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Racism and Xenophobia in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper,"

Herland and With Her in Ourland

by

John S. Mertsock

A Thesis

**Submitted to the Department of English of the State University of New York,
College at Brockport, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of**

MASTER OF ARTS

2001

Racism and Xenophobia in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper,"

Herland and With Her in Ourland

by

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*To Bridget and My Little Julia: Thank You for Your Patience and
Encouragement*

Introduction

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's Social Agenda

In the early 1920s, a collective xenophobic episode, referred to as the “Yellow Peril,” infected the United States. This fear of foreigners pervaded our society from the working class to the highest institutions of academe. Bolstered by controversial sociological and anthropological theories of the time such as social Darwinism and eugenics, racist notions like the “Yellow Peril” were given a new, supposedly legitimate, power. These radical theories found their way into the studies of some of the most respected American scientists, political leaders and writers of the time. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, one of the most revered feminist authors in American literary history, perpetuated these xenophobic ideas. This can be seen in much of her work on many different levels. In this light, this paper will focus on three of Gilman's major works, her short story “The Yellow Wallpaper,” the utopian novel *Herland* and its sequel *With Her in Ourland*, from the perspective of race. This study will concentrate on the symbols and images stemming from the “Yellow Peril” that pervade these works, conveying the racist notions inherent in popular turn-of-the-century sociological constructs, including eugenics and social Darwinism. In addition, I will discuss the work of Susan Lanser and Carol Farley Kessler as leading scholars in the re-reading of Gilman's

work from the race perspective. This thesis will not be an attempt to discredit Gilman as an artist because of her racist views. It will look at racism at the turn of the century, radical sociological theories of the time and the effect they had on Gilman's writing.

Although Gilman did speak out in favor of ending racism at times, she was an admitted believer in social Darwinism, eugenics and was definitely steeped in Eurocentricism. Jane Rose writes of Gilman's two-sided ideology:

Despite her socialist values, her active participation in movements for reform, her strong theoretical commitment to racial harmony, her unconventional support of interracial marriages, and her frequent condemnation of America's racist history, Gilman upheld white Protestant supremacy; belonged for a time to eugenics and nationalist organizations; opposed open immigration; and inscribed racism, nationalism, and classism into her proposals for social change. (70)

In a 1913 issue of the *Forerunner*, she wrote: "That we have cheated the Indian, oppressed the African, and robbed the Mexican is ground for shame" (Lane 256). It is quite clear that Charlotte Perkins Gilman harbored some contradictory viewpoints, lending a certain vagueness to some of her more intense sociological work.

Her controversial views on race can be seen in her correspondence, personal memoirs and the bulk of her published writing, including her visionary utopian publications as well as her standard fiction and speeches. Gilman was

ahead of her time with her utopian vision and thoughts on women's rights, but when it came to race, she was unable to think beyond her time. The racist notions left over from the period of slavery, the collective paranoia caused by the massive influx of immigrants at the time and weak scientific theories about the biological and intellectual inferiority of non-white races dominated intellectual circles at the time, and Gilman adhered to them all. Detecting and writing about both subtle and gross oppression in America of women and envisioning solutions to these problems was easy for Gilman, but seeing beyond the shortsighted bigotry prevalent in those days was something she was unable to do.

This is quite ironic if we view feminism as a movement to abolish oppression. In this sense, one would think that no feminist should embrace racism as a movement to help the cause. Although some may say that just because one is oppressed, it doesn't necessarily guarantee that one will not oppress others, intelligent, respected visionaries like Gilman, should have been able to see the hypocrisy apparent in being a feminist and a racist. I do believe that she did struggle with this unconsciously. Much of her work contains contradiction and a certain vagueness that seem stem from a possible latent psychological struggle with her beliefs. This can be seen especially in *Herland* and *With Her in Ourland*.

It is worth noting, however, that her acceptance of sociological and pseudoscientific theories such as social Darwinism and eugenics—both twisted versions of Darwin's evolutionary laws, her racist and ethnocentric views, and her

race-based assumptions about the stages of human development were widely accepted ideas in the academic circles and many of the universities of her time. Social Darwinism was a theory based on the misuse of Darwinian principles about animal and plant evolution by applying them to the social development of races and nations. Robert Bannister defines the social phenomenon as “a type of theory that attempts to describe and explain social phenomena chiefly in terms of competition and conflict, especially the competition of group with group and the equilibrium and adjustment that ensue upon such struggles” (4). Further, Bannister criticizes social Darwinism in his book, *Social Darwinism: Science and Myth in Anglo-American Thought*, by writing that “pseudo-Darwinists twisted and misrepresented *The Origin of Species* and his remarks in *The Descent of Man*. Since Darwin meant pigeons not people in referring to struggle, all applications to human society were nonsense” (15). Unfortunately, Gilman did not see it this way.

Much to the frustration of prejudiced American citizens in Gilman’s time, legislation, protest, and even riot failed to keep immigration at bay. As a result, many radical nationalists and other sociological figures adopted eugenics as a potential long-term solution to the problem. Eugenics was a pseudoscientific call for strict enforcement of laws banning reproduction in what believers considered “inferior races,” treating humans as they would treat pedigree dogs or plants bred for perfection. Bannister writes of this proposed control: “None was more

controversial than the movement to improve the stock of the human race by eugenics legislation, a reform that attracted a vigorous minority” (165). While some sociologists and psychologists at the turn of the century studied the human mind and culture to improve society, eugenicists “attempted literally to weed the human garden” (Bannister 166).

The eugenicist Edward Bellamy, one of Gilman’s sociological mentors, envisioned a world where eugenics and social Darwinism as social control could help the feminist cause in Boston by the year 2000 through sexual selection. He claimed in his book *Looking Backward: 2000-1887* that women would be “liberated from economic dependence upon men” and given the ability to choose mates for “pure love” only. This sentiment is echoed in many of Gilman’s works, especially utopist stories like *Herland* and *With Her in Ourland*. Prophecy like this, which was often made by Bellamy and other pseudo-scientists, made their work very popular among the racists, elitists and nationalists of Gilman’s era.

Early in her career, Gilman caught the 1890s popular fever for Nationalism; “a country-wide network of clubs, a veritable political party, founded to support Edward Bellamy’s ideas in his socialist utopia, *Looking Backward: 2000-1887*” (Kessler 23). Nationalist enthusiasts, like Gilman did not question the paternalistic and racist tone of some nationalist thinking; its intended idealism is what caught their attention. Gilman quickly became a frequent lecturer before nationalist club audiences and a writer in support of nationalist reforms. These

speeches, articles, letters and some of the poetry and stories of this time in Gilman's career contain the language of racism that would later come through in stories like "The Yellow Wallpaper" and *Herland*. For example, the 1908 article, "A Suggestion on the Negro Problem," written for *The American Journal of Sociology* reveals Gilman's racism and elitism; features that were obviously part of her thinking. In it, she suggests many ways to get African-Americans out of the country and to keep others from coming in—reflecting the paranoia inherent in the Yellow Peril. In this article and many stories like it, Gilman "did not hesitate to mock the dialect of ex-slaves or to tell jokes that insulted black people. The only women of color in her stories were domestic servants at whose defense she made sport. The racist message of her fiction was that black women did not exist except insofar as they served and amused white women" (Allen 52). In the article, Gilman proposes automatic enlistment in the army of all African-Americans. Kessler writes of this article, "Gilman's unacceptable recommendation of compulsory enlistment in an army of 'all Negroes [men, women, and children] below a certain standard of citizenship' would exacerbate rather than solve any 'problem'" (48). By today's standards, her very belief in a "Negro problem" is a racist notion.

Another example of racism in her early writing can be seen in her utopist short story, "A Woman's Utopia" (1907). In it, her character Morgan G. Street challenges his cousin Hope Cartwright and her R.G.U. [Argue] Club to improve

the United States. Hope explains that in her plan “Social Services took up the over plus of immigration in a most convenient way; and it settled the Negro problem” (504). Later, she says, “Now we allow only a certain number of immigrants each year, from each country-and take care of them” (593). Hope even implies euthanasia as part of her “solution”—this was actually proposed by some radical eugenicists in Gilman’s era. Hope then outlines some ideas on race, including, “The mass of the population is less specialized than the more highly organized racial servant--naturally. But we have no longer as low a grade of people as we used to have” (596). Hope’s ideology is a clear representation of Gilman’s xenophobia. Kessler writes of such language, “Reading these words today, we flinch at best. They prefigure the impending, misguided capitulation of the majority of white women to racism in order to affect the 1920 passage of a women’s suffrage Constitutional Amendment as well as a national xenophobic reaction to immigrants that closed doors to ‘huddled masses’ also in 1920” (50). These racist, elitist and xenophobic stances that Gilman overtly took in her early writing are in direct contradiction to most of the core, essential reform views of the women’s movement.

On August 5, 1922, Gilman wrote in a letter to a friend that she wanted to leave New York. She wrote that she longed to “leave this hideous city--and its Jews. The nerve wearing noise—the dirt—the ugliness, the steaming masses in the subway” (Lane 337). Gilman was no happier sharing the city with African-Americans. She was horrified to find “two

Negroes, grandmother and grandson' assigned to lower berth, under her, in a train, and she had herself transferred to the 'upper 8,' with 'an old, old lady under. She is a Prussian'" (Lane 337). In a letter the next day, she again referred to the incident. "'To have sat in the sun opposite those coons and their baggage—and their lunch—the boy squirming about and making all manner of noises—would have used me up pretty badly,'" she wrote to her friend. (Lane 337).

