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Universitat Autònoma  
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**“No men, eh?”: A Dystopic Paradise in Charlotte  
Perkins Gilman’s *Herland***

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## **Abstract**

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* (1915) portrays a nation of parthenogenetic women in which motherhood is at the center of their lives. From the perspective of a male narrator, the sociologist Vandyck Jennings, Gilman compares the outstanding features of this peaceful matriarchy against the negative features of Jennings' society, a patriarchy that subdues women. Although Gilman features a number of utopian elements in the description of her ideal all-female society, the aim of this dissertation is to illustrate how the text unintentionally gives voice to the power imbalances and oppressions of *fin de siècle* American society. Therefore, this paper analyses the utopian and dystopian aspects of *Herland* in order to evince the interesting paradox of a female kingdom that thrives by marginalizing other social groups. Particular attention will be given to the fact that this early-twentieth century novel serves as a warning of certain emerging American anxieties that are present to this day.

**Keywords:** Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *Herland*, utopian fiction, dystopia, gender roles, motherhood, feminism, racial discrimination





## 0. Introduction

*We yearned for the future. How did we learn it, that talent of insatiability?*

Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, 1985

Atwood's words might have a profound resonance when trying to understand women's history. From ancient times, human beings have created and perfected a diverse range of political structures to improve communal welfare for future generations to come. However, men have tended to be portrayed as the only active and efficient individuals who have actually promoted—and thus made possible- the transformation of modern societies. Women of the western culture, in contrast, seem to have remained alienated from the public sphere due to the social restrictions placed upon them by the patriarchal rule.

In terms of politics, and particularly in the early twentieth century, it was generally accepted that governmental decisions were merely men's business. This led to women's increasing protests and active participation in politics. For instance, the controversial Reform Act of 1832, which stated that only British male householders had the right to vote<sup>1</sup>, anticipated the emergence of first-wave feminist movements such as the Suffragettes and, later on, the abolitionists in the United States.

According to Phillip Wegner (2005), the American author, lecturer and social activist Charlotte Perkins Gilman was one of the first writers who “put the issue of gender and women's rights at the center of the discussion” (88). But Gilman's political activism-ran in the family. In her autobiography *The Living of Charlotte Perkins*

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<sup>1</sup> For further information, see “The 1832 Reform Act” in The British Library website: <http://www.bl.uk/learning/histcitizen/21cc/struggle/chartists1/historicalsources/source2/reforma ct.html>.

*Gilman*<sup>2</sup>, the writer mentions her well-known aunt Harriet Beecher Stowe (Gilman, 1990: 3), who challenged the peculiar institution of slavery with her abolitionist novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852).

Gilman's infancy was intellectually rich. At an early age she started to question the knowledge she acquired in school: "I wonder why we all have to keep still... I wonder what would happen if any one spoke out loud... I'm going to find out" (Gilman: 19). This rebellious attitude paved the way for a mature Gilman to effectively analyse and dismantle perceived disparities in women's access to social resources. One of her most distinguished non-fiction works is *Women and Economics*<sup>3</sup>, where the author addresses the economic dependence —and thus, oppression- of woman. This condition is caused by the "sex-distinctions" which are, in her view, unique in the human species, and which were firmly established within nineteenth-century American society:

"A feminine hand" or a "feminine foot" is distinguishable anywhere. We do not hear of "a feminine paw" or "a feminine hoof". A hand is an organ of prehension, a foot and organ of locomotion: they are not secondary sexual characteristics. The comparative smallness and feebleness of woman is a sex-distinction. We have carried it to such an excess that women are commonly known as "the weaker sex" (Gilman, 1998: 45).

This essentialist understanding of gender was often used to justify gender-based biases in American society. In a constantly changing world where men were entrusted with the task of improving the country, women were prescribed with the attributes of True Womanhood. First described by Barbara Welter in "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860", a mid-nineteenth century True Woman was the symbol of moral strength and virtue: "Piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity' were thought to be natural to women" (Welter 1976, quoted in Cruca 2005: 188).

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<sup>2</sup> First published posthumously on October 4, 1935. This dissertation uses the 1990 edition by William L. Andrews (ed.).

<sup>3</sup> *Women and Economics* was originally published in 1898.

As other early feminist writers, Gilman intended to raise awareness of women's precariousness by making use of utopian fiction. During the second half of the nineteenth century, some science-fiction female writers started to construct narratives that projected their own desires of ideal societies. Indeed, thirty-six titles of US women utopian writers were published during the 1890s until 1919 (Kesler 1984, cited in Albinski 1988: 830). An interesting example is the made-up paradise of *Mizora* (1880), which Mary E. Bradley Lane imagined as a land ruled by parthenogenic white women, and where "teaching and housework were viewed as scientific professions" (Donawerth, 2009: 216). Nevertheless, the literary concept of a desirable land—that is to say, a society with better conditions than the one in which the writer lived- was firstly introduced in 1516 by Renaissance humanist Sir Thomas More for the title of his most-acclaimed book *Utopia*. The term utopia, in turn, is a derivation of the Greek word οὐ τόπος, meaning "no place" (Rogan, 2009: 309).

