

CHARLOTTE PERKINS GILMAN'S CONFLICTING PERSPECTIVES ON ECOFEMINIST PRINCIPLES



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Abstract

Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860–1935) was one of the most productive American writers of the turn of the century. She was an author of novels, short stories, non-fiction essays and poems, well known as an activist fighting for women's rights and a precursor of feminism. Gilman proposed a redefinition of the roles in domestic life and society, with women taking more prominence. The writer rejected the male dominant role prevailing in patriarchal society and supported other emancipation movements. Using the affinity of man and animals, Gilman initiated an ecofeminist discourse by presenting a different vision, and proposing new views on the assumptions that underpin her contemporary culture. In her feminist work on the equality of women, Gilman has repeatedly drawn attention to the overt display of cruelty against animals. While addressing their rights and freedoms, the writer emphasized the similarities between women and animals in the patriarchal system, both being treated in subhuman disregard against the privileged position of men. However, her attitude towards animals is not precise and the writer repeatedly formulates conclusions that are surprisingly contradictory to her own views. In her utopian novels, the writer emphasized the potential threat from animals to humans and even questioned the animals' overall significance. Gilman's views often clash with veiled anthropocentrism, and her ambivalent attitude to the issue of human-animal dependencies makes it impossible to reduce her views to one particular attitude. Her radical feminist views, focused primarily on women's empowerment and the fight against patriarchy, aimed for the overall transformation of society. However, the lack of consistency in Gilman's views is also manifested in her ambivalent attitude to the overall issue of equality. As she focused on improving the situation of women, Gilman simultaneously ignored the problems of other marginalized social groups, with an undercurrent of racism, class prejudice and xenophobia showing through her writings.

Key words

ecofeminism, feminism, animal rights, anthropocentrism, women's rights, racism, eugenics

Introduction

Ecofeminism is a broad and diverse contemporary social movement which examines both the relationship between women's oppression in patriarchal society, and the exploitation of the environment, asserting that a comprehension of one is supported by an understanding of the other (Davion 1994, 8). Ecofeminists contend that the

domination of nature by humans emanates from patriarchal societal structures, the same doctrine that validates the domination of women. Regardless of the differences between the many variants of ecofeminism, their common feature is the opposition to patriarchy as a mutual source of oppression, and a conviction in the interconnectedness between women and nature. Ecofeminists believe that all forms of oppression are linked, as Greta Gaard points out,

ecofeminism's basic premise is that the ideology which authorizes oppressions as those based on race, class, gender, sexuality, physical abilities, and species is the same ideology which sanctions the oppression of nature. Ecofeminists call for an end to all oppressions, arguing that no attempt to liberate women (or any other group) will be successful without an equal attempt to liberate nature (Gaard 1993, 1).

The aim of ecofeminist philosophy is to reject hierarchy in nature and society, as well as to repudiate speciesism, which allows an elevated existence of human beings over animals. In this paper I will analyze selected works of Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860-1935), whose ideas served as precursors to the ecofeminist movement. Gilman's revolutionary views concentrated principally on the equality of women and the fight against patriarchy, integrated with her endorsement of animal rights. In her writing she used an affinity between humans and animals, and she presented a new approach to the presumptions of her contemporary culture.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman was an influential turn of the century American feminist writer, lecturer, and social reformer and became one of the most prominent feminist theorists; through her novels, short stories, poems, non-fictional works and lectures promoting her arguments for social and economic equality of gender. In my article I will focus on some of the conflicting messages found in her writings regarding ecofeminism, specifically on gender equality and social structure. Gilman was ambitious with her convictions and quite purposeful with the intention behind her work, as she demonstrates on several occasions in her writing. For instance, she mentions in her autobiography that from her early years she was "already scheming to improve the world" (Gilman 1990, 21), and

from sixteen I had not wavered from that desire to help humanity which underlay my studies. Here was the world, visibly unhappy and as visibly unnecessarily so; surely it called for the best efforts of all who could in the least understand what was the matter, and had any rational improvements to propose (Gilman 1990, 70).

