

A Feminist Reading of Herland by Charlotte Perkins Gilman

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Abstract

Charlotte Perkins Gilman is one of the representative feminist writers in the United States. Her novel *Herland* constructs a utopian society for women and breaks binary opposition between men and women. This thesis analyzes from two different perspectives -- space and environment, and ideology in a woman-dominated country to reveal the ability of females' deconstruction of dualism and reconstruction of equality rebuild between people and nature, and between men and women with subjectivity and agency of women. On the other hand, by comparing patriarchal ideology in reality and feministic thoughts in *Herland*, this thesis also aims to reveal the advancement in this feminist utopia, thus indicating the practical significance of the novel as a social criticism by creating a female dominated utopia to explore the ways to solve the various social problems in patriarchal United States.

Keywords

Charlotte Perkins Gilman; *Herland*; Feminism; Ideology; Utopia.

1. Introduction

1.1. A Brief Introduction to Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Her Works

Charlotte Perkins Gilman was an influential feminist and theorist who argued for societal reform and women's rights through her writings. She was a noted writer, lecturer, economist and theorist who fought for women's domestic rights and women's suffrage in the early 1900s. She is also a publisher who led the First Wave Feminism in the United States. She is best known for her short story "The Yellow Wall-Paper," a work in terms of feminist and gender studies. This story is reflective of Gilman's own struggles with postpartum depression, the "rest cure" prescribed by her doctor, and the trapped feelings she had in her marriage and motherhood.

From 1909 to 1916, Gilman was the sole writer and editor of her own magazine, *The Forerunner*, where she published countless stories and articles. She wrote articles that were intended to spark thought and hope. Over the course of seven years, she produced 86 issues and gained around 1,500 subscribers who were fans of the works appearing often in serialized form in the magazine, including the utopian writings *Moving the Mountain*, *Herland*, and *Ourland*. Many of the works she published during this time depicted the feminist improvements to society that she advocated, with women taking on leadership. She depicted the stereotypically female qualities as positive ones, but not objects of scorn. These works also largely advocated for women working outside the home and for the sharing of domestic tasks equally between husbands and wives.

Herland as a utopian novel, is a witty critique of life in the United States at the time where Gilman lived. The story concentrates on three men – Van, Jeff, and Terry – who discover a small uncharted country called *Herland* which, by force of natural disaster, has been governed and populated for two thousand years solely by women. They evolved with the ability of parthenogenesis to reproduction. The narrator Van recounts his easy capture, humane imprisonment and gentle indoctrination to the language, culture, history, laws, and education system in *Herland*'s all-female society. Van's detailed memoir relies on the lessons taught to

him and his male friends by three middle-aged female tutors, his firsthand observations and personal reflections, and the results of his readings from Herland's libraries. Through his depiction, readers can learn many detailed information about this country. For instance, Herland is a country with highly efficient, scientifically balanced agricultural economy. It is a pacific, highly cultivated and rationally ordered society molded by women who value motherhood, and happiness and welfare of their children. After one-year living in Herland, the three men Van, Jeff and Terry fall in love with three girls they met at the first day landing the country – Ellador, Celis, and Alima. The different values in Herland and Ourland lead to contradictions between the three couples. Jeff is the first to adapt Herland's values. Van, unlike Terry, who never comprehends his chauvinism and its inherent destructiveness, finds his social consciousness raised through his discussions with Ellador. He is increasingly embarrassed by the massive shortcoming of the male-dominated culture he represents. Gilman thought her novel failed as literary experiments. Instead, as a pedagogical device, Herland is an engaging, persuasive and highly effective effort. Gilman compares the hypothetical women-centered society to the harsh realities and crushing inequalities of everyday life found pervasively in male-dominated society. Through the exposition of Herland's ideas about economics, education, clothing, prisons, parenting, male-female relationships, human evolution, species conservation and breeding, and social organization, Gilman points a way to solve problems in modern American life.