This dissertation focuses on Gilman's utopian novel *Herland*<sup>4</sup>, which is the second book of a trilogy entitled with the same name. Originally serialized in her monthly magazine *The Forerunner* in 1915, the first and third parts are *Moving the Mountain* (1911) and the sequel *With Her in Ourland* (1916), respectively. Nevertheless, *Herland* can be read independently since it does not follow the storyline of the trilogy's introductory novel. In *Herland*, Gilman employs the narrative perspective of the sociologist Vandyck Jennings to describe the positive aspects of a motherly country ruled by strong, independent and "inconveniently reasonable" women (Gilman, 2011: 163).

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<sup>4</sup> The edition of *The Herland Trilogy* used in this dissertation is the one from Wilder Publications, Inc., 2011.

The story begins when the three male characters of the novel —Terry O. Nicholson, Jeff Margrave and the aforesaid narrator- plan a long expedition after hearing some tribal tales of a “deadly, they said, for any man to go there” (Gilman: 119) all-female land. Although the passage leading to the land is arduous, the explorers’ finally encounter girls. The female characters of Celis, Alima and Ellador attain major relevance when they become Jeff, Terry and Vandyck’s love interests and future wives, respectively. Throughout the narrative, the utopian dimension is made clear by comparing the advanced and peaceful nation of Herland against the negative aspects of the visitor’s society. At the beginning of their journey, the explorers speculate on the possibility of a country solely inhabited and ruled by women by expressing their own sexist prejudices:

“They would fight among themselves,’ Terry insisted. ‘Women always do. We mustn’t look to find any sort of order and organization”

“You’re dead wrong,’ Jeff told him. ‘It will be like a nunnery under an abbess — a peaceful, harmonious sisterhood” (Gilman: 123- 124).

Each one of them embodies the conventional traits of the “masculine culture in excess” (Gilman, 2014: 14) that the writer discusses in her non-fiction work *The Man-Made World or the Androcentric Culture*<sup>5</sup>. The male characters of *Herland* reinforce their authority over women even when they discuss the traits the unexplored female community should possess. Gilman’s literary strategy in *Herland*, thus, implies the portrait of one-dimensional patriarchal archetypes and their prejudiced assumptions about womanhood with the aim of denouncing the unfair treatment women face in American society. These patriarchal social patterns, which are the bastions of male privilege, stand in contrast to the community’s advanced agricultural and educational methods —as well as the absence of crime and disease-, which define it as an ideal

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<sup>5</sup> Originally published in 1911.

place to live: a utopia. Moreover, the daily lives of these women are determined, to a great extent, by their driven love towards their children and their ambition to build a secure future for the generations to come. Indeed, motherhood is a priority for the inhabitants of *Herland*, and ideologies of motherly love and optimal infancy education have a great impact within the country's social hierarchy.

Although several scholars have primarily considered *Herland* to be a clear exponent of utopian literary fiction (Albinski, 1988; Bartkowski, 1991; Mohr, 2005; Wegner, 2005; Murphy, 2008; Davis, 2009), there has not been a strong focus on the problematic elements of Gilman's all-female society. Racial discrimination, lesbianism and sexual liberation are some of the topics omitted in the narrative, among others. Moreover, the negative implications that the exclusion of a large part of the population might have on society are also disregarded.

The aim of my dissertation is thus to question *Herland's* utopianism by analysing in depth both the positive and negative aspects of the female society designed by the American feminist writer Charlotte Perkins Gilman. As a point of departure, I will introduce the literary genre of utopia as an essential tool for imagining better conditions for women. Moreover, I aim to illustrate how the inhabitants of Herland challenge the Victorian images of the "Angel in the House" and the "True Woman". Furthermore, I will study Vandyck Jennings character's development in order to provide a clear vision of patriarchal discourse, which is questioned by the narrator throughout the novel. In the second part of my TFG, which deals with the research question of this dissertation, I intend to unveil the dystopic elements implicitly involved in the writer's literary choice of a society that has motherhood at its centre. Most importantly, I will contend that these dystopic elements reflect turn-of-the-century American anxieties.

## 1. “A Very Practical Little Heaven”: Utopia in *Herland*

### 1.1 From Damsels in Distress to Independent Women

*The women must learn to dare to speak.*

*The men must bother to listen.*

*The women must learn to say, I think this is so.*

*The men must learn to stop dancing solos on the ceiling.*

Marge Piercy, “Councils” in *Circles on the water*

In popular usage, the term *utopia* carries a pejorative meaning, as it alludes to something rarely attainable. From better worlds to highly-efficient societies, the range of ideal fabulations is actually vast. However, Dunja Mohr establishes a distinction between literature and other imaginings, stating that “literary utopia (and dystopia) concentrates on socio-political themes and changes, opting for solutions in the socio-political or economic realm and not for theological adjustments to reform a fictitious future society” (Mohr, 2005: 13). In addition, the literary scholar writes that the reforms proposed by utopian authors are grounded on their respective contemporary times in order to change the institutionalized status quo (Mohr: 14). During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the literary genre of utopia was the chosen space for many British and American women writers who wanted to project their concerns about contemporary society onto fictional scenarios<sup>6</sup>. According to Mohr, this female group of writers “stepped into the literary arena and turned to the hitherto male utopian genre, noting that Your-topia is not necessarily My-Topia. Women authors began to recognize

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<sup>6</sup> In the book chapter “Nineteenth-century sf” of *The Routledge Companion to Science Fiction*, Arthur B. Evans mentions different turn-of-the-century utopias written by women, such as Elizabeth Corbett’s *New Amazonia: a foretaste of the future* (1889) as well as the novel mentioned in the introduction of this TFG, *Mizora: a world of women* by Mary E. Bradley Lane (Evans, 2009: 15).

utopia's potential for feminist purposes" (2005: 21). Deprived of egalitarian rights in the real world, they decided to formulate alternative societies where women could prosper without relying on masculine figures to support them.