Gilman's critical writings supporting the emancipation of women were one of the first late nineteenth century feminist texts that also touched upon animal rights (Donovan 1993, 173). In her works Gilman frequently used animal analogies primarily to promote her feminist ideas but also to speak out regarding the injustices and mistreatment of animals, viewed in society as inferior subjects compared to the privileged positions of man. Her work, particularly on the issues of feminism, animal rights, and criticism of patriarchy forms what many refer to as the preliminary arguments that eventually formed the concept of ecofeminism (Deegan and Podeschi 2001, 19).

However, from a conceptual perspective there are numerous contradictions in Gilman's thinking, making it impossible to classify her views into a clear-cut ideology. Although she strongly promoted gender equality, she focused her attention solely on the experiences of white, middle- and upper-class women, to whom she was a peer, disregarding other female demographic groups. Likewise, despite her support for a progressive view on animals, Gilman's approach towards animal rights was also marked by ambivalence. For example, while she harshly condemned the cruel treatment of animals in the fashion industry; concurrently she emphasized and endorsed anthropocentric dominance over animals. Lastly, regardless of her progressive positions fostering feminist ideology, her works were not free of racism and class prejudice that are rejected by contemporary social norms, much less from an ecofeminist perspective. Gilman was masterful at describing how women's lives were impacted by social and economic bias; however, her own biases came through in her writings; she challenged patriarchal dichotomies but at the same time she constructed hierarchies and voiced her support for anthropocentrism, and racial eugenics. The conflicting opinions and ambiguities created in Gilman's writings raise the question of their intentionality. Were they a byproduct of the times and the result of the unintentional blindness and as such mirrored a similar struggle waged by other progressive feminist critics such as Mary Sanger? Or were they a manifestation of a deep conflict within the authoress herself, who wavered between support for a new progressive society and allegiance to the older power structures? This article will not clear Gilman's contradictions but will confront them head on. It will focus on Gilman's utopian novels "Herland" (1915) and "Moving the Mountain" (1911), as well as review some of her non-fictional writing.

1. Oppression across species

In her contemporary ecofeminist analyses of the joint oppression of women and animals, Lori Gruen argues that both categories,

‘woman’ and ‘animal’ serve the same symbolic function in patriarchal society. Their construction as dominated, submissive ‘other’ in theoretical discourse, (whether explicitly stated or only implied) has sustained human male dominance (Gruen 1993, 61).

Gilman’s perspectives on this linked oppression are concurrent with today’s ecofeminist philosophy as she saw a clear connection between the cruelties faced by exploited animals and the oppression of women, and viewed these oppressions as highly interconnected rather than separate phenomenon.

Gilman formulated a compelling connection between the way in which women and animals were treated in the male dominated patriarchy. In her non-fictional writing, she describes nonhuman animals as “creatures” similar to women in suffering, locked in the same patriarchal framework that justifies the subjection of women and endorses exploitation of nonhuman animals and nature. Arguing that patriarchal structure constrained the personal growth and financial independence of women in “Women and Economics” (1898), Gilman often refers to animals to illustrate that women and animals hold analogous positions in their socio-cultural status in relation to the advantaged station of men. To illustrate the subordination and exploitation of animals and women, Gilman invokes domesticated animals and compares them with other free animals, outside of human control. For example, in “Women and Economics” she presents the massive exploitation of the dairy milk cow, created through selective breeding by humans, for the service of humans, and then compares it to a wild cow:

The wild cow is a female. She has healthy calves, and milk enough for them; and that is all the femininity she needs. Otherwise than that she is bovine rather than feminine. She is a light, strong, swift, sinewy creature, able to run, jump, and fight, if necessary. We, for economic uses, have artificially developed the cow’s capacity for producing milk. She has become a walking milk machine, bred and tended to that express end, her value measured in quarts (Gilman 1998, 23).

Gilman recognizes the similar experience of *femaleness* between the different species, both as subjects to exploitation and violence. Distant from anthropocentric associations, Gilman’s comparison of women and cows clearly coincides with freeing women from their patriarchal dependencies, establishing women’s rights to control their own sexuality and reproductive system, as well to bear and raise children. The cow, dragged out from her natural environment is kept in captivity and violently controlled, and her reproductive system manipulated against her nature and instincts. The reproductive freedom of women and animals are subjected to a similar form of oppression. Gilman’s critique anticipates that of ecofeminists. In a manner

evoking that of Gilman, twenty-first century author and animal rights advocate Joan Dunayer notes:

the dairy cow is exploited as female body. Since the cow's exploitation focuses on her uniquely female capacities to produce milk and 'replacement' offspring, it readily evokes thoughts of femaleness more generally. Bearing with it a context of exploitation, the cow's image easily translates to women (Dunayer 1995, 13).

