

Oversimplified men: a striking comparison to society in the 21<sup>st</sup> century

Kristin M. Johnson

Seminar Paper  
Presented to the Department of History  
Western Oregon University  
in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Bachelor of Arts in History

Spring 2009

Approved \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Approved \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Approved \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

HST 499: Professor Max Geier

During the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, Charlotte Perkins Gilman was a radical feminist and author who worked to break down gender barriers. Her advocacy for human rights and woman's equality was broadcast through her writing of poetry, short stories and novels. In the serialized novel *Herland* Gilman tells the story of a feminist utopia that has survived for over two thousand years with no male contact, until three male explorers, Terry, Jeff and Van, go on an exploration that leads them to this utopia. By looking through a literary critical lens, Gilman's novel *Herland* demonstrates her having a bias, and represents the male figures in a very two-dimensional way. Though these men seem oversimplified, the elementary character strategy was necessary for the time; the audience was only able to participate one chapter at a time, once a month.

Gilman was writing in order to expose the gender, class, and racial inequalities of society during the late 1800s and early 1900s, and her work played an integral role in the Women's Movement of that time. She stood beside women like Catherine Beecher Stowe during the Suffrage Movement, and witnessed the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment being passed. Although she was writing for that time period, her work is still recognized and used today. At the time of her writings, she was revolutionizing and changing the way that the Women's Movement was viewed. She saw the movement expanding and evolving, and Gilman contemporized the way people thought about women, for her time. She used a variety of strategies to reach a large audience. In *Herland*, instead of overtly and negatively criticizing society, she used sarcasm and humor to enlighten society to the frustrations and prejudices surrounding them. In *The Yellow Wallpaper* she uses an underlying personal struggle to bluntly criticize society's gender archetypes and tell the internal battles of a 'sick' woman.

Periodicals from the time of Gilman's writing and present day books show the significance of her work to the Women's Movement and to present day gender equality. Gilman played an important role in the Suffrage Movement and the post-1960s Feminist Movement, which continues today. Her work continues to be used today for some different reasons than what was intended of her work during her lifetime. Gilman's work during the 1910s was focused on reaching large audiences. With her monthly magazine Gilman tried to use many different writing styles and tactics to impact the public. She used poetry, serialized novels, short story and non-fiction articles to get her point across about women's needed economic independence and education. After the 1960s Gilman's work has shifted in purpose. During the Post-Feminist Movement the serialized novel *Herland* was republished as a book, with a different feel than during the 1910s. The movement had shifted into a new type of feminism where the person became political. *The Yellow Wallpaper* became a staple in high school English classrooms across the United States, showing the intimate details of a woman trapped inside her own thoughts and confined to bed-rest. Gilman's work has not changed at all, but the meanings and uses have shifted into present day, modern times.

Exploring Gilman's, life and works, *The Yellow Wallpaper* and *Herland*, show the significance of her work at the time she was writing and how it has become classic in today's society. Gilman's monthly magazine, *The Forerunner*, gave direction to women looking for guidance surrounding views of gender equality. She was a radical for the time period. Women were not encouraged to speak publicly or to have a job as an author. Gilman published her own autobiography, that documented her life experiences and what led her to being the woman she was. Since her death, her diary has also been published, showing the details of her thought

process and why exactly she felt the need to write the way that she did. For Gilman, writing meant more than it did to most people.

We [humanity] are affected by climate and locality, by physical, chemical, electrical forces, as are all animals and plants... what we do, as well as what is done to us, makes us what we are. But beyond these forces, we come under the effect of a third set of conditions peculiar to our human status; namely, social conditions.<sup>1</sup>

She wrote for the people and humanity, to expose truths and injustices; she wrote for her own sanity and for future generations of feminists (whether or not she knew it at the time). Gilman's controversial writings fill a gap between the Women's Movement, and the contemporary Feminist Movement today through the use of humor, articulate writing style and ideological viewpoint. She spoke to elites, in hopes of proving that education was necessary. She had high hopes for society to be able to change with proper education and equality.

Many people have written about Gilman's life. Most historians agree that her work was revolutionary and necessary to the Suffrage Movement. Unfortunately those writing about or for Gilman are called into question when it comes to being bias. Looking at articles from the *New York Times* during that early 1900s shows the negative standing she had in the media. The negative reputation was given to Gilman by the overwhelmingly patriarchal press. In a book review of Gilman's *The Manmade World, or Our Andocentric Culture*, an editor writes,

Since the beginning of recorded history the most civilized part of our world has held that woman was at the bottom of all the evil from which we are suffering. Now comes a woman who tells us that it is all the other way.<sup>2</sup>

The clearly male dominated press does not give a clear or unbiased viewpoint to follow during the time. This leads to problems when trying to analyze her work. What it shows is the low tolerance for women who do not fit into the typical female mold. The people who have come

---

<sup>1</sup> Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *Women and Economics*, (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1966), 2.

<sup>2</sup> "Charlotte Perkins Gilman Puts Man on the Grill," *The New York Times*, (January 15, 1915).

after Gilman and written about her take the exact opposite position. They feel that Gilman was an amazing woman with no faults. This leads to an overtly positive bias. Gilman did have a positive influence on the Women's Suffrage Movement, but was rejected by the male dominated society surrounding the media. The women writing about Gilman all came out of the 1960s Feminist Movement and the post, 1970s Women's Movement toward gender equality. Elitism played a roll in both time periods, as Gilman targeted the educated/intellectual classes. These tended to be upper-middle class Anglo-Americans. Both time periods lend themselves to problems, but with some analysis a rationale for both can be drawn. By taking a look at Gilman's life, conclusions can be drawn as to why she was viewed the way she was.

July 3, 1860, in Hartford, Connecticut Charlotte Anna Perkins was born into the wealthy and well known Beecher family; nobody had any idea of what a radical feminist she would become.<sup>3</sup> The Beecher family was well known in the political arena for their work and involvement in civil rights, religion and social reform. They were educators, authors and artists. Gilman was related to the famous Harriet Beecher Stowe, notable for her work fighting slavery, and Catherine Beecher, notable for her participation in the Suffrage Movement. Gilman fit perfectly into this family of hardworking, intellectual individuals. Not long after she was born, her father left, and did not frequently visit Charlotte.<sup>4</sup> Charlotte was courted by Walter Stetson and refused many marriage proposals on the basis that she would simply become a mother and wife. She would not be able to perform the social work she had struggled so long and hard for. Finally, giving in she married her first husband, Walter Stetson in 1884.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Ann Lane, *To Herland and Beyond*. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1990) 21.

