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Female and male solidarity in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland*: Myths deconstructed

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Abstract

The article investigates the myths of female and male solidarity as they are presented and deconstructed in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 1915 utopian novel *Herland*. A claim is made that the sisterhood and motherhood are at the ideological core of *Herland*, and due to the introduction of the male narrator to the novel, the clash of strikingly different opinions on solidarity is presented as the major source of tensions between the characters. The eutopian, single-sex land of Herland is characterized by strong fellowship between the inhabitants, which is the source of the profound successfulness and prosperity of the country. However, as the three male explorers cross the natural barrier hitherto protecting the female land against the threats of hostile patriarchal civilizations, they question the non-competitive and supportive relations between the women, projecting onto them the expectations and stereotypical views they have acquired from their own world. For the travelers, the parthenogenetic model of reproduction and unified motherhood of Herland, along with the utter economic equality and the ability to sustain a highly developed civilization without men, are incomprehensible features of the female country, and as such they create a platform for dialogue about the traditional structures of societies. As the original male sol-

idarity perishes with the progression of the novel, yet another myth on gendered solidarity is deconstructed.

Key words

solidarity, eutopia, female utopia, female solidarity, myth, Herland

Kobieca i męska solidarność w powieści *Herland* Charlotte Perkins Gilman: Obalone mity

Abstrakt

W artykule omówiono mity kobiecej i męskiej solidarności, które zostały opisane, a następnie obalone w utopijnej powieści *Herland* (1915) pióra Charlotte Perkins Gilman. Postawiono tezę, że ideologiczny rdzeń dzieła stanowią siostrzeństwo i macierzyństwo, zaś męski głos narratora powieści odpowiada za przedstawienie starcia skrajnie odmiennych poglądów na solidarność. Utopijna, jednopłciowa kraina Herland charakteryzuje się silnym poczuciem wspólnoty wśród mieszkanek, któremu państwo zawdzięcza swój powszechny dobrobyt. Gdy jednak trzej mężczyźni przybywają do Herland, przekraczając naturalną barierę, jaka dotychczas chroniła kraj przed wrogimi, patriarchalnymi cywilizacjami, kwestionują oni pozbawione rywalizacji, serdeczne relacje między kobietami, przenosząc na nie swe oczekiwania i stereotypowe poglądy, które nabyli we własnym świecie. Reprodukcja oparta na partenogenezie, zjednoczone macierzyństwo, a także całkowite równouprawnienie ekonomiczne oraz zdolność do utrzymania wysoce rozwiniętego kraju bez pomocy mężczyzn są dla podróżników zupełnie niezrozumiałymi cechami kobiecego państwa, i jako takie stanowią platformę dla dialogu o tradycyjnych strukturach społecznych. Gdy wraz z rozwojem fabuły początkowa męska solidarność ulega rozkładowi, obalony zostaje kolejny mit na temat solidarności przedstawicieli tej samej płci.

Słowa kluczowe

solidarność, utopia, kobieca utopia, kobieca solidarność, mit, Herland

The aim of this paper is to explore the myths of female and male solidarity as presented and deconstructed in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's utopian novel *Herland* (1915). The single-sex world of Herland is a eutopian land not dissimilar to the locations presented in most early utopian texts in terms of its accessibility, functioning, and the society's condition. Separated from the outer world by means of a virtually impenetrable natural barrier, the country of women is protected against the threats of hostile patriarchal civilizations, and the boundary serves, among other things, as a symbolic demarcation of a striking contrast between the ideas governing the outside and the inside. The self-sufficient female land is neither tormented by wars, nor does it suffer from any kind of poverty, and its profoundly successful existence is based on strong fellowship between the inhabitants. As the three male explorers enter the female country, they pose a threat to the whole community because they bring with themselves their unfair views on gender inequality. One of the most important examples of the clash of inhabitants' and travelers' opinions concerns the concept of solidarity. Indeed, solidarity itself constitutes a crucial ideological notion discussed in the novel, as it remains at the core of the value system of the female land.

Solidarity is frequently defined as a sociological phenomenon of "unity (as of a group or class) that produces or is based on community of interests, objectives and standards" (Merriam-Webster). It relies greatly on positive emotions such as empathy and a sense of community. Naturally, as every unity embedded in culture, solidarity is also characterized by the differentiation into 'us' and 'them', and in the novel such a differentiation is emphasized on multiple levels, e.g. by the fact that the society is all-female, hence it excludes men, or by the inaccessibility of the country, marked by the boundary which divides the world into 'our' Herland and what lies beyond it.