The issue of the abuse of animals by the dairy industry is addressed further by Gilman in her utopian novel "Herland". The novel features a society consisting exclusively of women, who abstain from using animal products. Herlanders are unable to understand "the process which robs the cow of her calf, and the calf of its true food" (Gilman 1998, 40) and perceive it as a horrific violation of both motherhood and animal ethics, as well as outright violence.

Gilman clearly viewed the oppression of animals in patriarchal society in the same light she saw inequalities faced by women; men abused the power to control both to suit their purposes. She consequently advocated fundamental reforms to stop injustices, and dismantle the patriarchal system of domination. In her poem "Why Nature Laughs" (1890), she uses a figure of a personified "ancient woman", "Grandma Nature", to intentionally assault society, especially mankind, for inflicting injuries upon nature. "Grandma Nature" identifies with women and points out the negative aspects of the male dominated world. During her conversation with a male narrator she expresses her deep emotions; laughs, and then explodes with anger when she talks about the misfortunes she considers that humans have brought upon themselves:

She was laughing there more wildly
Than I had ever dreamed.
At first she only sat and shook,
And then she rolled and screamed (Gilman 1996, 95-96).

Nature has a dominating voice; she is all-knowing of mankind's rights and wrongs. Nature elucidates that the imprudence of men and women led them to find doomed solutions instead of fixing the underlying problems to improve their lives. Rather than concentrate on natural joys, humans are responsible for the pitiful condition of society that Grandma Nature feels could be easily remedied.

Building on this comparative perspective, Gilman viewed the world of wild animals as equal between male and female, with both genders having their independence and crucial roles for propagation of the species. She juxtaposed the

animal world with human civilization built on male dominance. Since the animal world does not have the same social structure as the human world, Gilman drew patterns from the animal kingdom to imitate in human culture. The rules that applied in the animal world did not impose shackles on females to restrict their freedom. In “Women and Economics” one of her most often cited quotations states that as humans we are “the only animal species in which the female depends on the male for food, the only animal species in which sex-relation is also economic relation” (Gilman 1998, 3). She points out that unlike animals, humans are dependent on social conditions, and the male-dominated social environment shapes human life enormously. Similarly, in her poem “Females”, Gilman compares women to independent female animals and her argument is that women could be as independent as their animal counterparts; however, that is not the reality. Animals in her poem represent a range of species, (fox, hen, whale, eagle) and what they have in common across all the species is that females are free and equal to males; while only the human woman is dependent and subservient.

2. Animal Rights and Ethics

Gilman often employed animal symbolism to allude to female oppression and exploitation, as well as directly show empathy for nonhuman animals, also discriminated upon by the patriarchal system. In her utopian novel “Moving the Mountain”, Gilman goes to great lengths to speak against cruel and abusive practices such as the imprisonment of animals in menageries, hunting (depicted as a violent form of male recreation), animal slaughter for the food and fashion industries, as well as illnesses and defects arising from the inbreeding of animals. As the story’s protagonist, Nellie, explains to her brother, John, visiting the female utopia, “people do not think it is a pleasure now to watch animals in pain” (Gilman 2015, 146). In a new female-run country, exploitative practices that led to inflicting suffering on animals have been abolished. However, Gilman’s overall views towards animals is somewhat ambiguous, with conflicting messages found among her numerous writings; most notable is Gilman’s more or less explicit anthropocentrism. Lori Gruen lists two types of anthropocentrism: “inevitable anthropocentrism” and “arrogant anthropocentrism”, both of which are applicable to Gilman’s views towards animals. Inevitable anthropocentrism relates to the situation when humans retain their superior perspectives but still acknowledge and appreciate the perspective of other species, showing a certain level of empathy. Arrogant anthropocentrism is the chauvinistic perspective featuring a sense of human superiority, closed to any concern for the interests or rights of others. Some of Gilman’s statements indicate a chauvinist attitude towards animals, which “elevates the human perspective above all others” (Gruen 2015, 24) and placed humans at the peak of superiority.

