Introduction

Charlotte Perkins Gilman was one of the most read female authors of her lifetime. Nevertheless, her pieces caused highly controversial debates among those who were not yet ready to put the women’s traditional role into question. Constantly suffering from the stigma of being born as supposed ‘secondary creature’ Gilman dedicated her life to the ‘woman question’, which in these times belonged to the burning topics to both feminists and antifeminists (the latter, of course, were in the majority). Even though, real emancipation was still in its infancy. While virtues of monogamy and family were supposed to be paramount, the women’s ‘personal’ life did not have any right to exist. But Gilman did more than eking out her suffering in a literary ivory tower; on the contrary she rebelled against the inequalities which every turn-of-the-century woman had to face, and eventually lived her idiosyncratic life to the fullest. Publicly maligned as an ‘unnatural’ mother (c.f. Lane, 94 ), as a haridan asserting her creative ego and restless gypsy denying the sacrosanct existence of home, she developed a sharpened awareness for the pressures exerted by a ‘moral’ majority. Especially in *Herland* - her famous female Utopia - she exposed the then social life as an extremely perverted, sexist and artificially created building that deliberately enforced gender stereotypes to guarantee male domination. By depicting an alternative all-female society that satirically puts male superiority into question, she created a genius ethical value system that tried to redefine conventional conceptions of marriage, motherhood, home and sexuality as they had been thitherto held together by the cement of Christian and Victorian principles. Among the broad spectrum of critique which Gilman utters towards her contemporary society, the scientifically underpinned examination concerning the absurdist origin and perpetuation of gender inequality seems to hold the most fundamental significance.

The centre of our interest is mainly restricted to the terrain of *Herland*. In the course of its analysis we will crystallize out the four major criteria Charlotte Perkins Gilman localized to be responsible for creating and perpetuating female inferiority (as they were carefully cherished in the 1920s): women’s economic dependence on men, the artificial femininity made up and vehemently demanded by male conceptions, their psychological dependence on men which secured that women developed a kind of slave personality and finally their reduction to the sexual function which again turned out to be a basic problem on the psychological side (c.f. Hill, 15-17). Above all, Gilman
deeply condemned the highlighted praise of the “icon of mother and children” (Bleich, 20) since it suggested to women the impression of being merely an empty vessel that was to be filled with a ‘blessed fruit’ in her function as honourable ‘culture carrier’. Gilman emphasizes the urgency of a new conception of motherhood insofar as she applies motherhood as a major metaphor. Although this surely constitutes a distinctive feature of her Herland fantasy, it would go beyond our scope to give special attention to its examination.

Until her deliberately chosen death, Gilman maintained her strong belief in the assumption that “women are potentially omnicompetent [and] that there is no human task they could not perform [if] restraints on their activities were removed“ (Miller, 96). To recognize the ‘denouncing blasphemy’ of Gilman’s novel in its entire dimension - and what it meant in that time to hint publically at women’s discrimination - it is inevitable to shed light onto the harmful socio-political background in advance. Furthermore, it will be seen from what follows that this reference vividly illustrates the turn-of-the-century women’s mentality. For women still accepted the polarization of both sexes until an increased awareness of injustice finally united them into a collective performer. In order to keep in touch with these evils as they are portrayed in Herland, it is necessary to exemplify the then social reality with the help of certain passages chosen from the novel. Based on this brief survey, the second part of this examination is focused on Gilman’s four criteria of criticism as they have been outlined before. In conclusion, I will dedicate my attention to a critical approach towards Gilman’s ‘new woman’ as she envisioned her in Herland.

Although Gilman is not exclusively concerned with the fate of white upper-middle class women, this examination nevertheless focuses on the critique of bourgeois gender inequities as she has localized and transformed them into her most famous female Utopia.