<sup>4</sup> Lane, *To Herland and Beyond*, 28.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 94-96.

Discontented after a few short months of marriage, Charlotte found herself pregnant and soon after fell into a deep depression. Gilman's short story *The Yellow Wallpaper*<sup>6</sup> was an outlet of her personal story and feelings of depression and hysteria brought on during her marriage to Stetson. The fictional account depicts a woman who is sent away for "women's problems" and finds herself confined to a room to rest. She is forced to quit writing; writing was an emotional release and joy, and she finds herself lost in the wallpaper of her room. "We have been here two weeks, and I haven't felt like writing before, since that first day...John does not know how much I really suffer. He knows there is no *reason* to suffer, and that satisfies him."<sup>7</sup> The story ends with the self destruction of a misunderstood and tormented woman. The message echoed by her personal life was blunt, abrasive, and straightforward, something which was unheard of during Gilman's life. Women were 'supposed' to sit around idly, and do what they were told.

Gilman's personal experiences that sparked the fire for *The Yellow Wallpaper* began during her pregnancy, and became exponentially worse during her third trimester. She became increasingly ambivalent toward her husband, Walter. She watched him paint, continue his artwork, and see his career take-off, while she was stuck in bed and doing chores. In her diary she expressed her frustrations about the little writing she was doing, "This last year has been short. I have done little, read little, written little, felt and thought—little to what I should have."<sup>8</sup> She continues on questioning, "And I am Happy? Every day almost finds me saying so, and truly. And yet—and yet—'call no man happy until he is dead.'"<sup>9</sup> Gilman found herself torn; her husband Walter truly cared for her, and took the time to make sure she was as comfortable as possible, yet she was still ill. After the birth of her daughter, Katherine Beecher

---

<sup>6</sup> Charlotte Perkins, *The Yellow Wallpaper*, (Brooklyn: The Feminist Press, 1973).

<sup>7</sup> Gilman, *Yellow Wallpaper*, 13-14.

<sup>8</sup> Denise Knight (edited by), Gilman, Charlotte Perkins. *The Diaries of Charlotte Perkins Gilman*. (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1994) 308.

<sup>9</sup> Knight, 308.

Stetson in 1885, Gilman briefly comments, “Motherhood means——Giving.”<sup>10</sup> In this way, Gilman was hesitant about the newborn. There would have to be sacrifices made in her life. Much later that year Gilman made the realization, “I have long been ill; weak, nerveless, forced to be idle and let things drift. Perhaps now I can pick up the broken threads again and make out some kind of a career after all.”<sup>11</sup> In spite of Gilman’s attempts to become happy and begin writing again, she could not. On 30 August, 1885 she writes:

Every morning the same hopeless waking. Every day the same weary drag. To die mere cowardice. Retreat impossible, escape impossible. I let Walter read a letter to Martha in which I tell me grief as strongly as I can. He offers to let me go free, he would do everything in the world for me; but he cannot see how irrevocably bound I am, for life, for life. No, unless he die and the baby die, or he change or I change there is no way out.<sup>12</sup>

This downward spiral continued until the beginning of 1887, when Gilman finally made her way to a treatment center in Philadelphia. In one of the last entries in her diary (until after treatment) she says, “no one can ever know what I have suffered in these last five years. Pain pain pain, till my mind has given way.”<sup>13</sup> At the end of her treatment she picked herself back up and was ready to begin writing and taking care of her daughter.

In 1887 she took her daughter Katherine to California, separating from Stetson.<sup>14</sup> The end of her marriage to Stetson and the beginning of a new life in California is exactly what Charlotte needed to get back to her career and writing. After many years in California she moved to Chicago with her daughter and reconnected with her cousin George Houghton Gilman. George married Gilman in 1900, with the understanding of her passion for social equality and honesty about her past.

---

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 323.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 329.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 332.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 385.

<sup>14</sup> Lane, 120.

Once married, the couple moved to New York and Gilman began to write copiously. In 1909 she founded her own monthly magazine called *The Forerunner*. The monthly magazine was full of articles, poetry, non-fiction and serialized fiction.<sup>15</sup> She wrote most of the articles herself during the seven years it was published. Each month Gilman was producing the magazine she writing around twenty-one thousand words.<sup>16</sup> She was fed up with the large newspaper moguls who ran almost all of the publishing. Her motive was, “to stimulate thought; to arouse hope, courage and impatience; to offer practical suggestions and solutions, to voice the strong assurance of better living.”<sup>17</sup> Charlotte was a spokesperson for human rights and women’s suffrage. She spoke in front of large audiences and at conferences. She would go on speaking tours in New York and to London. She would speak about different views on Women’s Rights depending on what her purpose was. She spoke on the subject of suffrage in order to get votes, and about education for young women when there was a push for women to stay in the home.

Her work was incredibly controversial and received a lot of criticism. She was divisive because nobody else was raising awareness to social inequalities and offering up advice as freely and bluntly as possible. Gilman writes to *The New York Times*, “what the practical public wants is clear reasoning and plain facts. That public, in America, is quite capable of making its own opinions if fairly informed.”<sup>18</sup> Gilman was arguing against anti-suffragists and making the claim that if a person was more educated, then they would have a better ability in deciding that women deserve to be enfranchised. Gilman was doing more than writing and editing her own magazine, she was also writing books and articles for other periodicals. She kept up on her reputation in

---

<sup>15</sup> Gilman, Charlotte Perkins, *The Forerunner* (1909-1915).

<sup>16</sup> Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper*, 38.

<sup>17</sup> Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *Forerunner*, (Issue 1, November 1909) 32.