Even if the protagonists in “Moving the Mountain” seek to avoid the suffering of animals, there is still clear evidence of mistreatment as well as many ambiguities regarding the role and status of animals in Gilman’s utopia. The protagonists explain, for example, that women keep a certain number of animals in laboratories for use in scientific testing when it would place humans at risk. The diet of the citizens of the utopian country features animal protein with every village operating their own pastures and dairies. Still the level of meat consumption has been greatly reduced compared to the standards of Gilman’s time. At this point it is worth emphasizing that Gilman’s position on meat consumption changed within a decade and evolved from the acceptance of a low level of animal protein to that of complete vegetarianism. In “Herland”, another utopian novel published four years after “Moving the Mountain”, the society follows a diet completely free of any animal products and resembling today’s vegan diet, supported by the ecofeminist movement. Veganism constitutes one of the principle frontiers of the ecofeminist movement. One of the main champions of ecofeminism, Josephine Donovan stresses that “feminism must take a stand against animal suffering and exploitation, including the consumption of meat by humans” (Donovan 1995, 228), whereas ecofeminist author Carol J. Adams proclaims that the “eating of animals is the most pervasive form of animal oppression in the Western world, representing as well the most frequent way in which most Westerners interact with animals” (Adams 1993, 196).

In “Moving the Mountain”, the presence of animals in cities is very limited as their domestication is forbidden. As such, the practice of breeding specific races of dogs no longer exists and cats are seen as a general nuisance because they kill birds which are viewed as essential to farming operations. The population of both species is greatly reduced compared to reality and they are relegated to life only in rural areas. The inhabitants of the novel’s utopian society only keep animals that are deemed to be useful for humans; reflecting Gilman’s anthropocentrism as she essentially acknowledged human superiority over animal life. Her utopia values some forms of nature over others, with tight control over animals and the extermination of certain species viewed as an outright danger to humans, such as tigers and wolves. Regarding such species, the protagonist, Nellie, is not concerned about their fate but rather shows a sense of relief when speaking about exterminated tigers: “As a matter of fact, I don’t think there are any left by this time; I hope not” (Gilman 2015, 147). Asked by her brother if they exterminated whole species she responds positively: “Why not? Would England be pleasant if the gray wolf still ran at large? We are now trying, as rapidly as possible, to make this world safe and habitable everywhere”, for human needs (Gilman 2015, 147). These examples show a clear departure from Gilman’s activist messages conveyed in other writings and condemning animal cruelty and hunting, described as a “relic of barbarism” (Gilman

2015, 148). The utopia depicted in “Moving the Mountain” turns a blind eye to human ruthlessness in the wake of a wide spread policy of controlling the animal species.

A similarly disturbing form of anthropocentrism is depicted in the pages of “Herland” as the inhabitants of this utopia modify nature to meet their needs. There are no domesticated animals, except for cats, not because of any specific concern for animal rights but rather that animals were eliminated because they took space away from agricultural development needed for humans. Likewise, in “Moving the Mountain”, there is a lack of detail or description in how the unwanted species were eradicated. What the reader encounters are only euphemisms such as: “I don’t think there are any left by this time” (tigers) (Gilman 2015, 147), “exterminated” (Gilman 2015, 147), “we are now trying, as rapidly as possible, to make this world safe and habitable everywhere” (gray wolves) (Gilman 2015, 147), “there are no animals kept in cities anymore” (Gilman 2015, 68), “we keep very few” (cats) (Gilman 2015, 151). Gilman seems to purposefully avoid discussion of the actual extermination methods, the details of which, most likely, would have evoked the slaughter of animals and the hunting and trapping practices she detested and vehemently opposed.

Gilman’s ambivalence extends not only to the control of animals but also to the practice of the animal selective breeding. In her short story “When I Was a Witch” (1910), Gilman criticized the selective breeding practices for lapdogs as it represents an extreme example of men’s manipulation of nature, creating living beings wholly dependent upon their creators for their existence. However, the “Herland” protagonists use the same practice of selective breeding for the cats that they have chosen to remain as their only domesticated urban animal. Despite their diet based on no animal products and overall disregard for livestock, Herlanders have a systematic program for the selective breeding of cats exclusively for human advantage. Gilman’s anthropocentric tendencies show again as she writes that cats are bred to promote the most desired traits for new offspring; they kill mice and moles, but not birds. Additionally, the cats are affectionate and devotedly attached to their human owners and they are quiet so as to not disturb children.

