

2021

## Herlands: Imperial Feminisms from Charlotte Perkins Gilman to Wonder Woman

Anna Jankovsky  
anna.jankovsky@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://huskiecommons.lib.niu.edu/allgraduate-thesesdissertations>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#), [Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#), and the [Film and Media Studies Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Jankovsky, Anna, "Herlands: Imperial Feminisms from Charlotte Perkins Gilman to Wonder Woman" (2021). *Graduate Research Theses & Dissertations*. 7225.  
<https://huskiecommons.lib.niu.edu/allgraduate-thesesdissertations/7225>

This Dissertation/Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate Research & Artistry at Huskie Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Research Theses & Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Huskie Commons. For more information, please contact [jschumacher@niu.edu](mailto:jschumacher@niu.edu).

## ABSTRACT

### HERLANDS: IMPERIAL FEMINISMS FROM CHARLOTTE PERKINS GILMAN TO *WONDER WOMAN*

Anna Jankovsky, MA  
Department of English  
Northern Illinois University, 2021  
Dr. Ryan Hibbett, Director

The society of women is a trope of feminist utopian fiction in which a group of women live together in harmony without the influence of men to disrupt their society. This trope functions on five criteria: 1) The society must be able to defend itself and replenish itself without the assistance of men. 2) It must be fully isolated and nearly impenetrable from the outside world. 3) It must have a utopic order of society untroubled by ambition. 4) It must be infiltrated and challenged by a man during the course of the story. 5) It must grapple with the tension between the identity of woman as mother, sister, and individual. Texts that use the society of women trope also often employ the metaphor of imperialism to describe how women are subjugated in Western patriarchal society. This study follows two examples of texts using the society of women trope and the metaphor of imperialism to present feminist ideology in two different ages: Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* deploying first-wave feminist philosophy and Patty Jenkins's 2017 film *Wonder Woman*, appealing to the modern audience. The society of women trope in these two examples is proven to be a popular and enduring tool for storytellers to communicate a feminist agenda in popular fiction.

NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY  
DE KALB, ILLINOIS

MAY 2021

HERLANDS: IMPERIAL FEMINISMS FROM CHARLOTTE  
PERKINS GILMAN TO *WONDER WOMAN*

BY

ANNA JANKOVSKY  
©2021 Anna Jankovsky

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL  
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
FOR THE DEGREE  
MASTER OF ARTS

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

Thesis Director:  
Dr. Ryan Hibbett

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
LIST OF FIGURES .....	iii
INTRODUCTION .....	1
CHAPTER 1: DEFINING THE “SOCIETY OF WOMEN” .....	5
CHAPTER 2: A PROBLEMATIC EARLY EXAMPLE: <i>HERLAND</i> .....	10
CHAPTER 3: A MODERN EXAMPLE: <i>WONDER WOMAN</i> .....	21
CONCLUSION .....	40
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	44

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure	Page
1. Amazon warriors swing from cliffs with “primitive” weapons.....	30
2. Hippolyta in battle.....	32
3. A young Diana runs through Themyscira streets.....	32
4. A young Diana gazes at the Amazon community.....	33
5. Diana stoically discusses war.....	36
6. Diana melts at the sight of a baby.....	36
7. Modern day Diana works among artifacts.....	37

## INTRODUCTION

“Matriatism,” a poem in Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s posthumously published second volume of poetry, reiterates major themes of the author’s work after her death:

Small is the thought of “Fatherland,”  
With all its pride and worth;  
With all its history of death;  
Of fire and sword and wasted breath—  
By the great new thought which quickeneth—  
The thought of “Mother Earth.”  
Man fights for wealth and rule and pride,  
For the “name” that is his alone;  
Comes woman, wakening to her power,  
Comes woman, opening the hour  
That sees life as one growing flower,  
All children as her own.

Fathers have fought for their Fatherland  
With slaughter and death and dearth,  
But mothers, in service and love’s increase,  
Will labor together for our release,  
From a war-stained past to a world at peace,  
Our fair, sweet Mother Earth.