<sup>18</sup> Charlotte Perkins Gilman, “A Rational Position on Suffrage,” *The New York Times*, (March 7, 1915).



the newspapers, and would comment back in the editorial section, constantly defending herself and her beliefs.

Gilman stopped running her magazine in 1915 in order to put her efforts toward the Women's Suffrage Movement. While expressing her views in *The New York Times* editorials Gilman stated, "What the anti-suffrage cause needs is evidence, not prophecy. What THE TIMES needs, if it expects to influence thinking people in this matter, is to show knowledge of the facts and to appeal to the reason instead of to a blind sex-prejudiced dislike."<sup>19</sup> The language that Gilman used was forward and to the point. She did not leave anybody wondering what her opinions or ideals were and she demanded that changes be made. Her comment about influencing "thinking people" depicts her viewpoint, that if people are educated, like the elite, then they would not subscribe to the gender stereotypes that oppressed women.

While Gilman was actively involved in the editorial dialogue of the *New York Times* she continually defended herself to anti-suffrage groups as well as people who disliked her published works and speeches. Not only were men outspoken against her writing, but women too. Men seemed to be threatened with the idea that women would gain more power, and there would be an unequal power balance in the opposite direction. Women disagreed mainly because they did not understand her radical point of view; there was confusion about the work women did in the home that was unpaid, making it impossible to become independent. In an article on women's rights to education Gilman began by saying, "the age-old habit of thought which has held woman as of some lower species is not to be shaken off in so short a period as a century."<sup>20</sup> Gilman was referring to the fact that women were not given the same education based on the thought that they could not learn the same skills as men. In response to this article, Winifred S. Gibbs wrote

---

<sup>19</sup> Charlotte Perkins Gilman, "Mrs. Gilman Asks Evidence," *The New York Times*. (February 11, 1915).

<sup>20</sup> Winifred S. Gibbs, "Woman and Cooking," *The New York Times*. (September 8, 1907).

that by following her [Gilman's] suggestions for improvement there would be disastrous results. There would be an increase in child mortality, excesses in crime and drugs, as well as health problems that would ruin "home life". Such controversial opinions were held among other people as well. After Gilman gave a six day lecture on "The Larger Feminism" she found many people disagreed with her. She spoke about the evolution and biology of the sexes, disproving the idea that women came from Adam's rib.

She took as her subject, 'The Biological Base of the Large Feminism.' She said that the feminist movement had grown so tremendously in the last five years that its opponents no longer tried to buttress themselves behind sneers and mockery of it, nor behind the Bible, with its man-made myth of Adam's rib, but had been forced to try to buttress themselves behind biology and science instead.<sup>21</sup>

The problem for the opposition to Gilman was that they could not find evidence to back their arguments. Gilman tore down their beliefs and instilled a new set of scientific standards that showed women's ability to be equal with men.

Many women alongside Gilman fought during the late 1800s through the 1910s for the right to vote. This one simple right would open the doors up to many more rights. Women could finally have a say in politics and the public arena. The Movement began as a series of small movements in individual communities and states. Gilman's arguments for suffrage fell right in line with other suffrage groups across the U.S. Her call to fix injustices included, "inferior pay for equal work, exclusion from desirable positions, unfairness of situation in courts of justice composed entirely of the other sex, difference in punishment for the same offense, denial of rights of parentage, unjust marriage laws, and many others."<sup>22</sup>

Other suffragists agreed with these claims, but Gilman not only had the evidence to back them up; she had arguments to oppose anti-suffrage opinions. She believed in political equality

---

<sup>21</sup> "Adam the Real Rib, Mrs. Gilman Insists," *The New York Times*. (February, 19, 1914).

<sup>22</sup> Gilman, "A Rational Position on Suffrage."

and autonomy. To her democracy was, “the most just and serviceable form of government,” and in order to be effective, “calls for a competent and universal electorate; and if because of temporary conditions, the electorate must be limited, it should not be limited on a basis of sex-distinction.”<sup>23</sup> Gilman further emphasizes her elitism and necessity of education among women and men alike. She explains that the government should be full of elites, but educated elites not based on sex, but based on qualifications.

At the time women and men were encouraged to remain in separate spheres: women were to stay at home and men took care of public affairs. This kept women economically tied to their husbands. Gilman strongly believed that women should have economic autonomy from any man. “The female of genus homo is economically dependent on the male. He is her food supply.”<sup>24</sup> This was a radical thought for the time. The idea that women get paid any type of wages was unheard of. Not only would that put more women in the workforce, but it would challenge many men who felt women should not have that type of responsibility, or that could not handle that type of responsibility. Women may have fallen behind in their domestic duties if they were making money at other jobs.<sup>25</sup> Anti-suffragists claimed that the woman’s place was in the home, and while she was there she could be in charge of domestic duties. For Gilman and other suffragists this was not enough.

The Movement was about more than labor rights; Gilman was fighting for equal education rights for young women. Gilman noted in a speech that, “girls are trained in cooking and sewing not because of the educational value of those pursuits, but because they are to be cooks and seamstresses.”<sup>26</sup> Gilman felt that by having women learn these skills was a disservice

---

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Gilman, *Women and Economics*, 22.

<sup>25</sup> Polly Wynn Allen, *Building, Domestic, Liberty*. (Amherst: The university of Massachusetts Press, 1988) 16-17.

<sup>26</sup> Gibbs, “Women and Cooking.”

to them, “some dexterity is required, it is true, in deft of peeling of potatoes, but the main issue is not the finger work.”<sup>27</sup> Women needed a better education in order to be independent. The continued efforts of suffragists and Gilman eventually began to make a difference. As more and more states began to give voting rights to women there was an even stronger push for national suffrage in the late 1910s. The rural West coast agricultural centers began enfranchising women state by state. Then the densely populated East Coast states began to enfranchise women, and in 1920 women legally gained equal status with men in the political arena. Luckily Gilman was able to see her and many other hard working individuals efforts pay off when the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment passed.<sup>28</sup>

Charlotte Perkins Gilman spent much of her life defending her views and work. However she did have a few compatriots who were on the same side and supportive of her hard work. Some of these allies were found in women’s clubs. Women’s clubs made a large contribution to the movement. Gilman found herself involved in the Heterodoxy club in 1912, which promoted feminism, diversity and a discussion of social problems.<sup>29</sup> She even found supporters in Europe. Gilman traveled speaking about the affairs and injustices of women. In a trip to London, Gilman noticed how women overseas were more interested in national and political affairs. London women’s clubs were geared more toward socializing, like men’s clubs were, however they were much more independent than women from the U.S. In her lecture Gilman discussed the women’s clubs in America, explaining they “are mainly for mutual improvement. They are educational institutions.”<sup>30</sup> Women in London felt that the

---

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Charlotte Perkins Gilman found out she had cancer shortly after women were enfranchised. Gilman believed in the relief of suffering in more than just society and social construction. She ended her life in 1935 with an overdose of chloroform rather than living in agony.