Yet another set of mixed messages lies in “When I Was a Witch”. The protagonist discovers that she possesses supernatural abilities and powers to make her wishes become reality when she encounters circumstances she feels are unjust. When she sees a horse being beaten, she wishes that the horse feels no pain, but that the pain should be felt by the abuser. The wish becomes true, and the horse owner starts to beat himself with his own whip. However, when she sees the suffering she perceives in lapdogs and urban housecats, she does not wish ill upon the owners and breeders, but rather wishes for the speedy death of the animals, displaying an extreme way of improving the situation of animals in the mind of the narrator, and Gilman’s alter ego.

Despite her many writings speaking out against the cruelty and oppression of animals, Gilman has a conflicting undercurrent of anthropocentrism across her body of work. She condemns the cruelty and suffering that animals may experience at the hands of humans, at the same time continuing to place humans in a greatly superior position of species hierarchy. This anthropocentrism tarnishes a neat picture of Gilman as protofeminist, and renders a smooth reception of Gilman's ecological messages difficult.

3. Animals in Fashion

Another aspect of Gilman's ambivalence is her attitude towards exploitation of animals in the fashion industry, demonstrating that she is both progressive, but also locked in the patriarchy she fights against. Gilman viewed fashion as a product of patriarchal society, reinforcing gender stereotypes and dramatically restricting women. Lori Gruen points out that cultural patterns of female attractiveness are useful tools of manipulation by the fashion industry and strengthen destructive stereotypes since

wearing the skin of dead animals empowers women, we are told. But, again, all it does is reduce women to objects who inadvertently serve the profit and pleasure interests of men. In order to obtain their skins, animals are either trapped in the wild or raised on ranches (Gruen 1993, 71).

While accusing the fashion industry for exploitive practices towards animals - it treats women and animals as "manipulative objects" (Gruen 1993, 71) in the same patriarchal framework fostering the subordination of women and exploitation of nonhuman animals.

Gilman's views against the animal abuse in fashion are detailed in her essays collection "The Dress of the Women. A Critical Introduction to the Symbolism of Clothing" (1915). The theme of animal suffering is persistent there, making suffering not only the quality of human beings but also nonhuman animals as well. In her essays, Gilman clearly points out that while men are guilty of cruelty towards animals, fashion-conscious women are simultaneously responsible for being "ignorant of true beauty; ignorant of the suffering caused by their demands; ignorant of the waste involved in supplying them; and indifferent to all these considerations" (Gilman 2002, 88). Further, she opines that women are consequently disregarding the fact that millions of animals are killed in the service of producing furs and other luxury animal-based products. Gilman treated fashion as a means to manifest who we are and how we want to be treated. She pointed out that decorations and clothes have a symbolic meaning and convey symbolic status and construct social appeal.

Simultaneously, Gilman was a propagator of the utilitarian use of clothes. In analyzing women's fashion, Gilman constantly called for a change in women's clothing, which she thought should be above all "useful, beautiful, economical, allowing to full personal expression" (Gilman 2002, 101) arguing that Victorian fashion constrained women's health. She asserted that most of women's clothes such as tightly laced corsets, shoes with high heels, or long and heavy dresses can provoke physical injuries and have no reasonable values, they are worn for only one reason, which is sex distinction. She contrasted this type of fashion to the animal world, in which males are more colorful and attractive and their external qualities help to draw the attention of the opposite sex (Gilman 2002, 68). In the matter of fashion, Gilman accused women of exorbitant replication of sexual stereotyping and gender bias.

