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Fractured Feminism: Racism, Classism, and Sexism in *Herland*

Senior Paper

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Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 1915 novel, *Herland*, is often praised as a feminist utopian story ahead of its time. First published as a serial in Gilman's own literary magazine *The Forerunner*, and then again as an independent novel in the late 1970s when second wave feminists began focusing on Gilman's work, *Herland* has been a point of interest since it was first published, and it received renewed attention at the height of the women's power movement in the 1970s, primarily because of the all-female ideal society Gilman creates.

Gilman lived and wrote during the tail end of first wave feminism, which is usually said to have begun at the Seneca Falls convention in 1848 and ended with the introduction of women's suffrage in 1920 (Bailey 18). First wave feminism "focused largely on gaining rights for women as citizens of the United States" (Launius and Hassel 12). That focus was almost entirely pointed towards white middle class women, while women of color and working class women were ignored. Second wave feminism is generally accepted as beginning in the 1960s and lasting through the 1980s. *Herland* was republished in the 1970s, which is one reason it was so popular at the time. Gilman's writing is often associated more with second wave feminism because it proposes women's liberation as something more than just the freedom to vote. Second wave feminism was centered around ideas of reproductive justice, bodily autonomy, access to educational and occupational opportunities, safety from violence, and a change in the cultural objectification of women (Launius and Hassel 12-13). Gilman presents a society where women have all this and more.

Gilman proposes feminist forms of thinking in *Herland*, such as a pro-woman attitude, the exclusion of men from society (which includes the unimportance of a male figure in reproduction), and the sense of community the women have. These ways of thinking were ahead of the first wave

feminist movement Gilman was living in and more in line with second wave thought. This is why many scholars see *Herland* as a feminist touchstone in American literature.

However, Gilman's "utopia" has a number of problematic aspects, including elements of racism, classism, and sexism, that should be addressed, but remain largely ignored in scholarship. Vivien Greene writes on the complexity of utopian ideas in *Herland*, arguing that utopia is not an idea with a concrete definition. Greene notes that, "the term can refer to an ideal society, but what constitutes this society remains a point of disagreement" (Greene 2). This is the problem with *Herland* in that Gilman establishes an ideal society that centers whiteness, a different vision perhaps than early 1900s women of color and poor women might have imagined. Green notes that many utopian stories act as "alternatives to the demands or structures of contemporary life", which is exactly what Gilman is doing with *Herland* (Greene 2). However, she is proposing a land without diversity of race, gender, or class, which contradicts the intersectional vision of idealism.

Considering Gilman's personal views and her brand of "humanism", the flaws in her utopian society become apparent when adopting an intersectional perspective. Her utopia was built for white women who shared her middle to upper class socioeconomic bracket. She did not consider people outside of her own experience, as modern day intersectional feminism would challenge her to do. Second wave feminism is often categorized by its "man hating" policy and attempts to put women in a place above men rather than equal to them. *Herland* does this with the creation of a society devoted solely to women. Gilman's views resonated with those of second wave feminists because *Herland*'s society depicts what some second wave feminists dreamed of their own world becoming. A place where women ruled and men took on a lower role in society, if they were allowed to participate at all. This is perhaps why there was a resurgence in the popularity of her writings in the 1970s through 90s, and why most scholarship surrounding

Herland categorizes the book as a “feminist utopia”. However, *Herland* is not for men, or people of color, or poor people. It’s not intersectional. Learning from the gaps in Gilman’s lack of inclusivity is part of what keeps this story relevant to this day.

To begin with, there is the issue of how Gilman presents gender in her novel. *Herland*’s entirely female population could be considered a feminist haven to some and a disaster reliant on stereotypes and misandry to others. Gilman gives the women of *Herland* traits like intelligence, agency, leadership skills, and societal organization. These, among others that the women exemplify, are traits that wouldn’t typically be associated with women at the time Gilman was writing. So, in that way, Gilman is breaking barriers. She is depicting women as strong and competent humans, enough so that they can run an entire country on their own, and have been doing so for two thousand years. Yet, she is only breaking these barriers for some women. Gilman is only making a dent in the social norm, proposing changes for white middle to upper class women like herself, but no one else. In this way, she is perpetuating the existing system of oppression further, and doing so primarily for social groups in far less privileged standing than her own.

