

Abstract

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The revival of critical interest in the writings of the early twentieth-century American feminist Charlotte Perkins Gilman is linked to the emergence of a second wave of struggle for women's liberation in the 1960s and 70s. Before this, Gilman's work, in particular her short stories and novels, remained neglected or forgotten in the literary histories of modern American literature. Only her study *Women and Economics* (1898) received sporadic critical attention as a minor classic within the field of social studies. However, the rediscovery of her utopian novel, *Herland* (1915), as well as the renewed enthusiasm for her earlier story, "The Yellow Wall-Paper" (1892), created a dynamic among literary critics and publishers to make more of her work available and known to readers and researchers. It is within the continuing critical discussion about literature, society and gender that my own study of Gilman is situated. In particular, I have tried to argue that the vision of gender equality that is dramatised in her three utopian novels – *Moving The Mountain* (1911), *Herland* and *With Her in Ourland* (1916) – can still inspire us to face up to the new challenges of women's liberation today.

The particular focus of my research into Gilman's legacy is on the three areas of sexuality, marriage and motherhood, to each of which I have devoted a separate chapter. This is not only because these are still three fundamental aspects of shared experience in the lives of women where patriarchal power and control have a decisive impact. They are also central concerns in Gilman's writing, not least in her utopian novels. Gilman's understanding of the fundamental link between personal relationships – of women as lovers, wives and mothers – and her broader political aims of transforming society remains, I have argued, a radical starting-point for feminists today. Another central concern in my own research is to refocus attention on Gilman's utopian novels as a whole, not only because they have been a critically neglected aspect of her oeuvre, but also because this is where I believe many of her fundamental insights about gender politics come together in a particularly persuasive narrative form. My study also includes a discussion of the continued resonance and power of the utopian genre itself to help us envisage a world free of gender inequality and oppression. Gilman understood at an early stage the importance of the utopian genre, both as a way of criticising the existing order, as well as providing an image of an alternative future that could inspire her readers to action. It is this double narrative function of utopia – looking both backwards and forwards – that I have tried to explore in detail, once again in order to illuminate Gilman's own ideas and to assess their continued relevance today.

Keywords: Charlotte Perkins Gilman, utopia, feminism, sexuality, marriage, motherhood.