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Herland, by Charlotte Perkins Gilman

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HERLAND

Author: Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860-1935)

Type of work: Novel

Type of plot: Social criticism

Time of plot: 1914-1915

Locale: Herland, a remote and uncharted country populated entirely by women

First published: 1915 (serial), 1979 (book)

Principal characters:

Vandyke (Van) Jennings, a sociologist who is observant, thoughtful, and introspective

Terry Nicholson, a wealthy explorer, pilot, and chauvinist

Jeff Margrave, a physician, botanist, and gentleman who worships women sentimentally and uncritically

Ellador, a young woman of Herland who marries Van and prepares to accompany him on a reconnais-

sance of the outside world

Alima, a strong young woman who marries Terry but rejects him when he tries to subdue her physically

Celis, an artistic young woman who falls in love with Jeff, marries him, and becomes pregnant

Somel, Van's tutor

Moadine, Terry's tutor

Zava, Jeff's tutor

Form and Content

Herland is the first half of a witty, sociologically astute critique of life in the United States. This story concentrates ostensibly on three men—Van, Jeff, and Terry—who discover a small, uncharted country called Herland which, by force of an unusual accident of nature, has been governed and populated for two thousand years solely by women. Biological reproduction occurs miraculously by parthenogenesis (that is, without insemination). Charlotte Perkins Gilman exploits this contrived situation in order to contrast and compare the social features of a hypothetical woman-centered society to the harsh realities and crushing inequalities of everyday life found pervasively in male-dominated societies. The cohesive theme and primary purpose of *Herland* is the exposition of Gilman's interconnected ideas about economics, education, clothing, prisons, parenting, male-female relationships, human evolution, and social organization generally. In *With Her in Ourland*, the neglected sequel to *Herland* published in 1916, Gilman presents the second half of the Herland chronicle, dissects the patriarchal and technological madness of World War I, and points constructively to an alternative future based on the pragmatic application of feminist values. *Herland* is not fundamentally a utopian novel; rather, it is a lucid, persuasive analysis of modern life as Gilman saw it.

Gilman frames *Herland* as a series of narrative reminiscences told by Van, one of three male explorers who trek to Herland. Van recounts his easy capture, humane imprisonment, and gentle indoctrination to the language, culture, and history of Herland's all-female society. Van's detailed memoir includes recitations of the lessons taught to him and his male colleagues by three middle-aged female tutors, his firsthand observations and personal reflections, and the results of his supplemental readings from Herland's libraries. The effect is sometimes didactic. Readers learn many gazetteer-type facts: For example, Herland is ten to twelve thousand square miles in area, has a population of three million women, and supports a highly efficient, scientifically balanced agricultural economy based on tree culture. Van describes Herland as a pacific, highly evolved, and rationally ordered society molded by women who, beyond all else, value the happiness and welfare of their parthenogenically created children.

Gilman enlivens *Herland's* didactic formula by having Van report verbatim several of his conversations (and those of his male companions) with Ellador and other Herland women. These frequently amusing and sometimes painfully ironic dialogues provide a point of direct contact where the men of Ourland and the women of Herland discover one another, argue, fall in love, and—

in Terry's case—temporarily shatter the equality and powerful maternal calm of Herland. Unlike Terry, who never comprehends his chauvinism and its inherent destructiveness, Van finds his social consciousness raised through his discussions with Ellador. He is increasingly embarrassed by the massive shortcomings of the male-dominated culture that he represents.

The arrangement and style of *Herland* result in part from its publishing history. Gilman, unable to interest established publishing houses in her work, originally self-published the twelve brief chapters that comprise *Herland* as monthly installments in her feminist maga-

Analysis

By Gilman's own estimate, her novels failed as literary experiments. As a pedagogical device, however, *Herland* is an engaging, persuasive, and highly effective effort. The novel's light, patient, sympathetic voice is a worked example of the tolerant, noncoercive instructional mode employed by Herland's exemplary tutors: Somel, Moadine, and Zava. Sociological instruction through fiction is one of Gilman's literary strengths, and it is difficult to find a more straightforward instance of this genre than Gilman's own *First Class in Sociology* (1897-1898), a short novel of hypothetical classroom dialogue serialized in the *American Fabian*. Sociological instruction via fiction is a powerful educational tool used by several women sociologists: Examples include Harriet Martineau's *Illustrations of Political Economy* (1832-1834), Mari Sandoz's *Capital City* (1939), and Agnes Riedmann's *The Discovery of Adamsville* (1977). Judged pedagogically as a work that entertains and provokes while also teaching complex and sophisticated ideas, *Herland* is a superb sociological accomplishment.