However, Gilman's dialogue on animal rights and freedoms includes contradictions in the basic arguments behind the acceptance of animals as sentient beings. For example, in "Herland" Gilman's female protagonists show their detachment from animal suffering while speaking with their male visitors about animals used in fashion, and they even show a degree of curiosity to learn more about these customs. In "The Dress of the Women", Gilman accuses women of ignorance in their choices to wear animal-based fashion: "Have they no imagination? Do they deliberately refuse to visualize even once the tragedy that takes place to provide one garment to feed their vanity? Tragedy!" (Gilman 2002, 85). Meanwhile in the same work, she displays a complete indifference for animals being shot by firearms,

For an animal to be killed, promptly, by a well-aimed shot, is no great evil. He has no period of terror or of pain. But an animal caught in a steel trap suffers the extremity of physical agony and of blind, limitless terror, for as long as his life can hold out. That this should be done at all can only be defended when human life is at stake, and there is no other way to save it. It is done, for the most part to provide women with furs (Gilman 2002, 85-86).

She prioritizes the method of killing animals, negating one method and accepting another. She therefore places animals outside the category of sentient objects, drawing conclusions that the death of the animal is not the primary concern, but rather the way in which it is deprived of life is what matters most. Here is where Gilman departs from contemporary nature-conscious feminism. Ecofeminism holds that an entity ending the life of another entity performs a morally reprehensible act; rejecting one method of killing the animal as cruel, and accepting the other is an assumption contrary to this principle of ethics. Gilman's statement has become a measure of the moral assessment of the act of killing, justifying the act when it takes into account the consequences upon humans. Her vocal concern for animal rights lies

in contrast with her indifference about animal fate. Gilman's anthropocentrism indicated in placing humankind in a privileged position, making one species superior to another, replicates the hierarchies of the patriarchal system that was created on such dualism. By reinforcing the hierarchy between nature and humanity, Gilman displays Gruen's "arrogant anthropocentrism".

4. Race and Eugenics

While her criticisms of patriarchal society were ground-breaking, there were clear boundaries to her progressive ideals that must be addressed. For all the progressive views Charlotte Perkins Gilman had on the equality of women, gender roles and animal rights, her strong views supporting eugenics and racism are correspondingly controversial and repugnant; creating an air of confusion due to the contradictory view of the explicitly anti-racist and anti-ethnocentric ecofeminist ideals.

Gilman was born into a wealthy upper-class family and her aunt was Harriet Beecher Stowe, the author of "Uncle Tom's Cabin" (1852). Despite the overriding anti-slavery message of "Uncle Tom's Cabin", the story features many derogatory racial stereotypes and does very little to argue against racial bias. Gilman looked up to her aunt and was influenced by her aunt's interest in abolishing slavery as well as the racial themes in her aunt's writings and family discussions. As such, race became a recurrent theme in Gilman's work; it entered both fiction and non-fiction, as both the primary subject in some writings, or as a subordinate topic in others (Knight 2000, 159-160). Additionally, Gilman's racial biases were aggravated by what she saw as a flawed immigration policy in the United States. Her repulsion revealed itself as she described, in an essay published in 1923 "Is America Too Hospitable?", the "swarming immigrants" that lack the "progressiveness, ingenuity [and] kindness of disposition which form a distinct national character" (qtd. in Knight 2000, 162). Likewise, in her poem "The Melting Pot", Gilman asserts that the uncontrolled addition of so many immigrants to the multicultural society of the United States can result in the destruction of the nation (Knight 2000, 162).

In "Moving the Mountain", Gilman designs her own utopian solution to the "immigration problem" whereby no immigrant is refused entry to the country, but rather all must go through a compulsory socialization program, where immigrants must show adherence to a set of social and educational standards before they can enter a community for residence. As described by Łuczak,

What Gilman envisions as an immigrant-friendly state topples into a totalitarian regime. Gilman's new American immigration policy violates the newcomer's civil rights, dehumanizes them and denies them the right to rebellion. The immigrants

join the ranks of 'the others' whose humanity is not a given but has to be achieved and depends on the pronouncement of those who know better (Łuczak 2015, 135).

Gilman's nativist ideas presented in her utopian novel spilled over into her opinion essays addressing the immigration policy of the United States and her suggestions for change to the policies. Gilman used her utopian fiction as a proxy for her growing distinction between Americans of Anglo descent and immigrants recently arrived from Asia, Africa and Eastern Europe. Gilman's utopia catered to the races she favored as her protagonists, while disregarding and condescending the issues faced by others she labelled as "strangers" and "savages" (Łuczak 2015, 128).

