

UTOPIA IN ACTION

Mapping an

by Layah Singer-Wilson

L'auteure rêve d'une société égalitaire, inspirée du roman « Herland » publié en 1915 par Charlotte Perkins Gilman.

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change my self and I want to change the world. I am frustrated with the old molds that churn out familiar and unfortunate ceramic lifestyles. I am eager to create new, more fluid forms that allow us to be diverse and complementary women and men. I am the daughter of a fiery and illuminated second wave (“first wave” being the suffragettes) feminist woman, and a socially conscientious, respectful, and wise man. I have been taught that “male and female” are human qualities, not definitions of character, boundaries by which to be confined, or the names of clubs one either belongs to or is rejected from. I have grown up in an environment where human relationships are considered sacred, and have come to feel that what goes unnoticed in the social realm, has major repercussions on environmental, political, and other fronts. It is with this foundation that I write of my experience as a young woman today.

I walk through the world with my eyes and heart wide open: I feel what I see, and I must express what I feel. I have a strong creative impulse, literary leanings, and a tremendous desire to envision and establish social changes for the better. The driving desire to live one's own ideals and help create an environment according to them, is one which I think many young people feel. Throughout history, waves of inspired and energetic youth have revolutionized and celebrated the positive changes they've brought about. Recently, I picked up *Herland*, by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, at my local public library. Upon reading it, I knew it was the perfect vehicle through which to explore and express my thoughts in the Independent Study Project format I was given by my OAC English teacher at The Toronto Waldorf School. My essay was written as an investigation of both Charlotte Perkins Gilman's ideals

for a better world, and my own.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* targets western society's imbalances, and sets out to provide an example of a culture that has made conscious choices to perfect and balance itself. In her 1978 introduction to *Herland* (which was originally published in 1915), Ann J. Lane defines the mission of a utopian novel: “to provide a speculative vision of the desired goal of human existence” (xxi). While utopian concepts can seem far-fetched or naively optimistic, I was personally inspired by Gilman's visions for change. I was also acutely aware of the fact that I felt that I had written about, and read, a “woman's” book. Touted on its cover as a “lost feminist utopian novel,” the connection that is made between feminism and *Herland* is misleading due to the associations that a reader makes upon hearing the term “feminism.” It seems that merely mentioning the word “feminism” encourages some people to conjure up images of legions of man-hating, angry, Amazon-like, rabid, and warring women, who are ultimately disrespectful in their fight for respect. I for one am not willing to be identified by the graphic assumptions of the masses. While I have feminist leanings, I find myself hesitant to use the word “feminist.” This is why it was important to me that Gilman used a society of well-adjusted women in her novel, to make a point about humankind, not womankind. My interest was in how Gilman constructed a world where women were the catalysts of change, *to show how dramatic the changes to society need to be.*

I think one of the reasons Gilman's book spoke to me, and my budding social awareness, is that the political pitches she made are presented in such a way that her loyalty to the human condition is obvious. Lane quotes Gilman referring to herself as a “humanist” (*Yes, I thought to myself, I could call myself that*), and introduces the idea of gender imbalances affecting the entire society through Gilman's own words: “women, forced to lead restricted lives, retard all human progress” (xi). In a kind of ironic role-reversal, the three male characters in *Herland* “find it odd being treated not as men, but as people” (xv). Gilman herself has been scotch-taped into a gender-biased picture of solely “women's” writing and education, that “denies her a well-deserved status within [a gender neutral] educational history,” says women's studies professor Deborah de Simone (13). Not only is Gilman short-changed, but so are all the males who are turned-off reading the novel

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by the word “feminist” on its cover, and Gilman’s reputation as a writer for “girls.” It became clear to me, that though *Herland* was written in the early twentieth century, her theme still holds true: a modern-day society would benefit from less gender-based judgement, just as a turn-of-the-century one would have.

This book sparked my awareness of how the health of the constituents of a society affects the health of the whole. I am concerned about the cultural and individual isolation of men and women from each other, and was therefore especially interested in Gilman’s look at how to bring a community back into balance. I studied her investigation of cultural ideology, education, and the human power to alter society for the better.

I discovered, through *Herland*, that in the early twentieth century, society’s definition of “masculine” and “feminine” was not very different from the stereotypes we uphold today. At the beginning of the novel, the men that happen upon Herland bring with them all the sexist subtleties of their time. The women they encounter are completely unlike any women they have ever met. The masculine characteristics their society has taught them to value, such as strength and protectiveness, do not bear any weight with the wise, strong, and sweet women of Herland. Just as the word “feminist” conjures up an army of assumptions to most, by the end of the novel, the male characters have a revelation regarding their own thinking:

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 men everywhere, doing everything. (Gilman 137)