According to Mayhew (1971), an integrated solidary system is based on four notions: attraction, i.e. ties of affection between the group members; loyalty, i.e. a disposition to protect the shared goals and fellow members; the aforementioned

sense of membership or inclusion; and, finally, association, which refers, broadly speaking, to sharing a common cause. All of these foundations are referred to in the novel. Interestingly, neither Mayhew nor other scholars who specialize in categorizing solidary systems have discussed such systems in terms of gender. As noted by Bernard, up until the 1980s, solidarity had been studied as an almost exclusively male phenomenon. It can be argued that this was caused by the widespread myth that women are incapable of bonding (Bernard 1981: 362). *Herland*, published as early as in 1915, actively opposed this myth, presenting a notion of strong and fair female solidarity.[1]

The utopian system in Herland is based on economic and social equality of its inhabitants, shared responsibility for the functioning of the country, and equal distribution of all the goods. Equality is expressed also on the emotional and psychological levels. The women of Herland are neither jealous nor competitive; they feel that it is their common goal to protect, develop, and enhance their motherland. Furthermore, they share strong mutual affection: they simply love each other. The concept of motherhood is not understood in the western terms, as the women of Herland cherish a shared, common motherhood, taking care of all the girls, not only their own, to such an extent their life is described as "the long cycle of motherhood" (Gilman 2015: 201). Moreover, no woman loves her own child (who is never called "daughter") any more than the other children and adults. In fact, the motherhood – not limited to a specific family relationship – is presented as the value around which most of the inhabitants' actions, relations and ideas revolve: "All their wide mutual love, all the subtle interplay of mutual friendship and service, the urge of progressive thought and invention, the deepest religious emotion, every feeling and every act was related to this great central Power, to the River of Life pouring through them, which made them the bearers of the very Spirit of God" (Gilman 2015: 261).

[1] The word *myth* is used in this essay in its basic meaning, that is, as a widely held belief, idea, or a conviction of some group of people.

In the discussion of the mutual affection governing Herland, it is vital to note that female solidarity described in the novel is connected not only with motherhood, but also with sisterhood, both of which are frequently mentioned as the sources of profound successfulness of the female land. Undoubtedly, in order to grasp the nature of solidarity of Herland, it is vital to understand the relations between motherhood and sisterhood. In the novel, the two concepts are first confronted with each other at the beginning of the travellers' expedition, when they speculate on the nature of the relations between the inhabitants of the female country.

> "They would fight among themselves", Terry insisted. "Women always do. We mustn't look to find any sort of order and organization".
>
> "You're dead wrong", Jeff told him. "It will be like a nunnery under an abbess—a peaceful, harmonious sisterhood". […]
>
> "Nuns, indeed! Your peaceful sisterhoods were all celibate, Jeff, and under vows of obedience. These are just women, and mothers, and where there's motherhood you don't find sisterhood—not much". (Gilman 2015: 163)

The explorers believe that motherhood and sisterhood preclude each other, as they associate motherhood with sexuality and sisterhood with celibacy. The sexualization of motherhood is certainly connected here with the idea of female competition for a male partner, whereas the origins of connoting sisterhood and continency and purity are not fully explained in the novel; it seems that the three men simply perceive sisterhood as the primary idea governing the lives of nuns in convents. Not surprisingly, though, the male beliefs on the sexualized motherhood and sexless sisterhood prove to be profoundly wrong when confronted with the reality of Herland.

The sexualization of motherhood, understandable while considering traditional societies with a sexual reproduction model, is not applicable in Herland. The asexual reproduction itself combines the concept of motherhood with the purity and celibacy which was originally viewed as tokens of sisterhood by

the travelers, thus drawing the two types of relationships closer to each other. Reflecting upon the history of the female country, the male narrator, one of the three travellers, first signals an incoherence of the male views on the mutual exclusiveness of sisterhood and motherhood: using the convent metaphor, he observes that after the miracle of parthenogenesis, the daughters and granddaughters of the First Mother lived "in an atmosphere of holy calm" and grew up "as a holy sisterhood", but at the same time he admits that "the longed-for motherhood" was the highest value of the ancient society, a national ambition rather that personal joy (Gilman 2015: 200). Moreover, he realizes that motherhood and – by extension – family ties were crucial to the development of the modern Herland: "[T]his one family, five sisters, twenty-five first cousins, and a hundred and twenty-five second cousins, began a new race" (Gilman 2015: 200).

