

Reimagining Gender Roles in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland*

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Abstract

Herland by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, presents a vision of how women were viewed in American society and how these perceptions influenced their status at that time. *Herland* imagines a world where only women live. When the male characters enter this unknown place, they encounter a society that challenges their fixed ideas about gender roles, civilization, and power. Through the characters in the story, Gilman criticizes patriarchy and shows how a feminist way of thinking could exist in such an imagined society. The novel first follows the usual, fixed ideas about men and women that society often creates by dividing them into two opposite groups. Then, in the matriarchal society it describes, it turns these common traits upside down, presenting them in a completely different way.

Key Words: Perceptions, Gender roles, Patriarchy, Feminist way, Matriarchal Society

Introduction:

Herland (1915) by Charlotte Perkins Gilman is a utopian novel that offers a sharp and often humorous criticism of American society during her time. The story focuses on three men—Van, Jeff, and Terry—who come across a hidden and unknown land called Herland. Due to a natural disaster long ago, this country has been ruled and inhabited only by women for nearly two thousand years. Over time, these women developed the ability to

reproduce without men through parthenogenesis. The story is told by Van who describes how he and his friends are captured easily, treated kindly and gradually taught the language, culture, history, laws and education system of this all-female society. His account is based on what he learns from three women teachers, along with his own observations, thoughts and readings from Herland's libraries. Through his narration, readers get a clear and detailed picture of this unique country. In *A Journey of Feminist Rebellion Through Charlotte Perkins Gilman's Short Story The Yellow Wallpaper and Her Novel Herland*, Arzu Ozyon asserts: "Herland is considered to be the product of the writer's period of maturity as a feminist...and is viewed as the peak of her career as a feminist" (119).

Herland is shown as a peaceful and well-organized society with a strong and scientific agricultural system. It is carefully developed by women who place great importance on motherhood, as well as the happiness and well-being of children. After living there for a year, Van, Jeff and Terry fall in love with three women—Ellador, Celis and Alima—whom they meet on their first day in the country. However, the differences between the values of Herland and their own world create conflicts in these relationships. Jeff quickly accepts the ideas and way of life in Herland. Van also changes over time, especially through his conversations with Ellador, which make him question his earlier beliefs. In contrast, Terry fails to understand his own male-centered attitudes and their harmful effects. Van becomes more aware of the weaknesses of the male-dominated society he comes from and begins to feel uneasy about it. *Herland* is an interesting and convincing work. Gilman uses this imagined women-centered society to highlight the problems and inequalities present in real, male-dominated societies. By describing Herland's ideas about areas like economy, education, clothing, prisons, parenting, relationships and social organization, she suggests possible solutions to the issues of modern American life.

Exploring the Unknown: The Search for Herland:

The story is told by Vandyck Jennings who describes the journey that led to the discovery of Herland. He travels with two other men, Terry O. Nicholson, also called Old Nick and Jeff Margrave. The three set out to explore an unknown area, guided by stories and rumours shared by local tribes. Each of these men represents a different type of thinking common in the early twentieth century. Terry is rich, bold and strongly interested in adventure and discovery. Jeff is kind and idealistic and he admires the beauty of nature

and life. Vandyck is a sociologist who looks at society in a logical and scientific way. Their shared interest in science and exploration brings them together for this journey. However, their views about women and gender roles are shaped by their own personalities and backgrounds. Terry has a clearly patriarchal attitude towards women. Jeff tends to see women in a romantic and idealized way. Vandyck stands between the two, offering a more balanced and thoughtful view based on reason and observation. During their journey, they hear many local stories about a place called, Herland where only women live. At first, they find the idea of a society without men where women are the only members and also the leaders of culture and civilization. Their curiosity pushes them to explore this mysterious land further.

Male Bias and Gender Stereotypes:

The three male explorers believe that women are naturally argumentative and unable to work together or build an organized society. This idea reflects a common sexist belief that groups of women cannot remain stable without male control. Through these attitudes, the author reveals the deep-rooted assumptions the men hold about women's abilities in social life. Gilman shows how patriarchal thinking often treats disorder as a feminine trait, while linking reason and structure only with men. In this way, she questions the belief that social order is created only by men and not by all human beings. Terry strongly believes that women are naturally jealous, competitive and unable to form true unity, especially when it comes to motherhood. He thinks that maternal feelings lead to conflict instead of cooperation. Gilman uses Terry's views to show how patriarchal thinking presents women as emotionally unstable and socially weak. His ideas reduce women's relationships to simple rivalry. However, the novelist challenges this by presenting Herland as a society where motherhood becomes a source of unity, shared responsibility, harmony and intelligent cooperation. Terry's thinking serves as a contrast to highlight the strength of this women-centered society. Jennings, who appears more logical, also holds biased views, though he presents them in a scientific way. By showing his perspective, Gilman points out how so-called scientific ideas were often used to justify inequality between men and women. His confidence in such thinking reveals how deeply these biased beliefs were accepted in society.