<sup>29</sup> Cynthia Davis, Knight, Denise. *Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Her Contemporaries*. (The University of Alabama Press: Tuscaloosa, 2004) 156-157.

<sup>30</sup> “Says Our Women Are Ill-Informed,” *The New York Times*. (May 20, 1913).

circumstances (oppression) of women in both places were similar and underrepresented.<sup>31</sup>

Despite the backlash of the media in the United States Gilman was able to find support from the women in London.

There has been a shift in viewpoints from the 1910s to the present. Today most sociologists, historians and feminists agree that Gilman had a positive impact on society and the Women's Movement. Gilman was exposing truths about gender inequalities and the societal constraints put on women. Her ideas were unheard of. She called for women to become economically independent from their husbands; this means they would need to sustain themselves with some type of wage labor. The type of writing that appealed to people of the time was seen in her monthly magazine. Her serialized novel was written with simplicity and sustenance. This simplicity however is not as necessary as it once was. Gilman's short story on the other hand has become very influential with the passing of time. There had been a great deal of changes and evolution that happened during the time period between her death and the 1970s. There was an entirely new wave of feminism that occurred, yet Gilman's work continued to pertain with the new wave being about "personal as political." Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* depicts the personal life in great detail, showing the ins and outs of an oppressed woman's life. The whole point of the story was to promote a change of thought, and politics to be changed at the same time viewpoints shifted.

The Women's Movement changed and the "second wave" of feminism began in the 1960s. It stemmed from the civil rights struggle that many minority groups took advantage of supporting and expressing societal concerns. The shift in the Women's movement was what many refer to being the "personal is political." This mindset changed the movement completely. In 1963 Betty Friedan wrote *The Feminine Mystique*: a revolutionary book which opened doors

---

<sup>31</sup> "Says Our Women Are Ill-Informed."

for feminists, and eyes of women who had never been exposed to the idea that education and self-determination will lead to women's independence. Friedan also helped start the National Organization for Women (NOW). These women pushed for equal employment opportunities, and wages. It seems possible that Friedan would have read Gilman's work at some point in her career. Her ideas were on par with Gilman, especially when it came to economic autonomy.

Following the 1960s revival of the Women's Movement there was yet another shift in the issues that women began fighting for in the 1970s. Not coincidentally in 1979 Gilman's serialized novel *Herland* was republished for the first time as a full book. Her book was dealing with many of the ideals that women were trying to put forward to the public. There were new issues in politics that were being fought for. Women fought against prostitution, pornography and the exploitation of women's bodies. This exploitation could be private, as in rape or public, like the media and advertising. There was also a shift in cultural attitudes; the realization that language is powerful changed everything. Gilman was a huge proponent of using correct language. She encouraged education so that there would not be a misuse of language. New wave feminists called upon people to think about the language they used/chose and to change it to be more gender-neutral.<sup>32</sup> The voice of feminists came from a very diverse group of people, calling for people to be more aware of the language they used.

Today Gilman's work is praised and she continues to make an impact on today's society. Her work is classic and has been able to evolve with the passing of time. Gilman was writing about her experiences as well as her direct observations of society. This is how she relates to such wide audiences over time.

---

<sup>32</sup> In some aspects the shift into language consciousness can be compared to move towards "political correctness." The same concepts around word choice and being aware that conservatives called for is something that the feminists were also asking of society.

When she started a serialized story *Herland* for *The Forerunner*, the book would not be published again until 1979. Gilman's book became revitalized with a new era of women because many of the same gender stereotypes continue to be perpetuated. The themes of inequality resonate with the new age of women. The only change in the book being republished is its packaging. The reader is given the entire book at once, versus one chapter at a time through a periodical. This completely shifts some of the points in the book, and shows clear gender biases in Gilman's own works. However the book's idealism continues on and in Gilman's *Herland* the audience can be taken to a different mental state. The utopian novel was a way for Gilman to express her frustrations and begin or continue a healing process.<sup>33</sup> Her thought for the utopian novel was not necessarily unique. During the same time period, other utopian novels were being written for the same purpose.<sup>34</sup>

Gilman's use not only included ideas around socialism, but paired with feminism made her unique. Because of the way she writes and what she is writing about, the audience is given the chance to escape and potentially take a step in a healing direction. *Herland* set the stage for exploring new societal concepts. Concepts around gender and a woman's "place" in the world that are not status quo, and may be downright unaccepted are all possible within the utopia. Anything and everything is possible, no matter how extreme. Once the reader is actively participating in a new mental process, doors of behavioral change are able to open. The first step in making a transformation within society is to change the way that people think about a certain concept. Gilman does this in her writing. She introduces the material in a clear, comfortable environment but with a drastically new way of thinking.

---

<sup>33</sup> Carol Kessler, *Charlotte Perkins Gilman*. (Syracuse University Press: Syracuse, 1995) 12.

<sup>34</sup> Edward Bellamy, famous for the use of utopian writing.

The utopian model is ideal, but the message is clear, and the actions that need to be taken are drastic. Gilman was asking for change in a society that kept women in a separate sphere than men.

*Herland* begins with three American men setting out on an expedition into an unknown land during the eve of World War I. All three men were classmates and friends who had some differences, yet were all interested in science. The narrator, Van, was a sociology major that was interested in every type of science. Jeff, was a doctor whose real passion was poetry and botany. They both had a strong grasp in biology. Terry, was an explorer and an engineer; he owned cars, boats and could fly a plane. As the men are guided through a mysterious land, guides tell them stories of a land of women. The men become fascinated and were skeptical at the thought of this. Gilman tries to capture the audience's curiosity at the same time the men become interested. Her writing style is one the reasons she had such a large reading audience.