These racist views are overpowering in some of her writing and seem to taint and constrain works like *Herland* and *With Her in Ourland*. In other works, like "The Yellow Wallpaper," the writing is more subversive in this respect. Ann Lane writes of Gilman, "Despite the extraordinary ability to transcend many of the limitations of the intellectual and cultural world she inhabited, she was, nevertheless, often imprisoned by others" (Lane 294).

Knowing that readers would better understand her feminist vision if it were presented through stories with characters enacting it, Gilman often represented her ideas clothed as characters. Carol Farley Kessler describes Gilman's view of the social function of literature in her work, *Charlotte Perkins Gilman: Her Progress Toward Utopia*, "Gilman explained how she understood fiction to be 'world-food' that 're-presents' rather than 'preaches' ideas" (48). It seems that works like "The Yellow Wallpaper" and *Herland* do just that--they represent not only Gilman's personal ideas, but also the ideas of an era, personified in her characters. Many readers and critics see only her feminist views in these

characters and images, not the racist undertones placed there by a society infected by the “Yellow Peril” and other racist conceptions.

In his book, *The Yellow Peril: Chinese Americans in American Fiction, 1850-1940*, William F. Wu defines the “Yellow Peril” as

the threat to the United States that some white American authors believed was posed by East Asians. As a literary theme, the fear of this threat focuses on specific issues, including possible military invasion from Asia, perceived competition to the white labor force from Asian workers, the alleged moral degeneracy of Asian people, and the potential genetic mixing of Anglo-Saxons with Asians, who were considered a biologically inferior race by some intellectuals of the nineteenth century. (i)

After entrenching itself in the collective psyche of America, The “Yellow Peril” phenomenon listed Italians, Jews, Catholics and many other races and creeds as unwelcome. Stemming from this collective fear was the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which put a stop to all Chinese immigration with few exceptions. Anti-immigrant riots were common in Gilman’s time and many of the immigrants already here were driven into small urban areas that became the Chinatowns and “Little Italy” neighborhoods of today. Many authors of the time observed these neighborhoods and “produced fiction that focuses on these communities as

exotic, filthy, and crime-ridden ghettos. Drugs, prostitution, and murder are depicted as accepted elements of Chinatown society” (Wu 3). We can see that not only the physical features of East Asians but also their locations within America were seen as exclusively “other.” It seems that Gilman fits the profile of the “authors” that Wu refers to. In her article for the *Forerunner*, “Let Sleeping Forefathers Lie,” Gilman proclaims that America has become “bloated” and a “verminous dump” for Europe’s “social refuse,” “a ceaseless offense to eye and ear and nose” (261). In another article for the *Forerunner*, “Growth and Combat,” she writes that immigration was “creating multforeign cities” that are “abnormally enlarged” and “swollen,” “foul, ugly, and dangerous,” their conditions “offensive to every sense: assailing the eye with ugliness, the ear with noise, and the nose with foul smells” (332, quoted in Lanser 431). These descriptions are echoed in the narrator’s descriptions of the oppressive wallpaper in “The Yellow Wallpaper.”

This thesis will focus primarily on two of Gilman’s major works and briefly on another. Chapter one will be a study of Gilman’s short story, “The Yellow Wallpaper” from the race perspective, discussing racism and xenophobia as a subtext in the story. The symbols of the oppression of women and the narrator’s subsequent psychosis that feminist critics see in the story will be discussed as symbols of racism and xenophobia.

Chapter two will be a look at Gilman's utopian novel, *Herland* as a mouthpiece for Gilman's radical sociological viewpoints. Social Darwinism and eugenics will be discussed as key elements in the story. In the novel, Gilman seems to call attention to what she thinks are major sociopolitical faults in American society by using Herland as a contrast. In addition, Gilman offers sociological and scientific solutions to these faults by portraying their success in fiction. Many of these faults and potential solutions are based on racist and ethnocentric assumptions engendered by popular thought at the turn of the century:

Chapter three will be a brief look at the sequel to *Herland*, *With Her in Ourland* as an even more controversial and racist text. *With Her in Ourland* is a relatively unknown work that has been virtually ignored in literary circles until recently. As a whole, the novel lacks literary quality and comes across as anti-American and anti-Christian.

Chapter One

The Peril in the Paper: Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" from the Race Perspective

In 1973, the Feminist Press published an edition of "The Yellow Wallpaper" and it quickly became their best-selling publication and "one of the best-selling works of fiction [published] by university presses in the United States" (Hedges 222). It has been reprinted in many different languages and it has inspired film versions, a television adaptation and even a play. It is included in nearly all major American literature anthologies.

"The Yellow Wallpaper" is at base a story about a wife and mother presented by Gilman from a feminist perspective (a woman struggling for freedom in an oppressive patriarchal world). The story seems to be deceptively simple. The narrator, a writer, finds herself increasingly depressed and unaccountably ill. Her husband John and her doctor agree that she needs complete rest and a cessation of her work if she is to recover. She is then forced to stay in a room with hideous wallpaper, behind which she sees a caged woman trying to get out. She liberates the woman and eventually breaks down, while at the same time, "creeping"

over her weakened husband at the end. When read closely though, this work is much more than simply the story of an oppressed wife and mother. This is why it has been studied by many authors from many different perspectives.

Elaine Hedges writes of the abundance of criticism on the story, “Since the story’s republication, there have been more than two dozen critical studies of it, including biographical, genre, reader response, discourse theory, psychoanalytic, and new historicist and cultural studies readings (222). These diverse readings have helped to secure a place for the story in contemporary literary studies. Dock claims that:

Omitting “The Yellow Wallpaper” from an American literature anthology has become almost as unthinkable as leaving out “The Raven” or “Civil Disobedience.” The story appears not just in those weighty, two-volume collections of American literature but also in textbooks for courses in women’s studies and genre studies and in dozens of introductory literature texts for undergraduates. (66)

As a high school English teacher, I cannot imagine eliminating “The Yellow Wallpaper” from my American literature unit. At the high school level, it can be interpreted as a study of the stages of psychological breakdown, a criticism of early medical practice, a historical representation

of the racist views of Victorian America and, of course, a representation of early feminist thought.

The notion that the Feminist Press “discovered” and republished the story seems to have given the literary feminist camp a certain claim to or ownership of its interpretation. Elaine Hedges describes the story as the feminists’ “white whale, or, as some recent studies would have it, our feminist albatross, for by now not only the story’s once roughly agreed-upon meaning, but its privileged status as an exemplary feminist critical touchstone are being challenged” (223). The challenges of earlier interpretations of the story are well founded and are overdue. Granted, the feminist interpretation is sound and makes a lot of sense, especially in light of Gilman’s political life, her personal experiences that relate directly to the plight of the narrator in “The Yellow Wallpaper,” and the gigantic body of work that concurs with the general feminist interpretation of the story.

On the other hand, when interpreting literature, one cannot ignore any personal testimony by the author on her intentions for writing the story, even if that testimony directly contradicts the bulk of scholarship on it. In addition, I believe that any analysis of an author’s manifest meaning and intent in creating the narrative must reflect not only her personal interests, but also latent psychological complex and the social structures of her era. This is definitely the case with Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper.”

Although she does not directly place the story in any genre and never utilizes any overt racist language in the writing, its subtext must be studied from the angle of race or scholarship on the piece is incomplete. Linda Wagner-Martin writes of the story, “In Gilman’s ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’ subtext becomes text, repressed discourse becomes visible. It convinces less by its explicit content than by its metaphoric impression” (60).

In terms of author intent, it is ironic that Gilman never openly considered “The Yellow Wallpaper” a subversive political or social piece. She professed in her autobiography that it “was no more ‘literature’ than my other stuff, being definitely written ‘with a purpose’” (121). She claims that her only purpose was to point out of the dangers of a particular medical treatment and to influence her former doctor, S. Weir Mitchell, to eliminate the “rest cure” that he had suggested for Gilman when she had a bout of depression. Gilman openly expressed that this was her only intent in her short piece for the *Forerunner*, “Why I Wrote the Yellow Wallpaper.” After describing the evils of Mitchell’s medical practice in the article, she concludes with, “It was not intended to drive people crazy, but to save people from being driven crazy, and it worked” (658). Beyond this, Gilman essentially never hinted toward any specific intent for “The Yellow Wallpaper.” This could have been a “canny ploy by the author to keep all markets open for her story by claiming none” (St. Jean 240). According to

Shumaker, “Unlike Gilman’s other purposeful fictions, however, ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’ transcends its author’s immediate intent, and my experience teaching it suggests that it favors both female and male students, even before they learn of its feminist context or of the patriarchal biases of nineteenth century medicine” (591). Shawn St. Jean writes of Gilman studies:

The very notion that feminists “recovered” Gilman’s story tends to slant readings in what are perceived by readers as feminist directions... It seems, then, that feminists have traditionally had an interest in aligning their perceived thematic concerns with the actual treatment of Gilman and her story. If “The Yellow Wallpaper” actually had gone unprinted during the early three-fourths of this century, critics could continue to avoid the inconvenient duty of reconciling the story’s large and diverse readership with the image of the slighted woman author. (240)

Dock asserts that since the publication of “The Yellow Wallpaper,” feminist scholars have “accumulated a wealth of information about Gilman’s life in general and about ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’ in particular. Some ‘facts’ have become ‘common knowledge’ as critics have built on one another’s work. But those ‘facts’ need reassessment as scholars

increasingly acknowledge that literary criticism is as grounded in historical biases” (52). While most of the feminist analyses of the story are illuminating, they certainly do not cover all the possible interpretations of the work. In an article for *Feminist Studies*, Susan Lanser writes “literature and criticism are collusive with ideology, that texts are sign systems rather than simple mirrors, that authors cannot guarantee their meanings, that interpretation is dependent on a critical community, and that our own literary histories are also fictional. The consequent rereading of texts like ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’ might, in turn, alter our critical premises” (Lanser 422). Thus, it is important to view literary scholarship not only in terms of the personal background of the author, but also of the critic.