In Gilman’s novel, a group of American men (Van, Jeff, and Terry) venture to find *Herland*, a “strange and terrible” country they have heard about in their travels around the globe, a country that is rumored to be populated exclusively by women (Gilman 4). When they reach the legendary land, the Americans are amazed by what they see. Van writes that they see “a land in a state of perfect cultivation, where even the forests looked as if they were cared for; a land that looked like an enormous park, only it was even more evidently an enormous garden” (Gilman 13). Through this description, the landscape is feminized. It’s meticulously cultivated and clean, in a way that implies the involvement of humans, and more specifically of women, rather than just wild growth.

The land is “cared for” and beautiful. There are also comparisons to be made to the garden of Eden, what the men have seen of Herland so far is described as perfect in every way.

Herland is completely isolated from the countries around it, elevated both figuratively, as it is highly civilized by Western standards according to Van, and physically in that it is raised on a plateau of its own above the surrounding area. The land is manicured like a private garden, and the men wander alone for a while before they come across any locals. The first women they meet are Ellador, Alima, and Celis. The Americans are taken aback by the women’s curiosity, intelligence, athleticism, and lack of femininity. In the time that Gilman lived and wrote, femininity was strictly defined. A woman was expected to look and behave one specific way, and any deviation from that norm could have potentially left her an outcast in society. Typically, femininity entailed submissiveness, homemaking, and child rearing, and excluded independent thinking, manual labor, and higher intelligence, which were “masculine” traits and thereby things that men were expected to be.

This is the major point of interest for Van, Jeff, and especially Terry. They cannot imagine how a society can function without these intelligent, masculine men to run it. They grow uneasy in the presence of these women. When the women flee after their short encounter with Van, Jeff, and Terry, the men follow them. They end up in a nearby town, where they meet more of the local women, this time a large group of them. The Americans attempt to run away from the Herlanders and are promptly subdued and taken into custody. The men wake later that day to find they are being held in a guarded room, the makeshift jail cell is beautiful and the most comfortable room they’ve ever stayed in. The men are held captive for weeks, though never mistreated, and the women begin to teach them their language and give them small privileges of freedom. This bout of captivity serves to show that Herland is not a place where men are allowed to exist freely. The

men eventually attempt to escape, but the women had expected such and followed them for a while before taking them back to their room. Upon returning, the men decide to make the most of their situation and begin trying in earnest to learn about the history of Herland and its people.

As they learn, Van, Jeff, and Terry grow more amazed at how smoothly their society runs with only women to operate both the public and private spheres, despite being in the presence of these women nearly full time and observing how they operate first hand. Robin Silbergleid writes that there are lines of thinking that keep women in the private sphere based on their perceived differences from men. Gilman is “seek[ing] to validate women’s differences from men as legitimate in the public sphere” by depicting a colony of women that is entirely self-governing without the aid of men (Silbergleid 169). The American men notice how different Herland’s women are from the women in America that they had been accustomed to their whole lives. Van observed of these new women: “Here you have human beings, unquestionably, but what we were slow in understanding was how these ultra-women, inheriting only from women, had eliminated not only certain masculine characteristics, which of course we did not look for, but so much of what we had always thought essentially feminine” (Gilman 59). The Herlanders are unlike any women the Americans had seen before, and yet, they are different from men as well. Gilman depicts the women of Herland as breaking from traditional feminine roles and qualities while also maintaining certain aspects of stereotypical femininity. The women of Herland are described as beautiful, clean, and dignified. All aspects of traditional femininity that the American men would have expected to see in a woman. Van, Jeff, and Terry would not have had any additional frames to view women through besides their physical attributes, which explains how little vocabulary they had with which to appreciate the women. This could be Gilman’s way of critiquing how women were viewed in her own society.

The Herlanders are also shown to place an extraordinary emphasis on motherhood, perhaps the most feminine state a Western woman can be in. The women of Herland live together as a community that acts much like a family. They worked together to cultivate the land of their country and create the best lives that they were able to after the great war that left them a man-less country. Then “the miracle happened” and one of the women fell pregnant despite the lack of men available to aid her in doing so (Gilman 57). This was unheard of, and there was certainly no evidence to suggest that virgin births were a realistic option for these women. So the women decided that this pregnancy was a gift from the gods. This pregnant woman became the first “parthenogenic” woman that was able to reproduce without a man, and she was followed shortly by the rest of the population of Herland (Gilman 58). Every woman was a mother, and “children were the – the *raison d’être* in this country”, children were the reason for being, the purpose of every Herlander’s life (Gilman 53). The importance of motherhood is unmatched by any other roles these women play. This emphasis is complicated further by Gilman’s personal experience with Motherhood, in regards to her own mother and becoming a mother herself.