Deciding that it was too much of a challenge to give up, the men began the journey into this unfamiliar territory. They began cautiously, but became eager quickly at the thought of this all female world. Terry was sure that they would find men hiding somewhere, or that they were secluded in another part of the land. Gilman wanted to show that these men did not understand how women could live in a world independent from men. This is one of her main points throughout her career: women's autonomy and economic independence is not only possibly but encouraged.

After landing on the outskirts and forest of the city they flew over, the men spotted three girls and began to run after them. The girls ran into town and the men followed. They were soon surrounded by a large group of women and corralled into a large building. Terry became increasingly uncomfortable and attempted to run for it, pulled out a gun and began to fire into the



air. Quickly all three of the men were subdued by anesthesia and detained by five women each. Following the escape attempt, the men were imprisoned. Terry, the “masculine” man could not handle the pressure of the women having the power and ended up making a rash decision, which ended surprisingly for him. He did not think that the women would be able to have the physical strength to subdue them.

During the odd imprisonment of the men they were given a new wardrobe, a comfortable room and fed well. The only odd thing was that a group of women followed them around, kept track and took notes. The men were expected to learn their language; the women, by observation would learn English. The men would learn a lot, but still felt caged. They would stage an escape. The men snuck out, and back to the flying machine in which they came. Upon arrival there was a group of women waiting for them. They were brought back into captivity. This time the women realized the men needed more freedom, and granted the men some variety within their daily routines. This is the first time you begin to really see the men staying in their static character positions, while the women observe and learn, and change their methods when they understand the men do not like being oppressed that way.

Once the men had regained the trust of the women, they were allowed out into the city. They were also told the history of Herland. After explaining two thousand years of history, the Herland race had come a long way. The women then asked questions of the men, comparing both countries. The men were sheepish about some of the topics, such as criminals.

As for the intelligence, I confess that this was the most impressive and, to me, most mortifying, of any single feature of Herland. We soon ceased to comment on this or other matters which to them were such obvious commonplaces as to call forth embarrassing questions about our own conditions.<sup>35</sup>

---

<sup>35</sup> Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *Herland*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1979) 79.

They would try to avoid giving answers that would make the rest of the bi-sexual world sound bad. The men felt ashamed of their backgrounds and thought it necessary to hide the truth, while the women were open about everything. Again we see Gilman moving around the gender roles that plague/d society.

As time passed three of the women became very fond of Terry, Jeff and Van. The men became attached to these three women as well. Alima was involved with Terry and their relationship was extremely rocky. They fought all of the time and could not seem to ever agree. Jeff became infatuated with Celis. He doted on her every word; instead of trying to mold her, he changed his views. Ellador *chose* Van as her companion. None of the women understood the idea of feminine sexuality; nor did they understand recreational intercourse. Terry was positive that these ladies had no “femininity”. Celis realized the necessity for sex in order to procreate and wanted such things for her and Jeff. Ellador seemed confused. She wanted the option of procreating with Van; however found that what she really wanted was to learn more about him and the place in which he was from. After these courtships, the three women and men decided to get married. This ceremony was strictly for the men, as the women did not see the need for marriage. As the men grew to know these women, they found a lack of what people know today as “sexuality.” This is the only time in the novel where the women fall into a typical gender role of being female, by simply getting married and doing what the men want, even though they do not understand.

Instead of a need for pleasure, these women’s needs were for motherhood. For this and only this reason, would they need to “consummate” their marriages. Celis came to appreciate and want to have children with Jeff, and soon found herself pregnant. The Herland community was ecstatic. Terry became impatient at not getting his way and tried to push himself onto Alima

and it was decided that Terry must leave. In order to fly the plane they came in, they would need two people. Van agreed to go back with him, and Ellador insisted she accompany him on this journey. Not only did she want to be with Van, but she wanted to learn everything there was to know about his country. And so ends the saga and adventure of Herland.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman played a major role in modernizing the early 1900s Women's Movement. The movement was evolving and she recognized the need for change. Instead of serious criticism of society, she began to use humor. Upon the men being discovered by the women we see Gilman criticize lightly how she sees men treating women in society,

Jeff, with his gentle romantic old-fashioned notions of women as clinging vines. Terry, with his clear decided practical theories that there were two kinds of women—those he wanted and those he didn't; Desirable and Undesirable was his demarcation. The latter as a large class, but negligible—he had never thought about them at all.<sup>36</sup>

We see the social problems of the current society through fiction and comedy. This allows the audience to be at ease, yet still be challenged with new ideas about gender construction. Though she wrote *Herland* in 1915, the difficulties women faced are still important. Being re-published in 1979 shows how timeless Gilman's work is. Sadly the societal problems she addressed are still significant in today's world.

In the widely established view of feminist critique<sup>37</sup> to analyze Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland*, there is a clear message and call for change in society and the roles women and men are placed in. The presentation of both genders is not egalitarian. The men are simplistic, while the women do bend to some of the men's rituals (wedding). The goal of Gilman's novel was not to show her own gender biases, but instead to show the disparity

---

<sup>36</sup> Gilman, *Herland*, 21.

<sup>37</sup> The critical method of feminist criticism involves explaining roles of gender and whether or not they conform to society's norms, judging the way gender is constructed, and whether or not the piece of work gives advice and suggestions as a way to change those gender constraints

between men and women. When the novel was first published, it was serialized, forcing the readers to take long breaks between chapters. She had to have simplified characters in order to keep her audience's attention. Unfortunately the three men in the novel come across as stagnate and one-dimensional when the book is read in one sitting.