1.2. Literature Review

Gilman has gone through a period of "rediscovery" and "classicization" in literary criticism. "The Yellow Wallpaper" is so important work of Gilman that it cannot be omitted from the Anthology of American Literature. In China, although the study of Gilman has started in the 1980s, Gilman still be driven out of the classical list of literature textbook written in China. In China Gilman's research is still in "The Yellow Wallpaper" and Herland, while foreign research on Gilman has spread to more works such as his utopian novels, sociological works, biographies and so on.

Herland is one of Gilman's utopian works. Gilman's utopian novels did not attract the attention of domestic researchers until the end of the 20th century. Until now, there are only a few journal articles on Gilman's utopian novels in China, and all of them only involve Herland and there appears only a few comparative studies between Herland and other Chinese novels, such as Journey to the West and The Marriage of Flowers in the Mirror (Chen, 96). Zeng Gui'e has researched on Gilman's utopian works from in terms of dress, architecture, environment, motherhood and other aspects of Gilman's utopian works (Zeng, 321).

In looking at Gilman's works, gender theory is the most commonly used theory of criticism by scholars both at home and abroad. At the same time, the combination of gender theory, utopian theory, psychoanalysis theory, narrative theory, cultural research and sociology have greatly expanded the research fields. As Gilman's own research field is very extensive, involving not only literature but also economics, sociology and many other fields, foreign research on Gilman is relatively divergent. Researchers not only explore the literariness, but also deeply discuss the thoughts on economics, sociology and even architecture contained in her works (Zeng 322).

Body politics in Gilman's works is a common concern in feminist studies. Gilman's extensive use of metaphors such as disease and infection aim to show that the traditional marriage lowers the status of women and that unhealthy body politics can only lead to the physical and psychological incompleteness of individuals (Beer, 54-67). Vertinsky discusses the relationship between feminism and body culture in Gilman's works and points out that Gilman takes body autonomy as a strategy to realize women's liberation with a vision ahead of times (Vertinsky, 55-72). Geng discussed eco-feminist approach to Herland, as ecofeminism opposed to

anthropocentrism, male centrism, and male coercion of women and nature in patriarchal society. It is a significant expansion to feminist theory (Geng, 314).

At the same time, Gilman's works have been deeply explored in more fields, such as narratology, phenomenology, and Foucault's disciplinary theory etc. (Zeng, 323).

Gilman's views on economics and sociology have also been valued by researchers. Schonpflug discusses the division of labor and economic efficiency and argues that Gilman successfully fused feminist economics with utopia (Schonpflug, 107). There are other researches from the perspectives of eugenics, socialist ideology and architecture (Zeng, 323).

Despite of external research, there are internal research focusing on literariness itself. Qi Tao explores the nostalgia theory and utopian theory in *Herland* and *Ourland* by comparative study. By analysis of Gilman's personal experience, Qi concludes that the reason why Gilman wrote utopian stories lies in that she could not construct a spiritual home close to the reality and could only escape into the illusory utopia to seek spiritual shelter (Qi, 22). And Lu Xiaochuan interpreted the *Herland* from the perspective of space theory (Lu, 32).

Intertextuality interpretation and comparative study will continue to be a one of the most important research areas of Gilman's works. The comparative literature research of Gilman's works can be divided into two major categories. One is the comparison between western literature text and the other is studies between western and eastern text (Zeng, 324). Liu Ying makes the comparison among the women in three different feminist utopian novels, coming to the conclusion that humanistic care and ecological care are the main motifs in feminist utopian novels (Liu, 38). Meanwhile, Gilman's relationship with the West is getting more and more scholars' attention (Zeng, 325).

Although there have been previous feminist studies on *Herland*, they are mostly generalized, lacking textual analysis of the environment and space, and ideology of *Herland*, and also ignore the role that three men play in the text and the patriarchal society represented by them. This thesis will analyze *Herland* from two aspects – spatial environment and ideology. By comparing patriarchal ideology in reality and feministic thoughts in *Herland*, this thesis aims to reveal the advancement in this feminist utopia, thus indicating the practical significance of the novel as a social criticism by creating a female dominated utopia to explore the ways to solve the various social problems in patriarchal United States.

