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## Sexuality and Power in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland*

Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860-1935) was a pioneering feminist thinker who explored the nature of male and female sexuality in her utopian novels, the most important of which is *Herland*.<sup>1</sup> In this novel, she raises the question whether the emancipation of women would be better served by a degree of sexual continence rather than by a demand for sexual permissiveness for both men and women.

Gilman's attitude towards sexuality has sometimes, in more recent years, caused critics to attack her for being both prudish and out-dated. I want to challenge this simplistically Victorian image of Gilman by looking more closely at her portrayal of the key characters in *Herland* in order to show that her ideas remain relevant to today's feminist debate. In order to reappraise the radical potential of Gilman's sexual politics, one has to link it to the debate that was going on in the 1960's and 70's about the real issues behind what has become known as the sexual revolution. One of the most challenging statements of this idea of sexual liberation as being yet another form of women's sexual oppression can be found in Susan Sontag's *Partisan Review* article of 1973 in which she writes: "[W]ithout a change in the very norms of sexuality, the liberation of women is a meaningless goal. Sex as such is not liberating for women. Neither is more sex."<sup>2</sup> Rather than considering only the fact that Gilman argued against sexual promiscuity, I want to show that Gilman had a much more profound understanding of the real relationship between sexuality and women's oppression, which has only later become one of the central issues within feminism.

In order to understand how Gilman's sexual politics is developed in *Herland*, I want to examine the attitudes of the male visitors of Herland as well as the way Gilman creates a new 'race' of women in complete contrast to early 20<sup>th</sup> century American women. The clearest example of how Gilman understood what is at stake in human sexuality can be seen by examining the relationship between Alima, one of the young Herlanders, and Terry, who epitomises the male chauvinist and androcentric culture of Gilman's contemporary society.

The character of Terry, who is one of the three male explorers discovering Herland, is from the very start depicted as a predator. His companions' nickname for him: "Old Nick" (*Herland* 1) underlines a parallel between Terry and the devil himself. This early parallel shows that he poses a threat

to the integrity of Herland. From the other two men's point of view he is also seen as a typical male seducer, a charmer with much success with women. The juxtaposition between the threat Terry represents, together with his more playful seducer personality, shows that Terry's companions do not take his sexism seriously. The image of Terry, however, slowly, but in the end dramatically, shifts as it is critically reappraised through the more feminist values of the women of Herland. His relationship with one of them, Alima, serves to expose Terry, and with him the whole of patriarchal society, as being highly disrespectful to, and oppressive of women in general.

Women, in Terry's mind can be divided in two groups: "[T]hose he want[s] and those he d[oes]n't." (*Herland* 21) This typically draws attention to the way women are thought of in patriarchal society. The interest they generate among men is only connected to their sexual potential, their power of physical attraction. Even though Van, the male narrator of the story, is not as bad as Terry, he still shares this same mercenary attitude towards women: "'Woman' in the abstract is young, and, we assume, charming. As they get older they pass off the stage, somehow, into private ownership mostly, or out of it altogether." (*Herland* 20) From these comments one can clearly see that women are thought of merely as more or less desirable objects in the men's sexualised imaginations. More importantly Van also introduces here the concept of the ownership of women's bodies. The women men find attractive are appropriated by them and are labelled, so to speak, as their private property. The ones they don't might as well not exist. The fact that *Herland* is also a tale about colonisation helps us draw a further parallel between the men's feeling of entitlement to the countries they discover and their claim to ownership of the bodies of the women they marry.

The culmination, in *Herland*, of Gilman's argument about the unequal power relation between men and women and, as a result, the violent and predatory potential of men's sexuality is of course Terry's attempted rape of Alima. This abusive tendency in Terry's behaviour is also hinted at very early in the novel. When the men first meet their future wives, Terry tries to attract the girls with a piece of jewellery, which he himself calls "bait", and he gets ready to grab at the girl should she want to have it. It is the narrator's comment on Terry's act which is the most telling: "I didn't like the look in his eyes — it was like a creature about to spring. I could already see it happen — the dropped necklace, the sudden clutching hand, the girl's sharp cry as he seized her and drew her in." (16) At this moment, we feel that Van realises with horror what Terry is really capable of doing. Alima, Terry's future wife, is already the intended victim here.

At the end of the novel, Gilman clearly links Terry's attempted rape of Alima with 'normal' patriarchal behaviour. Terry's excuse for the rape is the very widespread belief in Gilman's society that women want to be mastered, something which we still often hear today. Besides highlighting the consequences that such dangerous patriarchal assumptions about

<sup>1</sup> Gilman, Charlotte Perkins. *Herland*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1979.