*Herland* presents men and women in ways that are not entirely equal. Men are categorized in three different ways. Terry represents one side, being tough, outspoken, violent, stubborn, and dominate. Throughout his time in Herland he still cannot believe that there are no men masterminding the civilized world the women live in. After being imprisoned Terry remarks, "This thing is a regular fortress—and no women built it, I can tell you that."<sup>38</sup> His persistent belief that no women could possibly be capable of such a feat is one pig headed personality trait that Gilman believes men to have. "While her characters may begin to seem stock...the ideal becoming juxtaposed with their undesirable opposites...the overbearing and self-serving man."<sup>39</sup> Gilman uses common stereotypes to expose the troubles within society. Jeff is the opposite of Terry. He represents a kind hearted, caring, obedient, trusting and emotional side of man. His mannerisms and actions are considered to be feminine characteristics and standards in today's societal constraints. During courtship and even after marriage to Celis, Jeff conformed to the Herland ideas.

He so worshiped Celis, and not only Celis, but what she represented; he had become so deeply convinced of the almost supernatural advantages of this country and people, that he took his medicine like a—I cannot say 'like a man,' but more as if he wasn't one.<sup>40</sup>

Even Van saw Jeff's traits as feminine. Van himself represented the third category of men: understanding, honest, compromising, rational, and intelligent. Upon learning about the history of Herland Van admits,

---

<sup>38</sup> Gilman, *Herland*, 29.

<sup>39</sup> Lia Vella, "Book Review," *Utopian Studies*. 318.

<sup>40</sup> Gilman, *Herland*, 123.

with growing acquaintance, was that they were ignorant as Plato and Aristotle were, but with a highly developed mentality quite comparable to that of Ancient Greece...Far be it for me to lumber these pages with an account of what we so imperfectly strove to teach them. The memorable fact is what they taught us...<sup>41</sup>

Jeff knew that although these women were learning a great deal about the world outside Herland, the men were getting a real lesson in life. By seeing women who are so independent and strong, but that can cooperate without competition, opened Van and Jeff's eyes. Terry on the other hand could not seem to believe his entire visit in Herland.

The women of Herland were of a different breed. They are presented as anti-feminine, competent, self sufficient, strong, intellectual, efficient and mothers. They are considered to be anti-feminine because of the "male traits" or gender roles that they are participating in: being autonomous, muscular, and smart, etc. These females trampled the stereotypes the men were used to. Van explains that the men learned the Herland language fairly quickly, but, "they learned ours much more quickly and used it to hasten our own studies."<sup>42</sup> The women were innovative, and knew that to better understand and teach the men, they would have to learn about the men's customs and language. This further upset Terry and his sexist feelings. The women are depicted as being masculine throughout the book. Gilman's portrayal of rationality in women is one that cannot go unnoticed. "Her utopians act less out of moral principle than practicality."<sup>43</sup>

She is breaking down the walls of conformity that depict women making choices based on emotion and moral codes. One of Gilman's biggest objectives was to prove that women are more than just mothers. "In reconstructing in our minds the position of woman under conditions of economic independence, it is most difficult to think of her as a mother," Gilman continues,

---

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>43</sup> Philip Abbott, "Utopians at Play," *Journal of Politics*. (Volume 62, 2000) 50.

“We are so unbrokenly accustomed to the old methods of motherhood, so convinced that all its processes are inter-relative and indispensable, and that to alter one of them is to endanger the whole relation, that we cannot conceive of any desirable change.”<sup>44</sup> She truly understood that in order to make a change in society people needed to be educated and learn what it means to be mother, but also autonomous from motherhood.

Standards in Herland were different from the standards of the “real world” that the men came from. The women of Herland wore short hair, which is considered boyish to society’s standards. Interestingly, while in captivity the men grew their hair long, because they were not allowed to have sharp razors or scissors. Terry was frustrated with this feminine long hair; however both Jeff and Van wore their hair and beards, proudly standing out from the women. Normal behavior in Herland was dedication to motherhood. Bringing up children was the main point and job of women. Children were not educated through school, but primarily with life lessons and educational games. Having motherhood as a primary goal in a woman’s life is also similar to the norms of the society in which the men came from.

The difference was that in Herland, if a woman had a child it did not mean that she should be a mother. Some women were not meant to be mothers, and Herlanders recognized this. Some were better cut out to perform other tasks. The few that were meant to be mothers took their job seriously and cared for the children the majority of the time. In the societal norms of Van, Terry and Jeff a woman was a mother. Being a stay at home mother was for every woman. The women of Herland saw men as being fathers. They would not be providers for the women and children, but equal to them. For Charlotte Perkins Gilman she identified with these women.

---

<sup>44</sup> Gilman, *Women and Economics*, 270.

She asserted women's right to independence from too much mothering responsibility, but she then glorified the 'eternal mother' as central to the feminine identity, had the women of her utopian novel *Herland* worshipping the 'Goddess of Mother Love,' and romanticized and sentimentalized her relationship with Katherine as though she regretted any time spent apart.<sup>45</sup>

Gilman did not feel as though she was equipped to be a mother, and did leave her daughter Katherine with her father for a period of time during her formative years. She believed that not all women were destined to be mothers, and believed that men had the potential to be fathers.

The society of the late 1800s and early 1900s in which Gilman was criticizing was one in which men dominate women. Her theories about this are still unfortunately true in today's society. Though there have been improvements made, a patriarchal society remains. The men are supposed to be the providers and bread winners. Women are not supposed to go to work or to leave the home. They are to be doted on and looked after. The men go to war and compete to provide for the women, instead of working together and pooling their resources.

*Herland* society challenges the stereotypes that have been a part of the current culture for ages. The utopian society describes women as being strong, and not agreeing with the norms of social construction. However, the women were expected to get married to the men, though they did not believe that it was necessary, they still conformed. The women did try to learn the norms of the gender bias society that the men illustrated. They were not being given the full picture of the society they were trying to conform to, but for some reason they believed and wanted to conform to the men's views. Although *Herland* challenges stereotypes, she also reinforces some of them. It challenges ideas about women being weak and unable to cope without the assistance of men. It also perpetuates the male stereotype that no matter what they do there is no room for

---

<sup>45</sup> Mary A. Hill, *Charlotte Perkins Gilman, the Making of a Radical Feminist, 1860-1896*. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980) 230.

change. The label that Gilman reinforces is that a woman's goal in life is to have children, although she notes that they shouldn't always educate those children. If a woman is going to have a child and not be the one to care for it, then she should not have children at all. Gilman recognizes the importance of males needing to become fathers. However, she sees that during her lifetime this change is not close to becoming a possibility quite yet.