Some awareness of Gilman’s personal life may help offer some insight into Herland’s exoneration of motherhood as something that transcends biological boundaries and is a community responsibility rather than an individual one. According to Gilman biographer Anne J. Lane, Gilman grew up in a household largely devoid of affection and attention. Her father left shortly after she was born, never to return, which made life extremely difficult for the remaining family. Mary Perkins, Gilman’s mother, was emotionally neglectful and cold towards her daughter, and this neglect stuck with Gilman for the rest of her life. The influence of such neglect can be seen in some of her writing on motherhood and children, most apparently in her non-fiction book, *Concerning Children* (1900), in which she discusses the importance of children to society. Gilman

insists that children are a massive part of the population, and thus crucial to the functioning of society, but Lane notes that “children are treated merely as parts of the family, not recognized as belonging to society” and that this view “constitutes the greatest unfairness in the way we raise them” (Lane 254). In her time, Gilman was “publicly maligned as an ‘unnatural mother’ when she chose to have her daughter live with her husband and his second wife” rather than with her, the biological mother of the child (Bartkowski 35). Gilman’s biographical history with motherhood is significant when proposing that Gilman wrote *Herland* in this way not in an attempt to re-write her own past, but to demonstrate the importance of having a community of mothers available to aid in raising a child.

Motherhood is the driving force for the women of Herland, to the point that it is almost a religion. Each woman would bear five children in her lifetime, all of which were girls, and all of which continue this tradition by having five daughters of their own. Asexual reproduction is what kept Herland populated and thriving for the two thousand years since they "rose in sheer desperation and slew their brutal conquerors" and were left man-less. They have lived and prospered indeed, without any men. This hyper-feminine role that every woman in Herland adopts is a clear example of the traditional femininity that Gilman brings into the characters in her novel. Compared to the society Gilman lived in, where “traditional femininity” was heavily reliant on a woman’s desire to be a mother and skill at raising a child on her own with little to no help expected of her husband, *Herland* instead creates a society where everyone is a mother and the responsibility of child rearing is shared across the community. Gilman could perhaps be criticizing her own society’s insistence that mothers have to do it all on their own, or that there is only one correct way to be a mother.

The way that motherhood is treated, while important, is not the only aspect of Herland's society that Gilman uses to promote feminist ideals in a less than inclusive way. Additionally, Frances Bartkowski writes about how Gilman discusses femininity in *Herland* in her own book, *Feminist Utopias*. Bartkowski notes that what makes *Herland*, and works like it, feminist utopian fictions, "is that women are not dismissed as one question among many... their place is everywhere", that is to say that a feminist utopia brings women front and center, rather than simply addressing the "woman question" as one of many (Bartkowski 24). *Herland* places women at the center of attention. Gilman creates an entire country that is populated only by women and which runs as smoothly as any "civilized" country should. Herland is organized, sophisticated, and safe. The women there are thriving. Gilman makes it apparent that these women are fully autonomous beings that don't need men to survive and prosper.

While the women are fully able to run their country smoothly and live happily without men, the Americans also note that "these women aren't *womanly*", which is almost as jarring to the visitors (Gilman 60). In addition to the previously mentioned feminine traits of beauty and the like, the Herlanders are described as *boy-like* in many aspects of their personalities and behaviors. Specifically upon their first encounter with Alima, Celis, and Ellador in the first part of the novel: "They were girls, of course, no boys could ever have shown that sparkling beauty, and yet none of us was certain at first" (Gilman 17). The women embody characteristics that would have been considered traditionally masculine at the time this was written, traits that women would never have been thought to have. They are smart, too smart to fall for Terry's tricks and attempts to catch them, and they are athletic, climbing in the trees above with ease. While imprisoned the men complain that their captors are "uncomfortably strong" (Gilman 33) and Terry notes that they didn't strike him as feminine or "*womanly*" (Gilman 60). This is because the women are intelligent,