2. Space and Environment in *Herland*

2.1. Living Environment

Ecofeminist Karen Warren pointed out that there is a close relationship between the conquest of nature and the oppression of women (Liu, 40). Both nature and women are the victims under patriarchal society, as patriarchy roots in the dualistic epistemology. Man and woman, human and nature, sense and sensibility, civilized and uncivilized, are all opposite pairs in dualistic views. Men's dominance over women and men's dominance over nature are relationship between men and women, and human and nature are based on the same patriarchal framework. Therefore, ecological crisis is deeply rooted in the patriarchal tradition. In a male-centered society, the fundamental motivation lies in men constantly seeking for more benefits. During this process, it is inevitably that the pursuit of economic interests is at the cost of polluting their own living environment.

In Gilman's utopia *Herland*, she depicts an ecologically livable city, entirely different from the 20th century American. Before entering the country, the three men Van, Jeff and Terry are astonished by the ecological environment in *Herland* – “the land itself... appeared to be well forested about the edges, but in the interior, there were wide plains, and everywhere parklike meadows and open places” (Gilman, 12). It is “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).

Van, before visiting Herland, believes that architectures are man-made mess in nature. In Ourland, houses made of steel and reinforced concrete destroy the harmonious beauty of nature. Industrial products and urbanization keep people away from nature. However, in Herland, women build an ecocity. All building materials are from nature: "It was built mostly of a sort of dull rose-colored stone, with here and there some clear white houses. (Gilman, 20)." The city planning takes into consideration not only eco-friendly elements, but also aesthetic values, truly achieving the aesthetic unity of man-made architecture and nature, as "it lay abroad among the green groves and gardens like a broken rosary of pink coral (Gilman, 20)."

By constructing an ecological utopian in Herland, Gilman expresses sharp criticism against men's self-expression in living environment and masculine characteristics in profit-seeking and over-exploitation. Gilman's time witnesses a booming period of American industrialization, when factories spring out like mushrooms. Modern science arms men with new instrument to exploit nature. The men dominated Industrial Revolution in America accelerates mass production and promotes consumerism, thus exhausting natural resources at an alarming degree. Rationality, self-benefit and pursuit of maximum interest are the major features of an "economic person" that are criticized by both D.H. Lawrence and Gilman who notice the devastating power of masculinity in lack of women engaging in managing environment and resources in patriarchal society.

Opposite to patriarchal America, in Herland, women and nature are not dualistic but interdependent. Women there believe that human beings are part of nature and science and technology is used to make their living place cleaner and better. For example, they successfully cultivate a kind of tree that both looks beautiful and produces nutritious fruit. By creating a highly idealized feminine utopia, Gilman shows to her readers the feminine power of protection, sustainability and reconstruction.

2.2. Housing

House as sites of cultural and political power control people's body and reconstruct power relation. Ian Woodward emphasizes that objects have a type of power over us in *Understanding Material Culture* (Woodward, vi). By studying the relationship between house and women, we can better understand the social structure and gender inequality between men and women in American society.

Conventional houses in Gilman's time are the main site for gender oppression. While men go out to work, women without occupation and incomes are stuck in the private space owned by their fathers, brothers or husbands, trapped in endless housework all their life. The machine production brings by Industrial Revolution intensifies the social division of labor, further pushing women into domestic life. There is no longer husband and wife as economic partners in a house. instead, the society is divided into two separate parts: men is outside and women inside the house. Such division of labor puts women in a disadvantaged position where either she cannot achieve her values or her values are underestimated. In Herland, three men from American all link "home" with "women". Their patriarchal idea soon conflicts with their girlfriends in Herland: "The more external disagreement was in the matter of 'the home', and the housekeeping duties and pleasures we, by instinct and long education, supposed to be inherently appropriate to women. (Gilman, 121)".

