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A Eugenicist's Utopia: Selective Reproduction and Intolerance of the "Other" in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland*

In 1883, Sir Francis Galton first introduced the term "eugenics" to express the role of hereditary science in the improvement of the human race. The concept was coined after appearing in his book, *Inquiries into Human Faculty and its Development*, in which Galton defines eugenics as, "the investigation of...the conditions under which men of a high type are produced" (Galton 30). He further promotes the practice of selective reproduction and explains his perspective that, "whenever a low race is preserved under conditions of life that exact a high level of efficiency...the few best specimens of that race can alone be allowed to become parents, and not many of their descendants can be allowed to live. On the other hand; if a higher race be substituted for the low one, all this terrible misery disappears" (Galton 199). This undeniably biased position originated during the first stirrings of the Progressive movement which gained popularity during the turn of the century.

As the Progressive Era continued to gain support, many of its followers became interested in nativist science, hereditarianism, and evolutionary theory. The movement, defined by social and political reform, was widely supported by feminists and other activists during the early 20th century. Still, Progressive reformers often maintained racist and prejudiced ideals, especially those which aligned with existing social hierarchies. As a well-read author, feminist, and Progressive during this period, Charlotte Perkins Gilman subscribed to many of these principles.

Like many supporters of eugenics, Gilman was interested in genetic science as well as its reinforcement of racism, ableism, and elitism. She agreed with Galton's argument that eugenics should, "consist in watching for the indications of superior strains or races, and in so favoring them that their progeny shall outnumber and gradually replace that of the old one" (Galton 199-200). In an essay titled "A Suggestion on the Negro Problem" from the *American Journal of Sociology*, Gilman engages with nativist rhetoric and expresses her concerns regarding the mixing of races in the United States. She explains, "in a certain number of cases the negro has developed an ability to enter upon our plane of business life...this proves the ultimate capacity of the race to do so; there remains the practical problem of how to accelerate this process. 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" (Gilman, "A Suggestion" 78). Later, she proposes a solution to this problem of "backward citizens," as she writes, "the whole body of negroes who do not progress, who are not self-supporting, who are degenerating into an increasing percentage of social burdens or actual criminals, should be taken hold of by the state" (Gilman, "A Suggestion" 81). Evidently, Gilman's personal beliefs concurred with those of hereditary science, which at this time, was largely defined by racism. She agreed with these notions of hereditarianism, especially regarding the influence of genetics, rather than environment, on intelligence, personality, and ability.

These biases were central to Progressive Era feminism and its pursuit of improved social conditions. Gilman and her fellow feminists began asking questions of how to improve these conditions for women, as well as how women could work to improve the quality of the race. In an article titled "Unnatural Selection: Mothers, Eugenic Feminism, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's Regeneration Narratives," Dana Seitler suggests that this view of eugenics allowed

white women to position themselves as a “a counter-discourse, an antidote...to the problem of racial contamination” (Seitler 69). Women who endorsed these ideas often felt a moral obligation to protect their families as well as the whole United States from contamination by the unfit and degenerate populations. For this reason, they promoted extreme measures of population management such as sterilization and the persuasion of poor women to use birth control. Seitler goes on to explain that, “for Gilman and other progressive feminists, eugenic theory allowed them to imagine different configurations of gender and power in relation to the social body. The determinations of eugenics aided in the production of an idealized model of femininity, a realignment of gender with a set of moral and biological norms and a system of social value” (Seitler 69). Thus, eugenic science became a way for white women to reimagine their significance and ability to improve society.

Due to the prevalence of these considerations, Charlotte Perkins Gilman chose to examine the role of eugenics and womanhood in her 1915 novel, *Herland*. In this utopian, feminist story, Gilman describes an isolated community of women who peacefully coexist, thrive, and reproduce through parthenogenesis. Three men embark on a journey to discover this strange land and are met with an unprecedented type of society made up of highly intelligent, strong, and self-sufficient women. Additionally, a substantial portion of Gilman’s novel depicts motherhood within Herland and its integral role in societal organization.

This is exemplified by the Herlanders’ encouragement of all community members to help raise their daughters as well as the designation of specialists to educate them once they reach the proper age. Thus, maternal care is shared among the women of Herland and extended to all its children. One Herlander describes the origin of these spiritual views of motherhood by explaining to the men, “they were Mothers, not in our sense of helpless involuntary fecundity,

forced to fill and overfill the land, every land, and then see their children suffer, sin, and die, fighting horribly with one another; but in the sense of Conscious Makers of People. Mother-love with them was not a brute passion, a mere “instinct,” a wholly personal feeling; it was—a religion” (Gilman, *Herland*). Through this radical version of motherhood, Gilman is able to criticize and contrast the values of the United States. Rather than being forced into motherhood due to a lack of reproductive rights as many American women are, Herlanders are in control of their reproductive practices and therefore view motherhood as a sacred opportunity.