Of all the topics that Charlotte Perkins Gilman considers in *The Man-Made World*, one of the most relevant is the unnatural distinctions between men and women. These differences, established by patriarchy centuries earlier, place the former in an advantageous position in comparison with the latter:

To the man, the whole world was his world; his because he was male; and the whole world of woman was the home; because she was female. She had her prescribed sphere, strictly limited to her feminine occupations and interests; he had all the rest of life; and not only so, but, having it, insisted on calling it male. (Gilman, 2014: 10).

Despite the progress that was being attained in different fields of society, women were still in an inferior position compared to men. Moreover, the popularization of the 'ideal femininity' represented in the Victorian image of the "Angel in the House"<sup>7</sup> perpetuated not only the repressive role assigned to women but also the untenability of the attributes given to this role. Nevertheless, despite the inequality that women had to suffer in the nineteenth century, it is true that "the rise of women's colleges, women's increased literacy, delayed age of marriage, an ideology of upward mobility, and capitalist development gave rise to the New Woman" (Kimmel, 1987: 265). As a result, many women started to awaken from a prolonged social lethargy. In the following passage of Sarah Grand's "The New Aspect of the Woman Question", the Irish feminist author unfolds some of the implications of this new type of woman:

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<sup>7</sup> *The Angel in the House* (1862) is a narrative poem written by Coventry Patmore and inspired by his own wife, Emily Patmore. The poem, which its popularity laid in its ideas rather than its literary quality, depicts woman as a docile and pure creature that should devote her life to her family within the domestic sphere.



Man deprived us of all proper education, and then jeered at us because we had no knowledge. He narrowed our outlook on life so that our view of it should be all distorted, and then declared that our mistaken impression of it proved us to be senseless creatures. He cramped our minds so that there was no room for reason in them, and then made merry at our want of logic. Our divine intuition was not to be controlled by him, but he did his best to damage it by sneering at it as an inferior feminine method of arriving at conclusions; and finally, after having had his own way until he lost his head completely, he set himself up as a sort of a god and required us to worship him, and, to our eternal shame be it said, we did so (Grand, 1894: 272).

Within the novel *Herland*, Gilman resolves to create a productive society of parthenogenetic—that is, virgin- and independent “New Women” (Gilman, 2011: 164) that were able to escape the constraining domain of gender roles. Interestingly enough, the male narrator is the character that identifies men’s social privileges and women’s struggles for equal rights in American patriarchal culture:

We have two cycles: the man’s and the woman’s. To the man there is growth, struggle, conquest, the establishment of his family, and as much further success in gain or ambition as he can achieve.

To the woman, growth, the securing of a husband, the subordinate activities of family life, and afterward such “social” or charitable interests as her position allows.

Here was but one cycle, and that a large one (Gilman: 200).

One of the most representative features of this “beautiful high garden land” (Gilman: 162) is, indeed, the absence of men. After a violent earthquake that decimates the whole army of soldiers and an unsuccessful slave upheaval, the “bi-sexual race” that inhabits the land ceases to exist. However, the critical aftermath gives the surviving women a second chance to peacefully develop on their own: “They set to work to improve that population in quality—since they were restricted in quantity” (Gilman: 174). Consequently, their hygienic, nutritional and clothing conditions experience a significant development, which helps them to become a society ahead of their time:

The years of pioneering lay far behind them. Theirs was a civilization in which the initial difficulties had long since been overcome. The untroubled peace, the unmeasured plenty, the steady health, the large good will and smooth management which ordered everything, left nothing to overcome. It was like a pleasant family in an old established, perfectly run country place (Gilman: 198).

Accordingly, with social improvement comes the biological evolution of a “newly-bred” stock of independent women that do not need men to procreate. Gilman links the liberation of women with the control they can exert over their own bodies, biological reproduction and childcare (Hausman, 1998: 506). Indeed, Herlanders’ devotion towards motherhood allows them to achieve their goal of building a better country for their children. For instance, these female citizens refuse to follow the fatal problem-solving method of armed conflict that their ancestors applied in their everyday life. Instead, they prefer to “[sit] down in council together and [think] it out” (Gilman, 2011: 173) every time a problem disturbs the peaceful ambiance of the land. Therefore, Gilman challenges the Darwinist assumption that only the fittest survive with what can be regarded as a non-competitive community. Due to these ideal conditions, the crime rate has remained unaltered for six hundred years (Gilman: 184).