Scholarship on “The Yellow Wallpaper” is predominantly written by white women about a white woman’s text. Judging by my research on Gilman criticism, especially that of “The Yellow Wallpaper,” I found that nearly all secondary material on this work is written by white women and very little by men. This fact calls for a rereading of the work from a more diverse variety of viewpoints, especially that of the historical context of race. In “Feminist Criticism, ‘The Yellow Wallpaper,’ and the Politics of Color in America,” Susan Lanser does just that. She introduces that article with a call for a new reading of Gilman’s work:

I believe we have also entered a moment not only of historical possibility but also of historical urgency to stop reading a privileged, white, New England woman's text as simply--a woman's text. If our traditional gesture has been to repeat the narrator's own act of underreading, of seeing too little, I want to know the risk of overreading, seeing perhaps too much. My reading will make use of textual details that traditional feminist interpretations have tended to ignore, but I do not propose it as a current or final reading; I believe no such reading is either possible or desirable and that one important message of "The Yellow Wallpaper" is precisely that. (424)

Although Gilman does not directly use any militant feminist language in the story at all, most readers immediately perceive this situation as a woman oppressed by patriarchal demand. This widely accepted analysis seems to interpret the story on a white woman's feminist basis only, disregarding potential manifestations of the author's latent psychological complex and historical context regarding race. Ironically, this has often had the side effect of "sealing off other avenues of inquiry that would only enhance our knowledge and appreciation of an important American writer" (St. Jean 241). Lanser writes, "It seems that just as it is impossible to get 'that top pattern...off the other one,' so it is impossible to

separate the text of a culture from the text of an individual, to free female subjectivity from the patriarchal text” (425).

In reference to specific symbols in the story, such as the key symbol of the wallpaper itself, the connotations of the color Gilman chooses for the paper and its connection to the “Yellow Peril” cannot be ignored. Even though Gilman never claimed that she intended to portray this as a symbol of racist ideologies of Victorian society, we must go beyond interpretations based only on the narrator’s conscious creation of the text and consider the monumental influence that national problems like the “Yellow Peril” had on the *unconscious* construction of her story. Thus, the color of the paper should be seen as at least the manifestation into text of latent anxieties engendered by her racist views. Lanser suggests that approaching the story from this angle is very important and places the text within its proper context, or at least a more open one:

If we accept the culturally contingent and incomplete nature of readings guaranteed only by the narrator’s consciousness, then perhaps we can find the yellow wallpaper, to literalize a metaphor of Adrienne Rich, “a whole new psychic geography to be explored.” For in privileging the questions of reading and writing as the essential “women questions,” feminist criticism has been led to the paper while suppressing the

politically charged adjective that colors it. If we locate Gilman's story within the "psychic geography" of Anglo-America at the turn of the century, we locate it in a culture obsessively preoccupied with race as the foundation of character, a culture desperate to maintain Aryan superiority in the face of the massive immigrations from Southern and Eastern Europe, a culture openly anti-Semitic, anti-Asian, anti-Catholic, and Jim Crow. (425, emphasis mine.)

The "psychic geography" that Gilman lived and worked in readily leads us to an interpretation of the wallpaper as a racist symbol. Gilman was exposed to racist ideas throughout her entire life. In New England, where Gilman was born and raised, agricultural decline, native emigration, and soaring immigrant birth rates had generated a distrust of the immigrant that reached proportions of a movement in the 1880's and 1890's. In California, where Gilman spent most of her writing life, mass fear about the "Yellow Peril" produced such legislation as the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. Across the United States, newly formed groups were calling for selective breeding, restricted entry, and "American Protection" of various kinds. Radical sociological theories gained power as they were viewed as instruments of reform. Lanser writes of this problem, "White, Christian, American-born intellectuals-novelists, political scientists, economists,

sociologists, crusaders for social reform—not only shared this racial anxiety but, as John Higham puts it, ‘blazed the way for ordinary nativists by giving popular racism an intellectual respectability’” (427).

The fact that Gilman chose wallpaper as the revolting object seems to place it in a racist discourse. The wall, a universal construct as the body is, is covered with a “skin” of wallpaper. Here, the color of this “skin,” yellow, and the narrator’s disgust for it are symbolic of Gilman’s racist views as well as the paranoia at the root of the “Yellow Peril” phenomenon. Gilman could have chosen a bedspread, food, foliage, art or any other yellow object for the source of the narrator’s anxiety—but she chose wallpaper. It seems then that the narrator’s description of the wallpaper could be viewed as Gilman describing the skin of immigrants: “The color is repellent, almost revolting; a smouldering unclean yellow, strangely faded by the slow-turning sunlight” (3), and “It is the strangest yellow, that wallpaper! It makes me think of all the yellow things I ever saw--not beautiful ones like buttercups, but old, foul, bad yellow things” (11). Her preference for white rather than yellow can be seen when John makes an empty promise to the narrator to calm her down: “Then he took me into his arms and called me a blessed little goose, and said he would go down cellar, if I wished, and have it [the wall] whitewashed into the bargain” (4). At a one point in the story, Gilman personifies the wallpaper overtly,

suggesting the view of the wallpaper as skin. She writes, “I never saw so much expression in an inanimate thing before” (5).

The yellowness of the paper is not only a source of visual disgust for the narrator, but other senses are also incorporated in the personification of the paper: “But there is something else about the paper—the smell!” (11). This smell, as well as the look of the paper becomes infectious and ever-present in the house, much like the view of immigrants in American cities during the Gilman’s lifetime. Xenophobia becomes clear in the narrative if one sees the house as America and the sensory descriptions of the wallpaper as descriptions of immigrants. The narrator says that the smell “creeps all over the house. I find it hovering in the dining-room, skulking in the parlor, hiding in the hall, lying in wait for me on the stairs” (11). As the yellow seeps through, the narrator becomes more anxious and begins to feel infected by the paper: “It gets into my hair. Even when I go to ride, if I turn my head suddenly and surprise it—there is that smell!” (11).

It is easy to envision this as parallel to Gilman’s disgust of foreigners packing the streets of American cities. Previously in the narrative, Gilman speaks metaphorically through her character about this same theme: “I get positively angry with the impertinence of it and the everlastingness. Up and down and sideways they crawl, and those absurd unblinking eyes are everywhere” (5). In her important re-reading of “The Yellow Wallpaper”

for *Feminist Studies*, Susan Lanser writes of Gilman, “The aesthetic and sensory quality of this horror at a polluted America creates a compelling resemblance between the narrator’s graphic descriptions of the yellow wallpaper and Gilman’s graphic descriptions of the cities and their ‘swarms of jostling aliens’” (Lanser 432). This language reflects the incredible power these racist views had at the time and the grass roots hold racism had on the collective psyche of Victorian America. In light of the powerful hold these racist ideas had on Gilman, we can easily interpret the narrator’s anxiety in “The Yellow Wallpaper” as a representation of the collective paranoia engendered by the “Yellow Peril.” Lanser writes:

Might we explain the narrator’s pervasive horror of a yellow color and smell that threaten to take over the “ancestral halls,” “stain[ing] everything it touched,” as the British-American fear of takeover by “aliens”? In a cultural moment when immigrant peoples and African Americans were being widely caricatured in the popular press through distorted facial and body images, might the “interminable grotesques” (20) of the yellow wallpaper—with their lolling necks and “bulbous eyes” “staring everywhere” with their “peculiar odor” and “yellow smell” (29), their colors “repellent, almost revolting,” smoldering” and “unclean” (13), “sickly” and “particularly

irritating” (18), their “new shades of yellow” (28) erupting constantly--figure the Asians and Jews, the Italians and Poles, the long list of “aliens” whom the narrator (and perhaps Gilman herself) might want at once to rescue and flee? (Lanser 429)

To take Lanser’s ideas a bit further, the view of the wall as a sort of distorted body with a threatening skin also reflects some of the basic concepts behind the theory of eugenics. Hatred for the breeding patterns of seemingly inferior races was part of this racist theory. In many places in “The Yellow Wallpaper,” The narrator’s descriptions the wallpaper may be viewed a distaste for the physical appearance of immigrants as a result of poor breeding: “The eyes go all up and down the line, one a little higher than the other” (5). This is followed by several images that could represent chaotic or inferior breeding habits. Gilman writes, “I know a little of the principles of design, and I know this thing was not arranged on any laws of radiation, or alternation, or repetition, or symmetry, or anything else I ever heard of” (6). The “thing” here could represent the difference in facial structure between the Aryan and the “foreign” with Gilman attributing the former as normal and beautiful and the latter as abnormal and alien.

Another image suggests a large, tangled family tree: “They connect in columns and they also connect diagonally, and the sprawling lines run

off in great slanting rays of optic horror, like a lot of wallowing seaweeds in full chase” (7) and finally, “If you can imagine a toadstool in joints, an interminable string of toadstools, budding and sprouting in endless convolutions” (9).

Seeing the yellow wallpaper as the threatening skin or bodies of whom Gilman saw as distinctively “other” is just one of many ways to look at the metaphoric representation of racism in the story. The wall also could represent the symbolic barrier that many Americans wanted to put up to keep further immigration at bay. The idea of walling out non-Aryan foreigners was the foundation of the “Yellow Peril.” In light of this, the wall in the nursery in the story could represent this barrier. As the “yellowness” comes through and threatens the narrator, she plunges deeper into madness.

