

A Sociological Analysis of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's Herland and With Her in Ourland¹

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Charlotte Perkins Gilman began her life on July 3, 1860 in Hartford, Connecticut (Lane, 1979, vi). Her father, Fredric Beecher Perkins, was the nephew of Harriet Beecher Stowe, author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Therefore, some may argue that Gilman had writing in her blood. Perkins left his wife, Mary A. Finch, and children just after Charlotte was born and did not provide much financial or emotional support (Lane, vi). Without a man in the household to provide a steady income, Gilman, her brother and her mother lived on the edge of the poverty line with day after day of unhappiness and constant worry for meals, clothes and survival.

Since the job market at this time was extremely limited in opportunities for women, Gilman was only able to work in jobs that were acceptable. During her adolescence, Gilman found work as a greeting card designer, an art teacher and a governess (Lane, vii). Gilman's mother worked in whatever job she could to support herself and her children. Gilman's father's family was very wealthy and respected in the east. However, without the support of her father, her mother took Gilman and her brother on "adventures" throughout the country and quickly became the black sheep of both the Beecher and Finch sides. Because work was difficult to find, and more difficult to keep, Mary Finch moved her family twenty one different times in a span of three years. Gilman grew up without any real human connections to anyone outside of her mother, brother and one or two close friends that were acquired later in her life. Watching her mother work and raise children alone, early in life, Gilman declared her energy to be solely dedicated to independence and work. Her "mission" in life would be to improve the world. Her plans did not include a husband or children. However, in January of 1882, Gilman met Charles Walter Stetson, who was later to become her first husband. On their second meeting Gilman wrote Stetson a letter making her dedication to independence clear:

Let me tell you ... that I am not the combining sort. I *don't* combine and I don't want to. My nature is the polliest of polygons, whose happiness it is true depends on the contact of its many faces ... but which keeps its own unchanging shape ... My life is one of private aspiration and development, and of public service ... I will give and give and give you *of* myself, but never give myself to you or any man. (28-30)

Gilman's unheard of bluntness soon deteriorated as Stetson convinced her that the only way she would find total fulfillment was to devote herself to him, their children and their home. Stetson wrote that Gilman's desires for independence and feminism were unnatural. Like many men of this time, Charles Stetson viewed female energy as being naturally directed at domestic work. In one letter, Stetson writes,

She had a wild theory about living in one place—a home of her 'own' and having me come and see her when

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the erotic tendency was at a maximum. Of course I would not do that: and I would not think much of a man who would do it. The sweetest of marriage is cooperation towards advancement, close communion at all times, and the founding of a hearth. I will accept nothing else. (144)

By 1883 Gilman finally bent to Stetson's suggestions and the two were married in May 1884. At first, Gilman absorbed herself in domestic duties and thanked her husband for helping her to discover the truth of the womanhood within herself. He had changed her nature completely from the time of their early courtship. However, Gilman soon discovered that to be the woman her husband wanted, meant to repress the 'unnatural' woman she genuinely was. These repressions led to her most famous work, *The Yellow Wallpaper* (Meyering, 1998, 4). An autobiographical writing of a woman suffering from schizophrenia and other mental illnesses, *The Yellow Wallpaper* describes Gilman's life under the commanding of men. This book is the story of a young woman who is driven to insanity by a husband who, while having the best of intentions, enforces the "rest cure," a perfect mirror to Charlotte's life.

Gilman's independence soon overcame her and she fled to California, leaving her daughter and husband behind. After a failed attempt at reconciliation, Gilman went back to California with her child and barely managed to support the both of them by running a boarding house (Lane, vii). It is at this time that Gilman launched her writing and lecturing career. Throughout the years of 1884-87 Charlotte experienced uncontrollable depression, leaving her in bouts of physical and emotional barrenness (Meyering, 37). Although Gilman was ill during these years, she still managed to run the boarding house, raise her child and write articles for women's magazines. In 1900, after a very long courtship, Charlotte married her first cousin, Houghton Gilman, with the understanding that Gilman would still write and maintain much of her independence (Meyering 45). During the time of her marriage to Houghton, Gilman found that she had a love for women, thus keeping her in a certain degree of isolation from her husband. Gilman's marriage to Houghton suited her well because she was still able to explore her lesbian feelings throughout the rest of her life with various letters and gestures expressing her love for women. In 1915 Gilman wrote a radical, fictional, feminist utopia called *Herland*. Receiving much praise as a fictional work, Gilman wrote its sequel, *With Her in Ourland*, in 1916.