While these ideals are represented positively by Gilman, they are organized and structured through eugenic science. Despite being cherished by the people of Herland, the system of reproduction is standardized and highly regulated. Gilman describes that during the establishment of Herland, members of the community recognized the dangers of overpopulation and its potential to limit resources and create poverty. They believed that by implementing a limit on the number of daughters each woman could have, they could create a more sustainable society. One Herlander named Somel explains, “the reason our children are so—so fully loved, by all of us, is that we never—any of us—have enough of our own” (Gilman, *Herland*). As Somel indicates, each woman is allowed a specific number of children and must share them with the rest of the community. Despite many of these women wanting more, they are typically restricted from birthing additional children. As such, the Herlanders, like American women, are controlled and monitored in terms of their reproduction. Although Gilman attempts to develop a utopia for these women to freely exercise their bodily rights, her belief in reproductive regulation disrupts this narrative.

Along with this, the characteristics of Herland’s children are further regulated through a policy of “negative eugenics.” This term, which Gilman borrows from Francis Galton, explains

how purportedly negative qualities were bred out of the Herlanders. As the male travelers learn more about Herland's history, they discover that certain women were deemed unfit to reproduce and were therefore restricted from doing so. Gilman describes this method of population control as an "appalling sacrifice" and laments that Herlanders, "are commonly willing to "lay down our lives" for our country, but they had to forego motherhood for their country—and it was precisely the hardest thing for them to do" (Gilman, *Herland*). Alternatively, women who possessed desirable characteristics were encouraged to reproduce in order to pass their traits on to the future generation of Herlanders. While motherhood is considered "the highest social service," it is highly systematized and, "is only undertaken once, by the majority of the population; that those held unfit are not allowed even that; and that to be encouraged to bear more than one child is the very highest reward and honor in the power of the state" (Gilman, *Herland*). In this way, eugenic values are enforced as the practices and ideals surrounding motherhood are continually manipulated in an effort to improve the quality of the race.

This process is dictated by the "Over Mothers," who act as a unique form of aristocracy, and have the power to make decisions regarding the Herlanders' reproductive rights and protocols. This governing body is given the task of monitoring the quality of the race and ensuring its gradual improvement. As Somel explains, "we have, of course, made it our first business to train out, to breed out, when possible, the lowest types" (Gilman, *Herland*). Furthermore, it is quickly revealed that the presumed "lowest types" of women are those with dark skin, disabilities, illnesses, or that lack high levels of intelligence. The travelers recognize this pattern and describe, "these people were of Aryan stock, and were once in contact with the best civilization of the old world. They were "white," but somewhat darker than our northern races because of their constant exposure to sun and air" (Gilman, *Herland*). Gilman goes on to

detail the other elements of this supposedly superior race as she describes, “they were tall, strong, healthy, and beautiful as a race” (Gilman, *Herland*). Through these strict methods, the Herlanders preserve and advance their perceived utopian society.

In an article titled “Her Body, Herland: Reproductive Health and Dis/topian Satire in Charlotte Perkins Gilman,” Stephanie Peebles Tavera addresses how Gilman’s belief in eugenics informs her portrayal of this idealized and elitist community. The Herlanders develop their version of a utopian society by enforcing rigorous standards of excellence and excluding those who do not conform to them. Tavera analyzes that, “Gilman’s gender-minimizing feminist argument takes a discriminatory turn, for her repeated praise of Herlandian whiteness, physical fitness, and intellectual performance suggests that such qualities serve as utopian criteria for female bodies” (Tavera 12). These attitudes are a result of the growing popularity of evolutionary science during the turn of the century. As the population of the United States continued to diversify, eugenicists used these theories to promote conformity, monoculturalism, and even selective breeding. For Gilman, these prejudiced conceptions presented a valuable lens through which to discuss her perceptions of utopia as represented by the idyllic society of Herland.