Gilman's strong racial bias was founded not only on her family upbringing and the popular social discourse prevalent in turn of the century America; but also furthered through her belief in eugenics, supported by the ever-increasing study of Charles Darwin's evolutionary theory and other turn of the century social scientists. Gilman strongly believed in Darwin's theories on evolution, considering that development on an individual basis can contribute to the future improvement of the species and race. Gilman's appreciation for evolutionary theory guided her to embrace eugenics, which was gaining popularity during this time. In the early 1900s, the United States went through a period of great enthusiasm for the resolution of social problems through development of scientific solutions, and eugenics was viewed as a popular instrument for this purpose. At the same time, early concepts around feminism were developing and Gilman used the concepts of eugenics in combination with feminism to redefine the roles of women in reproduction and motherhood, for the advancement of humankind. Additionally, Gilman was a strong proponent of the ideas from social scientist Lester Ward, whose evolutionary ideas incorporated a view of the female as primary to introduction of evolutionary changes. Ward felt the female was the key catalyst in driving species advancement. His opinion was that as civilization developed, patriarchy had come to replace the matriarchy that was prevalent in nature. Ward felt that a return to matriarchy would result in a more healthy society (Łuczak 2015, 104). Gilman latched on to this gynocentric chain of reasoning to support her own social commentary regarding race, eugenics and gender roles.

Gilman also felt strongly that the advances she sought in race advancement were strongly founded in the roles and responsibilities held by mothers in society. In "Women and Economics", Gilman introduces her concept of Social Motherhood, whereby she argues that child bearing and rearing are not simple functions of nature, but should be treated as important social responsibilities to further and improve humankind. Increasingly, Gilman's prose focused even more narrowly on race, stating that women have a key role to "improve the race by improving the individual" (Gilman 1998, 88). She furthered this concept in "Herland", where the role of mothers is

described as “Conscious Makers of People” (Gilman 2013, 55), and she supported the notion of women using their best capabilities to specialize among the roles typically associated with motherhood, from child bearing to feeding, rearing and education. Trained female experts use their specialized skills to nurture, raise, and educate the children in a collective approach, for the betterment of the race.

Gilman’s eugenic ideal is the key feature of her female population. She proudly boasts of the obvious Aryan bloodlines in her characters, and the clear superiority they hold over the “savage” (Gilman 1998, 6) inhabitants of neighboring territories. The advanced social progress shown by Herlanders is possible through their willing efforts to “make” the best offspring through the practice of eugenics. But the very concept of racial distinction and class hierarchy is anathema to the ecofeminist struggle against all power structures who use such distinctions to promote their own ideologies built on the subjugation of others.

Conclusions

Charlotte Perkins Gilman was indisputably outspoken in many of the topics she addressed. Her legacy in the development of the feminist movement and contributions toward ecofeminism are extremely influential. Gilman was undeniably forthright in her criticism and condemnation of the patriarchal structure and oppressive male dominance. She proposed a radical revision of traditional gender roles and called for broader social reforms to improve women’s lives and their rights to independence. While advocating women rights, she opposed the mistreatment of animals and endorsed dialogue on animal rights. Gilman highlighted the moral obligations that humans have towards animals, very often presenting women and animals as similarly oppressed.

At the same time, we can find many conflicting messages among Gilman’s works that create a sense of ambiguity and confusion as to the true nature of her opinions. Despite being a strong advocate for women’s rights, Gilman neglected issues of class, race and ethnicity. She rejected the male dominant role in patriarchal society and supported other emancipatory movements, nevertheless she held many xenophobic and bigoted beliefs. Her calls for equality are at odds with her criticism based on race and class. She was a strong advocate for animal rights, but on the other hand her views endorsed human dominance over animals and nature and was an advocate of traditional anthropocentrism.

From the perspective of ecofeminism, Gilman’s views tend to be very human-centric, and she places a higher priority on issues regarding gender compared to nature. Despite her focus on connections between animals and women (interconnected by the same oppression), gender was her central interest. She looked at animals through sexist ideologies, reflecting the dualism of binary oppositions that

she fought so hard to deconstruct through her feminist theories. Her concentration on the improvement of the socio-economic situation for women, while ignoring or criticizing other social and ethnic groups, and maintaining an anthropocentric view towards animals make Gilman a problematic foremother of progressive ecological and feminist thought and evidence a difficult origin of the American ecofeminist movement.

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