

Reviews

Avril, Chloé. 2008. *The Feminist Utopian Novels of Charlotte Perkins Gilman: Themes of Sexuality, Marriage, and Motherhood*. Lewiston: Edwin Mellen P.

Since the revival of interest in Charlotte Perkins Gilman in the 1970s, teachers and students of American literature continue to be fascinated by her 1892 short story, "The Yellow Wall-Paper," and its unsettling depiction of marriage, motherhood, and madness. "The Yellow Wall-Paper," moreover, is a realist story that compels readers to read literarily, and one reward for such readings is a clear but chilling insight into the workings of patriarchy on the mind of a creative woman. Gilman's now classic utopian novel, *Herland*, is compelling in other ways. In *Herland*, reason rather than madness prevails, and if the methods of social organization and reproduction in an all-woman society do exert a fascination, it is of a far more intellectual kind. Indeed, utopia is a genre driven by ideas, politics, and an authorial desire to critique and transform society. Freed from the demands of realism which, as Rita Felski has argued, generated pessimistic endings in modern literature about women's lives, the utopian novel, by definition, allows for greater optimism about our imagined future. The genre would have an obvious appeal to Gilman, who claimed to have written "The Yellow Wall-Paper" in order to preach about the dangers of middle-class marriage and who was convinced that rational thought was sufficient to effect transformations in consciousness and in society. Literature, in Gilman's view, was an important vehicle for changing how people thought. So writes Chloé Avril in *The Feminist Utopian Novels of Charlotte Perkins Gilman: Themes of Sexuality, Marriage, and Motherhood*. In this study, Avril examines Gilman's three utopian novels, *Moving the Mountain* (1911), *Herland* (1915), and *With Her in Ourland* (1916), focusing on their ideologies rather than their art. The professed aim of the study is to analyze Gilman's social criticism and utopian ideas, not the aesthetic merits of her writing. Yet, Avril's lucid analysis of Gilman's narrative strategies contributes to an appreciation of Gilman as a deliberate craftswoman, one who cleverly manipulated genre conventions and reader expectations in the service of feminist critique. Avril succeeds admirably in her project of demonstrating that Gilman's feminist critique

of sexuality, marriage, and motherhood is in fact still relevant, even central, to feminists today. In this way, Avril's work contributes substantially to Gilman criticism, but also to feminist theory and debate.

The introduction of *The Feminist Utopian Novels of Charlotte Perkins Gilman* presents the terms of Avril's analysis, locating Gilman's works in relation to utopian writing and feminist literary criticism. Three chapters follow, one concerning sexuality, one marriage, and one motherhood. The opening chapter on Gilman's attitudes toward human sexuality is fundamental, since her treatment of marriage and motherhood is strongly affected by these attitudes. Avril's analysis of Gilman's writing about sexuality is, moreover, rigorous and provocative, challenging many contemporary feminist assumptions about women and sexuality.

Gilman, like other late-Victorian feminists, strongly advocated sexual continence for both women and men. She was among those early feminists "who were concerned with the overindulgence of sex, especially on the part of men, which they saw as detrimental both to women and to future generations" (36). Many feminists of the last decades have been disturbed by or dismissive of Gilman's ideas about women's sexuality, Avril writes, finding them prudish, puritanical, or Victorian in their apparent denial of female sexual desire and sexual pleasure. Others have placed Gilman firmly in her historical context and drawn attention to the difficulties of thinking otherwise. Avril, too, brings the historical and cultural context of the early 1900s to bear on her analysis, but more, she argues that Gilman's thoughts on sexuality can be a fruitful point of departure for reexamining "our own modern assumptions about what sexual liberation means and what it has achieved" (38). She then goes on to question our modern association of female sexuality exclusively with pleasure, drawing on work by Catharine MacKinnon, Susan Sontag, and Caroline Knapp. Quoting MacKinnon, Avril reminds us that "violation and abuse" are as central as pleasure to female sexual experience (44), and it is in light of such negative dimensions of sexuality under patriarchy that she examines Gilman's reasons for emphasizing sexual continence. Venereal disease, unwanted pregnancy, and sexual alienation are other very real negative consequences of women adopting a more permissive attitude toward sexuality. Gilman, she sums up, "never argues against sexual pleasure; nor does she ever suggest that it is something bad in itself. Sexual

pleasure was simply not the main issue in Gilman's work. Instead, she focused on the oppressive aspect of patriarchal sex and sexuality. What is remarkable in her writings is to what extent she was aware of the dangers involved, especially for women, in sexual relations between people of unequal power" (47). The attempted rape of Alima by her prospective husband, Terry, in *Herland* demonstrates that "there can be no freedom to have sex without the freedom not to have it" (54), and Avril reads the Herlanders' choice to seal off their world "as a symbolic act of closure, denying accessibility to their persons" (67) and in this manner retaining full control over their bodies and thus also over their personal integrity.