Houghton Gilman died suddenly in 1934, two years after Gilman found out she had cancer. After the death, Gilman moved back to Pasadena to be with her daughter and old friend, Grace Channing Stetson (Lane, viii). In 1935 Gilman wrote her autobiography, *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman*. Making sure that all of the royalties from the book went straight to her daughter, Gilman ended her life this same year with chloroform (Lane, ix). The note she left appears on the last pages of her autobiography:

No grief, pain, misfortune or "broken heart" is excuse for cutting off one's life while any power of service remains. But when all usefulness is over, when one is assured of unavoidable and imminent death, it is the simplest of human rights to choose a quick and easy death in place of a slow and horrible one ... I have preferred chloroform to cancer.

HERLAND AND WITH HER IN OURLAND

As a child, Charlotte Perkins Gilman made a comment early on to "improve the world" and learned the importance of acting idealistically and morally. In writing *Herland*, Gilman took one important step towards her flawless utopian society. Gilman, as a radical feminist, saw that change was necessary from the very root of society (Johnson, 351). Gilman's belief in the power of humans to change their societies and to control nature to further those societies is shown literally in *Herland*. Because births in *Herland* are parthenogenic, Gilman shows that where there's a will, there's a way. Also, when the colony becomes overcrowded, with each woman producing five female children, the women simply limit themselves to only one female offspring (Meyering, 163). The many contrasts between *Herland* and the early twentieth century (the time in which the book was written) shows us that the American system had failed in terms of allowing women full humanity. Gilman wrote *Herland* during a time that did not welcome women to write serious articles on matters like sociology. Instead, Gilman found it perfectly acceptable to write a sociological theory book disguised as fiction, thus avoiding the quick dismissal of her views that would have happened otherwise.

Herland is a feminist utopia littered with sociological theory, disguised as a fiction novel. First appearing by chapter in her magazine *The Forerunner*, Gilman later decided to publish the entire book, releasing it to favorable reviews but skepticism concerning the "woman only" run environment. Although the book is told through the eyes of one man, Vandyck Jennings, it is still very much overrun by women and female ideals. Through dramatic confrontation when

three American men seek out this all-female society, Gilman shows many sociological feminist issues that parallel modern society. Socialism, feminism, slavery and race issues, religion and democracy are all included in this relatively short book.

TERRY, JEFF, AND VAN

Gilman starts *Herland* describing the three men that eventually seek to “discover” the all-female society. Terry is portrayed as the typical rich, macho, womanizer that does as he pleases with no respect for women as equals. Jeff Margrave is shown as the other extreme. Quiet with a “poetic heart” and a very skillful botanist, Jeff idealizes women and treats them as goddesses that should do no physical or mental labor. Vandyck Jennings, on the other hand, is the median to the two and the narrator of the story.

Jennings is a sociologist. One passage in *Herland* describes his attitude towards the interests of the other two men, “...and I didn’t care what it was they talked about, so long as it connected with human life, somehow. There are few things that don’t” (2). Gilman very deliberately formed Van’s character to place him in the center of the other two men. Also, his interest in sociology and human activities is no accident. Gilman is quietly showing the reader that the ideal equilibrium between the two worlds of fact and fun, is sociology. This is more clearly shown in Van’s interests when the men reach *Herland*. Van is not distracted by the beautiful women, as is Terry, or captivated by the amazing botany of the colony as is Jeff. Instead, Van was interested mostly in their language, schooling, religion, all aspects of life that a sociologist would find fascinating (31).

