerful model of feminist thought and community.

The existence of all-female utopian society, even in fiction, naturally inspires an investigation of the language and education of this culture. In fact, without learning the language of the Herlanders, Van, the book's narrator, would not be able to tell their story. Gilman was obviously aware of the power of language to shape and reflect society, and in creating this utopian vision, she acknowledges that a language invented solely by women would possess very different qualities than languages of a patriarchal origin.

Gilman's own use of language in *Herland* is uniquely feminist. She frequently utilizes plays on words and her own word coinages in her descriptions. For instance, when Van and his two male companions first confront the *Herland* population en masse, they resist entering what seems to be some sort of official building. As a result, "We were borne inside, struggling manfully, but held secure most womanfully, in spite of our best endeavors" (Gilman 23). The word "womanfully" here not only indicates the Herlanders' strength of body and will, but as a potential English word, it also exemplifies the potential strength of Western women. Another example of her apt and sometimes amusing choice of words occurs when Van is reflecting back on the men's preconceptions of *Herland*. "And we had been cocksure as to the inevitable limitations, the faults and vices, of a lot of women" (81). While Gilman did not coin the term

“cocksure,” it is her context that gives the word new meaning and impact, for Van and his companions based the certainty and accuracy of their expectations primarily on their authority as males.

As a sociologist, Van was awed and intrigued by the efficiency and perfection by the language of *Herland*. “It was not hard to speak, smooth and pleasant to the ear, and so easy to read and write I marveled at it. They had an absolute phonetic system...[that]... bore all the marks of an old and rich civilization” (Gilman 31). This description, though very favorable, leaves the reader curious and desirous of more details. These Gilman does not supply, but based on the prolonged absence of men in *Herland*, one can assume that it is neither an androcentric nor a gendered language. As Susan Gubar notes, “Gilman is understandably vague about how a mother tongue would constitute a different kind of linguistic activity from the father’s law. Yet the very word “*Herland*” implies that this language, mirroring the two-in-one of mother-and-child, would allow for simultaneous expression of self as self and the self as object” (145).

By learning the language of *Herland*, Van is empowered to become educated about the *Herland* culture and preferred style of education. Van’s perception of education is naturally tainted with his Western cultural biases. He comes from a world in which education is regimented into its respective buildings, grades and classes, thus preparing children for the inevitable hierarchy they encounter as adults. He describes this form of education as a “‘forcible feeding’ of the mind” which children must endure rather than enjoy (Gilman 95).

The pedagogy is such in *Herland* that its residents are not at first conscious that they are even being educated (Gilman 95). Van is surprised to hear that the children love to challenge their

minds and bodies. Thus, his teacher explains their educational theory:

The mind is as natural a thing as the body, a thing that grows, a thing to use and enjoy...

In the matter of feeding the mind, of furnishing information, we use our best powers to meet the natural appetite of a healthy young brain; not to overfeed it, to provide such amount and variety of impressions as seem most welcome to each child. (104-105)

As a result, every citizen has a basic understanding of logic and psychology in addition to the training they receive in their areas of special interest. In stark contrast to conventional Western educational models, the *Herlanders* also possess the freedom to take up new educational and vocational pursuits at any time.

In addition to language and education, the topics of sexuality and motherhood are important areas of feminist critique that are incorporated into *Herland*. Biologically, there is a powerful link between sexuality and motherhood, and there are obvious and intimate consequences that women experience as a result of both. However, Gilman chose to completely eliminate the role of sexuality in procreation by maintaining the *Herland* population through parthenogenesis.

Parthenogenesis is a biological process in which a female organism spontaneously conceives without fertilization from a male (Stein 969). In the novel, it “functions symbolically ... to represent the creativity and autonomy of women, mother-daughter reciprocity, and the interplay of nature and human nature” (Gubar 144). It is certainly a creative solution to the problem of sustaining a somewhat believable all-female society. However, by literally equating

parthenogenesis with “virgin birth” (Gilman 45), Gilman abides by the heterosexist norms of her own culture and associates female sexuality primarily with procreation, thus negating the ability of women to have a sexuality that is in no way dependent on men. This of course is not surprising when one considers the time period in which Gilman was writing, but there may have been more personal reasons that prevented her from elaborating on such an unconventional theme.

Gilman herself had some very intimate relationships with women, the true extent of which we will never know; however, in a letter to her soon-to-be second husband, she admits her “passionate love” for a certain woman and warns that the two women’s correspondence could be “dragged out someday” (Gilman quoted in Lane 166). Gilman had already been criticized for giving her daughter over to be raised by her ex-husband, so it is possible that she did not want to risk the public scrutiny if she openly considered lesbianism as a viable expression of female sexuality.

Nevertheless, the asexual nature of *Herland* women does play an important role in Gilman’s critique of Western cultural norms. The Herlanders lack of sex drive is a source of frustration and confusion for the three male interlopers, especially for Terry who has financed the expedition. For instance, upon their arrival in *Herland*, they encounter three young women in the woods. Terry views them as conquests yet to be made. He proceeds to dangle a bright, colorful necklace as “bait” in an effort to catch one of them. One of the curious young women manages to snatch it and the three of them run off into the forest laughing. After a short, futile chase, Terry

proclaims that “Women like to be run after” (Gilman 17).