Furthermore, the explorers learn that contrary to their expectations, the sisterhood of Herland is so strong that even the possibility of returning to the sexual model of reproduction prompted by the arrival of the three men does not result in the emergence of jealousy and competition among the women. The narrator thus describes this disappointment and its background:

> But I am sorry to say, when we were at last brought out and—exhibited (I hate to call it that, but that's what it was), there was no rush of takers. Here was poor old Terry fondly imagining that at last he was free to stray in "a rosebud garden of girls"—and behold! the rosebuds were all with keen appraising eye, studying us.
>
> They were interested, profoundly interested, but it was not the kind of interest we were looking for.
>
> To get an idea of their attitude you have to hold in mind their extremely high sense of solidarity. They were not each choosing a lover; they hadn't the faintest idea of love—sex-love, that is. These girls—to each of whom motherhood was a lodestar, and that motherhood exalted above a mere personal function, looked forward to as the highest social service, as the sacrament of a lifetime—were now confronted with an opportunity to make the great

> step of changing their whole status, of reverting to their earlier bi-sexual order of nature. (Gilman 2015: 223)

Therefore, instead of competing with each other to win a lover, the women of Herland understand that the appearance of the travelers constitutes a chance to further, probably more efficient, reproduction. This understanding and the lack of jealousy testifies the genuineness of the sisterhood governing the female country, whereas the confirmation of the central position of motherhood as the main value links sisterhood with motherhood yet again.

As the narrator progresses in his understanding of the female land, he ceases to contrast sisterhood and motherhood, and ultimately acknowledges their equal status in the ideology of Herland, admitting at the same time that the realizations of these concepts are still quite unbelievable to the men: "The power of mother-love, that maternal instinct we so highly laud, was theirs of course, raised to its highest power; and a sister-love which, even while recognizing the actual relationship, we found it hard to credit" (Gilman 2015: 200). Thus the idea of sisterhood and motherhood as two equally important sources of female solidarity is indirectly expressed in the novel.

The sole affection of motherhood and sisterhood does not fully explain the nature of female solidarity of Herland, though. The narrator, trying to provide a more accurate definition of the relationships between the inhabitants of Herland, indicates that the solidarity is based on "limitless feeling of sisterhood, that wide unity in service, which was so difficult for us to grasp" (Gilman 2015: 208). The limitless, supportive sisterhood above all possible divisions is therefore accompanied by cooperation for a shared cause. The "service" referred to in the excerpt is understood rather widely throughout the novel, namely, as common work aimed at the wide-raging development of the country: "a glad, eager growing-up to join the ranks of workers […] and beyond that, the whole, free, wide range of sisterhood, the splendid service of the country, and friendships" (Gilman 2015: 229).

One of the most important objectives of the service is prolonging the successful existence of Herland by educating subsequent generations of its inhabitants. The notion of education is vital in the country of women, as it is presented as the very mission in which the women unite: "The Herland child was born [...] into the society of plentiful numbers of teachers, teachers born and trained, whose business it was to accompany the children along that, to us, impossible thing—the royal road to learning" (Gilman 2015: 237). At the same time, it is exactly this wise, well-planned education that enables the society of women to stay united in the future, its aim being described by the narrator as "laying the foundation for that close beautiful group feeling into which they grew so firmly with the years" (Gilman 2015: 238). The education of Herland, therefore, is a sort of perpetuum mobile: the shared service of teaching unites the women, and the results of the teaching process ensure further solidarity in the generations to come.

Female solidarity becomes visible in numerous events presented in the novel, a case in point being the united and strong condemnation expressed by all women of Herland in response to an attempted marital rape that one of the travelers, Terry, was found guilty of. However, less extreme examples are equally, if not more, telling. An interesting manifestation of the profound female unity is also presented in scenes depicting clashes of opinions between the narrator and Ellador, his wife from Herland. The woman, although always resolved to understand the viewpoint of her husband, is usually unable to consider problems without referring to the collective ideas, views and beliefs of her nation. At a certain point the man realizes this: "I hadn't married the nation, and I told her so. But she only smiled at her own limitations and explained that she had to 'think in we's'" (Gilman 2015: 253). Not only are Ellador's opinions determined by the shared set of values and worldviews: it appears that the female unity is crucial to her identity, as the mode of thinking about herself in the plural indicates the deep psychological bond between her and her female compatriots. Interestingly, although the institution of

marriage is re-introduced in Herland, the "we's", as Ellador puts it, are still related solely to female unions rather that male-female partnerships.