As objects have power over ideology, to thoroughly break out such patriarchal idea, women need to build houses according to their own needs. Houses created by Gilman in Herland not only free women from endless and trivial housework, but also help women to establish communication with each other and help them to achieve self-development outside home. Everyone in Herland has a detached houses to live in since they are born. "They had, every one

of them, the "two rooms and a bath" theory realized. From earliest childhood each had a separate bedroom with toilet conveniences, and one of the marks of coming of age was the addition of an outer room in which to receive friends. (Gilman, 123-124)" Even after the Alima, Celis and Ellador marry to the three men from America, husbands and wives still live in separate houses.

Another interesting setting of houses in Herland is that they do not have kitchen and women need not to cook. When they need for food, they go to any convenient eating-house, or have a takeaway. Meanwhile, nurseries are built where all kids above two years old are sent there for co-mothers to educate and take care of. The houses and gardens planned for babies never hurt them – no stairs, no corners, no small loose objects to swallow, no fire – just a babies' paradise (Gilman, 108). In this way, houses are no longer isolated and every one can share facilities for dining, child care, and entertainment. The common facilities fulfill a crucial function to women's liberation from heavy household duties.

2.3. Plant and Animal Breeding

Contrary to traditional view that women are not good at science and technology, women in Herland show their highly developed agriculture and breeding. Gilman's Herland has a totally different way of plant and animal breeding with the real world. In order to feed a large population with a limited land, they fully take advantage of their forest and mighty garden to meet the needs for food supply. They very soon eliminated all the grazing cattle, and work out "a system of intensive agriculture" "with the very forests all reset fruit- or nut- bearing trees" (Gilman, 69).

Unlike the patriarchal world three men come from, Herland solve the problem of "the pressure of population" by crop amelioration and birth control, but neither by "struggle for existence", nor by predatory invasion. They choose to implement plans to improve agriculture that may cover centuries. They deliberately replant an entire forest area with different kinds of trees. Trees are classified by use "food-bearing", and "hard-wood" (Gilman, 15). Now every tree bore fruit – edible fruit. "That trees were the best food plants, they had early decided, requiring far less labor in tilling the soil, and bearing a larger amount of food for the same ground space; also doing much to preserve and enrich the soil" (Gilman, 80). They also plant seasonable crops, thus their fruit and nuts, grains and berries, kept on almost the year through. They also take advantage of geographical features to plant different fruits. As for their scheme of fertilization, "these careful culturists had worked out a perfect scheme of refeeding the soil with all that came out of it. All the scraps and leavings of their food, plant waste from lumber work or textile industry, all the solid matter from the sewage, properly treated and combined-everything which came from the earth went back to it. (Gilman, 80)".

People in Herland not only cultivate plants but also animals. There are no traditionally cultivated animals in Darwinian evolution in Herland, like cows, cattle, horses and dogs. Instead, they breed cats into mute ones that cease to kill birds, but rigorously breed to destroy mice and moles and all such enemies of the food supply" (Gilman, 51). Cats in Herland serve as an indispensable part in their economics and society. The horticultural writer John Lindley argued in 1831 that "there are two great considerations" in contemporary horticulture, "amelioration and propagation. (Bowden, 2019)" Therefore, even though women in Herland try to give their cats as much freedom as possible. Breeding itself is to better suit human needs and desires, thus violating the equality between human beings and other species. It can be regard as a limitation in Gilman's feminist theory.

3. Ideology in a Female-Dominated Society

3.1. Parthenogenesis

In a patriarchal society, motherhood is considered as a natural attribute of woman. Men who take control of authority of discourse shape an ideology that treat biology as fundamental and play down socialization to keep women in their place (Selden, 128). The old Latin saying "Women is nothing but a womb" establish this attitude early. If a women's body is her only value, then all attempts to question attributed sex-roles will disappear in the face of the natural order. For years women are under control by this biological determinism.

Besides of the biological difference between male and female, women are not allowed to use birth control and play a negative part in both sex and maternity. Under such circumstances, feminists seek for ways to allow women take control of their own body. At the early stage, Virginia Woolf appropriated the Bloomsbury sexual ethic of "androgyny", hoping to achieve a balance between a "male" self-realization and "female" self-annihilation (Selden, 125). However, Woolf's thought is considered as a passive withdrawal from the conflict of male and female sexuality. After that, radical feminists advocate a biological revolution through science and technology to eliminate the physiological differences between men and women. A woman can use technology, such as artificial insemination, in vitro fertilization, and embryo transplant to separate childbearing from marriage and heterosexuality. Therefore, motherhood is no longer women's born duty, but something socialized.