1 The American Women’s Role in the 1920s

1.1 Socio-cultural background

The overwhelming stereotype of the Victorian woman was that of an angel-like caring mother and loving wife completely devoted to husband and the well-being of her family. Endowed with the (Christian) attributes of purity, punctuality, meekness and obedience, she held the function of a peace-making housebound creature inevitable for society’s stability. To maintain this sexist hierarchy man had to over-emphasize the
honourable’ profession of the sacrosanct home-maker. For man was considered to be the ‘human prototype’ who, by biological and religious determination, was superior to women. Especially the biblical definition of the female vessel offered patriarchal tendencies to keep women in the hermetically closed vacuum of domesticity. Exalting the story of the original sin on to an omnipresent podestal man assigned to the descendants of ‘Eve’ an everlasting, indelible stigma of guilt. And since the emergence of the ’New world’ was hopefully envisioned with marking a “divinely granted second chance for the human race“ (Fryer, 5), especially US-women had to be taken on the shortest leash possible.

Even if we have a look on the women’s outer appearance at that era, we easily recognize that it exemplified the expectations which men contributed to them as being ‘typically feminine’: they were supposed to have long hair, to wear decorative clothes (skirts, of course!) and to be in a constantly weak physical condition. Furthermore, the contemporary dichotomy of ultra-male/ femaleness becomes obvious if we compare the characteristics assigned to women in contrast to those assigned to men. While the latter naturally were supposed to be endowed with intelligence, rational thinking and inborn authority, women were defining themselves by low intellect, high emotionality, timidity, patience, submissiveness and the basic longing for “being mastered“ (132). According to these characteristics the biography of every woman was yet determined even before her birth: she was reared in the scheme of what was ‘biologically’ rooted male/ female behaviour, got to know her husband (most often chosen by her father, not by herself!) and finally tasted the ‘joys’ of being married. From that point onward a woman was supposed to be completely absorbed in the rearing of her children and in the happiness of her husband. Especially intelligent, sensitive and creative women felt restricted by an ideology which strictly bound them to their ‘inborn’ place in the domestic sphere - so to say to the famous ‘three K’s’ (kinder, kueche, kirche). Since they often found no ‘outlet’ to apply their longing in a way they would have desired, this suffering sometimes resulted in the development of severe neuroses or depressions. But although women eventually recognized their injust social, political, and religious secondariness contemporary society taught them, they still tried to cope with their imposed role of the ‘angel in the house’. Defining themselves as wives, mothers, and “redemptive moral agents“ (Atteridge Rose, 70), this suffocating pseudo-idealization resulted in women’s deep internalized subjugation.
1.2 Political situation

Although the suffrage movement had begun with the Seneca Falls Convention on Women’s Rights in 1848, which did declared “the history of mankind [to be] a history of repeated injuries and usurpations on the part of man towards woman” (c.f. Fryer, 9), it did not become a social force until the end of the century (c.f. Atteridge Rose, 78). Only step by step a change took place in the women’s perception of themselves. Finally, this ideological rebellion lead to the first wave of feminism, where the so-called Suffragettes went on the streets at the risk of their lives to sharpen the sense for the injustice of centuries. By sensational actions such as hunger-strikes or mass demonstrations these ‘blue socks’ dared to take the offensive step of knocking down the existing circumstances. In the United States, the foundation of the National American Suffrage Association in 1890 signalled the starting point of organized feminism. Emphasizing the fact that women represented ‘half of the human species’, they vehemently claimed their right to vote and exacted own income to reach economic independence. Gilman as representative of these ‘new women’ in *Herland* already predicts the dawn of the outdated nineteenth century moral virtues.

.3 Economic inequality

[Terry] squared his broad shoulders and lifted his chest. “We do not allow our women to work. Women are loved - idealized - honored - kept in the home to care for the children.” (61)

Terry’s melodramatic words reflect nothing but Victorian women’s reality. Thereagainst, in the pre-modern, agrarian society women were not only concerned with the reproduction and rearing of children but were simply bound to contribute to the family’s living. Consequently, they held an almost equal social status. Only in the freshly arisen capitalistic system, the gender-specific contributions to the society’s stability gained iniquitous evaluations by the discrepancy between paid and non-paid jobs. This negative connotated, gender-specific division of labour marked a significant milestone in women’s history: the fateful shift from biological differences into social discrimination.