Gilman does this with Van to reinforce him as the “perfect male character.” Showing that, here, he has been given the chance to seduce an entire colony of women, or ignore that they are women at all, Gilman’s character acknowledges the all female colony and still is interested in their sociology. Also, Gilman gives Van the ideal values when it comes to women. Once again, she has put him in the middle of the other two. While Terry sees women as objects with no substance and Jeff views them as a flower to prize in a glass case, Van uses his sociological mind to see that women are equal and should be treated as such. These three characters together also symbolize a very important attitude towards women during the early twentieth century. Gilman writes of the men first hearing about *Herland*, and immediately after deciding to seek the colony out and “civilize” it. The concept of a fully functional, technologically advanced and disease-free society of all females never enters the three men’s minds. Gilman writes, ““They would fight among themselves,” Terry insisted.” And, “You’re dead wrong,” Jeff told him. “It will be like a nunnery under an abbess—a peaceful, harmonious sisterhood”“(Gilman, 8). While Van doesn’t make an argument either way, he waits to meet the woman and see what they have done.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman also describes what the men were thinking and feeling when they first entered the colony of *Herland*. On page thirteen of her book, Gilman describes the men entering into the forest with guns ready and eyes on the look out. While these men were joking about the absurdness of a colony of only women on the boat, now they are poised for an attack. They are entering this unknown area as do typical men, ready to fight and kill at the prospect of danger. This stems from the idea that women cannot be civilized without men to first show them how. They expect to see savages with sticks. Gilman uses these three characters not only for the representation of men’s attitudes toward women, but their individual and group relationship with the women of *Herland* symbolizes some of her personal experiences. At the age of seventeen, Gilman developed a romantic relationship with a young woman, Martha Jessie Luther, which began the first of Gilman’s romantic female interests (Meyering, 166). Later in the book, all three men each become romantically interested in a separate Herlander. But again, it is Gilman’s idyllic character that is the only one who does not have sexual relations with their “chosen woman.” Coincidentally, he is also the only character that leaves Herland with his “bride” to explore the outside world. This relationship is focused on much more in the sequel, *With Her in Ourland*, which describes the travels that the two take together throughout the world, ending in America.

In *Herland*, Vandyck Jennings meets Ellador, a woman of Herland, and quickly falls in love. The two get married at the request of Van since Ellador knows no concept of marriage. In the end, Ellador went with Van to explore the outside world and take back to Herland all that she learned. Their relationship is part of the main focus in the sequel. Gilman describes their adventures through the world as those of two best friends. The two have the utmost respect for each other and their ideas, however, it seems that their labels of “wife” and “husband” are just that, labels. They are not married in the sense that Van knows marriage. This symbolizes the relationship between a man and woman that Gilman sees as perfect. They are connected with minds and souls, just not physical bodies.

ELLADOR AND OBJECTIVITY

Upon arriving in the outside world, Ellador is convinced that a world with two sexes must be twice as good as a world with only one. However, she quickly comes to find that it is twice as evil and hateful as her beloved colony. In the second chapter of the book, Gilman introduces Ellador to war for the first time in her life. Terry tries to explain by saying that it is “human nature” to fight and have war. However, Ellador quickly realizes that women are not allowed to fight. When she asks if bearing children is considered “human nature,” the reply is no, it is woman’s nature. Her response is to assume that war is men’s nature alone. (Gilman, 70)

Throughout the book, Gilman uses simple questions and answers much like the above when speaking through Ellador. This lets us see what our “complicated” problems are like to an outsider that only sees in terms of production, love, and common sense. She understood in her work as a sociologist that objectivity is the key to truly understanding a society. Although she understood that complete objectivity can not be reached, she came as close as possible in *Herland*. Gilman’s character, Ellador, enters into America with no knowledge of the workings of the society, economy or ecology, thus leaving her untouched by the blindness that handicaps Americans when dealing with the issues.

Throughout *With Her in Ourland*, Gilman makes Ellador’s objectivity well known. From the moment Ellador enters the first country on her voyage, she bears an incredible likeness to George Simmel’s “The Stranger.” Simmel understands that to correctly evaluate the social problems of a society one must be completely objective, or a stranger, to that society. Ellador is literally that to America, a stranger. Ellador’s objectiveness is very well displayed when dealing with the issues of American society. Gilman’s character sees America as being built, “too fast and too much in the dark” (Gilman, 1916, 115). In order to straighten the mess that is America, Ellador approaches the society as a doctor. America is the child and she is to come up with the diagnosis (Gilman, 1916, 113). Chapter six in *Ourland* displays a brief conversation between Van and Ellador about her workings on “the case” that is America. During the early twentieth century, sociology was lacking in credibility compared to natural and physical sciences, Gilman was fully aware of this and made no mistake in having Ellador’s character create these very technical terms for American society. A doctor is known for his/her dedication to “just looking at the facts” of a case or patient. Gilman uses these technical terms to link the ideas of sociology and science together in the book, thus associating the credit given to medicine with Ellador’s sociological theories.

Gilman also authored an important sociological work titled, *Woman and Economics* (Meyering, 1). This theoretical work is the most famous of Gilman’s six books and deals with the methodology of studying a society. Objectiveness and openness in all contexts of a society are vital parts to understanding the whole. As mentioned previously, Gilman cleverly creates Ellador’s character with the gift of seeing America through objective eyes. Ellador’s approach to American society is the perfect model of the methodology a sociologist should use when studying a society. Again, Gilman delicately inserts a sociological vision into her characters and disguises it enough so the reader will not be turned off by too much technical or theoretical writing.