curious, athletic, “boyish”, and in some cases old and wise. None of these traits are what the American men consider feminine or woman-like. However, according to Lou Ann Matossian, these masculine traits are intentionally magnified by Gilman in order to highlight the emphasis on masculinity in Western societies like America, which is one of the points that Gilman’s exclusionary feminism is attempting to address (and in the process of attempting to address this issue, she creates other issues). This emphasized masculinity is highlighted in Matossian’s *A Woman Made Language: Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Herland*, specifically in regards to the way that language has been a patriarchal tool for as long as a patriarchy has existed. Matossian proposes that Gilman is aware of this in her writing. Notably, Matossian explains Gilman’s observation on how, in a man’s world, “all human standards have been based on male characteristics”, and the terms “effeminate” and “emasculate”, for example, are both terms that “overvalue the male at the expense of the female” (Matossian 1-2). These terms mean “too feminine” and “not masculine enough” respectively, and according to Gilman there is never such a thing as “too masculine” in Western society. Even, it would seem, in the case of the Herlanders. The Americans describe the women as “not womanly”, but not as “manly”, boy-ish yes but never man-ish. Linguistically, Gilman dipped her toe in a couple of fields. She studied elocution (a style of speaking dedicated to clarity and accurate pronunciation) when she was younger and involved as a public speaker, and she “dreamed of a common language, established by women for the sake of a peaceful world”, which is striking when thinking about the language she created for *Herland* (Matossian 2). As the Americans spend more time in Herland they learn the language, which Van describes as easy to speak and pleasant to hear. This is a very “feminized” way of describing a language.

Since the language surrounding Herland and its population is feminized, Gilman also makes it clear that Herland's own language is not male centered like English and many other languages are, which is a significant finding when attempting to view *Herland* as a feminist utopia and seeing the flaws in Gilman's work that make it exclusionary. The language of Herland does not use "masculine generics" and Gilman implies that it is a language that evolved with "'scientific' rationality", meaning that she sees this language as one that makes sense for this society she has created, in that it is realistic that Herlanders would speak in this way (Matossian 2). Herland's language doesn't use "man" as the default descriptor for all of humanity, but rather uses "man" in the same way that English uses "woman", as a description of gender. This makes sense as far as the evolution of language is concerned, a land of women wouldn't develop a language that uses masculine generics. There are also words that the Americans introduce to the women of Herland that don't have direct translations into their own language, and are concepts that are hard for them to understand. The word "virgin" is one of the biggest examples of this, the Herlanders have no concept of what a virgin is, and when the men explain it to them (that it is a term used specifically to describe women, usually not men, who have never had sex and are therefore more valuable to society than a woman who has had sex), they are dumbfounded. "Wife" and "family" are two other important examples of this, as well as the concept of last names, which the Herlanders do not have and take issue with when they are introduced to the concept.

Expressing Herland's aversion to masculine generics and a woman's right to her own name is another way that Gilman exhibits feminist forms of thinking in *Herland*. The Americans have to explain to the women how last names work in America – with the woman taking the name of the man when they get married, and thus giving up her own name (or rather her father's, which was given to her at birth). The women of Herland don't have last names, and they find the concept

troubling. They see it as an infringement on the woman's rights – she has to give up her own name, which wasn't even hers to begin with, and replace it with someone else's. It erases her individuality as a person. This way of thinking is closely tied to third wave feminist modes of thought, which would propose that if a woman were to change her last name for marriage it should be her choice rather than her obligation. This is an interesting contrast to Gilman's usually second wave leaning ideas that she was writing about during first wave feminism. Matossian notes that Gilman concludes that the assumption behind this naming convention is that the man is more honorable than the woman in a relationship, and therefore his name should be associated with their family. Historically, women changing their names has been tied closely to class and race as well as gender, which is something that Gilman never addresses in her writing, again, moving back into her typically first/second wave lines of thinking rather than intersectional/third wave.

Many lower class women were (and are) unable to change their last names even if it is something they desire, because of the cost associated with doing so. In this way, taking a man's last name is a middle to upper class feminist issue – one that Gilman herself would have faced when she was married. She did keep her maiden name alongside her married name, at least as a pen name, which may speak to the feelings she had for the practice. Alternatively, Black women in America may have seen taking their husband's last name as a positive aspect of marriage, considering that Jim Crow era and earlier laws often kept them from marrying certain people, or marrying at all. Changing their last names could have been viewed as a rite of passage that they were only recently allowed to participate in legally.