The twisted rationale behind Gilman’s fear and hatred of other races can be seen in the subtext of the story as well. Gilman saw these immigrants as genetically inferior because of supposedly inferior intelligence, abnormal physical appearance and sociological weaknesses in their culture. Lanser claims that “Gilman believed that not all humans are equally educable, after all, particularly if they belong to one of those ‘tribal’ cultures of the East: ‘you could develop higher faculties in the English specimen than in the Fuegian’” (433). The narrator’s hatred of the

yellow wallpaper in the story may reflect Gilman's fear of the specific races that upheld patriarchal beliefs in their social and religious ideologies. Gilman made a direct connection between race and patriarchy, thus adhering feminist views with racist sentiments. For Gilman and many in sociological academe in her time, "patriarchy is a racial phenomenon: it is primarily non-Aryan, 'yellow' peoples whom Gilman holds responsible for originating and perpetuating patriarchal practices, and it is primarily Nordic Protestants whom she considers capable of change" (Lanser 433). In this light, Gilman's wallpaper becomes not only a representation of patriarchy but also the projection of patriarchal practices onto Aryan societies. Such a projection stands, of course, in implicit tension with the narrative, because it is the modern-minded, presumably Aryan husband and doctor who are the oppressive force. Nevertheless, for Gilman, an educated, Protestant, social-democratic Aryan, America explicitly represented the major hope for white, middle class women.

If patriarchal cultures were allowed to gather in their ghettos and expand, it could be a direct threat to this vision. Personifying the wallpaper reflects this paranoia as at some points in the story the narrator suggests that the wallpaper itself has subversive motives. She writes, "This paper looks to me as if it *knew* what a vicious influence it had" (5). If the wallpaper is to be seen as an oppressive force, Gilman's fear of the

projection of patriarchal culture onto the United States through immigration must be seen as one component of that oppressive force. Specifically, the yellow wallpaper could represent Gilman's fear of not only "infection" of the United States by people of other ethnic origins, but also the bringing in of patriarchal cultures by these people.

In light of Gilman's racist views coupled with her concern for the plight of the oppressed woman, "The Yellow Wallpaper" may be interpreted as Gilman's psychological struggle to come to terms with opposing ideals. The woman breaking through the wallpaper could represent the woman of color and the narrator's interest in helping her while at the same time being repulsed by her. Lanser's notion that Gilman may want to both "rescue" and "flee from" these aliens is an important one if we speculate on the opposing forces that must have been at work in Gilman's unconscious. There seems to be a latent desire to assist the woman of color, but the only way she could be truly saved is to eliminate the source of her oppression that will always keep her down—her color: "And she is all the time trying to climb through. But nobody could climb through that pattern—it strangles so; I think that is why it has so many heads" (12). Subsequently, in a strange sequence, the narrator works with the lurking figure to relieve her of her burden: "As soon as it was moonlight and that poor thing began to crawl and shake the pattern, I got

up and ran to help her. I pulled and she shook, I shook and she pulled, and before morning we had peeled off yards of the paper” (12). Here we can see how Gilman both feared subversion of democratic and feminist ideals by the immigrant, while she also wished to save the oppressed woman of color from the oppression of both her race and her patriarchal culture.

In a Jungian sense, Gilman’s shadow lurks behind the paper. She hints at connections to the mysterious form: “I’m getting really fond of the room in spite of the wallpaper, perhaps *because* of the wallpaper” (6). Eventually, the narrator fully identifies with the shadow and actually becomes her, as Gilman uses the first person to end the story, “I suppose I shall have to get back behind the pattern when it becomes night, and that is hard! It is so pleasant to be out in this great room and creep around as I please!” (14).

The narrator as well as the reader witnesses the symbolic amalgamation of the contradictions dwelling within Gilman’s unconscious emerging from the paper. In a sense, the woman emerging from the paper is herself as well as the projected self she represses, as she must identify at some level with any struggling woman, whether she is white, black or any other color. Delaschmit writes that the creeping woman behind the paper “is without a doubt part of the denied self” (32). When the narrator tries to free the woman from the wall, “is she trying to purge her of her color, to

peel her from the yellow paper, so that she can accept this woman as herself?" (Lanser 429). This question beautifully outlines the psychological struggle that seems to be portrayed in Gilman's story. The narrator's insane struggle with herself and the oppressive wallpaper represents the contradictions of ideology that existed in Gilman's psyche: How do you save the oppressed woman and condemn her race at the same time?

Despite faults on a moral plane, American literature would certainly be the poorer without "The Yellow Wallpaper." Charlotte Perkins Gilman wrote in a time of social upheaval, chaos in the scientific community and a society riddled with racial concepts disguised as and supported by scientific "truths." In order to grasp the complexity of Gilman's work, we must factor in all of the influences and inspiration engendered by such an environment.

Chapter Two

Herland: Gilman's Radical Sociological Experiment

During her long career, Gilman wrote many utopian stories. Of all these, the most popular is her novel, *Herland*. She serialized it in her journal, *The Forerunner* in 1915 and it was eventually published in its entirety. In it, women create a more radical utopia than the ones seen in previous stories by Gilman, one without men entirely. In this novel, three American men struggle with and eventually come to understand and accept the strange lifestyle of a world consisting only of women.

After hearing rumors during their travels of “a strange and terrible Woman-Land, a previously undiscovered Feminesia” (4) not to be found on conventional maps, three male adventurers from the United States set out to find and explore it. Gilman creates Herland as an exotic country located in an unspecified point somewhere in the southern hemisphere, a land inhabited by strong, uniquely attractive women and no men. The story is told in the first person by a male character, Van Jennings, an open-minded sociologist. With his fiends Terry Nicholson and Jeff Margrave, Jennings goes by boat, plane, and foot “up a dark tangle of rivers, lakes, mountains, morasses and dense forests” (9) in search of this intriguing place. At the end of their journey, deep in a range of “mighty mountains” they find a country “about the size of Holland, some ten or twelve thousand square miles” (10) with a population of about 3 million. With its “clean well-built

roads,” its advanced building material dominated by “rose-colored stone,” its white public buildings and “green groves and gardens,” Herland looks to the men to be an enormous park. Various readings (Freudian, feminist) could see this setting as a symbol of the womb and female genitalia and the journey into it representing a repressed desire to go back into the womb, a wish to encounter the vagina sexually, or a fear of the superiority of the female. The race and feminist readings overlap. Here we can see that *Herland*—as implied by the title and the symbolic geography—is more feminist than “The Yellow Wallpaper.” At the same time, this utopian novel is also a racist reform text calling for the use of radical Darwinian principles to “purify” the stock of the Aryan race in America. This chapter will focus on these principles as they appear in *Herland*.

Upon arriving in Herland, the explorers are surprised to find a highly advanced civilization created by these women. The women who capture, sedate, and confine the men in a very comfortable chamber of a “sort of castle” (7) are very confident and wise. The women are also physically advanced, intellectually and civically productive as well as completely uninterested in sex. Lane writes that *Herland* is:

a book about a woman’s world without passion or intimacy.

But, both passion and intimacy appear with the introduction of sexual love in the form of the three male intruders, only one of whom, Van, sufficiently tempers his male sexuality to the requirements of human reason. Van learns from the Herlander

Ellador about a universe he did not even have the language to imagine, and he teaches her about passion and sexuality. (305)

True, this book does not contain passion and intimacy as defined by a character like Terry. The Herlanders are intensely passionate about things like gardening, science and motherhood. This is a different passion than sexual passion, but Gilman may be saying that it is a sufficient psychological substitute in a world without men. Moreover, the lack of romantic sexuality in this fictional land helps Gilman to establish structure from the beginning. Knowing that sex would be the first thing to come to most readers' minds as a plot like this progresses, Gilman immediately removes sexuality so that readers can get a clear vision of her feminist and sociological agenda. In fact, she not only removes men and romantic sex entirely, she removes sex for reproduction from the novel, as well as many other cultural norms that seem to be inherently connected with masculinity like war, oppression and waste.

By structuring the book in this way, Gilman must have known that she was at risk of losing many readers and was risking the commercial success of the novel. Gilman seems to imply this at the beginning of chapter five: "It is no use for me to try to piece out this account with adventures. If the people who read it are not interested in these amazing women and their history, they will not be interested all" (51).

Initially, the three adventurers assume that the men of this bizarre land must be hidden somewhere, as any world *must* have men, especially

for reproduction. Soon, they learn that the women of Herland had developed a way to reproduce without men, a phenomenon called parthenogenesis. Upon inquiring into the origins of this biological anomaly, the men are told that all the native males had been killed “about two thousand years ago” (10). This had come about as a result of both natural and historical events. Decimated by war, earthquake and volcano, the few remaining men had been destroyed during an uprising of young women slaves against their “brutal” oppressors. Shortly after the women’s revolt, the first foremother of Herland had discovered that she possessed the surprising “virgin birth capacity” when she gave birth to five daughters. When these daughters had achieved maturity, each of them in turn gave birth to five daughters herself. After the nation was well established by several generations of multiple daughters, a quota of “one woman: one child” was opposed on all but the most exceptional women (Over-mothers) in order to control population growth and enhance the general welfare.