In Herland, Gilman makes an even bolder decision to exclude male from the process of reproduction. The parthenogenesis or asexual reproduction deconstructs the dualistic opposition between men and women in reproductive responsibilities fundamentally, thus enabling women gain full control of their own body. Gilman describes how those women use birth control to limit population according to their will:

"You see, before a child comes to one of us there is a period of utter exaltation-the whole being is uplifted and filled with a concentrated desire for that child. We learned to look forward to that period with the greatest caution. Often our young women, those to whom motherhood had not yet come, would voluntarily defer it. When that deep inner demand for a child began to be felt she would deliberately engage in the most active work, physical and mental; and even more important, would solace her longing by the direct care and service of the babies we already had. (Gilman, 71)".

Women choose to devote themselves into work to fight against their biological impulse of being a mother. This can be seen as a satirical metaphor indicating the confliction between motherhood and individual achievements still exist even in asexual reproduction. The only way to raise the value of motherhood the same as that of work is to assign social value to it. In Herland, motherhood is "the highest Social Service", and even "a Sacrament" (Gilman,70). Being able to bear more than one child is "the very highest reward and honor in the power of the State (70)". Those who do not have children of their own will "feed her heart with other babies" (70). Herland was written under the influence of first-wave feminism. Therefore, the women in Herland seem lack sexual desire, and they reproduce by parthenogenesis (Liu,39). They live a life of abstinence and celibacy, and have no idea of "sex-love" (Gilman, 89). "To them the one high purpose of Motherhood had been for so long the governing law of life, and the contribution of the father, though known to them, so distinctly another method to the same end, that they could not, with all their effort, get the point of view of the male creature whose desires quite ignore parentage and seek only for what we euphoniously term 'the joys of love'. (Gilman, 135-136)".

3.2. “Social Motherhood”

Gilman’s ideas of raising children originates from her own experience as a mother. She found it increasingly difficult to combine her work with responsibility as a mother. In Gilman’s time when mothers are not allowed to separate with children, Gilman relinquished custody of her daughter to her divorced husband, thus was criticized as a “unnatural mother” (Fokkema, 266). In the utopian novel *Herland*, Gilman are able to construct an idealized world and crystalize her ideas about raising children into the notion of “social motherhood”. “It implies that child-professionals would be involved in the raising and education of children, and also that some mothers would take care of not only of their own children but also those of others” (Fokkema, 266). With this “social motherhood”, women are freed from taking care of children and able to take part in social production and gain economic independence.

In *Herland*, “maternity” (Gilman, 83), which means to bear a child, belongs to everyone. It is a biological quality of being a mother. However, there is also “motherhood”, which is a social responsibility and their “highest art” (83). Therefore, not everyone has the ability to take the heavy responsibility of motherhood. For example, when it comes to breeding out the “criminal”, girls with bad qualities have the right to have children, but will be persuaded to “renounce motherhood” (83). They believe the bad qualities are not inherited but are acquired learning. They take education as important as reproduction. “Child-rearing” has come to be with them “a culture so profoundly studied, practiced with such subtlety and skill. (84)” The more they love their children, the more they are willing to trust the skilled child-professionals. With child-rearing transferred into a profession, women in *Herland* have time and energy to do every kind of work they are strengthened in, from security guards, “farmers and gardeners”, to “spinners and weavers”, “carpenters and masons”, architectures and teachers (68). The theory of “social motherhood” proves that women are as capable as men in all careers when they get rid of housework and motherhood. In this way, *Herland* breaks the natural link between women and motherhood.

3.3. From “Women” to “People”

Women in *Herland* highly value the concept of “People”. No matter women or children, attribute of “People” always stands before their biological attributes. In a society where men and women are equal, women choose to de-feminized themselves as long as they do not need femaleness to attract men. However, withdrawal of femininity does not mean they choose to learn from masculinity. Just like their parthenogenetic reproduction, people in *Herland* are also asexual: “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)”. By reconstructing a new gender cognition, Gilman deconstruct the dualistic opposition between men and women.