The book shows the rampant problems in society. It does not give step by step instructions on how to mend a broken society. Most of what Gilman is asking for is that men have an understanding of a woman's point of view. She wants people to see that women are just as capable when given the chance. This chance has been oppressed for so many years that people forget. Women are placed into unrealistic roles that leave them unsatisfied and frustrated with life. Although these roles have been defined for so long, Gilman instills hope. "Yet as 'scientifically' as these arguments for male superiority were presented, the fact that they aligned so closely with cultural beliefs meant that they held within themselves the potential for revision and redefinition."<sup>46</sup> Because male supremacy is a cultural construction, there is an opportunity for change to happen. Gilman wants her audience to be able to become educated enough to make a change from within.

This being her message, she does not necessarily give credit to man's ability to change. This is due to the serialization of the novel, which was necessary for the time, but again does not read, as well in a completed format. The book has changed because of the style and times. Through *Herland* the point she makes of categorizing men does not lend well to transformation. In her society there are three types of men: Terry, Jeff and Van. The outlook seems grim when seeing it in this light. One third of men like Terry will never change; one third of men like Jeff

---

<sup>46</sup> Jennifer Hudak, "The 'Social Inventory': Charlotte Perkins Gilman and the (Re) Production of Perfection," *Women's Studies*, (Vol 32, 2003) 459.



will be pushovers and dull; the last third and seemingly good bunch would be like Van who have the ability to compromise and seek equality. The differences in the men are apparent while they discuss the evolution of the civilization in Herland.

I [Van] liked it because of my eager and continued interest in the sociological achievements involved. Jeff liked it as he would have liked such a family and such a place anywhere. Terry did not like it because he found nothing to oppose, to struggle with, to conquer.<sup>47</sup>

The categorization of men is a bias that cannot be ignored in Gilman's writing. She uses simple stereotypes that can perpetuate prejudices. These generalizations pigeonhole the men into a place that they cannot grow from, which is what Gilman is asking her audience to do. However, if reading the book at a much slower pace, the audience might have appreciated and needed its simplicity.

Despite some bias she points out many seemingly normal acts, that when looked at from a different perspective, seem silly. For instance, the women of Herland do not pass names on through a matrilineal path. The women have no surnames at all. This dumbfounds the men. The women do not understand why they should want to stake claim to their children. They feel as though the children are part of a greater family, and a name means nothing. The men find this hard to believe, coming from a society where a person's last name could mean status. The women do not feel the need to know which child belongs to which mother. There are careful records kept if there is ever a need to know descendents. Van realizes, "Here, as in so many other instances, we are led to feel the difference between the purely maternal and the paternal attitude of mind. The element of pride seemed strangely lacking."<sup>48</sup> These women do not see the need for a senseless competition based not on skill, but on whom their mother was, something unchangeable.

---

<sup>47</sup> Gilman, *Herland*, 99.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's use of fiction is one that cannot be ignored. Though her writing is not the best of literary works, her message is clear. The utopian model shows not only how the world can be, but how close the world is to that change. "By presenting a character's dilemma and drawing the reader through the process of realization, Gilman intensifies the 'utopian moment,' making the character's problem and its solution real and compelling for the reader."<sup>49</sup> Her work is simple and to the point. She does not try to leave the reader in wonder about who the message was directed at or how it is to be interpreted.

The journey into Herland through the eyes of Van was a good choice to make on the part of Gilman. Having a man's perspective as the outsider immediately puts him in a position of learning. Society becoming educated is one of the points Gilman is trying to make. By having Terry as the unwilling and stubborn man being kicked out of the utopia, we see that women are no longer willing to put up with sexism. Jeff however shows us that some men are willing to do anything for women, giving an interesting perception of masculinity. Categorizing the men into three extremes shows prejudice, as they do not cross or change these stereotypes as the story unfolds.

Regardless of the bias she shows, there is still a message and call for compassion towards civilization and society. "While she [Gilman] acknowledges the distinct categories of male and female, she ultimately believes in a concept of "common humanity."<sup>50</sup> Gilman's simplistic literary skills in this particular novel do not detract from her overall ideals and concepts. It was necessary for the time. She was fighting for more than woman's rights. She was fighting for equality within the human race.

---

<sup>49</sup> Vella, 318.

<sup>50</sup> Jennifer Hudson, "'The Bi-sexual Race': Mediating Masculine and Feminine Discourses in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland*, *With Her in Ourland* and *Beyond*." *Journal of Bisexuality*, (Vol. 5, Issue 4, 2005) 8.

Gilman's work continues to be influential, despite how long it has been since it was first published. The ideas that Gilman had around gender were revolutionary, and right. So much so, that her work is re-published time and again to be studied and used as a reference for what gender equality should look like. Gilman was critical of sexism, economically dependent women, and the slowly evolving circumstances of gender relationships. Not only was she critical, but she had high hopes for a large-scale change in the status quo of women.<sup>51</sup> Part of the reason Gilman continues to be useful is her own personal experiences with gender relations. A lot of her work reaches audiences in a way that most books and texts do not.

Gilman's novel *Herland* became re-published as one piece in 1979. Her other pieces of work, like *The Yellow Wallpaper*, have also been re-evaluated and re-published. It is her use of language that draws the audience in and makes them think about their role in society, without being too aggressive. Even in her famous non-fiction work, *Women and Economics*, as well as published articles, Gilman uses satire to get her message across.<sup>52</sup> In an article advocating for suffrage and the necessity to educate children Gilman comments, "the mother in the home does what she can, but the public care is given to pigs, cows, lobsters, wild game, more than to children."<sup>53</sup> She is hopeful that people will understand that because of women not being able to vote that their children are going to end up neglected by the government. If women had the vote she feels that the education and wellbeing of kids would improve.