<sup>2</sup> Susan Sontag, "The Third World of Women," *Partisan Review* Vol. XL, no. 2 (1973): 180-206.

women can have, Gilman adds a criticism of American institutions which not only defend but also perpetuate such violent and oppressive behaviour against women. Her main target in this context is the judiciary system. As Van is writing the story, he adds a telling comment about early 20<sup>th</sup> century America when he says: "In a court in our country [Terry] would have been held quite "within his rights," of course." (132) This goes to show that the ownership of a woman by her husband is as good as written into the law.

It is in this context of the threat posed by men's attitudes and behaviour that Gilman's sexual politics of continence has to be understood. The character who conveys this message of self-control is Van's wife Ellador. Of course one can wonder why or how the Herlanders have developed such an understanding of sexual relations. Sexuality as we know it, or as Gilman's contemporaries knew it, is unknown to them. It is obvious, however, that the only way we can make sense of their analysis is as a response to the oppressive state of affairs which Gilman herself knew about and wanted to address. Ellador's reluctance to have non-procreative sex with her husband, for example, reflects Gilman's perception of sex as a diversion from the real problems of women's liberation. She was indeed very aware that the fact that the removal of the sexual restraint for women far from ensuring them the same status as men would only add to their traditional function as playthings for men and would postpone their full enjoyment of a life as dignified equals to men.

In the novel, Terry's and Van's expectations to have sex as a right they are granted in marriage, and their insistence on gratifying this 'right', despite the feelings of their wives, show that this desire is not based on mutual needs and yearnings but only on what the men want.

Van, therefore, also belongs to this category of sexually prejudiced men who are the product of an androcentric or patriarchal culture. He is of course not as prejudiced and oppressive as Terry but his milder patriarchal attitudes are not meant to minimise the extent to which patriarchy is harmful to women. They show on the contrary that there is no escaping these sexist attitudes when one lives in an androcentric culture. Van's character shows that even well-meaning men, the ones who do not openly abuse women, nevertheless make behaviour such as Terry's possible, since they themselves do not question the basic assumptions about women's inherent inferiority. An analogy can be made with the escalator system, where you do not need to do anything actively to be carried along. In a way, sexism is rather like an escalator that carries all men along and conveys on them privileges whether they actively oppress women or not. The only way out of this system is for men to step off the escalator and actively reject and work against patriarchy. This is something which Gilman hopes to contribute towards by educating men and women through her stories. Van's transformation at the end of the novel underlines this educational function of Gilman's texts.

Both Terry's early physical provocation and the more serious rape

attempt at the end fail of course since Alima, Terry's wife, is very strong and able to defend herself. Gilman's critique of men's violent sexual tendencies under patriarchy is however not lost on the reader since Gilman makes sure always to compare the Herlanders with contemporary American women. It is, as always in utopia, through comparison between ideal and reality that the reader really gets an understanding of how the society which is being criticised works or rather fails to work.

The women of Herland are therefore depicted in complete contrast to the sexually and socially subjected women of early 20<sup>th</sup> century America. Their relations to their bodies is the key to their integrity and self-confidence. They are without doubt the sole owners of their bodies. There is no shame attached to them. On the contrary, the Herlanders are proud of their bodies and train them so that they serve their own purpose, not that of men. This is why all of the men's attempts to trick the Herlanders into submission by flattery, gifts, and plain pleas to indulge them do not work on these women. This is what Gilman imagined for women in the future: a society where they could be sexually and socially their own women.

The way the relationships between men and women are described in the novel and the way the Herlanders themselves are portrayed highlight an important trait in Gilman's thinking about sexuality, that is the fundamental link between sexuality and power, and the question of who has the control over women's bodies.

It is obvious that today, in the media, questions about women and sexuality are more or less left unproblematised since there is a belief that women's oppression is behind us and that we are now almost completely liberated. This is something which is implied in the so-called post-feminist discourse.

Even if it would be impossible today to adopt Gilman's proposed solutions to women's sexuality uncritically, I would nevertheless argue that her analysis as developed in her utopia *Herland* is still very much to the point in today's debate. It allows us to recognise that the fundamental power structure which Gilman sees at the centre of sexual relationships between men and women is still profoundly unchanged. It is also important to give back to Gilman some credit for her insight into human sexuality rather than to only condemn her for the solutions she proposes. These are admittedly limited by the historical period in which she lived and by her focus, also typical of the time, on economic oppression, which she saw as being at the core of the subjection of women.

As Susan Sontag wrote in the article I already mentioned at the beginning of my paper: "Any serious program for liberating women must start from the premise that liberation is not just about *equality* (the "liberal" idea). It is about *power*." (Sontag 185) It is obvious that this equality has not been achieved today, let alone a real change in the power structure. And this is what we have to focus on changing if we ever want to move on from the problems that Gilman herself already confronted more than a century ago.