Moreover, as Gilman writes in *The Man-Made World*, women are perceived as the heroines who can save the world from its warlike nature: “Who kept the human race going, somehow, in spite of the constant hideous waste of war, and slowly built up the real industrial civilization behind that gory show? —Why just the slaves and the women” (Gilman, 2014: 100). In a related way, the ancient Greek comedy *Lysistrata* by Aristophanes depicts an androcentric society where women, who are forced to remain within the domestic sphere, decide to put an end to the exhausting Peloponnesian War. Similar to the American writer, *Lysistrata* is utterly aware of women’s subordinated role within a strict hierarchy, thus the woman convenes a female meeting where she discloses her pacifist strategy: women are to make use of their social handicap—for they are expected to devotedly serve the soldiers- by refusing to make any sexual contact with their male partners while the war continues.

Another fundamental —and yet, utopian- notion of *Herland*'s matriarchal community is its prime system of education. Since their arrival in the all-women nation, the three men explorers are constantly questioned by the locals about representative social habits of the United States. In fact, their thorough study of Vandyck, Terry and Jeff helps them “to compare the history of two thousand years, to see what differences are —between us, who are only mothers, and you, who are mothers and fathers, too” (Gilman, 2011: 156). Furthermore, women assign a tutor to each one of the visitors in order to teach them their culture and language. The male characters have to share their knowledge with crowded female audiences of all ages, establishing a reciprocal bond between both sexes. The literary scholar Graham Murphy asserts that *Herland* “strives to break its isolation by reincorporating men into their social system, albeit without adopting patriarchal gender-coding” (Murphy, 2009: 481). Therefore, on the whole, it can be argued that the objective of the inhabitants of Gilman's utopia revolves around the need to improve a community that is in constant progress.

Nevertheless, apart from progress, children are the truly “RAISON D'ÊTRE” (Gilman, 2011: 160) of this country of caring mothers. In this society, the development of infancy is more efficient now that women have assumed control over every aspect of human life, environment and reproduction. According to the personal aptitudes each little girl develops, they receive a special training that will ensure their specialization in any field that can be profitable for the community. In order to fully satisfy the interests of their children, “spinners and weavers, farmers and gardeners, carpenters and masons” (Gilman: 172) are the main occupations of Herlanders. Moreover, the inhabitants of the utopian land have been playing with the arts and sciences for many centuries with successful results (Gilman: 176). The entrance of women into the workforce symbolizes that, in a preferable egalitarian society, women can do anything that men can:

Women have been systematically excluded from scientific professions and have been assumed naturally unfit for such intellectual activity. That the women of *Herland* have made the advances they have is certainly a feminist statement by which Gilman contradicts millennia of gender stereotypes expressed explicitly both in the mainstream scientific thought of her own day and in the utopian tradition (Christensen, 2017: 290).

In conclusion, Gilman's hope of a better society resides in providing a clear vision of what a country could become if women were allowed to participate as equal citizens. The ability to master tasks reserved for men and the gentleness of their motherly love implies Herlanders' relentless pursuit to improve the land for future generations to come. Above all, this is a trait that clearly challenges the inactive female images of the 'Angel in the House' and the 'True Woman'.

## **1.2 The Awakening of the Male Narrator**

One of the main literary strategies that Gilman incorporates into the narrative of *Herland* is the employment of a male first-person narrator. From the first line of the novel, the reader learns that the story "is written from memory, unfortunately" (Gilman, 2011: 118). After living for nearly a year in a nation only inhabited by women, the sociologist Vandyck Jennings, also known as Van, decides to share his unique experience with the rest of the world. Gilman's choice of the character's profession does not seem arbitrary; indeed, the American author did envision a similar situation in her work *Women and Economics*. The visit of a sociologist to a land of parthenogenetic females makes him reconsider his prejudices against women:

An extra-terrestrial sociologist, studying human life and hearing for the first time of our so-called "maternal sacrifice" as a means of benefiting the species, might be touched and impressed by the idea. "How beautiful!" he would say (...) What a supreme and magnificent martyrdom!" (...) Alas for the extra-terrestrial sociologist and his natural expectations! After exhaustive study, finding nothing of these things, he would return to Mars or Saturn or wherever he came from (Gilman, 1990: 191).

Like the sociologist in *Women and Economics*, Van is positively impressed by the female society. He describes the country as “a land in a state of perfect cultivation, where even the forests looked as if they were cared for” (Gilman, 2011: 126). Every natural element is conveniently placed in order to satisfy the needs of the community. However, Van is still in disbelief after seeing that all those figures that welcome the masculine trio of explorers are women: “But they look —why, this is a CIVILIZED country!” I protested. “There must be men” (Gilman: 126). Van cannot imagine that a land with an organized agricultural system, good roads and well-developed architecture could be made possible without the intervention of men.

In fact, in their perceptions, each of the male characters exemplifies a unique vision of patriarchal behaviour, which provides the author with a medium to discuss the failings of patriarchy in the early-twentieth century American society. According to Simone Knewitz, “Gilman does not simply want to present a woman’s point of view or women’s experiences, but rather undermine the privileged male perspective (...) The differences between the real world and the visitors’ beliefs and the utopian society are emphasized in Gilman’s novel” (Knewitz, 2005: 81). Even though Gilman addresses controversial issues regarding women’s enfranchisement, the rational views of *Herland*’s sociologist narrator are meant to make male readers comfortable. On the other hand, Gilman’s female contemporaries could observe how the firmly —and yet, sexist- assumptions of the visitors become a mockery throughout the narrative. Indeed, the transformation of Van’s way of thinking is essential not only to understand his evolution as a character, but also to distinguish the obsolete features of *fin-de-siècle* American masculinity depicted in his companions’ discourses.