In *Herland*, Van describes the wide world of men:

“When we say men, man, manly, manhood, and all the other masculine derivatives, we have in the background of our minds a huge vague crowded picture of the world and all its activities. To grow up and “be a man,” to “act like a man”-the meaning and connotation is wide indeed. That vast background is full of marching columns of men, of changing lines of men, of long processions of men; of men steering their ships into new seas, exploring unknown mountains, breaking horses, herding cattle, ploughing and sowing and reaping, toiling at the forge and furnace, digging in the mine, building roads and bridges and high cathedrals, managing great businesses, teaching in all the colleges, preaching in all the churches; of men everywhere, doing everything – ‘the world’. (Gilman, 135)”

But when men think of “Women, we think Female -- the sex” (Gilman, 135). However, in *Herland*, women are not seen as females but as people; “people of all sorts, doing every kind of work (135)”. They are “merely athletic, light, and powerful” (Gilman, 24), and they are intelligent,

rational and talented. In Herland where no men exist, women are no longer “the Other” but people independence and agency. The cultivation they have created makes Van suspect: “those ‘feminine charms’ we were so fond of are not feminine at all, but mere reflected masculinity-developed to please us because they had to please us, and in no way essential to the real fulfillment of their great process. (Gilman, 60)”.

Not only women are seen as people, child from the very beginning of her life is first regarded as an independent person. “No Herland child ever met the overbearing rudeness we so commonly show to children. They were People, too, from the first; the most precious part of the nation. (Gilman, 101)” They are helped to develop several professional skills and have their life target from childhood years.

Moreover, the way of naming also reflects the author's attempt to break the binary opposition of men and women. There is no surname or family name for children or for married women; instead, they have their own names that might even change according to their different characteristics as they grow older. However, for the chauvinistic Terry, surname is a sign of possession. The relationship between father and children, and between man and woman is the relationship of subject and object. Woman is the possession belonging to father and husband, and child is the private property of parents. Naming has power over the being named. Therefore, the vanishing of family names implies the collapse of patriarchy.

4. Conclusion

This thesis analyzes Gilman’s feminist ideas in Herland from two different perspectives. First, by analysis of space and environment in Herland, we can see Gilman shows female’s brilliant talent and in rebuilding the balance between man and nature, ecology and science and technology, thus bring vitality to the circulation of material in the natural world. Second, by analysis of ideology and special social roles women plays in Herland, we can realize the identity of women, who are first People and then Women. Gilman also create a society where women are able to achieve motherhood and sisterhood without the losing the subjectivity and agency of women.

What is more important is that the genre of utopian novel, by constructing a female utopia, deal the patriarchal society a head-on blow, as a female-dominated country can have a civilization as high as that in a patriarchal country, and even do better in ecology, education and peacekeeping while taking into account the development of economic civilization. With the help of imagination, feminist utopian novelists create a spiritual home for women and human beings in their novels, and a world with completely different and independent logic and rules. They help the challenge of women to male discourse hegemony in their own peculiar way.

However, the limitations of this novel should not be neglected. Professor Ding Naifei argues in “A Land Where Cats Do Not Sing: Herland in Taiwan” that in a vision of female-dominated country, there is an astonishing cultural, racial, and sexual prejudice (Ding, 324-343). She believes that this novel describes white women with assets, civilization and social and economic status in the early 20th century. When the novel does contribute to social construction of gender, it does not reflect on class and race, but conspire with them. Meanwhile, celibacy is another characteristic of Herland, where women are sisters or friends, but there is no homoeroticism. Instead of personal pleasure, greatness and sacredness of motherhood is emphasized. Herland’s ignoring the unique characteristics of women and encouraging women to be asexual indicates their inability to face their own sexuality, which is somehow another self-underestimation. This is closely related to the ideas of the first wave feminism and is further developed and improved in the second wave feminism.

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