Toward the end of the novel, Terry’s effort to thrust his sexual appetite upon another is again thwarted. After managing to forge an intimate relationship with Alima, one of the three young women in the preceding scene, Terry and she commit themselves to one another in a marriage of sorts. However, they do not live together or sleep together, and Terry is confounded by his new wife’s retention of *Herland* values and customs. He “put in practice his pet conviction that a woman loves to be mastered, and by sheer brute force, in all the pride and passion of his intense masculinity, he tried to master this woman “ (Gilman 132). Terry slips into her room one night to take what he considers rightfully his, and the result is not only the dissolution of his marriage to Alima, but his expulsion from *Herland* as well (Gilman 133). Terry’s fate is inevitable because, even after a year in *Herland*, he cannot conceive of women who “do not look forward to marriage as a source of sexual pleasure...[or] children...[and who] have no notion of masculine chivalry or feminine coquetry” (Keyser 165). Thus, Terry is Gilman’s primary tool for questioning the social construct of gender that Western culture has accepted as the “natural” behavior for the two sexes.

In spite of her refutation of innate sexual norms for women, Gilman retained some traditional views of motherhood that continue to be debated by some modern feminists. She espoused a cultural feminist philosophy that adheres to the belief in the inherent nurturing quality of women that “include[s], most importantly pacifism, cooperation, nonviolent settlement of differences, and a harmonious regulation of public life” (Donovan 32). By stressing the

importance of motherhood in *Herland*, Gilman creates a society that is the literal opposite of patriarchy with opposite results. Thus, she is entreating Western culture to utilize a more compassionate, loving, and hence maternal approach to civilization (Jones 100). However, some feminists argue that the primary identification of the *Herland* women as mothers reverts back to cultural stereotypes in which women are “naturally” more nurturing than men. Mary A. Hill best articulates this theoretical struggle in *Charlotte Perkins Gilman: The Making of a Radical*

*Feminist:*

Biological determinism or assertions about ‘innate differences’ serve to validate the separation of males and females into their respective public-private spheres and thus to nullify women’s claims to real equality...But there are some positive self-affirming implications of the “ideology of motherhood” as well. Many women, of course, express pride in mothering experiences, not because of guilt, not because they accept a biological inferiority to men, but because mothering provides them with fundamental sources of self-respect and worth. (230)

It is apparent that the issue of motherhood was one that Gilman had to reconcile with her literary aspirations and that the creation of *Herland* was one manner in which she dealt with her own feelings of guilt (Lane 179). She was uncertain about her ability to be a good mother, and in *Herland*, she creates the perfect society in which each child is “mothered” primarily by those best fit for the task, and in a more general sense, by the whole community as well (Gilman 83).

In addition to the desire for the best mothers for their children, the Herlanders wanted the

best possible environment for them to be born into. For this reason, *Herland* committed itself to never overpopulating beyond its means to adequately sustain its citizens. *Herland* women who sensed that they were about to conceive could willfully choose not to. In the novel, Van is acutely aware of his own culture's failure to curtail overpopulation and poverty, and he speaks reverently about the Herlanders' success. "They were Mothers, not in our sense of helpless fecundity...but in the sense of Conscious Makers of People" (Gilman 68).

Finally, Gilman further develops her critique of patriarchal culture by brilliantly juxtaposing it with the power structures and religion of the two-thousand-year-old matriarchy of *Herland*. Due to the time period in which she was working, Gilman necessarily created a male-less society in order for a matriarchy to seem feasible. Thus, "*Herland* may be described as a fiction organized to show what women can be and do when they are free to develop as persons, rather than as females in a patriarchal society" (Jones 117).

After having lost all of "their" men to a volcanic eruption and a slave uprising, the surviving women of the original country take up arms against the remaining male slaves (Gilman 55). Although the early history of *Herland* includes this violent struggle, it is a singular event that does not have a sequel. The Herlanders are not ashamed of this part of their history as it has necessarily enabled them to develop their own culture; but, for them, violence served no other useful purpose and therefore was not a continued tradition in their society.

The resulting peacefulness of *Herland* directly challenges the popularity of "Social Darwinism" of Gilman's day. "Gilman, unlike Darwin, envisions evolution as growth, not as

conflict” (Kirkpatrick 134), and this is apparent in the Herlanders’ lack of competitiveness and even knowledge of competition (Gilman 60). This refutation of “the survival of the fittest” exemplifies a truly feminist perspective in which a model of “power-over” is replaced by one of “power-with.” Starhawk defines power-over as “the power of the prison guard, of the gun, power that is ultimately backed by force,” whereas power-with represents “the power of a strong individual in a group of equals, the power not to command, but to suggest and be listened to” (9-10).