Feminist Strength and Reversal of Patriarchal Ideas”

Gilman uses clear and lively descriptions to show the strength and ability of the women in Herland. The male explorers expect the women to be weak and shy. Instead, they

meet women who are confident, calm and completely fearless. They move freely and easily, showing no sign of worry in front of them. Rather than acting nervous, the women treat the situation almost like a game. Their quick and balanced movements challenge the

Men's belief that women are physically weak. Gilman makes it clear that such limits on women are not natural but created by society. When given freedom, women can be just as strong or even stronger than men. When the explorers reach the town, they see the true collective strength of the women. The women do not panic or lose control; instead, they stand together with unity and discipline. This directly challenges the idea that women are emotionally unstable. The most powerful moment comes when the women easily overpower the men. This completely reverses traditional expectations. The most striking feminist moment occurs when the women physically overpower the men. The narrator remarks: "...each of us was seized by five women, each holding arm and leg or head; we were lifted like children, straddling helpless children, and borne outward, wriggling indeed, but most ineffectually. We were borne inside, struggling manfully, but held secure most womanfully" (21).

In Herland, women are not in need of protection, they are the ones in control. The presence of strong female leaders further supports this idea, showing that leadership and authority can belong to women just as much as men. Gilman also criticizes patriarchal thinking by placing men in a position where they are controlled and dependent, much like women have been in history. This reversal exposes how men often assume they should have power and control. Terry, in particular, feels uncomfortable when he is treated like someone weak and dependent. His reaction shows how deeply he believes in male dominance. The explorers are surprised to find a society where women are capable, independent and in charge.

Another important idea is that Herland removes the usual way women are seen as objects. The women do not look at the men with attraction. Instead, they see them simply as human beings. This shows a society where gender does not decide power or relationships. Gilman presents a world where women do not depend on male approval and are not reduced to their appearance. The novel also challenges the belief that women are less rational or intelligent. The women of Herland are calm, logical and cooperative. Their system of discipline is fair and thoughtful, unlike the aggressive and unfair systems often seen in male-dominated societies. They question the men carefully, use evidence and show

strong reasoning. Their society is well-organized, with advanced systems of education, health and social planning. Through this, Gilman shows that women are fully capable of leadership, science and critical thinking. Herland becomes a powerful example that gender inequality is not natural but created by society. By showing women as intelligent, organized and strong, Gilman clearly rejects the old belief that women are inferior to men.

Conclusion:

Herland ultimately emerges as a powerful feminist re-envisioning of social order where the absence of patriarchal authority does not lead to chaos, but rather to harmony, efficiency and collective well-being. Charlotte Perkins Gilman skillfully dismantles the long-held assumption that male dominance is essential for societal progress, exposing instead how such authority is historically constructed and maintained through unequal power relations. A central achievement of the novel lies in its radical redefinition of motherhood. Unlike patriarchal frameworks that confine motherhood within restrictive domestic boundaries and associate it with self-sacrifice and loss of individuality, *Herland* elevates it into a shared, conscious and socially valued institution. Motherhood becomes not merely a biological function but a disciplined, intellectual and ethical responsibility, nurtured through education, cooperation and communal support. In doing so, Gilman challenges the essentialist notion that maternal competence is innate, asserting instead that it is cultivated through knowledge and collective effort.

Furthermore, the novel critiques the fragility of patriarchal masculinity through characters like Terry O. Nicholson whose sense of superiority collapses when removed from the structures that sustain it. His reliance on inherited privilege rather than inherent capability underscores the constructed nature of male dominance. In contrast, the women of Herland embody autonomy, rationality and social responsibility, redefining participation in public life beyond gendered limitations. By imagining a self-sufficient, cooperative and intellectually vibrant female society, Gilman not only subverts traditional gender roles but also offers a visionary critique of existing social systems. *Herland* thus stands as a seminal feminist work that reimagines gender, power and motherhood, urging readers to reconsider the possibilities of a more equitable and consciously structured world.

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