Nevertheless, in the latter part of the 19th century, the ambiguous image of women began to crumble. The criticism started from the newly developed socialist ideas. Hand in hand with the industrialization women caused a so-called ‘domestic revolution’
which means that they penetrated the borders of their private life and moved into the public sphere, taking on low-paid jobs like typing and working at the telephone switchboard. But still they remained within the social system and were yet very far away from emancipating in male dominated higher professions like academic research. Believing in the rosy thesis that the only true profession a woman ever has to fulfil was that of the mother’s profession they did still not manage to revise the familiarized conception of the “celebrating child-mother bond“ (Bleich, p. ?) as it is exemplified through the following paragraph:

Terry’s idea of motherliness was the usual one, involving a baby in arms, or ‘a little flock about her knees,’ and the complete absorption of the mother in said baby or flock. (73)

The only further education that was allowed to women of bourgeoise origin was the teaching profession. But in these times female teachers were rare exceptions. ‘If a girl could read the Bible at the age of nine, she had learned enough for her life’ - this was the polemic statement which brushed all female demands for further education mercilessly off the table. Faithfully following the misinterpreted Rousseauian maxime of “la femme est faite specialement pour plaire a l’homme“, men remained the one and only force that ‘kept the world’ going: in their various positions as philosophers, courageous explorers and political leaders they embodied nothing but - ‘the world’.

Although early feminists such as Gilman regarded the abolishment of women’s social and political disadvantages as a catalytic force for emancipation, they nevertheless knew that the root of all evil lay in the women’s emotional and sexual dependence on men. Precisely because men were considered as the exclusive ‘rulers of the world’, women tried to compensate their lack of self-respect by the high exaggeration of their sexuality or even identified with the sexual function they assumed in marriage (c.f. Gubar 142). Since sexuality was viewed with prudery, society left them completely on their own concerning contraception, which was supposed to be an absolute taboo theme. Gilman’s critique of the then double morality leads into the centre of the unequal gender relations. With the help of her most extreme macho type Gilman powerfully exemplifies the phenomenon that men’s outer-conjugal advances were accepted by society and channelled by different sorts of prostitution, whereas women were submerged by a strict moral codex of monogamy.
2 Criticism of the traditional women's role as depicted in Herland

Naturally, Charlotte Perkins Gilman had been confronted with incensed critique of subversing ‘monolithic truths’ which had been taken for granted during her lifetime. Especially her ‘blasphemous’ questioning of man’s superiority to woman released fierce reactions. Among others, her critical examination took religion as the major starting point for the contemporary gender inequality. From her point of view Christian principles were one of the most important moving forces to keep women in eternal subjugation. In Herland, this view is exemplified when Ellador enters into a religious discussion with Van and thus reproaches ‘Ourland’s’ society with sticking to an ancient belief that puts (women) off until a vague joy in a fictional hereafter. Naturally, it would go beyond the scope of our examination to speculate deeply about the phenomenon, that Gilman choose the Amazonian jungle as setting for her utopian vision. But an idea that suggests itself, is the association which it evokes with the garden of Eden. Since Gilman was highly concerned with the eternal scapegoating of women, she presumably wanted to put her Herlanders in another, different paradise to denounce and to ‘re-write’ the doctrine of the original sin, which encourages its victims to hold out their fate on earth and to hope that divine salvation will end this suffering. Therefore, Gilman juxtaposes dogmatic Christianity with the Herlanders belief in Pantheism which yields life as a long cycle of motherhood, giving “clear, simple, rational directions as to how [they] should live - and why.“ (115)

2.1 Economic dependence

“A wife is the woman who belongs to a man“ (118) - this paramount definition stated by Terry affected all areas of women’s life in those days. Especially in terms of economy they had to suffer from an incredible state of dependency. Keeping her into the alleged innate place of the sacrosanct home, man nipped his wife’s business-related emancipation already in the bud. For women’s inborn place at the fireside was regarded to be an unquestionable law of nature. Consequently, women did not even think about a possible domestic revolution and remained bound in their passive existence. Since bourgeoisie wifes were “cooped up in [their] fortresses [...] like fairy tale princesses“ (Gubar, 142) who were not allowed to do any kind of higher profession they were completely at the mercy of their husbands’ income. Naturally, divorce was regarded not only to be a social crime but also an indelible offense ‘against the bible’. Furthermore,
the inadequate education of women enshrined them into an unavoidable vicious circle: since own income was denied to women, they could not reach economic autonomy of their husbands; and since they were delivered up to male ‘goodwill’ concerning this existential area of life, they did not dare to take the risk of rebelling against male authority. Thus, economic dependence was closely related to women’s domestic prison, which caused fatal symptoms in terms of women’s psychological conditions. The following paragraph, which vividly exemplifies the men’s pitiable inability to answer the Herlander’s question of what the US women were actually doing in their home all day long, is highly symptomatic for the phenomenon that they have never viewed a woman as subject with own individual desires and own personality before.