Herlanders elevate motherhood to the most important responsibility among them. “To them, the longed for motherhood was not only a personal joy, but a nation’s hope!” (59). Kessler writes that Gilman “validates motherhood by making it the nation’s highest office. Her reverence of for mothers is both personally compensatory and socially reformist” (Kessler 36). Ideas like reverence for motherhood and the need for cultivating a “pure” breeding stock can be seen, in a Freudian sense; as representations of repressed wishes, in a feminist view; symbols of the power of women,

and in a sociological sense; an introduction to the framework of Herland's culture—a framework built around radical, racist sociological concepts like eugenics, radical immigration reforms and social Darwinism

As the men experience the world and interact with its inhabitants, one cannot help but see that Gilman is making a glaring comparison between the fictional world of Herland and the real world of American society to point out the faults of the latter. Kessler writes, “The more the three men learn about Herland as they are escorted about, the more modest they become about their land, which appears increasingly less reasonable in comparison” (74). This seems to be the effect that Gilman wants the novel to have on her readers. Lane echoes Kessler:

The women of Herland have no knowledge of sexuality—reproduction is by parthenogenesis—or home or family or marriage or profit motive or sense of self apart from others. As they and their visitors learn about each other's worlds—and the men and the women do learn from each other—our culture is ridiculed; with wide-eyed innocence, common sense, and reason the Herlanders expose much that is ludicrous, oppressive and unreasonable about the way we do things, about the way we work, define gender roles, and establish social expectations” (293).

In “The Yellow Wallpaper,” Gilman's sociological agenda exists as a subtext. In *Herland*, the narrative seems to be based upon sociological

views that she aligned herself with, including social Darwinism and eugenics, bringing them all to together in this carefully constructed, well-organized utopia. Lane writes of *Herland*, “It is Gilman’s radical, alternative vision of collective motherhood. The ideas she worked out in her nonfiction studies, all of them, are carried to fruition in this utopian world” (293).

As we have seen, racism was very much a part of most of Gilman’s social ideas. Like many of her other works, overt racism is seen in the language of *Herland*, but for the most part, her pseudoscientific ideas based on racial assumptions become the foundation of this complex novel. Racist language seems to be secondary in the novel and only occurs incidentally and almost casually. For example, when Terry sings a racist song to illustrate his stereotypical manliness and to strengthen his weakening ego in the face of marriage:

*I’ve taken my fun where I found it.
I’ve roved and I’ve ranged in my time,
The things that I’ve learned from the yellow and black,
They ‘ave helped me a ‘eap with the white. (131)*

Here, Gilman’s intent was most likely to portray the stereotypical male ego in the face of submitting to a woman in marriage, but the racist discourse emerges quite clearly. The “yellow” and “black” are clearly seen as expendable and easily “taken” as sexual practice for the “white.” This seems to imply that white masculinity has some basis in race.

Subtle references to skin color and Aryan dominance can be seen throughout the novel. Van describes the Herlanders early in the novel: “There is no doubt in my mind that 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” (55-56). This language is meant to set up a narrative framework to introduce Gilman’s evolutionary ideology, probably not to convey overt bigotry. Later, Van says “We did not yet appreciate the differences between the race-mind of these people and ours. In the first place, they were a ‘pure stock’ of two thousand uninterrupted years” (122). Scientific jargon like “pure stock” exists throughout the novel, aligning human reproduction with genetic engineering in animals and giving the whole process a dystopic rather than utopic tone. In *Herland*, the cultivation of their race into “perfect” Aryan, community-driven breeding machines projects *Herland* as an allegory for what she thought could be achieved using social Darwinism and eugenics.

The power of Darwinism and its hold on Gilman is easily seen in *Herland*. In the wake of the Darwinian revolution, “science became as powerful as religion in providing a rationale for theories of human nature and the proper arrangement of society” (Magner 117). This revolution had a hold on many respected intellectuals of Gilman’s time, lending twisted versions of the original concept open to manipulation and abuse by those who wanted support for their aging racist notions. Feminist writers like

“Mary Wollstonecraft, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Antoinette Brown Blackwell, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and Eliza Burt Gamble have demonstrated that the use of scientific theories to justify social arrangements may indeed be a two-edged sword” (Manger 101). These women did not restrict their interest in science to its use in debating sociopolitical ideas, but saw science as a major component of human enlightenment, and of technical and intellectual progress—one that could make drastic changes in an entire culture in a relatively short period.

Gilman wrote extensively on Darwinism and its application to feminist and sociological reform in speeches and articles, and in *Herland* we see it her fiction. I do not think that Gilman used social Darwinism solely to support her racist beliefs, at least in *Herland*, she seems to use scientific theory to support social reform that could improve society as a whole—not just the gene pool. The book is a striking example of the feminist’s and the amateur sociologist’s answer to Darwinism. Manger writes:

Although some historians have argued that in the late nineteenth century Darwinism was all things to all men, the question of what Darwinism meant to women has been essentially ignored. However, the feminist response to Darwinism may provide insight into the paths by which those outside the scientific and academic world learned about, interpreted, and in turn taught others about the meaning of

science. Analysis of the relationship between feminist ideas and Darwinism may also expose subtle links between prevailing concepts of human nature, assumptions about the special or particular nature of woman, and the uses and abuses of scientific theory. (115)

Although Gilman was neither a scientist nor a professional scholar, her conception of human nature and social evolution was also inspired by the theories of Lester Ward (eugenics) and Herbert Spencer, the best-known exponent of social Darwinism. Thus, both Spencer and Gilman were “interpreters and popularizers of science in an era when evolutionary theory was applied to virtually every facet of the human condition” (Magner 119).

For Gilman, the scientific perspective was the key to alleviating individual and social problems and to eliminating obstacles to human progress. From a Darwinian viewpoint, history could be reinterpreted as a record of generally unsuccessful experiments in humanness. Magner writes that “Although Gilman paid appropriate homage to Spencer and Darwin as the pioneers and champions of evolutionary thought, Gilman believed that existing human societies were not the inevitable products of biological forces but the results of human ideas, choices, and behaviors” (121). Some reform Darwinists, like Gilman, believed that with a determined, prolonged and uninterrupted effort at education and social management, social conditions could be changed and improved.

In *Herland*, *education*, rather than the radical social Darwinian *elimination* is the solution to social problems. Gilman did not believe that human evolution entailed the elimination of the idle and unfit by natural selection. Nor did she accept the Malthusian preoccupation with the problem of excess fertility among the “unfit” or the concern that the “fit” were not making their proper contribution to reproduction (Magner 125). Van says, “But very early they recognized the need of improvement as well as of mere repetition, and devoted their combined intelligence to the problem—how to make the best kind of people. First, this was merely the hope of bearing better ones, and then they recognized that however the children differed at birth, the real growth lay later—through education. Then things began to hum” (61). In *Herland*, Gilman stresses the importance of education as a way to avoid the inevitable process of social Darwinism by putting the best of the best in charge of teaching and mothering Herland’s most precious component—children.

Van reports, “Children were seen as precious and the most revered element of the nation” (101). In *Herland*, babies are provided with an environment designed to stimulate the mind. As early as possible, they are given “choices, simple choices, with very obvious causes and consequences” (Hall 106). The babies are taught interrelationships, one step at a time. Their physical safety is ensured by the removal of all possible dangers from the houses or gardens they inhabit. The babies are raised in the warmer climates of the country, and experience no disease.

“Shortcomings and misdeeds” are presented merely as “errors and misplays—as in a game” (91). Most importantly, children are seen as people, “The most precious part of the nation” (100). This also reflects the shift in adults’ perspective on children in the industrial age. With industry and the influx of more money, children began to be seen by some not as objects or burdens, but as beings that can be loved and cared for in order to make them happy and cultured. In *Herland*, Gilman seems to be using an exaggeration of this idea as a fundamental means to improving the gene pool.

It seems that all this attention and careful breeding to avoid unfit citizens would create a race of automatons with no diversity—not so in Herland:

Later we were more and more impressed that all this gentle breeding was breeding; and they were born to it, reared in it, that it was natural and universal with them as the gentleness of doves or the alleged wisdom of serpents... children were natural except the fact that they never cried. I never heard a child cry in Herland, save once or twice at a bad fall; and then people ran to help, as we would a scream in agony from a grown person. (104)

Gilman sums up her call for education reform in America as part of changing society and creating “fit” citizens with, “They had faced the problems of education and so solved them that their children grew up as

naturally as young trees; learning through every sense; taught continuously but unconsciously—never knowing they were being educated” (96).

Gilman also believed that if we recognized the organic unity of society we would see that “development takes place not in direct combat between individuals, but in a superior process supplanting an inferior process” (Magner 126). This idea is the crux of Spencer’s model of social Darwinism and a central theme of *Herland*. Spencer and Gilman both believed that through the forces of physiology and sociology, families once rejected as irreparably “unfit” could be restored to “fit” status in a few generations. So, by eliminating words with masculine connotations like “combat” from the social Darwinist model, Gilman establishes a subtler struggle for existence with the superior *helping* the inferior to become better rather than eliminating them altogether. The exception lies, of course, in the massacre of the men at the genesis of the Herland world.