SOCIAL DARWINISM AND RACE

Gilman was a self proclaimed Social Darwinist (Meyering, 125). Social Darwinism is a merging of Darwin’s theories of survival of the fittest with sociological theories (Edwards, 431). This theory states that society is developed and operates by natural laws in much the same way species do in Darwin’s theory, the strongest survive while the weakest become extinct. Gilman includes this theory in *Ourland* by giving Ellador this same mentality. Social Darwinism is presented in the book by what Ellador calls “socialism” and is made to make much sense when presented through her character.

Ellador formulates a variety of prescriptions, or solutions, using ideas for various social problems throughout American society. As she sees them, the problems that America is faced with are minimal and simple to overcome. Ellador talks of famine as a completely alien concept. How is it that a country cannot feed all of its citizens? As she views the issue of slavery, she sees this as a mathematical issue. A country is only able to produce a certain amount of food and, therefore, feed only a certain amount of people. What she does not understand here is greed, the want of a man to acquire more than he’ll ever use, just to say that he has the most. For this, Ellador prescribes a type of communal kitchen where many women cook for several families (Gilman, 179) thus combining their efforts and saving time. This prescription is a type of socialism in that she proposes a group effort to better the society, instead of an individual effort

to benefit only a small section, the family, of the society. In fact, Ellador actually calls this proposed solution the “socialization of home industry” (Gilman, 1916, 135).

However useful this approach is for views of America, it also has its downfalls. Ellador is purely objective, concerning herself solely with statistics and production, almost objective to a fault. In one passage, Ellador and Van are speaking of democracy and slavery. Ellador states that, “About the first awful mistake you made was in loading yourself up with those reluctant Africans” (Gilman, 1916, 117). Ellador does not mean this as a racist comment, however, she means it as an issue of numbers. Slaves were brought into the country forcefully, and for that Ellador does later sympathize and disagree with. However, the issue of taking away free will is not her main concern; it is the issue of importing an unheard amount of people so quickly that has her confused. Mathematics tells her that the people of the country can not support such a large population growth that quickly and prosper at the same time. So why do this to yourselves? Gilman’s character cannot answer this question because she does not have a concept of slavery.

Gilman also applies social Darwinism to issues of democracy. Gilman gives this character her own idea that democracy can only work when given to everybody, and everybody does not include those who are poor and oppressed. Ellador explains:

“You have stuffed yourself with the most ill-assorted and inassimilable mass of human material that ever was held together by artificial means... It never occurred to you that the poor and oppressed were not necessarily good stuff for a democracy... And do you think that you can put a little of everything into a melting-pot and produce a good metal?” (Gilma, 1916, 119-120)

While at times Ellador seems very harsh in her “prescriptions” for America, Gilman presents these hash ideas in a very matter-of-fact manner, leaving the reader to identify with the sociological ideas. The women of *Herland* have already successfully weeded out those individuals that would not cooperate with the society. Children who were born with an abnormality or adults who desired more children than their means of production would allow were all removed from society (Gilman, 94). While this does leave a flawless society, this action borderlines on the eugenic ideas of Hitler’s Nazi Germany. On page eighty nine of *Herland*, Gilman describes this in detail with Ellador explaining that “the lowest types” of girls (those with sexual desires) are “bred out,” or not allowed to reproduce. While this type of eugenics is important to women, it also traps them in a maternal role. A woman in *Herland* is not important for herself, she is important for the colony as a whole and while Gilman disguises this as socialism, it bears much resemblance to Hitler’s idea of a pure Aryan race (Meyering, 198). In her actual life, Gilman was racially prejudiced and those ideas surface throughout her works. While the characters of *Herland* and *Ourland* verbally discredit the idea of racism, in the “prescriptions” that Ellador suggests, she is ultimately practicing racism in wanting one race completely taken out of society. This innate, unknowing racist attitude parallels that of Charlotte Perkins Gilman. Although Gilman may verbally ban racism (such as she does in the book), like many people of that time, she innately has it imbedded into her thinking.