The issue of female control of the body and sexuality recurs in Avril's analysis of Gilman's critical but ambiguous representation of marriage in her utopias. Avril begins by explaining the legal concept of coverture which characterized marriage in the 19th century and, indeed, can be seen to exist in residual form today. The instant a woman married, she ceased to have any individual status before the law, surrendering her property, her sexuality, and many of her legal rights to her husband. Early feminists thus compared marriage to slavery and to prostitution, and reforming women's rights within marriage was a central point of unanimity in the early women's movement. For these reasons, Avril argues, Gilman's work remains relevant to our contemporary discussions of marital rape, as well as to debates concerning prostitution, domestic violence, and the effect on women's lives of defining marriage as private.

Against this cultural background, Avril traces changes and contradictions in Gilman's novelistic treatment of marriage. According to Avril, Gilman provides radical critiques of marriage in her early non-fiction and in texts such as "The Yellow Wall-Paper." Here, Gilman presents conventional marriage as a form of domestic and sexual servitude for women, and she argues that prostitution and marriage are intimately related practices, derived from the same patriarchal logic, and differing only in that one is condemned, the other sanctioned by society. In the utopian novels written after Gilman's second marriage—a happy one—representations of love and marriage become more positive, emphasizing the potential for intellectual companionship and mutual respect within marriage. Such utopian, "companionate" marriages, however, are riddled with inconsistencies. Some feminist readings, generally approving of the darker view of marriage in the early works,

have suggested that Gilman is heterosexist and unable to think outside of nuclear norms. Avril nuances her critique, using precise readings of the novels to call attention to Gilman's strong sense, particularly in her utopias, that reforming monogamous marriage is a better alternative for women than free love because, potentially at least, it gives them control over their own bodies, and sets male sexuality, and the accompanying dangers of venereal disease, under control. In other words, Gilman's understanding of human sexuality has a decisive influence on her representations of marriage. While the marriage that she advocates in her utopias differs radically from conventional marriage practices at the turn of the century, the seeming inevitability and compulsory nature of marriage generates jarring contradictions in the novels (such as why any of the women of Herland would ever consent to marry the men of Ourland) and appears to weaken Gilman's critique. Avril concludes this chapter by suggesting that "the contradictions that arise in the novels from the perpetuation of marriage seem to suggest that . . . the institution is flawed in itself" (126). In this light, Gilman's work remains valuable for contemporary readers because it unwittingly demonstrates the inherent flaws of patriarchal marriage, resistant to radical reform.

A similar value can be ascribed Gilman's critique of motherhood under a system of patriarchal values. Women's reproductive capacity becomes a justification for diminishing women's lives and social status, and the limitations of motherhood work to perpetuate nuclear family norms by inculcating in children a sense of the mother's "natural" subordination. Gilman's utopian worlds, by contrast, are based on a concept Gilman called "maternal energy," a strong force among women for racial preservation and for improving physical and social conditions for their children. "Maternal energy" is thus a gendered force for human advancement and civilization. Gilman's utopias also envision a "new motherhood," one that is voluntarily undertaken, highly valued by society, and collective and social in organization. Gilman distinguishes between the biological, reproductive function of maternity and the social, fostering function of motherhood in her writing, and her attitudes towards these two functions, separated in her fiction, are the subject of close analysis. Avril does not shy away from examining evidence of racism and classism in Gilman's ideas about *which* mothers or *types* of mothers should bear children, and *which* are suitable for the high station of nurturing children. Nor does she close her eyes to the curiously

unembodied character of maternity in Gilman's writing, nor to the ideological contradictions generated by the essentialism inherent in Gilman's conceptual universe. Finally, Avril does not use the historical and cultural context of Gilman's time as an alibi for her eugenicist and elitist tendencies. Instead, as throughout this study, Avril subjects Gilman's utopian representations and feminist thought to careful scrutiny and evaluation. She concludes that Gilman's "embrace of eugenics compromises her alternative vision of empowered motherhood" (174), but that examining the flaws of her vision is an important way of "illuminating similar contradictory feminist practices today" (175).

The Feminist Utopian Novels of Charlotte Perkins Gilman argues its points rationally and cogently, working to elucidate the ideological rather than literary merit of Gilman's writing, and to demonstrate its relevance for feminism today. Perhaps too often in the study, contemporary feminism is equivalent to second-wave feminism; there are few traces of the contributions and complications generated by queer studies, masculinity studies, or ethnic studies in the last decade's debates about sexualities, partnerships, and parenthood. Nevertheless, by way of solid scholarship, extended reasoning, and a clear focus on ideas, Avril's work does successfully show the continued importance of Gilman's thought for the feminism of our own day. Written over one hundred years ago, "The Yellow Wall-Paper" still speaks powerfully to readers, who recognize the patriarchal structures at work in the story. Written nearly as long ago, the "post-feminist" utopias Gilman envisioned remain just that: utopian. The challenge of transforming social practices that oppress women remains central to feminist projects, which stand to gain from reviewing Gilman's complex themes of sexuality, marriage, and motherhood.

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