Here, we see Gilman positing motherliness as the cure to strife caused by the patriarchal order of the world. The “Fatherland” is positioned against “Mother Earth” as a lesser notion. In this poem, “Father” implies greed and pride, wanting only for the progeneration of the family name. The Father does not care about the next generation, but only fights for the repetition of history, blind to the death and strife that it causes in its pursuit of maintaining patriarchal order. However, “Mother” cares for peace and is likened to the natural state of the Earth. The Mother stands for love and end to conflict, as she cares for all life, not just that which is born from her.

Mother also knows pain and strife at the hands of man—she has labored under the patriarchy as she labors in birth to the Father’s son. It is, however, in this pain that the Mother grew strong. “Comes woman” from the shackles that the patriarchal order has placed upon her to show the Fatherland that it resides in Mother Earth by her blessing and due to her reproductive power.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman, known to modern scholars as a monumental, if historically limited, artist of the first wave feminist movement, was obsessed with the idea of motherhood. In her fiction and poetry she played with the idea of the essential state of women being their capacity for motherly love. Gilman gives mothers tremendous power beyond the limits set upon the power available to men. Women may encroach on the man’s power in their influence over the future generation of leaders of the patriarchy. While the father is a mere country, the mother is the Earth that the country is built upon, and thus has influence over it. In this implied threat to the power of the established patriarchal order, Gilman presents women—mothers—as a powerful force to be feared and respected.

With the power dynamic questioned at the end of this poem, and through the poem’s title, Gilman implies the question whose answer has become a trope of 20<sup>th</sup> century literature and film and spawned generations of stories that rework the meaning of motherhood. The question here is of matriarchy: would there be a significant difference between a society run by men and a society run by women? This question, anthropological in nature, fascinated the imagination of fiction writers in the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Some feminists, as Charlotte Perkins Gilman, adopt the opinion that female societies could be utopic, without the aggressive influence of men to spark conflict and competition. Then, once imagining this world of women without men, writers are rarely content to leave the utopic state of matriarchal order in harmony. Instead, they introduce conflict to the female order with the introduction of a man into this society: what conflict would

arise between the genders when the power lies in the female's hands? Is there an essential division between men and women, or can the two ever be reconciled to live in actual harmony? Thus, societies of women, and their introduction to the world of man, have become a trope of literature spurred by the intense fascination surrounding the idea of matriarchy. This remains universally salient through different cultures, ages, and genres, of which a notable early example is Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland*.

Traditionally read as a feminist text with imperialist influence, *Herland* is a unique novel that bridges many genres, attacks many inequalities, and raises many new problems as well. The story of three male American scientists discovering a land of only women is ripe for mining of first-wave feminist philosophy. However, even more ripe are the imperial implications that the ensuing clash of the genders reveals. Feminism, in the first wave, in fact, can hardly be described without the use of imperial vocabulary. Men are guilty of dominating the females in society. In this rhetorical tradition, the wife and mother is subjugated in her own home by her husband and son in the same sense that the native is subjugated in their homeland by the white colonizer. *Herland* and like texts use the frame of imperialist language to describe the injustice of female subjugation in "civilized" society. This trend, though clearly problematic in its disregard for the plight of indigenous peoples and prioritization of the white woman, is highly prominent throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century and into the present day. Through highlighting the inequality between men and women, fiction allows artists to envision a world in which women are allowed to create a matriarchal order to offset the patriarchy of their trauma. In this study, I will establish a new reading of *Herland* that identifies the trope of the "society of women" in fiction. This study will enlighten a tradition beginning with the early sci-fi of *Herland* and making the transition to modern comic books and film adaptations, such as Patty Jenkins's recent *Wonder*



*Woman.* Through the society of women trope in modern culture, we can see the continuation of the metaphor of imperialism in social realms outside of actual empire and colonization.