Firstly, Jeff is closely related to the aforesaid Victorian concept of the “Angel in the House”, as the narrator asserts that his comrade “was born to be a poet” (Gilman,

2011: 118) and that “he idealized women, and was always looking for a chance to “protect” or to “serve” them” (Gilman: 190) In one occasion, Jeff does not accept a situation where a “frail” woman —Celis, who becomes his future love interest-, has to rely on her physical strength to carry a heavy object. In turn, the young girl wants to know the reason of Jeff’s negative; however, the man decides not to pronounce his thought, which is “because she is weaker” (Gilman: 192). Here, Van’s companion is confronted with the limitations of his preconceived notions regarding femininity, which leaves him powerless to act. Jeff is the kind of man that devotedly “accepted the angel theory, swallowed it whole (...) He had become so deeply convinced of the almost supernatural advantages of this country and people, that he took his medicine like a —I cannot say “like a man”, but more as if he wasn’t one” (Gilman: 217). Furthermore, the narrator considers that his comrade has lost his masculine identity, hence he becomes “thoroughly Herlandized” (Gilman: 225). As the months pass by, Jeff realizes that he has finally found his place in the country and firmly refuses to return to the US: “Why should I want to go back to all our noise and dirt, our vice and crime, our disease and degeneracy?” (Gilman: 226). The male explorer realizes that the land has better conditions than his own country and therefore he blindly accepts the given conditions, thus idealizing a society that indeed has its flaws. Ironically enough, Jeff is the only character who has sexual intercourse with Celis, who, at the end of the novel, is expecting a baby.

Terry, in turn, embodies the opposite end of the masculinity spectrum, that is to say, a “man’s man” (Gilman: 124) or womanizer that disrupts the peaceful state of things. Before their arrival to the unexplored country, Terry imposes masculine supremacy within the linguistic domain by naming the land in three different ways: “Feminisia” (122), “Ladyland” (125) and, finally, “Herland” (127). This character’s

controversial behaviour consists primarily of women's objectification. He denies them their condition of equal partners, thus dehumanising and confining them to remain under his rule. In Chapter 11, named "Our Difficulties," he asserts that "there was never a woman yet that did not enjoy being MASTERED" (Gilman: 223). However, in the novel's matriarchy, Terry encounters difficulties due to the scant attention to sexual intimacy of Herland's inhabitants. Even though this man easily allures women in his American homeland, Van acknowledges that "the things he'd learned didn't help him a heap in Herland. His idea was to take—he thought that was the way. He thought, he honestly believed, that women like it. Not the women of Herland!" (Gilman: 223). Terry's sexual frustration triggers an attempt to rape his wife Alima; this pernicious behaviour, in turn, implies the elder women's decision to expel him from their country.

All in all, Van's disapproval of his friend's attitude seems to illustrate Gilman's concern on the ill treatment and sexualization of women, which, in its way, is an impediment to future social development: "I'm sorry—and I'm ashamed" (Gilman: 222). Moreover, Gilman's use of a sympathetic male narrator as a literary device lessens utopia's didactic tone, therefore the reading of the novel becomes more enjoyable.

## **2. Reflecting on the Dystopian Elements of *Herland***

In this section, my main purpose will be to analyse the dystopian elements of *Herland*. My contention is that they not only undermine Gilman's utopianism but are evidence of the general mindset of the period. To start with, it is important to distinguish between both literary genres. As mentioned previously, utopia focuses on the depiction of an imaginary place which offers ideal living conditions to its citizens. Contrastively, in Lyman Sargent's words, dystopia refers to "a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author

intended a contemporaneous reader to view as considerably worse than the society in which the reader lived” (Sargent 1994, quoted in Murphy 2009: 473). Moreover, Tom Moylan exposes —and Murphy endorses this view- that dystopia does not work “to undermine Utopia but rather to make room for its reconsideration and refunctioning in even the worst of times” (Moylan 2000, quoted in Murphy: 473).

At first sight, Gilman creates a desirable nation for women. The demarcation between workplace and the confinement of the household does not exist in Herland; in fact, child rearing is considered to be a task only performed by experts. Indeed, womanhood achieves relevant improvement within Gilman’s fictional society, given that the steady progress of the territory is under the sole responsibility of its female inhabitants. In other words, women are depicted as the “mothers of the world”:

“Here we have Human Motherhood —in full working use,” (...) “Nothing else except the literal sisterhood of our origin, and the far higher and deeper union of our social growth. The children in this country are the one center and focus of all our thoughts. Every step of our advance is always considered in its effect on them —on the race. You see, we are MOTHERS” (Gilman, 2011: 171).

Motherhood is clearly the basis for the collective wellbeing of this all-female society. Moreover, in her essay “His and Herland: Charlotte Perkins Gilman “Re-presents” Lester F. Ward”, the scholar Cynthia J. Davis studies the influence of the sociologist Lester F. Ward in Gilman’s work. Ward’s “Gynaecocentric Theory of Life” argues that women are the general species type for humans, hence “it becomes clear that it must be from the steady advance of woman rather than from the uncertain fluctuations of man that the sure and solid progress of the future is to come” (Ward, quoted in Davis 2003: 77). In addition, Davis notes that “Ward provided the theory that Gilman then appropriated, enlarged, and politicized in order to lend “scientific” credence to her arguments for a radically restructured future and a liberated gender politics” (Davis:



75). However, instead of deconstructing gender and racial stereotypes, Gilman's narrative perpetuates the social imbalances of the time in which the author lived.