The socially problematic issues that Gilman outlines in *Herland* echo the theoretical proposals of Lester F. Ward (1841-1913), a major American sociologist who admired Gilman and vice versa. Ward's concept of gynocentric (that is woman-centered) social theory reinforces Gilman's strong belief in the fundamental rationality of women's values and social contributions. Gilman developed this perspective at length in her nonfiction works. *Herland* reflects, in greatly simplified form, sociological ideas comprehensively examined in Gilman's *Women and Economics* (1898), *Concerning Children* (1900), *The Home: Its Work and Influence* (1903), *Human Work* (1904), and the novel *The Man-Made World* (1911).

The overarching theme in *Herland* is that from

zine, *The Forerunner*. The frequent restatement of central themes from chapter to chapter reflects Gilman's practical need to remind her readers of key elements in the story left unattended during the month-long intervals between issues of *The Forerunner*. *Herland* sparkles most brightly from within the pages of *The Forerunner* where, in many well-stocked libraries, *Herland* can still be read serially in context and in concert with Gilman's essays, poetry, and other major serialized fiction and nonfiction projects published during the brief but extraordinary life of *The Forerunner* from 1910 to 1916.

women's roles and values as mothers springs a fundamentally important social current that society ignores at its collective peril. Mothering, in this view, is a social activity in which all members of society engage together. A social mother, Gilman maintained, is concerned with not only the welfare of her own children but also the support, happiness, and prosperity of all children. If the world were run from the point of view of social mothering, it would, presumably, evidence many of the positive social attributes of *Herland*: a healthy and well-educated populace, humane prisons, efficient use of resources, and so forth.

The premise that women's values provide an excellent basis for society was not unique to Gilman. Several prominent women sociologists, including American Nobel laureate Jane Addams (1860-1935), were feminist pragmatists who subscribed to a range of views similar to Gilman's. A brief and important precursor to *Herland* is Addams' witty and biting 1913 essay "If Men Were Seeking the Franchise," which was published in *Jane Addams: A Centennial Reader* (1960). Addams, who was a friend and colleague of Gilman, describes a hypothetical society of men and women (otherwise similar in situation to *Herland*) in which women dominate the populace and have the political power to deny men the right to vote. Addams whimsically concludes that men, much like the men who venture to *Herland*, cannot safely be allowed to share in government until they abandon their selfish and destructive ideas.

Gilman's personal perspective as a mother is revealed in her autobiography, *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman* (1935). Gilman's decision after a much-publicized divorce to give custody of her daughter, Katherine, to her former husband, Charles W. Stetson, is a consequential example of Gilman's idea that children

should be reared by the one who is best at parenting—and that this individual is not necessarily the biological mother. The cooperative, mothering attributes of the

society sketched in *Herland* no doubt comprise the kind of social situation that Gilman wished for her own daughter.

Context

The initial influence of *Herland* was restricted primarily to regular readers of *The Forerunner*, in which *Herland* was serialized in 1915. By extending reduced-price subscriptions of *The Forerunner* to participants, Gilman tried to encourage the formation of “Gilman Circles” in which the contents of her magazines, including *Herland*, were to be discussed by women in small, face-to-face groups. Poor sales, however, caused the demise of *The Forerunner* and the collapse of Gilman Circles. Overall, *The Forerunner* reached few readers, and thus *Herland* had minor social or literary force. From 1916 to 1979, the novel remained buried in the pages of Gilman’s defunct magazine.

The impact of *Herland* increased dramatically when its chapters were collated and republished together in book form by Pantheon Books in 1979. *Herland*, forty-four years after Gilman’s death and sixty-four years after the serialized first publication, reached a new feminist audience. The republication of *Herland* was promoted as the recovery of “a lost feminist utopian novel,” and the work quickly attracted attention from feminists in the growing women’s studies movement.