We explained as best we might. We talked of ‘social duties,’ disingenuously banking on their not interpreting the words as we did; we talked of hospitality, entertainment, and various ‘interests’. All the time we knew that these large-minded women whose whole mental outlook was so collective, the limitations of a wholly personal life was inconceivable. (97)

2.2 Artificial femininity

The ‘eternal feminine’ character traits Gilman’s contemporaries assigned to women fit the cliche of the ‘weaker vessel’ who “should not carry anything” (92). Besides common stereotypes such as hysteria, dependency, fragility, emotionality, and narcissism, nineteenth century authors deliberately put women into several categories of womanhood (Hill, 510). Antithetically to the ‘American princess’ who was portrayed as pure and a-sexual saint, the 'temptress' held the conception of an alluring, evil and immoral whore. Furthermore, man created the image of a possessive and manipulating over-mother who was clearly predestined to challenge some kind of Oedipus complex. Significantly, they never viewed women as human beings. When Terry furiously cries out “Of course they can’t understand a Man’s world! They aren’t human - they’re just a pack of Fe-Fe-Females”(80), he unwillingly is postulating the thesis that a woman deviant from male expectations is deprived of her belonging to the human species. Above all, Gilman condemned any categorizing of women. Calling herself a humanist (c.f. Lane, 15) she regarded it to be a fatal misconception to judge human beings with the help of traditional patterns of vices or virtues instead of looking at them as human individuals. In Herland she pungently demonstrates the absurdity of man’s invented notion of “the woman of mystery [who was said to be ] like a prism: turn her this way
you see one facet; turn her that way and you see another “ (Fryer, 22). When Van states that

Jeff] accepted the angel theory, swallowed it whole, tried to force it on us - with varying effect. He so worshipped Celis, and not only Celis, but what she represented; he had become so deeply convinced of the almost supernatural advantages of this country and people, that he took his medicine like - I cannot say “like a man,” but more as if he wasn’t one. (123)

Gilman uses him as her mouthpiece to criticize male Victorians’ tendency to enshrine their wives on a pedestal - as pure and innocent as Eve before the Fall.

Surely, Gilman must not be seen as a representative of the postulation of equality, who intended to abolish the differences between the male and the female sex completely. In the contrary, she wrote for women’s equal rights. Gilman tried to revise the reproach of ‘gender-levelling’ by the strong argument, that only equality in principle offers the chance to accept womanhood as possibility rather than an unavoidable fate. By desexualising the Herlanders Gilman merely tried to focus the emphasis on the omnicompetent life that was potentially open to women, if they were once freed from their connotation of being secondary human creatures. When Terry claims that the Herlanders have “no modesty [...], no patience, no submissiveness, none of that natural yielding which is woman’s greatest charm“ (98) he once more unwillingly portrays the characteristics partriarchal life demanded from women. Precisely because these ‘females’ do not cope with his culturally internalized notion, that women themselves derive pleasure out of the coquettish ‘come-and-find-me’ - element which men do assign to them, he states that the Herlanders have “[...]neither the vices of men, nor the virtues of women - they’re neuters.“ (98). Expecting the ‘typical’ womanish features of jealousy, pettiness and hysteria, these men stumble upon Herland and eventually are bound to learn otherwise. For Gilman endows them with a full range of human characteristics and deliberately sets them apart from traditional attributes.