During the early twentieth century, the influx of new types of immigrants that were arriving from Southern and Eastern Europe, along with Asia, preoccupied US-born citizens (Abate, 2008: 73). As a consequence, many American men and women began to speculate that the high rates of reproduction among the newcomers "would precipitate the extinction of the white race. As a result, nativism and xenophobia were not merely the standpoints of radical fringe groups, they became part of mainstream U.S. sentiment" (Abate: 73). For instance, Gilman published in 1908 the journal article "A Suggestion on the Negro Problem" where, along the lines of *Herland*, she draws a plan to help integrate the African-American community into American society:

We have to consider the unavoidable presence of a large body of aliens, of a race widely dissimilar and in many respects inferior, whose present status is to us a social injury. If we had left them alone in their own country this dissimilarity and inferiority would be, so to speak, none of our business (Gilman, 1908: 78).

However, the author's considerations about this "alien" segment of society that must be dealt with appropriately by American citizens does not seem to apply to her fictional world. The "strangers of alien race" (Gilman, 2011: 175) of *Herland* are in fact the three white male explorers, but they are cordially received by the women of this foreign land and are not confronted with apprehension. In fact, Van states that the group of women "don't seem to notice our being men (...) They treat us —well— just as they do one another. It's as if our being men was a minor incident" (Gilman: 142).

Nevertheless, the physical portrait of the Herlanders *does* illustrate some of the racial prejudices of the American writer. Prior to the discovery of this all-women country, the narrator describes its surroundings as of "strictly Amazonian nature" (Gilman: 121). This piece of information may indicate that the land is located in the heart of South America. However, once the three men are settled in the female country,

Van decides to read all about their history. Through a brief inspection of the land and its inhabitants, the sociologist has no doubt that these women “were of Aryan stock, and were once in contact with the best civilization of the old world”. He then specifies that they are white, “but somewhat darker than our northern races because of their constant exposure to sun and air” (Gilman: 162). Additionally, the portrayal of a land “as neat as a Dutch kitchen” (Gilman: 161) emphasizes the author’s preference for an unmixed racial supremacy. As Bernice Hausman suggests:

Gilman's racism, like her homophobia, was part of her evolutionary perspective. Her understanding of race involved the idea of differential development, and she opposed mixing racial groups that she perceived to be at different stages of development: in her view, this was the tragedy of the United States (Hausman, 1998: 503).

Throughout the narrative, Van enumerates other physical and psychological female attributes that suggest the subtle discrimination of marginalized sectors of society. In contrast with what the three comrades have imagined before their arrival in Herland, the women who inhabit the country are “tall, strong, healthy, and beautiful as a race, but differed individually in a wide range of feature, coloring, and expression” (Gilman, 2011: 180). As Michelle Ann Abate notes in the fourth chapter of her book *Tomboys: A Literary and Cultural History*, Gilman, “although commonly remembered for her ideas about social reform, she was also a lifelong devotee of, and outspoken advocate for, female athletics” (Abate, 2008: 75). In fact, as the author mentions in her autobiography, when she was younger she enjoyed running: “Each day I ran a mile, not for speed but for wind (...) I never was vain of my looks, nor of any professional achievements, but am absurdly vain of my physical strength and ability” (Gilman, 1990: 67). Indeed, Van is at ease with the idea that Herlanders do not brag about their physical appearance:

These women were not provocative (...) The thing that Terry had so complained of when we first came —that they weren't "feminine", they lacked "charm", now became a great comfort. Their vigorous beauty was an aesthetic pleasure, not an irritant. Their dress and ornaments had not a touch of the "come-and-find-me" element (Gilman, 2011: 221).

This assumption suggests that, in Herland, the freedom to express sexuality is quite controversial. Even though this new race of women had lived without men for two thousand years, there is no indication that Herlanders intended to arouse sexual attraction in men or that they were sexually attracted to them.

In fact, it seems that the stereotype of isolated, "unfeminine" women has a long history. The ancient Greek myth of Amazons depicts autonomous and independent females "who cultivated the land and worked in agriculture (...) They are women not subject to the control of men and, therefore, oppose the patriarchal system" (Roque, 2017: 39). Herland's matriarchy of parthenogenetically citizens, as it has been previously stated, does not need men to survive. Moreover, the impressive appearance of the tall, slim Amazon warriors is perceived in Herlanders' physique by the narrator during the first meeting of the explorers with the female community: "calm, grave, wise, wholly unafraid, evidently assured and determined (...) each was in the full bloom of rosy health, erect, serene, standing sure-footed and light as a pugilist" (Gilman, 2011: 133). Contrastively, in that same moment, the male visitors feel "like small boys, very small boys, caught doing mischief in some gracious lady's house" (Gilman: *idem*). This reversal of gender roles —that is, women's performance of masculine traits and men's submissive role- in a society that has not had any contact with masculine figures for two thousand years demonstrates that gender is, indeed, a social construct.