Both the pro and con side of racism is represented in *Ourland*. On page twenty one, Gilman describes different human races as being at different levels of development. She states that democracy requires, “the intelligent conscious co-operation of a great many persons all ‘equal’ in the characteristics required to play that kind of game... the human race is in different stages of development, and only some of the races... have reached the democratic stage” (121). Here, it seems that Gilman is using the equality required for democracy as an excuse for racism. Ellador is saying that democracy is not working in the United States because there are races in the country that are not developed enough to understand the process. Since it takes equality to make democracy fully work, and certain races are not able to understand democracy, logically, those certain races are not equal. And holding one race above or below that of another race is the central concept of racism. Although Gilman may not have intended for her ideas to be observed in this manner, logic does lead us to racism and the possible surfacing of some underlying racist meaning.

FEMINISM

Gilman is a cultural feminist, believing that women were the founders of human society when, at one point in history, women lost their power and men gained dominance over them (Deegan, 32). Gilman actually gives this idea to Van on page one hundred and seventy two of *Ourland* where Van states that no one can fully study the sciences concerning a society without acknowledging that the female is “the whole show,” who “holds her own... till Mr. Man gets

into the saddle. How he came to do it is a mystery that I don't believe even you (Ellador) can explain" (Gilman, 172). Ellador has labeled this great catastrophe of nature the "Great Divergence." This idea is fully represented in both *Herland* and *With Her in Ourland*. Herland, at one time, included both men and women. A war was fought and the country lost all the men to battle, starting the two thousand year span of only females until the three American explorers came upon the colony (Gilman, 21). Gilman takes the idea of cultural feminism and applies it here, only leaving the power in control of the women. *Herland* is an example of what the world would be like if men had not gained control. Coincidentally, the colony happens to be without hate, disease, war or hunger. Gilman also creatively inserts commonalities between the American in *Ourland* and that of the early twentieth century. One of these commonalities includes a thought by Van, "I noticed that Ellador and her sisters always said "she" and "her" as unconsciously as we say "he" and "his." Their reason, of course, is that all the people are shes. Our reason is not so justifiable" (Gilman, 150). While this is a minor thought in the book, it does give the reader a definite parallel between the book and reality.

Throughout *Ourland*, Ellador describes specific changes for America, but none more passionate than those for women. Gilman gives her belief in women's ability to fulfill their potential to Ellador. In the book, Ellador explains her frustration concerning American women and their choice to stay subservient to men. According to both Gilman and Ellador the action of American women being submissive and obedient towards men is a *choice*. Ellador does not understand the lack of ambition in American women, she states the nature of the problem in *Ourland*:

"There's nothing on earth to hinder them, Van, dear, except what's in their heads. And they can stop putting it in, in the babies, I mean, and can put it out of their own, at least enough to get to work... The worst thing that has been done to you is to fill your poor heads with this notion that you cannot help yourselves. Tell me, now, what is there to hinder you?" (167-168)

In describing her frustration with American women and their lack of efforts to change, Ellador becomes a symbol for the same frustrations in Gilman. Ellador is frustrated at the idea that these American women have convinced themselves, or let men convince them, that they are *in* their place, at home. This is a direct thought and statement in *Ourland*. Not only is Gilman's character addressing the issue within the book, but Gilman is using the book to address the issue in modern American society.

CONCLUSION

In writing both *Herland* and *With Her in Ourland* as fiction novels instead of straight theoretical texts, Gilman's audience becomes vastly wider and more open to the ideas in the books. As mentioned earlier, fiction was much more acceptable for women to write than sociological theory or observation. Realizing this, Gilman deliberately planned the scene, plot, and characters of her works into a fictional utopian world that the reader could safely enjoy. Not only is Gilman's use of a utopia clever, but it becomes very effective as a vehicle to transport her feminist and socialist ideas to the reader. The society that Charlotte Perkins Gilman has created in *Herland* is so much of a fantasy that the reader must make a considerable leap from their reality. By changing, literally, *all* aspects of a society Gilman has made the reader aware of what exactly their society is like. Suddenly, the most mundane details, such as the usage of the phrase "he" to refer to both men and women are given attention and are cause for contemplation.

Lane concludes her introduction to *Herland* with an accurate summary and description of Gilman's theme, "Still, the "ideal of desirable quality" (Manual, 1966) which must be recognizable to the reader:

The society to be transformed must first be known. In Gilman's work it is not the scientist, the warrior, the priest, or the craftsman, but the mother, who is the connecting point from present to future. In her utopia, Charlotte Perkins Gilman transforms the private world of mother-child, isolated in the individual home, into a community of mothers and children in a socialized world. It is a world in which humane social values have been achieved by women in the interest of us all.

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