As shown above, fair and true female solidarity constitutes the foundation of the ideological system of Herland and ensures its proper functioning. However, this kind of solidarity is contrasted with the myths of female disability to form a solidary society, which are brought from the outer world by the narrator and his companions. Due to the introduction of three male characters, a male narrator included, *Herland* presents multiple, often contradictory convictions on gender roles, proper structures of societies, and varying physical and psychological abilities of men and women. Indeed, the male points of view shaped beyond Herland and tested against female points of view constitute the main source of tensions between the characters of the novel. This clash of strikingly different beliefs is crucial for the presentation of the story world and it propels the narration.

The male-centered worldview of the narrator and his friends affects their perception of the inhabitants of Herland. As the three explorers enter the female land, they automatically question the non-competitive and supportive relations between the women, projecting onto them the expectations and stereotypical views they have acquired in their own world. The variety of those expectations is enormous. One of the first myths described in the novel is concerned with an alleged inability of women to cope on their own, to build and sustain a highly developed country without men. The explorers naturally assume that men must live in Herland as well, and simultaneously they reduce the role of women they first encounter in the country to a purely sexual one. They reflect that the men "may live up in the mountains yonder and keep the women in this part of the country—sort of a national harem!" (Gilman 2015: 167). The fact that the women of Herland work hard in order to maintain their civilization is therefore highly surprising for the adventurers, who claim that beyond the utopian land women "would of course work for their children in the home; but the

world's work was different—that had to be done by men" (Gilman 2015: 202). As the story unveils, other myths are introduced, for example in relation to women's jealousy and organization skills: "We all know women can't organize—that they scrap like anything—are frightfully jealous" (Gilman 2015: 200). Similarly to the harem association, the notion of female jealousy is a projection of the male-dominated power structures.

Furthermore, for the explorers, the parthenogenetic model of reproduction and unified motherhood of Herland are utterly incomprehensible. Most importantly, though, the men exclude any possibility of female solidarity. At a certain point, the narrator thus describes his friend's views on that matter: "I remember how long Terry balked at the evident unanimity of these women—the most conspicuous feature of their whole culture. 'It's impossible!' he would insist. 'Women cannot cooperate—it's against nature'" (Gilman 2015: 207). This myth in a way lays the foundation for all the other myths, as it is concerned with the very basic feature of female psyche. In the novel, it is debunked not in one particular scene or utterance, but rather throughout the progression, in the detailed description of the successful female country, its origins, history and functioning. To illustrate the deconstruction of the myths brought to Herland from the outer world, one may take a look at how the narrator eventually dissects the male expectations of the country:

> We had expected them to be given over to what we called "feminine vanity" – "frills and furbelows", and we found they had evolved a costume more perfect than the Chinese dress, richly beautiful when so desired, always useful, of unfailing dignity and good taste.
>
> We had expected a dull submissive monotony, and found a daring social inventiveness far beyond our own, and a mechanical and scientific development fully equal to ours.
>
> We had expected pettiness, and found a social consciousness besides which our nations looked like quarreling children – feebleminded ones at that.

> We had expected jealousy, and found a broad sisterly affection, a fair-minded intelligence, to which we could produce no parallel.
>
> We had expected hysteria, and found a standard of health and vigor, a calmness of temper. (Gilman 2015: 216-17)

It is due to the solidarity, sisterhood and cooperation, which constitute the ideological core of the female society, that the country prospers. All in all, therefore, the myths brought from the outside are deconstructed in the course of the narration, as it turns out that the female country based on unity and equality does in fact function in a perfectly organized, successful way, and the narrator openly admits to notice the exquisiteness of the utopian land.

Ironically, simultaneously to deconstructing the male misconceptions concerning the other sex, the progression of the novel tests and exposes yet another myth: that of strong and unwavering solidarity of men. Upon arriving to Herland, the explorers are a solidary group, although they greatly differ from each other. The narrator, Van, is a sociologist, whose opinions on the structure of society and gender roles are traditional, but moderate, and who does not hesitate to change his mind once it turns out that some of his convictions were faulty. Jeff is a doctor and a botanist, and his attitude towards women is extremely romantic: he believes that they are to be protected and cherished. The longer he resides in Herland, the more "herlandized" he becomes, embracing all the rules of the female country and praising it as the best possible society. The last of the three friends, Terry, is a classic male chauvinist who believes that women should be "mastered" emotionally and physically by men, and that women actually need and enjoy such kind of treatment. His assumption of male superiority disables him to function properly in Herland. Despite considerable differences, however, the men seem to be solidary at the beginning of their journey. Their solidarity is based on the concept of brotherhood; they are loyal friends of the same background and they simply accept their differences, which in the patriarchal society of their homeland, the United States,

were not all that visible. It is in Herland that the divergences start to dissolve their unity, especially as Terry, in spite of obvious proof to the contrary, is not able to accept that women are not inferior to men. The narrator thus describes this dissolution:

> I hated to admit to myself how much Terry had sunk in my esteem. Jeff felt it too [...]. At home we had measured him with other men, and, though we knew his failings, he was by no means an unusual type. We knew his virtues too, and they had always seemed more prominent than the faults. Measured among women—our women at home, I mean—he had always stood high. He was visibly popular. [...] But here, against the calm wisdom and quiet restrained humor of these women, with only that blessed Jeff and my inconspicuous self to compare with, Terry did stand out rather strong. (Gilman 2015: 212)

It can be argued that the male solidarity presented in the novel is not successful because, unlike the female solidarity governing Herland, it is based on certain wrong values. At the beginning of the novel, the men feel united in their sense of superiority above women, although each of them feels superior for a different reason. As it ultimately becomes clear that their attitude to the other sex is groundless, solidarity between them perishes: Van and Jeff are willing to accept the truth about Herland and its inhabitants, while Terry refuses to do so. The female solidarity, on the other hand, turns out much more unwavering and, thereby, successful. Faced with the visitors from the outer world, the women stick to their beliefs as well as to the positive perception of and attitudes toward other representatives of their own sex.

It is also worth noting that the male entry to the utopian land can be perceived as a threat to the female rule, especially if the reader shares some of the myths the male characters verbalize. The patriarchal myths defining gender roles and the characteristics of both sexes seemingly threaten the power of women in Herland. Eventually, however, the danger is averted since two of the three visitors change their views. Terry and

Van eventually leave the utopian land, and the one who stays, Jeff, joins the women in their understanding of the role of sisterhood.

As has already been pointed out, female solidarity as presented in *Herland* stems primarily from the affection the inhabitants feel towards each other, and also from positive valuation of the concepts of motherhood and sisterhood. Naturally, they are also solidary in response to the outer world, which is patriarchal, if not male chauvinist. Yet, it should be noted that the female utopia in *Herland* is not based on unity in suffering, but rather unity in happiness. Interestingly, in her realist short fiction, Charlotte Perkins Gilman usually presented a strikingly different form of female solidarity: the one based on negative emotions caused by the oppression of patriarchal society. The protagonists of her short stories usually feel united precisely because they share the same experiences of male dominance. This phenomenon can be found, among other stories, in a brilliant piece entitled *Turned,* whose plot revolves around three characters: a wife, a husband, and a maid. The two women are contrasted at the very beginning of the story, as the wife, Mrs Marroner, is an exquisitely educated woman, an active academic with a PhD, while the servant, Gerta, although beautiful and ever-obedient, is not too bright or ambitious. When the maid gets pregnant and it is revealed that Mr Marroner is the father, the wife, understandably, becomes furious. However, after some consideration, she comes to the conclusion that it is not Gerta that is to blame, but her husband, who took advantage of his position of power in order to rape or seduce the girl. Despite her original rage towards Gerta, having left the unfaithful husband, Mrs Marroner decides to take care of the mother and the baby. She additionally educates the maid, turning her into a conscious and self-confident woman. At the end of the story, the husband finds the women in their new house, but he is clearly not welcome, and as he enters, he is faced with a carefully constructed question, juxtaposing him to both women: “What have you to say to us?” (Gilman 2009: 181). Clearly, *Turned* – like many other short

stories by Gilman – pictures female solidarity based on shared suffering, as the husband symbolizes multiple variants of male oppression. Although he hurts the two women in different ways, yet in each case one may easily discern his disrespectful attitude toward the other sex and the excessive use of his privileged position in the patriarchal society. The female solidarity in *Turned* is, indeed, the solidarity above all divisions, in spite of vast differences between individuals. But most importantly – it is the solidarity based primarily on painful experiences. The different foundations of the female unity in *Herland* and in Gilman's realist fiction prove that the solidarity in *Herland* is yet another realization of utopian thinking presented in the novel. Part of the message conveyed by the work is that should the male oppression disappear, women would be solidary differently – joyfully rather than sorrowfully.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman recognized the contemporary myths concerning female and male solidarity and actively worked on debunking them. In her novel, she proposed a model of sisterhood and female solidarity, simultaneously challenging the concept of patriarchal brotherhood and exposing male nonuniformity. Her discussion on gender-related solidarity constitutes a vital part of the ideological, feminist overtone of the classical utopian text. Indeed, the profound solidarity which laid ground for the fictional world of Herland exceeded – and still exceeds – the real-life realizations of the concept. Gilman's utopian understanding of solidarity can be perceived as a part of her much broader project: fighting oppressive gender stereotypes and promoting feminist ideals.

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