Moreover, it is judged that before Van, Jeff and Terry's arrival "there was no sex-feeling to appeal to, or practically none. Two thousand years' disuse had left very little of the instinct; also, we must remember that those who had at times manifested it as

atavistic exceptions were often, by that very fact, denied motherhood” (Gilman: 192). Therefore, it seems that lesbianism and sexual liberation were considered “unfit” traits for any Herlander to own. Contrastively, in the chapter “Their Religions and Our Marriages”, the three men’s decision to marry their respective love interests —and the corresponding acceptance of women- accentuates the strong influence of heterosexuality. Hausman addresses this issue in the article “Sex before Gender: Charlotte Perkins Gilman and the Evolutionary Paradigm of Utopia”:

Gilman believed that sexual relations apart from procreative purposes were indicative of the “excessive sex-distinction” in modern Western civilization. Thus, while she understood “sex” to be the vehicle for oppression precisely because of the way it was connected to an unequal economic relation, Gilman was not able to see institutionalized heterosexuality as a force that kept women dependent on men (Hausman, 1998: 503).

As it seems, Gilman holds a conservative view on the scope of female sexuality. The American writer does not question the superiority of the heterosexual union, which is remarkably celebrated in Herland. As Somel exclaims during the great day, “there has been nothing like this in the country since our Motherhood began! (...) You see, it is the dawn of a new era” (Gilman, 2011: 214). Furthermore, the expectations of marriage from each part are not similar; whereas Herlanders envision a new form of parenthood, men —especially Terry- want to spend their wedding night alone with their wives.

Another discriminatory element established in Gilman’s matriarchy is the absence of different body types. As Van declares, “physically [the women of Herland] were more alike than we, as they lacked all morbid or excessive types” (Gilman: 180). In addition, the widespread concept of women being athletic and strong implies the exclusion of disabled people, as it seems that rearing children in Herland was only in charge of women who were considered “fit”.

Therefore, motherhood and eugenics —that is to say, the planned breeding of people possessing “superior” traits- are the main manifestations of *Herland*’s dystopian

features. The sanctified value of motherhood is, indeed, a persistent *leit-motiv* within the narrative: “All that [Herlanders] ate was fruit of motherhood, from seed or egg or their product. By motherhood they were born and by motherhood they lived —life was, to them, just the long cycle of motherhood” (Gilman: 166). In addition, Van learns from her beloved Ellador and the community educators that motherhood is “not only a personal joy, but a nation’s hope” (Gilman: 164).

The history of Herland tells that after the tragedies that eliminated all men and slaves of the country, a group of highly-skilled “New Women” were needed in order to ensure a safe and thriving territory for the children to come. After a wretched period of time, a miracle happened: Maaia —who is the First Mother and the Goddess of Motherhood- bore five daughters by parthenogenesis. In turn, women follow the example of their mother-goddess, thus each one of them gave birth to five more daughters. Alys Weinbaum asserts that “the pure national genealogy and the unpolluted pedigree of each citizen render genetic filiation the dominant ideology in Herland. Herlanders are of “one family” descended from “one mother”, and thus the nationalist glue that binds them is their actual kinship” (Weinbaum, 2001: 284). Therefore, Gilman redefines the term motherhood as a thorough commitment: it is “the highest social service —a sacrament, really; that it is only undertaken once, by the majority of the population” and that “to bear more than one child is the very highest reward and honour in the power of the state” (Gilman, 2011: 173).

Seen from a twenty-first century perspective, this idealization of motherhood as a social duty is problematic, because it constrains women’s choices to focus solely on this task. Moreover, motherhood requires the community to prioritise the raising of children instead of making advances on inclusive social reforms or pursuing other endeavours. For instance, those Herlanders that possess one of the attributes disregarded by

Gilman's eugenic norm are asked to renounce motherhood in order that these "lower" characteristics are not passed on to later generations. As one of the women declares, "the more we love our children, the less we are willing to trust that process to unskilled hands—even our own" (Gilman: 185). On the whole, the selection of child-rearing experts creates a hierarchy of fit mothers, which consecutively indicates a lack of egalitarian social recognition and the discrimination of those who do not conform to the standard characteristics of Herlandian whiteness, physical fitness and motherly duty.

In chapter 6 "Comparisons are Odious", Van and his tutor Somel discuss the highly debated topic of abortion. The former wants to know how the descendants of Maaia dealt with five daughters:

(...) You have no tyrannical husbands to hold in check—and you surely do not destroy the unborn—"

The look of ghastly horror she gave me I shall never forget. She started from her chair, pale, her eyes blazing.

"Destroy the unborn—!" she said in a hard whisper. "Do men do that in your country?"

"Men!" I began to answer, rather hotly, and then saw the gulf before me. None of us wanted these women to think that OUR women, of whom we boasted so proudly, were in any way inferior to them. I am ashamed to say that I equivocated. I told her of certain criminal types of women—perverts, or crazy, who had been known to commit infanticide. I told her, truly enough, that there was much in our land which was open to criticism, but that I hated to dwell on our defects until they understood us and our conditions better (Gilman: 174).