The American men have never thought of last names in this light, until the Herlanders point out the inherent sexism in the patrilineal system. The language of Herland's people illustrates both a pro-woman attitude in that Gilman is making her readers question things that they (like the

American men) had never thought to question before, and the tight bond of community between the women in that the Herlanders are indignant on behalf of a group of women that don't even belong to their community but are still important to them.

Nevertheless, Gilman also uses language in a way that exhibits her problematic beliefs, namely on race. Matossian notes that "Gilman had a great deal to say about women's names", publishing numerous pieces of fiction and non-fiction that discuss the subject (Matossian 4). The first and most drastic of these pieces is noted as one of the strongest cases against women changing their last names after marriage from the nineteenth century. In this essay, Gilman compares "the situation of married women to that of slaves assigned the name of a master" (Matossian 4). This sentiment illustrates Gilman's lack of nuanced understanding of the struggles of African Americans as compared to those of white middle class women like herself. This false equation of marriage to slavery was not uncommon in early feminist arguments seeking women's liberation, but they were nonetheless misplaced. While the message that women should be respected in marriage and allowed to maintain a level of individuality is a good one, illustrations of this point through false comparisons between gender and race issues come from a place of severe misunderstanding on Gilman's part. This is reflected in *Herland* as well. So much so that it leads a modern reader to question if *Herland* should be categorized as a utopia at all, or rather as a dystopia.

In line with this racist manner of thinking in regards to marriage, there are aspects of Gilman's novel that offer contradicting messages about what utopia should look like. One aspect of *Herland* that contradicts some of Gilman's more progressive and feminist ideas is the fact that the narrator, and three main characters, are all men. In *Three Men in Herland*, Georgia Johnston discusses Van, Jeff, and Terry as characters that "penetrate the confines of a women's utopia" as

the only significant male presences in the story (Johnston 55). Gilman heavily emphasizes the binary opposition between these men and the women of Herland. According to Johnston, “women narrators were as frequently chosen as male narrators by women writing female eutopics” in the early phases of the genre, so Gilman could have used a woman as the narrator without raising any questions (Johnston 57). Yet, she chose to have a male narrator and tell the story through the male gaze of Van, which perpetuates the problems Gilman seems to be attempting to address in the first place. According to Johnston, because the men were from a society that likely mirrored the reader’s own society, the reader is automatically on the same page as the men so to speak. They start with the same level of knowledge. Gilman uses a “utopian voice to embody her view of feminism as a philosophy of growth” and to posit “the full humanity of women as subjects, not objects, in the world”, and yet she frames these women directly through the male gaze (Bartkowski 24). This could be because Gilman may have imagined a mostly male audience for *Herland* when writing. On the other hand, it is also possible that Gilman was writing her male protagonists as a form of satire for her female readers to laugh at. If this were the case, the men’s discomfort with Herland and its people could be read as a way to make fun of the fragility of masculinity rather than a sympathetic portrayal of three men who were out of their element.

Satirical or not, the male gaze is a prominent aspect of the storytelling in *Herland*. The narrator of the story, Van Jennings, is a white American man. The women of Herland are described through his perspective, and therefore the only view the audience gets of this proto-feminist society is that of a man from a patriarchal society. From a man’s perspective, Herland wouldn’t be utopic, and might even be considered dystopic, since there are no men living there at all. Van recounts his team’s travels in a journal upon returning home after their months long journey, and thus he would be considered an unreliable narrator, adding another layer of dissonance to his interpretation of

Herland. Second wave Western feminism moved to “reject the masculinist or phallogentric orientation” of the “advanced capitalist societies of Western Europe” that Herland is so heavily based in (Bartkowski 25). By framing the entire story through Van’s eyes, Gilman is still embracing this masculinist orientation. Even in a story about a land free of men, there has to be men present. This could be for a number of reasons: to give the male readers of *The Forerunner* a set of characters they could relate to, and as previously stated, that they could put themselves in the place of when imagining Herland. Or to give female readers male characters they could laugh at. The men are captured and subdued by the women multiple times, which is embarrassing for them and intended to be viewed as such by the audience – yet another example of Gilman’s bipartisan stance on how women should be viewed in her novel.

