

# 'The Best Civilization of the Old World': A Quick Look at Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland*, Humanity, and Racist Ideologies

Kimberly Davis

When reflecting on Progressive Era literature, one can be sure that the name "Charlotte Perkins Gilman" will enter the discussion soon enough. Known for her allegorical expertise, this feminist reformer's values graced the world of literature with their revolutionary and insightful approach on motherhood, womanhood, and humanity as a whole. Now, although Gilman's works have offered readers a philosophical outlook on these matters, it is important to recognize where her narratives fall short—especially in regard to racial equality.

In this analysis, I will be exploring one of Gilman's most renowned texts, *Herland*, and considering an aspect of this novel that seemingly offers a sustainable solution for domestic/social reform and another that, from my interpretation, represents a substantially problematic one from the perspective of race.

## The Conventional

An overarching concept in Gilman's *Herland* is humanity—an umbrella which includes all humans, all genders, collectively. With her work, Gilman urges the reader to consider the specific genders of 'man' and 'woman' not as separate socialized entities but as kindred, intertwined ones. In doing this, readers come face-to-face with what makes us similar, as beings, rather than allowing for clear distinctions to be drawn across identities. This can be seen in an exchange between Somel, a Herlandian woman, and Vandyck Jennings, one of the three well-traveled men. Somel states, "'We can quite see that we do not seem like—woman—to you. Of course, in a bisexual race the distinctive feature of each sex must be intensified. But surely there are characteristics enough which belong to People, aren't there? That's what I mean about you being more like us—more like People'" (90). Considering the novel in the context of the Progressive era, the introduction of this commonality could be suggestive of proposed social change—to view women as *humans* (not the skewed perception of the American *woman*), capable of engaging in public social efforts and initiatives outside of the home; whether that be purely in regard to domesticity or broadened to include the community.

## The Controversial

Although the concept of a humanistic, or human-forward, community has its utopian characteristics, it becomes tainted in the racial sense when Gilman infuses her eugenic beliefs with these supposed 'ideals.' Eugenics, in simple terms, is the belief in and/or practice of population control and improvement through selective breeding. During the Progressive Era, the eugenically favored population were those of European (white) descent, while many of those deemed 'unfavorable' or 'unfit' were immigrants and/or people of color. Gilman exemplifies eugenic values when she has Vandyck observe, "There is no doubt in my mind that [the women of Herland] were of Aryan stock, and were once in contact with the best civilization of the old world" (55). She further integrates her eugenic beliefs through the Herlandian Moadine, who explains, "'[We] made it our first business to train out, to breed out, when possible the lowest types . . . If the girl showing bad qualities had still the



*Herland* cover redesign by Julia Connolly and illustration by Petra Börner (2015).

power to appreciate social duty, we appealed to her, by that, to renounce motherhood. Some of the few worst types were, fortunately, unable to reproduce'" (83). Through these statements and an awareness for Gilman's use of social allegory, readers can conclude her standpoint, racially, in the conversation surrounding eugenics—especially with her utopian world, her 'perfect human race,' being made up of solely white individuals.

In a way, this is where thinking "in terms of the community" rather than in "the hopes and ambitions of an individual life" (80) could become problematic. When it comes to intersectional oppressions (such as racism in addition to sexism), there really is no 'catchall' solution for improving these conditions. And, certainly, there is no solution of any sort that should involve the restriction or elimination of racial diversity. Efforts and solutions are needed on both an individual and communal level—for *everyone*.

## The Conclusion

So, what exactly can we learn from the literature of Progressive Era reformers, like Gilman, in regard to imagining our own sustainable and just future for domesticity and society today?

I would say that, from my personal reflection on *Herland*, we need to make efforts to include people of all kinds (all genders, classes, races, ethnicities, and creeds) in our activism. We are all human. We all deserve rights. Our efforts must be inclusive as we work to expand and revitalize our definition of domesticity and what it means to be part of a fair society.

It is not a fight for superiority but for equity.

---

**Reference:** Gilman, Charlotte Perkins. *The Yellow Wall-Paper, Herland, and Selected Writings*. Penguin Books, 2019.