In the book, Van tries to explain to his “chosen” Herlander and future wife and teacher, Ellador, the process of the survival of the fittest in American society. Eventually, Van concludes that in the American model, women were the ultimate victims:

I explained that the laws of nature require a struggle for existence, and that in the struggle the fittest survive, and the unfit perish. In our economic struggle, I continued, there was always opportunity for the fittest to reach the top, which they did, in great numbers, particularly in our country; that where

there was less severe economic pressure the lowest classes of course felt it the worst, and that among the poorest of all, the women were driven into the labor market by necessity. (64)

Through Van, Gilman espouses her opinions on the economic class structure of American society. Often in the book, the men will begin explanations like this to defend American culture, but eventually it leads them to revealing evils in their world. In turn, a Herlander, usually Ellador, uses an example from their utopia that seems to be the best solution to or avoidance of such evils. Van paraphrases Ellador's explanation of how they controlled the problem of overpopulation—a problem that Gilman attributed to minorities in America:

There soon came a time when they were confronted by the pressure of population in an acute form. There was really crowding, and with it, unavoidably, a *decline in standards*. And how did these women meet it? Not with a “struggle for existence” which would result in an everlasting writhing mass of *underbred people* trying to get ahead of one another—some few on top, temporarily, many constantly crushed out underneath, a hopeless substratum of paupers and degenerates, and no serenity or peace for anyone, no possibility for really noble qualities among the people at large. (69, emphasis mine)

How did they do it? With careful control of who could be mothers and teachers and who could not. This careful control of reproduction in *Herland* is a direct representation of Gilman's belief in eugenics.

Theoretically as well as fictionally, Gilman asserted the natural superiority of the female sex. Enthusiastically endorsing the "scientifically-based" Gynaecocentric Theory of the sociologist Lester Ward, she elaborated extensively on the civilizing capacities of women and the destructive combativeness of men. Gilman states in her book, *Human Work*: "The innate underlying difference [between the sexes] is one of principle. On the one hand the principle of struggle, conflict and competition....on the other hand, the principle of growth, of culture, of applying services and nourishment in order to produce improvement" (271). Women did not want to fight, to take, to oppress. Instead, she believed women exhibited "the growing altruism of work, founded in mother love, in the antiseifish instinct of reproduction," (272), making them the core of an evolutionary process that could lead to an Aryan utopia like the fictional Herland.

Fundamental to the evolutionary process was woman's inherent responsibility for the preservation of the race, the selection of the mate, and the nurturance of children, therefore men were needed only for fertilization, making them a secondary being in the evolutionary process. "Here you have human beings, unquestionably, but what we were slow in understanding was how these ultra-women, inheriting only from women, had eliminated not only certain masculine characteristics, which of course

we did not look for, but so much of what we had always thought essentially feminine” (59). In *Herland*, Gilman cuts the male out of the reproductive process altogether. Gilman believed that evolutionary theory proved that women were the race type because reproduction of primitive life forms occurred without fertilization (Manger 125). Herlanders create a race that fits Gilman’s model perfectly: purely bred, white, intelligent, civic-minded women. Much of *Herland* is a suggestion for the use of eugenics in Victorian society to rid it of all humans who do not fit this description.

She believed that just as human beings took advantage of artificial selection to improve plants and animals with amazing rapidity, so too could we consciously choose to assist the evolution of our own species. In *His Religion*, Gilman wrote: “It has taken Mother Nature long, long ages to turn fierce greedy hairy ape-like beasts into such people as we are. It will take us but two or three close-linked generations to make human beings far more superior to us than we are to the apes” (140). In *Herland*, everything from the roads and trees to the animals and humans are bred and cultivated to be useful and as close to perfect as possible. Van says, “Here was evidently a people highly skilled, efficient, caring for their country as a florist cares for his costliest orchids” (20).

Gilman established eugenics in the foreground as the setting itself is seen as a paradise “bred” to perfection by the women: “There’s no dirt,” said Jeff suddenly, “There’s no smoke.” (21). Terry says of the vegetation in *Herland*, “I never saw a forest so petted, even in Germany. Look, there’s

not a dead bough—the vines are trained—actually... food bearing, practically all of them... These towering trees were under as careful cultivation as so many cabbages” (16). The forest can be seen as the opposite or potentiality of flawed American society in Gilman’s vision with its vagabonds and criminals represented by “dead boughs” and “dirt” and “smoke.” The idea of “cultivating”—a term that is used throughout the novel—carries implications of controlled care or taming so that nothing is truly wild. In this sense, the term connects directly to the processes inherent in eugenics.

Gilman then moves to the animals of Herland, gradually leading the reader to the more radical human experimentation found in the book. Van describes the birds: “All we found moving in those woods, as we started through them, were birds, some gorgeous, some musical, all so tame that it seemed to contradict our theory of cultivation” (16) The cultivation of dogs, cats and cows is also discussed in *Herland*—all obvious symbols of degrees of humanity in the real world.

What is not potentially useful to the women and children, and infringes on their lives, has been eliminated, such as cows and tree-eating moths. Cats, once their bird-killing instincts have been overcome, are allowed to remain to destroy small animals threatening the food supply. “Once cats are accepted as contributing to the life cycle, respect is extended to them as well” (Graeham 165). Van describes the cats of Herland:

By the most prolonged and careful selection and exclusion, they had developed a race of cats that did not sing! The most those poor brutes could do was to make a kind of squeak when they were hungry or wanted the door open; and, of course, to purr, and make the various mother-noises to kittens. Moreover, they had ceased to kill birds. They were rigorously bred to destroy mice and moles and all such enemies of the food supply; but the birds were numerous and safe. (53)

The men's suggestion that the women must have euthanized any "defective" kittens directly after birth in order to keep the feline gene pool clean is refuted by the Herlanders:

"You must have a heartbreaking time drowning kittens," we suggested. But they said, "Oh, no! You see we care for them as you do for your valuable cattle. The fathers are few compared to the mothers, just a few very fine ones in each town; they live quite happily in the walled gardens and the houses of their friends. But they only have a mating season once a year. It is many centuries that we have been breeding the kind of cats we wanted. They are healthy, happy, and friendly, as you see" (53).

This is followed by a discussion between Van and Ellador about dogs. Gilman uses this as a departure point to discuss how eugenics could weed out the criminal mind. Ellador asks, "How do you manage with your

dogs?" (53). In response, Van finds himself admitting that our dogs are mean and hurt children. He reveals that many "unmated" males are allowed to live. Dogs become analogous to American criminals as well as the stereotype of the heroic male. Van says that dogs are "threatening, fight each other, kill each other. Are chained, locked up, imprisoned, allowed to live" (60). Seen as allegory, this seems to be a step toward the radical "elimination" camp in radical racist evolutionary and genetic theory. These theorists proposed the killing humans that were unfit or a threat to a pure gene pool. Gilman sticks to the less threatening theories that simply keep the unfit from reproducing. Kessler writes that the Herlanders "have bred out criminal types by discouraging those showing such inclinations from reproducing, and only the most highly competent educate the children. Gilman is glib about making such judgments of fitness: nowhere does she indicate how such selection proceeds, and nowhere does she question human capacity to make such judgments" (74).

In earlier writings, Gilman did express that there was hope for the criminal as long as we apply the strategies that we see later in her career in *Herland*. For example, in her article for the *Forerunner*, "The Man-Made World, or Our Andocentric Culture," she wrote of criminals and vagabonds in the cities: "Some are morally diseased, but may be cured, and the best powers of society will be used to cure them. Some are only morally diseased because they grow up gravely injured. As a matter of fact, we make our crop of criminals, just as we make our idiots, blind, crippled, and

generally defective” (69). In Gilman’s *Herland*, the process of making or accepting so-called “degenerates” into society is reversed. Somel claims, “It has been quite six hundred years since we have had what you call ‘criminal’” (83). In *Herland*, it is suggested that the “crop” of people could be “cultivated and maintained” not eliminating defective offspring, but by carefully selecting the most fit and rejecting the unfit mothers of their children. As Van says in the novel, the Herlanders were “conscious Makers of People... They were making people, and they made them well” (70).

At first glance, “negative eugenics” (69)—women controlling the population by denying themselves motherhood—turns parthenogenesis into voluntary motherhood, an ideal form of birth control. Van says of *Herland* after they found that some mothers produced impure children: “There followed a period of ‘negative eugenics’, which must have been an appalling sacrifice. We are commonly willing to ‘lay down our lives’ for our country, but they had to forgo motherhood for their country—and it was precisely the hardest thing for them to do” (70). Giving up motherhood is seen as the supreme sacrifice for women (useful and peaceful) comparable to the war sacrifice for men (useless and violent). Ellador says, “Motherhood is the highest social service... those held unfit are not allowed even that” (70). Somel explains the process:

Somel: “We have, of course, made it our first business to train out, to breed out, when possible the lowest types” (83).

Van: “How? Through parthenogenesis?”

Somel: “If the girl showing the bad qualities had still the 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).

Somel’s last line seems to echo Gilman’s wish for population control among immigrants and the poor in America.

Like in her education model discussed above, Gilman reassures the reader that eugenics and tweaking the evolutionary model would not create strange zombie-like beings: “Yet, they did not *seem* cultivated at all—it had all become a natural condition” (73). Her sociological model is presented as a process that, if utilized properly, could become second nature and ingenious in its simplicity: “Yet this seemed to them the simplest common sense, like a man’s plowing up an inferior lawn and reseeding it” (80).

This treating of a race like a cash crop would seem to eliminate diversity in the race. On the contrary, in Herland, the women seem to have preserved a certain amount of diversity. Herlanders credit mutation and education for their genetic diversity. However, Gilman does not develop individualized female characters; rather they show a dystopian flatness. Kessler asks, “Does this sameness conceal an anxiety of difference? Although an excluding ethnocentrism appears in Gilman’s thought, she does, however, make gestures in the direction of inclusion” (74). By claiming to rehabilitate the genetic accidents while firing the mothers who

create them from the job, Gilman seems to elude the more radical side of eugenics.