The women of *Herland* personify the concept of “power-with” not only in their communal lifestyle with one another, but in their relationship with nature as well. “Having improved their agriculture to the highest point” (Gilman 79), the Herlanders strive to ensure the sustenance of their present numbers as well as their future population. Their entire landscape of their country is actually a garden in which trees are the primary source of edible foods because they “requir[e] far less labor...[and]...also do[...] much to preserve and enrich the soil” (Gilman 79). It is in this manner that the women of *Herland* achieve a life of harmony, providing the best possible future for their children, and naturally co-existing with nature and one another.

Such a utopian vision, though very attractive and seemingly inclusive, does have its shortcomings. The issue of race is one that Gilman does not sufficiently address from a feminist perspective. The *Herlanders* are an orphaned, yet “civilized” white Western race of women who, thanks to the historical volcanic eruption, are geographically isolated from the rest of their unnamed continent. Van repeatedly refers to the natives of the remainder of this land as “savages,” so, from his language we can assume that the cultures to which he refers would be

considered “third-world” in modern terms.

Numerous comparisons are made between the *Herland* culture and the “savage” cultures, and they serve to distinguish *Herland* as “civilized” and therefore superior. First, *Herland* is situated geographically above the rest of the continent at the top of a waterfall, isolating both, but not to the point that one does not know about the other (Gilman 5). Having been led to this legendary waterfall by a so-called savage, Van and his companions discover a beautiful piece of cloth in the water that, for them, affirms the possibility of a “civilization” because “No savage tribe that we had heard of made such fabrics” (4).

The history of *Herland* demonstrates another stereotypical distinction between the “civilized” and “savage” people. When Van recounts the uprising of the slaves, he describes them as “brutal conquerors” (Gilman 55). The women who would become the ancestors of *Herland* rose in their own defense and killed these male slaves (presumably to maintain their sexual and thus racial purity). Although some of the older slave women were spared and remained among this new community of women, they did not develop the parthenogenetic ability of their white counter-parts (56). In spite of the lack of race analysis in *Herland*, it is acknowledged that “Some of the remaining slave women rendered invaluable service, teaching such trades as they knew” (55). In this way, these women play an important role in the future sustenance and success of the matriarchy.

The logical result of the matriarchal structure of *Herland* is a theology that images the divine as female, thus imaging the culture of female as divine. Van admits that “It took me a long

time, as a man, a foreigner, and a species of Christian...to get any clear understanding of the religion of *Herland*” (Gilman 109). He compares their early religion to ancient Greek mythology, but he notes that as “they lost all interest in deities of war and plunder, and gradually centered on their Mother Goddess altogether” (59). This goddess figure, Maaia, was not merely a religious myth, but also an ancestor and a real historical person who symbolized the divine motherhood (56).

In order to gain a more complete understanding of the religion of *Herland*, Van inquires if Ellador considers God a person. She responds that “in trying to get close to it in our minds we personify the idea, naturally; but we certainly do not assume a Big Woman somewhere, who is God. What we call God is Pervading Power, you know, an Indwelling Spirit, something inside of us that we want more of” (Gilman 112-113). Van subsequently admits that most Westerners perceive God as an indwelling male spirit (113). Because the *Herland* theology differs from Western patriarchal religions by imaging a female deity and by empowering Herlanders as females with the feeling of the divine within, it is a feminist theology.

The *Herland* religion actually abounds in feminist ideology. Unlike patriarchal societies, the Herlanders have no concept of worship, no eternal punishment, and no fixed, unalterable religious dogma (Gilman 112-114). Instead, they participate in an “applied religion” in which they strive to become the best people and the best society they can become (114). Because their theology is concerned with the manifestation of love and understanding in the present, it does not include a concept of eternal life. The Herlanders do not require an eternity onto which they can

project their hope for “Peace and Beauty, Comfort and Love” because they have it on earth (117). Gilman prioritizes the present rather than an eternal future, and at the same time “for [her] everything in such a religion must be concentrated upon the opportunities of the future, not the mistakes of the past” (Kirkpatrick 134). What Gilman has created then, is a spirituality that is not only fully integrated into daily life, but one that grows and changes along with the individuals and whole of *Herland* society.

While discussing the *Herland* religion with Ellador, Van continually contrasts it with Western traditions, but is not brave enough to admit his own culture’s shortcomings (Gilman 117). In comparison to the Western ideology of a jealous, vengeful God who can punish and rule, this religion is so beautiful and effective, that Van declares that the Herlanders “are more Christian than any people I ever saw” (115). With this comment Gilman displays an incredible ability to translate feminist reality of *Herland*’s power structure and religion into normative terms of Western thinking. “The satiric critique generated from the utopian reconfiguration here means that the better *Herland* looks as a matriarchal culture, the worse patriarchal America seems in contrast” (Gubar 141).

Gilman’s utopian vision is courageously and wittily recounted and deals frankly with the shortcomings of Western “civilization.” By current standards of feminism, it is clear that Gilman was simultaneously the product of her time-period while transcending it in many ways. Her observations about the status of women inspired her to create a utopian vision in which women were not props or accoutrements but active participants in the formation of civilization. By

examining the influence of language, education, sexuality, motherhood, power structures, and religion on women's perceptions of themselves and the societies in which they live, Gilman has created a feminist framework in *Herland* that has and will continue to inspire the refinement of cultural expectations.

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