For these reasons, Gilman chooses to carefully organize her utopian society to demonstrate the benefits of a restrictive culture. She extends these ideas to all elements of the Herlanders’ lives as they have learned to produce superior beings in every sense of the word. It is described that, “physiology, hygiene, sanitation, physical culture—all that line of work had been perfected long since. Sickness was almost wholly unknown among them... They were a clean-bred, vigorous lot, having the best of care, the most perfect living conditions always” (Gilman, *Herland*). Along with this, Gilman excludes disabled bodies from the population of Herland.

Tavera expresses that, “she excludes other female bodies from her narrative, specifically women with disabilities and their off-spring. She does so purposefully, since like many sex education theorists and feminists, Gilman defended birth control as a form of positive eugenics for improving sexual hygiene” (Tavera 6). Gilman positions those with disabilities or physical ailments as inferior and a necessary sacrifice to improve the overall health of the population. In many instances throughout *Herland*, Gilman inserts her idealistic belief that selective breeding can benefit the race in all facets of life.

Evidently, the organization of this community extends far beyond racial homogeneity as Gilman imagines a society made up of women with similar appearances, opinions, and intellects. In her essay titled, “The Social Inventor: Charlotte Perkins Gilman and the (Re) Production of Perfection,” Jennifer Hudak suggests that, “unlike animals and less civilized people, the Herlanders are not subject to “helpless involuntary fecundity;” they choose not only how many people to “make” but what kinds of people to make, thus the social as well as racial homogeneity among the Herlanders” (Hudak 470). Their community is effective and efficient as its members agree on how it should be run, which Gilman further asserts as a positive result of selective breeding. These opinions are naturally bred into the Herlanders who are also not exposed to people with diverse opinions or experiences. Hudak goes on to explain this intolerance as she writes, “Gilman’s belief...was that humanity would progress to the extent that each individual would agree on the best course for society, and that they would each do their best to follow that course. Implicit in this belief was the understanding that individuals who would not progress, or who could not for reasons of mental or physical infirmity or race, had no place in the ideal society (Hudak 457-458). Each of the Herlanders internally understand and agree on the most advantageous methods of organization for their society.

Thus, the Herlanders' natural proclivity to cooperate is extended to all practices within their utopian society, including their methods of education. Gilman depicts a, "highly developed system of education so bred into them that even if they were not teachers by profession they all had a general proficiency in it—it was second nature to them" (Gilman, *Herland*). As a result, the Herlanders are portrayed as a people that have been, "steadily developing in mental capacity, in will power, in social devotion... for a good many centuries now with inevitable success" (Gilman, *Herland*). These practices further contribute to Gilman's construction of a supposedly perfected race. While she recognizes the significance of education, Gilman's dismissal of diverse forms of thought undermines the value of learning within this community. Regardless of their education, each student will grow up to think, participate, and conform in the same fashion as their mothers. As such, Gilman's narrow conceptions regarding the appearance of an efficient society serve to expose how prejudice shapes her utopian ideals.

To represent these ideals, Gilman expresses the Herlanders' implicit conformity of thought as a "natural condition" (Gilman, *Herland*). She describes how the women productively organize their community in order to create a sustainable and fruitful society for themselves and their daughters. Throughout *Herland*, Gilman expresses that the women appreciate the benefits of eugenic science and are grateful to be, "born to it, reared in it, that it was as natural and universal with them as the gentleness of doves or the alleged wisdom of serpents" (Gilman, *Herland*). Hudak evaluates the effectiveness of this likeminded community as she considers, "by containing and "curing" those with dissident views, and by "preventing" others from being born, the Herlanders ensure that the only women who remain exist in perfect agreement with each other, untroubled by any element that might disrupt the community's efficiency" (Hudak 473). As Gilman asserts, eugenic science has allowed these women to be, "moved by precisely the

same feelings, to the same end” (Gilman, *Herland*). While Gilman depicts this conformity as instinctive, the attitudes displayed by the Herlanders are a result of carefully manipulated breeding tactics.

For these reasons, it is clear that intolerance towards the “other” and all those deemed inferior plays an integral role in the creation of Gilman’s utopia. She develops a culture reliant on conformity and prejudice towards those who do not fit into a carefully designed mold. This idealism regarding such exclusionary tactics serves to represent Gilman’s perspective on the necessity of improving social conditions for women. Still, in her attempt to develop this feminist utopia, Gilman turns to hereditarianism to inform her depiction of an improved race. Like many white feminists during the turn of the century, Gilman embraces popular eugenic ideals as a means of progressing society past what she understood to be an uncivilized state. In this way, the utopia of Herland could not be successful without discriminatory practices and intolerant attitudes.

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