Yet, radically abstracted from the serial context of *The Forerunner* and divorced from *Herland*’s concluding sequel, the 1979 edition of *Herland* had a perplexing impact on the women’s movement. Gilman was championed in some quarters as advocating the establishment and superiority of women-only communities of the type outlined in *Herland*, and the book version became a popular rallying point for radical separatists within the women’s movement. That result, paradoxically, is opposite to Gilman’s clearly expressed view that the future of

the world depends crucially on the enlightened cooperation of men and women, mothers and fathers, laboring together side by side.

Other feminists, criticizing the 1979 book-length edition of *Herland*, find it sometimes naïve, ethnocentric, masculinist, and even racist. Superficial readings of Gilman’s enthusiastic embrace of evolutionary principles and her complex ideas relating to race improvement brand Gilman in some quarters as politically incorrect. Such criticisms, however, often neglect the intellectual context in which *Herland* was originally published and ignore the precise ways in which Gilman defined her terms and offered cooperative solutions to many social problems. Gilman never intended the satirical, fictional romps that comprise *Herland* and *With Her in Ourland* to be definitive or comprehensive statements on the complicated moral and philosophical issues that she discussed at length in *The Forerunner* and elsewhere.

The potential impact of *Herland* on women’s issues today remains largely unfulfilled. Whereas the work has become justifiably a recognized classic in women’s literature, separatist politics and postmodern critiques deflect serious discussion of Gilman’s insightful analyses of oppressive patriarchal social systems, as well as her dedication to constructive human advancement. When *Herland* is conjoined to *With Her in Ourland* and carefully studied in the context of *The Forerunner* and Gilman’s nonfiction books, the progressive feminist ideas reflected in *Herland* may someday have the cooperative, forward-looking social impact that Gilman so ardently intended.

Sources for Further Study

Allen, Polly Wynn. *Building Domestic Liberty: Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s Architectural Feminism*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988. An outstanding analysis of Gilman’s interrelated ideas about homes, communities, and the social arrangement of the built environment.

Deegan, Mary Jo. *Jane Addams and the Men of the Chicago School, 1892-1918*. New Brunswick, N.J.:

Transaction Books, 1988. This monograph is the major study of the Chicago women’s sociological network, centered at Hull House, in which Gilman participated. Deegan’s work is indispensable for untangling many of the relevant intellectual currents that defined Gilman’s era, especially the concept of “cultural feminism.”

Hill, Mary A. *Charlotte Perkins Gilman: The Making of a Radical Feminist, 1860-1896*. Philadelphia: Temple

University Press, 1980. A major biography of Gilman and the one to which students should turn first. Hill presents an astute and well-documented account of Gilman's early life and the origins of her ideas.

Karpinski, Joanne B., ed. *Critical Essays on Charlotte Perkins Gilman*. New York: G. K. Hall, 1992. An ambitious compendium of wide-ranging contemporary, reprinted, and original literary essays and critical assessments. Although somewhat technical, Lois Magner's study carefully explores Gilman's ideas on evolution and social Darwinism.

Keith, Bruce. "Charlotte Perkins Gilman (Stetson)." In *Women in Sociology*, edited by Mary Jo Deegan. New York: Greenwood Press, 1991. Presents a useful and straightforward overview of Gilman's work, writings, and stature as a sociologist. Keith includes a bibliography of Gilman's major works and a list of critical sources.

Lane, Ann J. *To Herland and Beyond: The Life and Work of Charlotte Perkins Gilman*. New York: Pantheon,

1990. This popular biography interprets Gilman primarily from a psychological perspective (an orientation that Gilman rejected) and stresses Gilman's family and interpersonal relationships. Unfortunately, Lane gives short shrift to major social issues and the intellectual milieu in which Gilman labored.

Meyering, Sheryl L., ed. *Charlotte Perkins Gilman: The Woman and Her Work*. Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI Research Press, 1989. This compendium offers fourteen frequently referenced critical essays, three of which focus on *Herland*.

Scharnhorst, Gary. *Charlotte Perkins Gilman: A Bibliography*. Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1985. This reference is indispensable for serious students. Scharnhorst lists 2,173 of Gilman's writings, including many found only in obscure magazines. This useful book also includes a compilation of published criticism, biographical materials, and relevant manuscript collections.

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