2.3 Psychological subversion

Day after day reminded of their human secondariness, the average woman in the 1920s suffered from a kind of omnipresent inferiority complex. Very often, this tendency was yet rooted in the mother-daughter relationship: reflecting the miserable fate of their own mother many girls developed a self-hatredly rejection of the latter because of a kind of female Oedipus complex (as defined by Freud). Additionally, close friendships between women in general were simply not supposed to be accustomed.
Since women had nobody to share their personal dilemma with—nobody being ready to recognize the existence of such ‘womanish mawkishness’—they were caught up in their lonesome gilded cage of unkind marriage. In order to maintain a minimum of self-respect, women often completely identified with their sexual function and therefore tried to perfect this one and only ‘faculty’. Since Gilman was extremely concerned with the lack of solidarity among women, in her novel she deliberately sets high value on the collective, cooperating sisterhood that seemingly is inevitable for the development of such a sophisticated and humane value-system depicted in *Herland*. When Ellador explains to Van that they “think in we’s“ (117) Gilman surely uses her as a mouthpiece to recommend to her female contemporaries to come together against an unbearable patriarchal order. Additionally, the Herlander’s highly developed social consciousness presents the absurdity of male prejudices concerning female behaviour as it is exemplarily shown by Terry’s denouncing statement that “women cannot cooperate—it’s against nature.” (67). In her female Utopia, Gilman locates three fundamental psychological means to suggest to wives a constant feeling of inferiority: the mythologization of home, the iniquate allocation of roles in marriage and women’s inadequate education.

2.3.1 Home

With a silent ironic smile, Gilman exposes the sacrosanct notion of home as harmful prison by putting the three men into the narrow sphere of domesticity. Since their “alleged or so-called wifes“ (124) have absolutely no idea of the imposed intimacy among a married couple they insist on sticking to their profession of foresters. Denying the men’s incensed demand for a ‘solitude a deux’ they hold the mirror up to their narcissistic husbands who eventually realize that they had “to do something, if only to pass the time, and it had to be work - [they] couldn’t be playing forever“ (125). Harshly experiencing the vacuum left by the isolation from ‘the world’, Gilman bounds them to experience the domestic fate of a US-woman, “that quiet, unnoticed whirlpool that sucks down youth, beauty and enthusiasm“ (qtd. in Hill, 509) on their own. This provocative ‘gender reversal’ again emphasizes Gilman’s vehement demand for the possible coexistence of love and work in every woman’s life.

2.3.2 Marriage

Gilman’s subtile critique of married life vividly transposes her credo of female self-determination. The Herlanders acute ear for “one of those gender divisions“ (106),
leads to the critical questioning of another “unpleasant“ (118) ‘Ourlandish’ custom: the wife’s adoption of her husband’s surname, which seals the woman’s “declaration of dependence“ (qtd. in Hill, 508), her fate of finally being absorbed into man’s possession. Here, Gilman literally forces her reader to probe internalized ‘truths’ and to ask for the sense of such an inequal alocation of roles.

2.3.3 Education

In Gilman’s utopian vision, education assumes a paramount position. Children are lightly and easily reared to live their imagination and reason to the fullest. In contrast to the US, where women had to suffer from strict educational barriers, little Herlanders are never restricted in the discovery of their own individual faculties. Consequently, they do not inherit the feeling of being born as ‘secondary creature’ who is exclusively bound to ‘womanish’ skills such as cooking, cleaning or crotcheting. Since they are raised in the surrounding of highly inventive, rational and omnicompetent women, a potential feeling of inferiority is nipped already in the craddle.

2.4 Sexual oppression

[...] Terry, in his secret heart, had visions of a sort of sublimated summer resort - just Girls and Girls and Girls - and that he was going to be - well, Terry was popular among women even if when there were other men around, and it’s not to be wondered at that he had pleasant dreams of what might happen. (7)