There is also the idea that “Herland” is a name created by the visitors rather than the women actually inhabiting the place. Johnston notes that Van’s notes suggest that “the land is not so much hers as *her*, a corporeal personification of the female” meaning that the land is not so much belonging to the women, as it is a woman itself (Johnston 58). When Van, Jeff, and Terry first begin their search for Herland, they call it “Woman Land”, “Feminista”, and “Ladyland” as well before landing on Herland (Gilman 4, 9, 12). They don’t know what the women that inhabit the country call it, and once they arrive and even begin to learn the language they don’t change the name to comply with what the women have named their own country. They continue to call it Herland, or at least Van’s record only refers to it has Herland. Johnston’s point is that the men are personifying the country itself as a woman, feminizing the very landscape where the story takes place, and thereby exemplifying the men’s sexist biases against the local women. This ties to Gilman’s exclusionary feminism in that Gilman paints Herland as an ideal place for women. With

no men to harm them or control them, their society functions better than most, and the sense of community is overwhelming. It seems ideal.

Conversely, it is also a land that is heavily reliant on the racist structure that Gilman has built. Herland as a country is coded as South American, but Van, the narrator of the book, specifically describes the people as “Aryan”. He says “they were ‘white’, but somewhat darker than our northern races because of their constant exposure to sun and air” and they had once been in contact with “the best civilization in the world”, assumed here to mean Europe (Gilman 55). This is not an accidental inclusion on Gilman’s part, but is rather reflective of some of her racist and white-nationalist views. Herland’s society is considered “civilized” compared to the neighboring countries because it is highly Westernized. Van even remarks that Herland is more advanced than some American and European cities he has traveled to, these being the standard for civilization. According to Van, in Herland the roads were “some sort of hard manufactured stuff, sloped slightly to shed rain, with every curve and grade and gutter as perfect as if it were Europe’s best” (Gilman 20). These paved roads are significant to Van because they prove that the people in this country are “intelligent” enough to have engineered their cities to be functional. Based on Herland’s implied location in South America, Van’s preconceived notions that the people there would be unintelligent or uncivilized could be based in racism as well as the sexism that comes with assuming a land of women couldn’t be those things. Van also notes that Herland has a well-established social structure and its own unique culture. A culture that is quite different from North America in the early twentieth century, in part because it is populated entirely by women, and yet still similar enough to be considered “civilized”. This furthers the idea that *Herland* can be read as both a utopia and a dystopia in that it illustrates that Gilman’s vision is ideal, but only for certain people, namely white middle class women. Herland is entirely populated by white middle class

women. There is no poverty, which makes sense for a utopian society, but there is also very little diversity.

Gilman focuses so intently on emphasizing white women's competencies that she neglects and even harms other groups in the process of making her own look superior. Judith Lorber writes in her article, "A World Without Gender", about feminist ideas on a genderless future. Lorber proposes that gender is an entirely social (rather than biological) division between "men" and "women" that is so "deeply embedded" in the fabric of most societies, it controls our lives (Lorber 402). She goes on to say that while the differences between these two groups and the dominance of men is "hard to justify in modern Western societies", the distinction continues to exist (Lorber 402). Lorber argues that feminists lost sight of the important goal of dismantling gender structures so that there can be true equality when they instead chose to focus on skewing the perceived differences between men and women into a positive light, valorizing the differences. Gilman does this with *Herland*. She valorizes the traits that these women have (feminine and masculine) when comparing them to the American men, or even women outside of Herland. In a utopian context, it would make sense to create a society free from gender at all, but Gilman chooses to emphasize womanhood, and make it something more than Western society viewed it to be. Lorber notes how "many feminists have implicitly called for a gender-free society by urging the minimization of the effects of gender, to the point of gender's practical disappearance", but Gilman seems to be calling for a one-gender society instead (Lorber 405). Yet another example of how Gilman's brand of exclusionary feminism diminishes diversity in attempts to make an "ideal" society.