The beliefs that languish in our fertile individual and collective subconscious are often apparent in our words and actions. In *Herland*, the men speak to each other about how the “femininity” they encounter does not fit into their definition of the term. One of the traveling companions had “gentle romantic old-fashioned notions of women as clinging vines” (Gilman 21), and another believed there are “two kinds of women—those he wanted and those he didn’t” (Gilman 21). What the men discover in the women of Herland, are capabilities that they had before deemed “masculine.” Gilman conveys her notion

of gender equality by contrasting the gender characteristics in *Herland* with the more familiar gender characteristics of the men’s homeland. The citizens of Herland are enthusiastic about the presence of men because it offers

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them the opportunity to have a more progressive form of balance and equality through a dual-gendered society. The women’s openness to see goodness in even the stereotype-charged specimens that “discover” them, is shown in their willingness to find the human qualities that might provide a basis for an overlap of, and understanding between, the two polar societies: “Surely there are characteristics enough which belong to People, aren’t there?” (Gilman 89) suggests a bright young Herland woman. The male characters realize what Gilman encourages her readers to consider—that men also “suffer from personalities distorted by their habits” (Lane xi) which are largely psychological afflictions that go unnoticed due to the afflicted society from which they stem.

Until men and women come into balance with each other, both sexes will suffer from the asphyxiation that we have historically inflicted, and continue to inflict on ourselves. When people begin to realize something must change regarding the male-female human interaction, the “opponents” come to see that there are more similarities than differences between them. Gilman points this out time and again, as the men encounter attitudes that were reserved for women in the “outside world.” “We found ourselves much in the position of the suffragette trying to get to the parliament buildings through a triple cordon of London police” (23). Later, as the men come to know their hosts better, they have a similarly ironic revelation as they find themselves valued in very superficial ways, that were also, in their world, restricted to women. One of them says in a fit of frustration: “The only thing they can think of about a man is Fatherhood! ... As if a man was always wanting to be a father!” (Gilman 124). Gilman skilfully shows how the gender stereotypes that taint

western society permeate the consciousness of both sexes in harmful ways, and struggle and victory are not rooted in "female" or "male" existence, but in human experience.

Our own present-day gender conceptions are narrow and slippery slopes that we clamber up and down during the portage of living. We hope to identify ourselves and each other along the way; we attempt to maintain composure when we become lost in our own muddled values, and to squish ourselves into the tight and muddy caves of society's values that—oh horrors!—look so much like our own. For a young person, or really *any* person, I believe that this is one of the most devastating realizations: I see *within* me, the jagged fragments of the environment that scars and surrounds me. The key to creating "right" is to

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see where one's own "fragments" fit in—where I am me no matter what is around me—and to see that what is "wrong" with the situation (be it on an individual or societal scale), is fuel with which to create "right." It is important to me not only to explore what pains me about my world, but also to consider what can be done about it. I believe the alteration begins with educating our young.

Not only must the core curricula of our educational systems change in order to encompass new foundational beliefs, but how our children are taught must also be shifted. Gilman's revolutionary philosophies on education are enacted in the all-female society of Herland. She points out that the modes of education employed in the "outside world" are predominantly masculine. The men realize that "in our theory great stress is laid on the forced exertion of the child's mind; we think it is good for him to overcome obstacles" (Gilman 104). The attitude with which we educate our children is reflective of what our society deems successful. Deborah De Simone highlights Gilman's belief that from day one of an average child's education they are taught in a "masculine-gendered" manner. "The competitive system emphasizes winning rather than the pleasure of learning or the exercising of the mind" (15). Many have speculated as to how educational establishments ought to be run, but according to Gilman, who sought equality and a wholesome pedagogical methodology, education just needed to be "feminized." The "feminization" of a strongly "masculinized" system would not bring about a conversion from one extreme to another, but a balancing.

The most essential difference in a "feminine" educational method, is that life is looked at without a general judgmental verdict of "good" versus "evil," "virtue" versus

"sin," "strength" versus "weakness." Without the harsh fear of making "mistakes," a child is able to learn organically what are the more positive choices to make in life, and escape the highly detrimental inner and outer condemnation of perfectionism. Gilman writes of the ideal scheme embodied by the Herland society: "life to them was growth; their pleasure ... [and] their duty" (Gilman 102). With an understanding of life as a kind of school, one can see that what is taught in childhood, is fostered throughout the rest of one's life through sub-conscious conditioning. If what is taught is that the highest aspiration is to learn and grow, then that is what is carried on through life. The teachers of the children, in Herland, all of whom were especially trained and spirited, sought "to nourish, to stimulate ... [and] exercise the mind of a child as we do the body" (Gilman 104). The benefits of such philosophy would surely not be gender-biased were it employed in a classroom of boys as well as girls, in a modern-day, "real-life" situation. Since the human species is divided into two biological sexes, it follows that both sexes would benefit from an education which balances "male-gendered" values and activities with "female-gendered" values and activities. I have attended a Waldorf school which, in my opinion, seeks to educate in such a balanced fashion. This educational system was founded by the philosopher Rudolf Steiner, and is embodied by hundreds of schools all over the world.