The paragraph above is taken from the very beginning of the men’s voyage. Paradigmatically it exemplifies the phenomenon that Terry - who embodies the most extreme chauvinist womanizer - automatically associates the existence of an all-female society with a kind of paradisic pleasance with a bunge of sexy girls hopping around in their birthday’s suits. From this point of view, he surely can be seen as a paragon of his contemporary chauvinist patriarchy which reduced women almost exclusively to their sexual function. Gilman here refers to one of the most horrifying social evils of her time. Especially the common existence of early marriages and the tabooing of pre-matrimonial sexual experience led to the sad fact, that many freshly married girls were confronted with a rude awakening in their wedding night. In these times a mother would not have even thought of educating her daughter in sexual matters. Consequently, many women suffered from the drastic traumatic experiences which married life involved. In a second passage Gilman urgently emphasizes the incredible dimensions
which man’s internalized claims of his granted conjugal duties have reached. Once again, it is Terry who misogynistically and violently demands for the ‘fulfilling’ of the latter. When he tries to rape Alima he exemplatory proves to be an unmistakable child of his time: selfishly ignoring the fact, that this woman lacks of a culturally learned notion of what an intimate man-woman relationship actually implies, he seemingly has nothing in mind than the satisfaction of his male compulsive desire. Frustated by the sublimation of his ‘manly honour’ he seemingly does not care in one thought what a violation actually releases in a woman’s mind. If you take this perverted egoism into account, Van’s description of Terry’s motives actually mirror the conception of sexuality according to the ‘Zeitgeist’ which dominated the American 1920s:

Terry put in practice his pet conviction that a woman loves (emphasis mine) being mastered, and by sheer brute force, in all the pride and passion of his intense masculinity, he tried to master this woman. (132)

While the common stereotype of a ‘good and loving’ wife was marked of complete submission to her husband’s needs, the latter gained the god-given freedom to do as him pleased. In other words: to women the then ‘virtuous womanhood’ meant nothing but the omnipresent fear of being ‘mastered’ - precisely in sexual terms. Gilman who was said to be an implacable opponent of men’s fixation on the female sex function vehemently demanded women’s full control of their own bodies. Consequently her Herlanders “have strong trained athletic bodies“ (132) and they are agile sprinters who could simply escape from a man’s importunate manners in case it was needed. Some critics have argued further, that Gilman invented the Herlanders parthenogenetic reproduction as a symbolic act to declare women’s self-sufficiency and their emancipation from men’s “phallocentric law“ (Peyser, 2).

3 A critical approach to Gilman’s “New Woman“

Between the lines Gilman often utters harsh criticism towards her female contemporaries. Postulating the thesis, that the origins of women’s inferiority must be seen as the result of the combination of their own passive servility and the eternal tyranny of men, she figures out several symptoms to support this assumption (c.f. Smith, 123). Her strongest argument consists of women’s non-realization that alleged ‘feminine charms’ are in fact not feminine, but are merely reflected masculine wishes developed to please men. Reproaching her contemporaries with accepting the status quo as a god-given, inevitable and monolithic truth, she vehemently demands for the recognition
that iniquate gender roles are not grounded in the bedrock of nature but in the contrary must be regarded as mere male erections to keep women in submission and dependence. To hold the mirror up to her ‘fellow sufferers’ she turns the internalized patriarchal cliches completely upside down and thus gains a ‘new woman’ who holds full human status.

3.1 (A-) Sexuality

Gilman’s internalized late-Victorian sexual ethics undoubtfully show through her utopian fantasy as well. Significantly, the “new woman“ she envisioned was supposed to lack of any conception concerning sexuality. Unfortunately, this elimination caused by Gilman’s ideologic glasses perpetuated the Victorian icon of the chaste angel in the house. Nonetheless, Linda Gordon hints at the danger that we must not forget that Gilman -as a child of her time - was living in a period which was torn between the emphasizing of “sexual liberation“ and the “romanticizing [of] the importance of sexual pleasure“ (c.f. Bartkowski, 30). Consequently, Gilman could not simply deliver up her ideological restraints of taking female sexuality as her theme. In order to avoid complete touch with this somehow ‘awkward’ aspect, she decided to install parthenogenesis partly “as a compromise with her ideological double bind“ (op. cit., 31). Additionally, she bounds her male characters to accept married life in radically different terms: Van, e.g. is transforming his compulsive desire into a moderate affection similar to that of an exalted close mother-child relation:

> It was like coming home to mother. I don’t mean the underflannels-and-doughnuts mother, that fussy person that waits on you and spoils you and doesn’t really know you. I mean the feeling that a very little child would have, who had been lost - for ever so long. It was a sense of getting home; of being clean and rested; of safety and yet freedom; of love that was always there, warm like sunshine in May, not hot like a stove or a featherbed - a love that didn’t irritate and didn’t smother. (142)