As the narrative progresses, it seems that *Herland* becomes less of a sociopolitical utopia calling for feminist reform and more of a radical piece of pseudoscience fiction full of contradictions as the topic of breeding out defects in humans dominates the text. As a whole, women seem to become merely scientific objects--breeding stock with no individuality. Independence is lost to codependence and an ethnocentric communal mindset as Gilman's obsession with symbolizing the clouded American gene pool dominates the narrative. Gubar writes that "while eugenics empowers woman, it entraps her in the maternal role: She is important not for herself, but as the Mother of a Race that is judged in terms of the racial purity of an Aryan stock. Presumably maternal in their respect for life, moreover, the women of Herland are presented as innately pacifist, yet their society originated out of war (Gubar 77).

Like "The Yellow Wallpaper," Gilman gives her readers an interesting story on a manifest level, but the study of her latent sociological agenda does reveal racism, ethnocentrism and contradictions in presenting some of her more radical ideas. The sequel to *Herland*, *With Her in Ourland* picks up where *Herland* left off, bringing the creators of the utopia in to the flawed culture of the men—A culture portrayed as inferior to Herland, where the race is allowed to grow like a weed, filling society with the unfit.

Chapter Three

With Her in Ourland: The Radical Sequel to Herland

With Her in Ourland is the largely unknown continuation of *Herland*. Set in “our” world or the real world outside of Herland, it resumes the adventures of *Herland*’s central protagonists, Ellador and Van, but it turns from utopian fantasy to a book full of challenging analyses of social and cultural problems that still plague us today: the population explosion, war, poverty, equal rights, etc. While doing this, the book also seems to be a vehicle for conveying Gilman’s racist ideas and becomes merely a sounding board for Gilman’s push for the use of eugenics to “clean” the American gene pool. In light of this, this chapter will look at the racist and ethnocentric discourse in *With Her in Ourland*, as well as her use of the book as a proposal for the use of eugenics as a remedy for the world’s social ills. The latter seems to be overemphasized in this sequel, taking away from the literary quality of the text as a whole.

Because *With Her in Ourland* lacks a structured plot, well-developed characters and is almost entirely sociologically-based dialogue, it, unlike “The Yellow Wallpaper” and *Herland*, qualifies neither as a predominantly feminist text or an entertaining story: it seems to be merely a record of fictional dialogue between Van and Ellador that displays Gilman’s sociological agenda page after page. As they discuss the world’s social ills, they use every mode of transportation available at the time to travel the

world. This is reminiscent of a sort of fictional travelogue with subversive political implications like *Gulliver's Travels*—minus the adventure and literary style.

However, some critics are much more positive about the work Gilman does in *With Her in Ourland*. Mary Jo Deegan comments in her introduction to the latest edition of the book, “No less witty, no less sage, Gilman’s long-ignored, sociologically informed critique in *With Her in Ourland* suggests neither feminist separatism nor quixotic escapism, but calls for reason, social action, and cooperation between the sexes” (2). Read closely, I think that the text does call for these things, except that they seem to be compromised by Gilman’s radical ideology. The “reason” is vague as Gilman does not seem to have a clear vision like she did in *Herland*, the “social action” is obviously a racist and elitist action, and the “cooperation between the sexes” is predicated on a patriarchy that seems to be unchangeable in the modern world.

At their base, there does seem to be an intellectual unity between *Herland* and *Ourland*, but the latter is a much less literary piece. It contains very little plot other than two travelers commenting on their cultural environment. The romantic subplot and sexual tension from *Herland* is dropped and it contains very little poetic language or literary style—it is mostly dialogue introduced by topic via the chapter titles. The dialogue carries the same simple structure throughout: observation of the cultural environment, pointing out problems, ridiculing their source and the

fact that they could be easily fixed, then prescribing solutions to fix Ourland. Mary Jo Deegan claims that “The sequel, moreover, proposes to reform Ourland. It outlines major progress in human evolution, exhibiting mythic dimensions far beyond amusing fantasy” (3).

Gilman seems to be more radical and daring in this second volume because she confronts a world at war. Like *Herland* and “The Yellow Wallpaper,” she includes shocking racist and ethnocentric language while at the same time incorporating anti-racist sentiments here and there in the narrative. The overall tone of *With Her in Ourland* still reveals a bitter, blaming, racist discourse, mixed with the incessant bashing of American culture and a relentless call for the immediate use of radical sociological experiments such as eugenics. It is no wonder the story was widely ignored: it has little literary value; it contains racist and ethnocentric discourse while at the same time confusingly ridiculing racism. It also comes across as anti-American as well as Anti-Christian. All of this leaves little room for feminist ideas; one chapter is devoted to it and that piece seems to trail back to other issues within a few pages. Van reflects the possible public reaction to the novel when he says of Ellador’s constant inspections: “It always nettled me a little to have her laugh at us. That she should be shocked and horrified at the world I had expected; that she should criticize and blame; but to have her act as though all our troubles were easily removable, and we were just a pack of silly fools not to set about it—this was irritating” (168).

In this novel, Gilman simultaneously puts a spotlight and a microscope on sociological problems in the modern world—especially within the United States. Van describes Ellador’s analyses: “As she turned her mind upon this or that feature of American life it straightway stood out sharply from the surrounding gloom, as the moving searchlight of a river boat brings out the features of the shore” (159). Some of the issues she attacks deserve attacking, and her views on them are interesting, intelligent and ahead of her time. She does include some poignant views on some sociopolitical topics. Taking Ellador and Van’s banter as Gilman’s voice, she comes across at times to be anti-slavery, seems to abhor the slaughter of Native Americans, and hates war. In discussing these issues, she makes it clear that men are the source of these problems and are the catalyst to their continued existence in a civilized world. With this in mind, perhaps the novel was ignored by the male-dominated publishing machine of her time, contributing to its obscurity. Overall, the novel has been repressed by the public and only recently has emerged to become a studied piece of modern literature.

With Her in Ourland, like *Herland*, is rife with bigoted, myopic views. Lane writes of Gilman:

She shares many odious attitudes upheld by the intellectual community of a hundred years ago. In some of her writing, in *Ourland* in particular, and in her private correspondence, she expresses beliefs that are anti-Semitic, chauvinist and racist.

Although such sentiments dominated the intellectual circles of the country, and although Gilman represents the least outlandish wing in these circles, still her ideas are dreadful, and they seriously mar her contribution as a social analyst and theorist. (6)

This view, championed by Lane, strategically distances *Herland* from *With Her in Ourland*, seeming to imply a rift in the unity of the Herland/Ourland connection. However, Deegan counters Lane with:

With Her In Ourland is Gilman's commentary on *Herland*; it transposes Herland's abstract principles into Ourland, a real, seriously flawed world anchored historically in generations of cultural practices to which Gilman and all writers of any given are necessarily party. It is Gilman's strength that—much more often than not—she saw perceptively beyond many social biases of her time. (16)

Although Deegan's rebuttal makes sense, there is no doubt that *With Her in Ourland* supports the fact that Gilman was mired in the primitive prejudices of her era. Gilman seems to utilize both characters (Ellador and Van) in the book to carry forth her racist and elitist notions. By using these characters in this fictional setting, especially by creating Ellador as the alien to the culture, Gilman can escape public backlash.

For example, as their plane nears the coastal cities of America, Van describes one of them: "We reached the coast in due time, and the town. It

was not much of a town, dirty and squalid enough, with lazy half-breed inhabitants for the most part” (64). Later, Van ends a conversation about civilizing the world with, “In the still numerous savages we find the beginners and the back-sliders—the hopeless backsliders—in human progress” (95). This reference to inferior savages is reminiscent of Herland’s savages who existed *beneath* the utopia, completely shut out of their enlightened world.

Comments like these between the two as they begin to explore America, lead to a general discussion of race and color in America. Van explains to Ellador that as Americans “We call the white races civilized—and lump the others” (100). He continues with what seems to be the crux of the middle chapters of this book: “Race and color make all the difference in the world. People dislike and despise one another on exactly that ground—difference in race and color” (102). He later sums up the race conversations with a regretful, “We were dead wrong on the blacks, and pretty hard on the reds; we may be wrong on the yellows. I guess this is a white man’s country, isn’t it?” (119). Statements like these make it difficult to get a clear picture of Gilman’s sociological vision. Does she regret America’s violent and racist past and present? Does she have total confidence in her reform agenda? It is hard to say.

After speaking to a southern sociologist on a ship, Ellador describes the conversation to Van:

He spoke of the innate laziness of the Negro race, their inborn objection to work, their ineducability—very strong on this—but his deepest horror was “miscegenation.” This he alluded to in terms of the utmost loathing, hardly mitigated by the statement that it was possible. “There is,” He averred, “an innate, insuperable, ineradicable, universal race antipathy, which forever separated the Negro from the white.” (160)

After using the sociologist character to outline a basic description of widely held racist views by Americans at her time, it seems that Gilman then uses Ellador to counter by explaining that this was the fault of White men for not giving the Negro race the right sociological situation to better itself. She begins with, “About the first awful mistake you made was in loading yourself up with all those reluctant Africans” (168). Ellador then continues with, “If it wasn’t so horrible, it would be funny, awfully funny. A beautiful healthy young country, saddling itself with an antique sin every other civilized nation had repudiated. And here they are, by millions and millions, flatly denied citizenship, socially excluded, an enormous alien element in your democracy” (169). So, Gilman never really disagrees with the racist notions of her time, she just blames the fact that some races are “inferior” on a weak, patriarchal society with no sociological vision.

We can see the same thing in her treatment of Jewish people in this novel. Throughout, Gilman seems to be complimenting Jewish people while at the same time ruthlessly criticizing them with anti-Semitic discourse.