As children we learn what we are taught—be they unconscious or conscious teachings. We can *choose* what we foster in our children. Whatever we give them, they will take hungrily into themselves, and learn to search out as the only source of nourishment.

A more communal style is the final fascinating educational reform suggested in *Herland*. Not only were these girls raised to be remarkably balanced individuals, but also to be outstandingly caring citizens with strong values regarding the place of the individual in society. The men remark "whereas our children grow up in private homes and families, with every effort made to protect and seclude them from a dangerous world, here they grow up in a wide, friendly world, and know it for theirs ..." (Gilman 101). In the "real" world, a sense of community outside of one's nuclear family is rare and devalued. In Herland, a communal environment and genuine caring for all fellow human beings is inherent and plays a large role in the societal absence of the violence and perversion of power that we have come to nearly accept as human nature. The presence of warmth and trust of strangers in the community-minded citizens of Herland, had been taught to them in much the same way that we learn to coldly, but not surprisingly, distrust each other.

I agree with Gilman, that without this kind of reformed, sensitive, balanced, communal education, men and women will not develop into "socially active, intellectually stimulating, financially self-reliant, civically responsible, and personally courageous human beings" (De Simone 16).

Furthermore, as long as the female half of the human race is denied equal opportunity to learn in a supportive environment, all of society is weakened by them because they have not had the chance to learn, or use their acquired knowledge to establish themselves individually, and contribute to the community. The kind of gender-balanced education that *Herland* recommends (that reminds me of Waldorf school), does a more thorough job of informing children, from the time they are very young, of their ability to effect social change.

While human power to alter society can be used positively to benefit all, it can also be used negatively as a weapon. The outcome of the actions of someone with individualistic and short-term goals will affect society less positively, than those of someone with foresight and wide social concerns. The *Herland* women were not passive rulers and planners, but were wise, pro-active, and compassionate leaders. Psychologically, economically, socially, religiously, educationally, agriculturally, and even reproductively,¹ they “habitually considered and carried out plans for improvement which might cover centuries” (Gilman 79). Of course, because the “real” world largely ignores the long-term ramifications of our social actions, the visiting men in the novel cannot boast of a more superior manner of governing. With a kind of “united action” (as opposed to competitive action), the women do everything possible to strengthen existing beneficial structures and create new ones where needed. This is the kind of platform for change that inspires me and strikes me as necessary for *now*. We must stop this tendency to cling to a “long nursed bunch of ancient mistakes” (Lane xviii), and learn from our historic weaknesses how to move beyond them. The ability to take stock and delicately weigh what exists, against what must be created, would benefit us, with the inward/personal in a perfect parallax with the outer/societal.

With this positive conscious evolutionary stance, the *Herland* women are an imaginary, yet poignant example of how it is possible to completely ignore what can be referred to as the Darwinian theory of the competitive/masculine “struggle for existence.” Rather than impulsively scrambling around, vying for limited resources, and hoping to outlast their neighbour,

They sat down in council and thought it out ... they said: “With our best endeavors this country will support about so many people, with the standard of peace, comfort, health, beauty, and progress we demand.” (Gilman 68)

With the human reason, emotion, and will that all are capable of, the women of *Herland* struck upon the simple yet miraculous method of altering their society for the better: through ensuring the ever-improving health of all aspects of the lives of all constituents of their population.

I saw Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s examination of nega-

tive cultural ideology, educational habits, and the human capacity to alter one’s surroundings for the better, as lending itself willingly to an investigation of how in a society, the state of the pieces of the whole are directly related to the state of the whole. *Herland*, written by a passionate and visionary woman in 1915, cleverly demonstrates how our “real” world could be altered to parallel the ever-evolving one it describes: with sensitivity and foresight towards the effects of all action. If only such consciousness, such full-hearted caring for one’s world, was fostered in the minds of our youth. If it was given to us through example by parents, teachers, and political figures, perhaps our land could be as lovingly and positively shaped as *Herland*. When what is taught is uncorrupted, who it’s taught to is undetermined by sex, race, or class, and how it’s taught is in a caring fashion, and supportive of the whole child, we will find ourselves in a society that approaches our ideals. Until then, inspired by the words of those like Gilman, we must continue to be diligent cartographers of humanist values.

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¹The *Herland* women mastered the delicate art of parthenogenic birth, brought on by mental and emotional will, that produced only girl-children. When a woman was not ready to give birth, and the desire for a child arose, she only needed to redirect her creative energy, and she would not become pregnant. This enabled individuals to have complete control over when they conceived, and it built up a society where only the women most fit to be mothers—those that wanted it with their whole being—became mothers. Motherhood was regarded as a huge honour by the entire *Herland* community, and pregnancy was treated with the same care as all other conscious creative processes.

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