In *Herland* the relation between married couples is raised on a rather interpersonal level that allows the development of tenderness and friendship. As Gilman could probably have avown from her own experiences, most of the marriages around the turn of the century were mere conventional arrangements that suffered from estrangement, non-privacy and were of rather institutional character. Nevertheless, it seems to be against human nature to exclude sexuality from the intimate relationship between two
loving human beings. If Gilman would have clearly focused on tender lesbian inclinations among the Herlanders, it would have to be read as a harsh rejection of basically violent, egoistic male sexuality. But unfortunately, she does refrain from endowing these women with any passion. When Van states “[...] that if life was smooth and happy, people would not enjoy it“ (73) he indirectly reproaches this worldly Eden with being a “paradise without sparkle“ - a view that critics like Bartkowski have articulated.

3.2 Lesbianism

Significantly, Gilman remains almost silent on this issue. Whereas later feminist writers like Monique Wittig took lesbianism as an explicit means to create a “lesbian narrative space“ (Gough, 204) which moves away from ‘womanish’ stereotypical functions such as mother, woman or wife, the Herlander’s homosexual tendencies remain almost invisible. Despite of implicit hints like the erotically connotated “utter exaltation“ and the “deep inner demand“ which women experience at the beginning of their pregnancy, Gilman refrains from emphasizing the lesbian potential that an all-female country inevitably involves. Nevertheless, many critics have argued that Herland must be read as a clear lesbian-feminist utopia which fictionally negotiates “two parallel utopian impulses: [Gilman’s] private lesbian fantasies of female nurturance, and her public belief in the potential transformation of heterosexual social structures.“ (Gough, 196).

3.3 Motherhood

In Herland, generations after the women have reached parthenogenetic autonomy, motherhood is still worshipped like the ‘golden calf’. Although Gilman criticized Ourland’s fanatic and inadequate exaltation of the status of motherhood, she fails to counteract this phenomenon by putting her ‘new motherhood’ upon a different pedestal of the same height. Pathetically proclaiming that they “will be the new mothers of a new world“, Gilman revolutionary redefines the purpose of motherhood insofar, as she regards it being the potential social force to create a better society. Gilman’s extraordinary sense of social responsibility unfortunately resulted in the fatal misconception of a perfect humanity. Since children are supposed to be the Herlander’s
‘raison d’etre’ they are highly concerned with alternative child-rearing and professionalized education to “make the best kind of people“ (59).

When Ellador learns of the here and then existence of infanticide and abortion, her horrified reaction exemplifies the gap between Gilman’s then struggle for woman’s rights and that of feminist’s today. Furthermore, this authoress confronts us with the miracle of so-called ‘negative eugenics’, a contraceptive method which allows the Herlanders to avoid overpopulation. According to Van’s description, Gilman advocates birth control through conscious parthenogenesis since the women’s ‘childlonging’ can always be felt by a woman’s “inner demand for a child“ (). Ironically, Gilman’s attitude matches nowadays’ anti-abortionists’ restaurative claim for sexual restrain.

3.4 Womanhood

Primarily, Herland is to be read as an encouragement of becoming an undomesticated, economically and psychologically self-determined woman. For Gilman’s Herlanders are marked of a high sense of community, rationality, intelligence and independence. As Margaret Miller puts it, “the characteristics that [the authoress] assigns [to] the Herlanders are clearly her vision of what female human nature would be like if social conditions were optimal, since [they] are both the creators and the products of a perfect ordered society“. But Elizabeth Cady Stanton was perfectly right when she claimed at the International Council of Women in 1888, that “thus far women have been the mere echoes of men [and that] the true woman is yet the dream of the future.“ (qtd. in Gubar, 148). In terms of a redefinition of womanhood, Gilman miserably failed to approach this dream. Although her questioning of alleged ‘eternal feminine’ characteristics surely paved the way for a new sensibility of ‘innate’ gender distinctions, she did not succeed in envisioning a real new woman. In the contrary, she rather perfects common human virtues instead of searching for exclusive ‘female’ faculties: where the US sets high value on ultra-individualism, Gilman presents a collective sisterhood, where the US exalt women’s sex-function, Gilman simply deprives her Herlanders of any sexual pleasure and additionally endows them with a questionable androgynous outer appearance which cannot be perceived as originally female.