This seems to suggest that the feminist Gilman was against abortion, which is perceived as a violating act against the sanctity of motherhood. Until the last third of the nineteenth century, this issue had not caused controversy in the US. However, some anti-abortion movements were connected with Nativism<sup>8</sup> and anti-Catholicism. In 1868,

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<sup>8</sup> The term Nativism is traditionally used by North-American scholars as the negative part of nationalism. The nativist political policy considers people from different cultural backgrounds and political traditions as a threat for American society. For further information, see William H. Katerberg's article "The Irony of Identity: An Essay on Nativism, Liberal Democracy, and Parochial Identities in Canada and the United States" (1995).

the American physician and anti-abortion leader Horatio R. Storer expressed his concerns on a country filled with “alien” children. As in *Herland*, Storer put nation’s hope in American women’s hands.

Despite Herlanders’ rejection of abortion, Gilman seems inclined to restrict birth control throughout her narrative. In contrast with the female citizens of their visitors’ country, the parthenogenetic women of Herland are in control of their bodies. They do not need abortion because eugenics ensures the fitness and purity of the mother and her respective children. On the whole, the perfected system that governs Herland is, as Andrew Christensen states, “less humanitarian and more racist, nationalist, classist, and even totalitarian. In the end, biological reproduction and social education in Herland are no less ‘mechanical’ than in that most famous of scientific dystopias” (Christensen, 2017: 299).

The radical transformation of nature and animal life is another characteristic feature of this overly-perfected society. Interestingly enough, the verbs “to cultivate” and “to breed” have a similar connotation within the narrative: “Those nation-loved children of theirs compared with the average in our country as the most perfectly cultivated, richly developed roses compare with —tumbleweeds” (Gilman, 2011: 176). In the old days, these mothers prioritized the cultivation of fruit- and nut- bearing trees and a large variety of seasonable crops in order to properly feed the “new female race”. The establishment of a plant-based lifestyle implies a more sustainable —and yet, unpolluted- country. Indeed, they do not have to waste litres of water in the production of meat products, as the only animals that inhabit Herland are birds and cats —the latter are “rigorously bred to destroy mice and moles” (Gilman: 158). Indeed, the communal ambition of growing and rearing faultless children has led women to exterminate a great number of undesirable species: “they took up too much room —we need all our land to

feed our people” (Gilman: 156). In Christensen’s article “Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *Herland* and the Tradition of the Scientific Utopia”, the scholar asserts that “control over nature” has tendency to “control over man” (Christensen, 2017: 297). It is reasonable to claim that the totalizing system of the nation has invaded the individual autonomy of each of the inhabitants, who have to think “in terms of the community,” like in the totalitarian regimes, because “their time-sense was not limited to the hopes and ambitions of an individual life” (Gilman, 2011: 181).

On the whole, the nation portrayed in *Herland* presents the author’s subjective idea of a thriving society ruled by parthenogenetic women. Nevertheless, the dystopic features of *Herland* seem to reveal the influence of early-twentieth-century conventional ideas in Gilman’s narrative. Robert O. Evans states that “a defining characteristic of the dystopian genre must be a warning to the reader that something must and, by implication, can be done in the present to avoid the future” (Evans 1973, quoted in Sargent 1994: 6). While the American writer was concerned about the unjust situation of white women within early twentieth-century US society, the narrative elements I have analysed in this section predict future anxieties that continue to be discussed today. Moreover, the origination of female social movements such as the Black Feminism in the 1960s or the more recent Argentinian push to decriminalise abortion —both movements deal with racial empowerment and women’s right to choose to control over their own bodies- implies active participation to improve critical conditions similar to the ones depicted in *Herland*.



### 3. Conclusions and Further Research

A close analysis of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's primary texts and their critical studies has allowed me to validate the research question and to claim that, indeed, *Herland's* fictional society has dystopian elements. These, in turn, reflect early twentieth-century American social anxieties. Two main questions were set out at the beginning of this dissertation: to what extent does Herland's society conform to the utopian genre? Can it be interpreted as a dystopia? As an answer, this dissertation has attempted to confirm that a country that marginalizes individuals and denies them full access to social rights is not a prototypical utopian land.

First of all, it has been examined how, by using the literary genre of utopia, late nineteenth and early twentieth-century female authors have envisioned better opportunities for women in fictional communities. In spite of the popularization of the "Angel in the House" and "True Womanhood"s Victorian images, Herland's citizens active participation in social affairs do challenge these patriarchal icons.

The character of Vandyck plays, indeed, an important role within the narrative. As it has been stated, each of the male characters embodies a radical position within the masculinity spectrum. However, Van's rational assertions and his thirst for knowledge make him more aware of patriarchal discourse's deficiencies. Nevertheless, Gilman does not question the mainstream thought of late nineteenth and early twentieth-century American society. In fact, she shares some of its views in *Herland*. This is seen in the society's direct attempts to exclude certain social groups from her "utopian paradise".

In summary, the overall contribution of my TFG aims to motivate future discussion on the dual concepts of utopian tradition and dystopia depicted in *Herland*. Nevertheless, a more enticing area of study would be to establish a connection between the novel here analysed and its sequel, *With Her in Ourland*. Moreover, I think that it

would be of interest to analyse recent narratives that deal with feminism and use Gilman's novel and ideologies as a foil to examine the past and critique the present evolution of women's rights. Indeed, a topic of further research that I find appealing would be to compare *Herland* with contemporary dystopian novels such as Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*.

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