Historically, especially in regards to the Classical Period, women and young boys were often lumped into a similar category of "underdeveloped men". A boy was seen as someone who would grow into a man, and therefore would eventually be a full class citizen. Whereas a woman

would never grow into a man, and was therefore simply lacking the most important component to citizenship. This sexist view persisted well into Gilman's time, and in some ways still exists today in that women are often viewed as second class citizens because they are not men. Robin Silbergleid writes in her article, *Women, Utopia, and Narrative: Toward a Postmodern Feminist Citizenship*, about the feminist reconstruction of citizenship and patriarchies. In the article, Silbergleid writes that feminist utopian novels "reconstruct citizenship" by challenging ideological reliance on a "sexual contract and the family romance narrative" (Silbergleid 156). This "sexual contract" follows the heteronormative path to family, and thereby citizenship for women. Women are expected to grow up, get married to a man, have babies, and then they can be accepted as citizens, still below men, but citizens nonetheless. This is a gendered vision of citizenship, and is meant to perpetuate "middle-class values". Silbergleid notes that "feminist revisionary work on citizenship has done little to move beyond such assumptions" (157). While feminist arguments point out the flaws in this patriarchal vision of citizenship and propose solutions, they "ultimately remained trapped within the sex-gender system enabled by romance narratives and the logic of the sexual contract" (Silbergleid 157). There is a "logical leap from heterosexual love to economic prosperity to democratic progress" in this accepted in Western patriarchal societies (159). *Herland* offers a different form of citizenship. In a land without men, heterosexual marriage cannot be the defining feature of what makes a woman a citizen. And yet, Gilman still falls back on patriarchal tropes. *Herland's* societal structure resembles that of a traditional patriarchy. The women in positions of power still hold typically "masculine" qualities that qualify them to lead. Is it possible that Gilman was suggesting a spectrum of femininity more akin to a modern understanding of gender?

As a female writer in the early 1900s, Gilman herself would have stood as a threat to the cult of domesticity and been a kick in the face to traditional feminine roles that would have held her back from pursuing a career in writing and activism. Perhaps Gilman was proposing that not only femininity, but womanhood itself is a spectrum, rather than the strict binary that her society emphasized so heavily. This would coincide with modern third wave feminist concepts about spectrums of identity, which reject the idea that “man” and “woman” or “male” and “female” are simply opposite ends of a binary and that humanity is limited to only these two expressions of gender. If this were true, it would be another example of the ways in which Gilman’s writing would have been ahead of her time, and probably considered feminist. And yet, the glaring aspects of bigotry still have a place in her works as well.

It would be easy to simply accept that *Herland* exhibits Gilman’s problematic views of society because of the time she lived and wrote in, or to write it off entirely because of this fact, but it is important to view and analyze these beliefs through a modern intersectional feminist lens in order to learn from the mistakes of the past and grow as a society. Carol Farley Kessler’s book, *Charlotte Perkins Gilman: Her Progress Toward Utopia*, makes some noteworthy points about Gilman’s utopia, and about utopia as a broader concept. Kessler argues that utopia can be defined as “a fictionalized society in the process of becoming better, though not perfect” and that “such fictions are guides towards, not blueprints for, utopia” (Kessler 7). This concept of utopian fiction as a guide toward, rather than a blueprint for, an ideal society adds an interesting perspective to the commentary surrounding *Herland*. As Michèle Riot-Sarcey addresses in “The Reality of Utopia”, the reality of utopia is found “when possible reforms are concretely envisioned”, meaning that, as Kessler said, utopia is a vision for what the future could be, not necessarily a guideline of how to get there. When acknowledging these racist, sexist, and classist aspects of *Herland* is it

truly accurate to call Gilman's *Herland* a "utopia"? The ideas she presents are frankly dystopic to some audiences. Could *Herland* more easily be classified as a dystopia when reading from a modern perspective?

Kessler also argues that Gilman's work leading up to *Herland* points to the idea that *Herland* was designed to "reveal a world of possibilities and potentials available to women as a sex, rather than to present a sex-separatist society as a final utopian solution" (Kessler 69). So, according to Kessler, Gilman was not necessarily proposing that a world free of men would be superior, but was rather showing what women could be without the patriarchy looming overhead. This argument doesn't hold up with a modern reading of *Herland* because of Gilman's reliance on traditional patriarchal standards.

It is true that *Herland* is a touchstone for feminist writing that came after it, and that it is a pioneering piece of literature in the sci fi genre. At the time it was written, *Herland* broke a lot of barriers, and even regained relevance in the height of second wave feminism because of some of Gilman's forward thinking propositions of what a better future might look like for women. However, Gilman's problematic views need to be addressed when studying *Herland*. Simply placing this novel on a pedestal and ignoring the racism, sexism, classism, and nationalism does nothing to help a modern audience learn from the mistakes of the past.

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