Like many other Utopian writers, Gilman also suggests to her readers the potential perfection of human beings. When the narrator in Herland desperately claims that he “want[s] to find a flaw in all this perfection“ (81), he expresses his fear of Nietzsche’s
‘superman’, which presumably some readers will have experienced during the consumption of this female utopia. On the other hand we must avow that Gilman’s vision finally proves to be a dynamic, open-minded utopia that declares itself ready to reinstall bisexuality if this experiment will succeed. Presumably, Val Gough (197) is on the right way concluding that “Herland is not a feminist blueprint for the future, but a fantasy of what would happen if motherhood was conceived otherwise than in hetero-patriarchal terms; it is a lesbian-feminist vision of the nurturing and collective capacities of women”.

**Conclusion**

Although Charlotte Perkins Gilman gained enormous reputation during her lifetime, her name cannot always be met in the literary canon nowadays. These explanations concerning her most famous female utopia, which only recently has been raised out of its “sleeping beauty history” (Bartkowski, 23), prove that her contribution to the fight for women’s liberation movement is worth being preserved from falling into oblivion again. With amazing foresight Gilman extrapolated a topic that is picked up and developed further in many American female dystopias of the 80s: the absurdity of everyday patriarchal life that strives for the complete subjagation of women’s rights, desires and self-esteem by the religious doctrines of a male-dominated society which puts women exclusively into the service of reproduction. Modern female writers like Margaret Atwood, who urgently verbalised her nightmarish anxieties of a perverted, ultra-patriarchal theocratical state that deliberately reduces women to ‘walking wombs’ without any citizen rights, prove that Gilman’s ‘outmoded’ feminist struggle only seemingly has come to a satisfied point.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman understood her feminist struggle as a categorial imperative. In my eyes it is a very ‘modern’ view to proclaim the egalitarian coexistence of both sexes. In the contrary, many stereotypical ‘Woman’s Libbers’ are to be blamed for the popular misconception of an alleged ‘feminism’ which strives for the ‘Gleichschaltung’ of both sexes. Since Gilman defended the maxime that no sex should gain priority over another, she faithfully stucked to her credo as self-declared humanist.

Naturally, time and history intervene both in her writing and in the reading, which may seduce us to be appalled by her race of “Aryan Overmothers“ (Bartkowski, 39-40). To avoid an inadequate belittlement of Gilman’s significance, it has been absolutely
inevitable for this examination to set high value on the consideration of the 
socio-political context. For Gilman still remained a child of her time who could not be 
immune to contemporary falacies. Apart from the little flaws which we discover in her 
ideal, she geniously participated into the discourse of the ‘new woman’. Her greatest 
contribution to that debate surely was the examination of the evils in the family 
microcosm, which she exposed to constitute the basis for women’s inferiority in the 
macrocosm of the then social, economic and political landscape.

From today’s point of view, Gilman’s utopian fantasy seems to attack evils, which 
have already been solved. Nevertheless, we must not incline to reduce Gilman’s 
feminist impact. Except from the systematic examination by Simone de Beauvoir in 
1947, only few female writers have proved to gain this philosophical insight of woman 
as ‘other sex’ or have emphasized the female need for independence to such an 
existential degree (c.f. Freibert, 68).

As history teaches us, almost every problem has to pass through three phases until it 
is finally accepted: first, it is ridiculed or is met with a pitying smile, afterwards it is 
vehemently combatted and finally it is supposed to be ‘natural’. This phenomenon 
seemingly applies to women’s emancipation, too. Nowadays, almost nobody seriously 
doubts the legitimation of women’s equality which Gilman ferociously demanded in 
Herland. But if we shift our attention to the current American youth culture we soon 
discover that even today young girls and women have developed a sharpened awareness 
of a subtile sexual discrimination, which is partly enforced by our media’s society: 
under the catch-phrase of the so-called ‘Riot Grrrls’ about the beginning of the 90s, a 
subversive underground scene of young, feministically orientated women was form 
These tendencies prove that women are not completely freed from the stigma of being a 
‘secondary creature’. Since even nowadays, “when we say women, we [always tend to] 
think female - the sex.“ (137).