Gilman was a radical feminist despite growing up in a broken home. She used her personal life to guide her writing and humanitarian work; this leads some of her work to be very emotionally charged. Her work cannot be ignored, as it has a huge impact on the contemporary feminist movement. She brought fiction and humor into a serious social movement. Her ideas

---

<sup>51</sup> Polly Wynn Allen, *Building, Domestic, Liberty*. (Amherst: The university of Massachusetts Press, 1988) 5-7.

<sup>52</sup> Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper*, 38.

<sup>53</sup> Charlotte Perkins Gilman, "A Rational Position on Suffrage."

about society were only slightly changed after 1915 when the first publication of *Herland* ran in *The Forerunner* magazine. Being republished almost 65 years later shows how slow the process of forward movement within a society can be. Her novel was the perfect place to explore a world in which gender “standards” have been thrown out. Although many of her characters are stereotypical, it simplified her novel for the audience at the time. Taking into account that her novel was serialized, she could not make her characters too complex. This would have lost readers and detracted from her overall message. The beginning idea of the three different types of men is understandable. However, to further emphasize her point, Gilman may have wanted to show that men are capable of change within the strict confines of society.

Gilman’s *The Yellow Wallpaper* seems to keep impacting the United States on a larger scale than Gilman’s other works in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The autobiographical short story is one that grips large audiences and continues to fascinate people, despite “women’s rest centers” no longer existing. Gilman was asking readers and anybody who would listen for change, just like women who came before her time.<sup>54</sup> This change was something that should come from an educated intellectual. Her call to the elites was in hopes that the well-informed people would understand and easily step out of their gender boundaries. Charlotte Perkins Gilman will not be forgotten in Women’s History; she played an integral role in the Suffrage Movement through her literary works, use of satire and radical ideologies about women’s independence and is still continuing to impact the current Feminist Movement through her literary works which make the reader consider the “personal being political,” and calling on the intellectual elites.

---

<sup>54</sup> Women like the Grimke sisters and Ernestine Potowski Rose gave directions to women and men on what they needed to do in order for change to happen. Angela Grimke, “Address at Pennsylvania Hall, 1838,” *Man Cannot Speak for Her, Volume II*. By Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, (New York: Greenwood Press, 1989) 31. Potowski Rose, Ernestine, “Speech at the National Woman’s Rights Convention, Worcester, MA 1851,” *Man Cannot Speak for Her, Volume II*, By Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, (New York: Greenwood Press, 1989) 104-122.

## Bibliography

- Abbott, Philip. "Utopians at Play," *Journal of Politics*. Volume 62, 2000, 50.
- "Adam the Real Rib, Mrs. Gilman Insists," *The New York Times*. February, 19, 1914.
- Allen, Polly Wynn. *Building Domestic Liberty: Charlotte Perkins Gilman's Architectural Feminism*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988.
- "Charlotte Perkins Gilman Puts Man on the Grill." *The New York Times*. January 15, 1915.
- Davis, Cynthia J., and Denise D. Knight. *Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Her Contemporaries: Literary and Intellectual Contexts*. Studies in American literary realism and naturalism. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2004.
- Davis, Cynthia J. "Love and Economics: Charlotte Perkins Gilman on "The Woman Question." *ATQ* 19, no. 4 (December 2005): 243-258.
- Gibbs, Winifred S. "Women and Cooking." *The New York Times*. September 15, 1907.
- Gilman, Charlotte Perkins, "The Yellow Wall Paper." Brooklyn: The Feminist Press, 1973.
- Charlotte Perkins Gilman. *Herland*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1979.
- Gilman, Charlotte Perkins, and Denise D. Knight. *The Diaries of Charlotte Perkins Gilman*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1994.
- Gilman, Charlotte Perkins. "A Rational Position on Suffrage." *The New York Times*. March 7, 1915.
- Gilman, Charlotte Perkins. *Forerunner*. Issue 1, November 1909.
- Gilman, Charlotte Perkins. *The Forerunner*. 1909-1915.
- Gilman, Charlotte Perkins. "Mrs. Gilman Asks Evidence." *The New York Times*. February 11, 1915.
- Charlotte Perkins Gilman. *Women and Economics*. New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1966.
- Grimke, Angela. "Address at Pennsylvania Hall, 1838." *Man Cannot Speak for Her, Volume II*. By Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, (New York: Greenwood Press, 1989) 31.
- Hill, Mary Armfield. *Charlotte Perkins Gilman: The Making of a Radical Feminist, 1860-1896*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980.
- Hudak, Jennifer. "The 'Social Inventory': Charlotte Perkins Gilman and the (Re)Production of Perfection." *Women's Studies*. Vol 32, 2003, 459.

- Hudson, Jennifer. "The Bi-sexual Race': Mediating Masculine and Feminine Discourses in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland*, *With Her in Ourland* and *Beyond*." *Journal of Bisexuality*. Vol. 5, Issue 4, 2005.
- Kalayjian, Patricia. "Raising the Dust: The Literary Housekeeping of Mary Ward, Sarah Grand, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman/Beyond the Gibson Girl: Reimagining the American New Woman, 1895-1915." *American Literature* 79, no. 1 (March 2007): 189-191.
- Karpinski, Joanne B. *Critical Essays on Charlotte Perkins Gilman*. Critical essays on American literature. New York: G.K. Hall, 1992.
- Kessler, Carol, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman. *Charlotte Perkins Gilman: Her Progress Toward Utopia with Selected Writings*. Utopianism and communitarianism. New York: Syracuse University Press, 1995.
- Knight, Denise D., and Charlotte Perkins Gilman. *Charlotte Perkins Gilman: A Study of the Short Fiction*. Twayne's studies in short fiction, no. 68. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1997.
- Lane, Ann. *To Herland and Beyond*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1990.
- Martin, Diana. "The Rest Cure Revisited." *American Journal of Psychiatry*, (May 2007), 737-738.
- Potowski Rose, Ernestine. "Speech at the National Woman's Rights Convention, Worcester, MA 1851." *Man Cannot Speak for Her, Volume II*, By Karlyn Kohrs Campbell. New York: Greenwood Press, 1989.
- "Says Our Women Are Ill-Informed." *The New York Times*. May 20, 1913.
- Vella, Lia. "Book Review," *Utopian Studies*. 318.