Even the “compliments” she gives them are obvious sarcastic affronts. For example, after Ellador enlightens Van with her suddenly complete wisdom on the history and condition of the world’s races, Van asks her, “Why don’t people like Jews?” (162). Ellador answers with a series of insights that degrade the Jewish people in many ways. She begins with an attack on them from a Darwinian standpoint: “In the successive steps of social evolution, the Jewish people seem not to have passed the tribal stage. They never made a real nation. Apparently, they can’t. They live in other nations perforce” (163). She continues with, “They could not maintain the stage of social organization rightly called a nation. Their continuing entity is that of a race, as we see in far lesser instance gypsies. And the more definitely organized peoples have, not a racial, but a sociological aversion to this alien form of life, which is in them, but not of them” (163).

Later, she adds another critique that seems to portray the Jewish race as an example of a race that failed at eugenics by getting the whole process backwards: “What is the use of artificially maintaining characteristics which the whole world dislikes, and then complaining of race prejudice? Of course, there is race prejudice, a cultural one; and all the rest of you will have to bring up your children without that. It is only the matter of a few generations at most” (166). Ironically, Gilman concludes her Darwinian remarks on Jewish people with a seemingly hypocritical statement: “When people endeavor to live in defiance of natural laws, they are not as a rule very successful” (162).

Ellador ends with an attack on a religious front: "I think the Christian races have helped the Jews to overestimate their religion" (164). After explaining to Van why she believes so, she concludes her remarks with a powerfully anti-Semitic statement: "I consider it in many ways to be a most evil religion" (165).

Coupled with her racist remarks on African-Americans, Jewish people, Native Americans and others, are Gilman's xenophobic statements about immigration in America. Gilman sets up a call for the use of eugenics to better the genetic stock in America by using Ellador to criticize the influx of immigrants to America. Obviously, Gilman believed that the uninterrupted flow of immigrants contributed to flaws in American culture because these "lower" races were not yet ready for democracy. Ellador repeatedly echoes this to Van as she criticizes America's immigration policies with xenophobic remarks.

During a review of American history with Van she says of immigration, "Then the population showed an ingrowing pressure, and reduced the standard of living to a ghastly minimum. Then came the later process of peaceful emigration, by which the coasts and the inlands of the Pacific became tinged with the moving thousands of the Yellow Races" (100). Ellador describes America as a nation with great potential but because of unchecked immigration it has become "bloated and weak, with unnatural growth, preyed on by all manner of parasites inside and out, attacked by diseases of all kinds, sneered at, criticized, condemned by the

older nations, and yet bravely stumbling on..." (118). She then chastises Van as an American that could let such things occur: "It never occurred to you that the poor and oppressed were not necessarily good stuff for a democracy... Van, there are millions of people in your country who do not belong at all" (120).

After Van innocently questions Ellador as to what his country should do, she implies a "simple" process of selection and offers some sympathy for those masses:

To legitimate immigrants, able and willing to be American citizens, there can be no objection, unless even they come too fast. But to millions of deliberately imported people, not immigrants at all, but victims, poor ignorant people scraped up by paid agents, deceived by lying advertisements, brought over here by greedy American ship owners and employers of labor—there are objections many and strong. (119)

Ellador concludes her advice by stating that some races definitely are not ready for democracy and that if America continues this trend it will self-destruct. Ellador says, "If you want a prescription, it is this: Democracy is a psychic relation, it requires the intelligent conscious co-operation of a great many persons all 'equal' in the characteristics required to play that kind of game. You could have safely welcomed to your great undertaking people of every race and nation who were individually fitted to assist" (121). She then suggests that immigrants should not be admitted merely

because they “were ‘poor and oppressed,’ nor because of that glittering generality that ‘all men are born free and equal,’ but because the human race is in different stages of development, and only some races—or some individuals in a given race—have reached the democratic stage” (121).

Eventually, we can see that she has convinced Van to believe in her pseudoscientific ideas. In response, Van concludes:

And we Americans, so young a people, so buoyantly carried along on the flood of easy geographical expansion, so suddenly increased in numbers, not by natural growth of our own stock but by crowding invasions of alien blood, by vast hordes of low-grade laborers whose ignorant masses made our own ignorant masses feel superior to all the earth—we Americans are almost as boastful as the still newer Federation of Germany (106).

After implying that the unchecked inclusion of other races is detrimental to the nation in many ways, Ellador then begins to construct a further prescription for social problems by discussing Darwinian sociological experimentation.

Ellador explains to Van that rejuvenating the culture would be an easy task: “You have a mixture of the best blood on earth, of the best traditions... All you have to do is to improve the cultural conditions, to increase the rate of progress. It’s no problem at all” (161). She then uses Herland as an example:

I never tire of the marvel and interest of your mixed humanity. You see, we were just us. For two thousand years, we have been one stock and one sex. It's no wonder we can think, feel, and act as one. And it's no wonder you poor things have had such a slow, tumultuous time of it. All kinds of races, all kinds of countries, all kinds of conditions, and the male sex to manage everything! (163)

Gilman then makes specific references to radical reform Darwinism through Ellador to strongly propose eugenics as a remedy: "Of course, there is no getting around Lester Ward. No one can study biology and sociology much and not see that on the first physiological lines the female is the whole show, so to speak, or at least most of it" (172). She concludes with echoes of her ideas from *Herland*: "There is the wide surrounding help of conditions, such conditions as you even now know how to arrange. And there is the power of education—which you have already tried. With all these together and with proper care in breeding you will fill the world with glorious people—soon. Oh, I wish you'd do it! I *wish* you'd do it!" (175). Again Ellador's student is convinced as the book ends with Van musing: "How to make the best kind of people and how to keep them at their best and growing better—surely this is what we are here for" (181).

Many of Gilman's social critiques in *With Her in Ourland* are original and powerful. The complete Herland/Ourland saga, despite glaring imperfections on both an ethical and literary level, clearly merits our

attention and analysis. Gilman was bigoted and ethnocentric at times, but she was also frequently insightful, humorous, ahead of her time, and a brilliant sociologist. Gilman was not a perfect woman; “She was, however, one of the most astute analysts of women’s oppression” (Deegan 46).

Would it be fair to disregard Gilman’s utopian fiction because of the imperfections discussed herein? I think not. Deegan makes a good argument for Gilman: “In defense of Gilman’s occasional lapses, I argue that far more severe patriarchal biases of Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, Max Weber, and Emile Durkheim, as well as most other male theorists, should not automatically disqualify their works from inclusion on standard reading lists” (47). *With Her in Ourland* is seriously flawed by Gilman’s elitism and ethnocentrism, but ignoring Gilman’s work because of this invites failure to examine her at all. Most modern readers, I believe, want to understand the interaction of race, sex, class, psychology and history in literature—despite the personal downfalls of the author. We know that Gilman was a victim of history, and this should be an invitation to learn from her work by utilizing it as a cross section of the collective psyche of Victorian America, including its brightest qualities as well as its darkest defects.

* * *

As we can see through studying works like “The Yellow Wallpaper,” *Herland* and *With Her in Ourland*, Charlotte Perkins Gilman was unable to separate herself from the shortsighted racist tendencies that were prevalent

in America at the turn of the century. She was in many ways the product of this extraordinary period of intellectual and political revolution—of its positive contributions, but also of its negative ideologies. Still, her own limitations, serious as they were, should not destroy her importance as a writer in American literature. Her racist views aside, she remains an extremely influential figure in our history. Lane writes that at the turn of the century, Charlotte Perkins Gilman was recognized as “a major theorist, an enormously influential and able social critic, essayist, writer of fiction and verse, and lecturer” (19). Hers was a name widely known in much of the Western world. The repercussions of her work are still felt today, “not only in feminist circles, where she is once more a celebrated figure, but also in our society in general, where she remains largely unknown” (Lane 19).

It is easy to find her faults: She had an oversimplified view of evolutionary progress that she seemed to find adaptable to any social opinion; she neglected the role of class, race and ethnicity with the role of gender; she had a belief in evolutionary stages of racial development that “strikes a contemporary reader as racist and ethnocentric” (Lane 293). All of these are clearly seen in the works I have discussed herein. Kessler also found fault with her sociological claims:

She accepted anthropological explanations that have long since been discarded and that cause her on occasion to invent a past that fits her theories. She relies on now unacceptable

notions of biological and sociological “laws,” which she sometimes invoked when they corroborated her ideas and which she tried to wriggle out of when they did not. (29)

Racism came through periodically in Gilman’s work, but we have to remember the times that she lived in. This is definitely no excuse, but it helps to put these things into perspective and lower the risk of anachronistic criticism. She did unquestionably believe in the superiority of some races over others. Like her disturbing idea of using people as breeding stock to improve the species, this was based on her understanding of the latest “scientific” thought of the late nineteenth century, as well as the general attitudes of her class and time. She was “not as free from the conventional views of her age as she liked to think. Although Gilman’s racist, anti-Semitic, and ethnocentric ideas are most apparent in her personal writings, in her letters and journals, these biases inevitably limit and scar her theoretical work as well” (Lane 255).

Gilman seems to be describing her role in our society when she describes the leaders of the eugenic process in *Herland*: “In each generation there was bound to arrive some new mind to detect faults and show need of alterations” (78). Gilman did detect what she thought were faults in her social and cultural environment; unfortunately, her solutions were not grounded in fact and reason, but in popular turn-of-the-century pseudoscience based on racism and xenophobia. This could lead many to believe that Gilman’s work should be ignored entirely. On the contrary,

this study has led me to believe that this makes her work valuable reading and a must in any classroom. Not only can it be read for entertainment, but it can also serve as a genuine history lesson pulled from a complex, ingenious, troubled American mind.

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