## DEFINING THE “SOCIETY OF WOMEN”

A trope is defined through its reoccurrence and definition of major philosophical themes in a genre. The “society of women” classifies as a trope of feminist utopian fiction because it represents a trend of feminist writers desiring to create a world in which the woman is not subjugated by her male counterpart, but instead allowed to reach self-actualization without this influence of men caging her potential. In the metaphor of imperialism, the female is the native who is colonized by the empire of white men. The colonizing force is the hegemonic insistence on the feminine ideal in Western patriarchal society—a silent housewife and mother. By confining women to a certain type of dress and a role in the home, feminist utopian ideas such as self-actualization in learning, or success in a physical pursuit, are held out of the reach of the oppressed female class. The society of women arises in this metaphor as a tool to envision a world in which metaphorically colonized women in Western patriarchal society are granted a homeland in which they are free.

This metaphor of imperialism to describe the confinement of women in patriarchal society is different from the feminist critique of the roles of women in society because of the scope that the critique takes. In texts employing the society of women trope to engage with the metaphor of imperialism, the stakes of the criticism are on a societal level rather than the individual level. Gilman’s own work can be used to describe the difference between these two scopes. *Herland* and much of Gilman’s poetry are less concerned with the household and focuses on the capacity of women to contribute on a societal level. Her most popular story “The Yellow

Wallpaper,” however, is a classic example of a feminist text that focuses on the domestic household and the individual level of patriarchal oppression.

The society of women trope deploys the language of imperialism in order to highlight the utopic traits of an all-female society and diminish the value of patriarchal order. In order to be fully counted as an example of the trope, I argue that a group of women in a text must be able to 1) defend itself and replenish itself without the assistance of men, 2) be fully isolated and nearly impenetrable from the outside world, 3) have a utopic order of society untroubled by ambition, and 4) be infiltrated and challenged by a man during the course of the story. The trope is further defined by 5) a tension between the identity of woman as mother, sister, and individual.

First, the society of women must be filled with women able to defend themselves and procreate without the assistance of men in order to make the function of a male presence in the society completely gratuitous. Without the biological function of men—their function to father the next generation and physical strength to protect—the purpose of the male in society is only to cause strife.

Second, the society of women must be fully isolated from the outside world to ensure that the influence of the patriarchal order of the outside world is not a factor in the development of the utopic female society. The society of women must develop in isolation from the rest of the world in order to preserve the claim of the women to have developed a successful utopia without any influence of men or male traits. The experiment of the society of women is a controlled environment that cannot borrow from the outside world for fear of contamination. What develops within the confines of the society of women is wholly the result of women and their abilities.

Third, the utopic social order in the society of women trope is necessary to insist upon the ability of women to run a civilization without the influence of men. What develops within the

confines of the society of women is not only the explicit result of female ability, but also it is perfected because of the lack of male influence. This aspect of the trope attempts to link the negative features of patriarchal societies to the influence of the men that run them. By imagining a strictly matriarchal society as utopic, the society of women trope attributes all negative traits to the masculine.

By allowing a man to infiltrate the society of women, the trope is given the opportunity to demonstrate the contrast between the civilization run by women and the patriarchal order that dominates the outside world. The male outsider proves the merit of the female society through his contrast. His ill-fated attempts to explain his world to the women also provide an opportunity for the creator of the society of women story to show the illogical nature of patriarchal society, while the logical nature of matriarchal society is clearly marked as superior to the eyes of the male visitor, despite his inability to understand the female order that created it.

Finally, the society of women must interact with the tension between the identity of women and the nature of their relationships with one another. The utopic order of the society of women establishes the essential ability of women to accomplish tasks without the patriarchy confining them to a place in the home. The internal function of women must also be addressed in the society of women, answering the question of who a woman is when she is not defined in relation to a man. This question is rooted in a woman's relationships with other women: as mother to daughter, sister to sister, and woman to self.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's novel *Herland* provides a prime example of the society of women trope born out of the moment of the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, ripe with both first wave feminist philosophy and imperialist sentiment. In her novel, Gilman creates a female society that has become fully isolated from visitors through the happenstance of natural geological events

that made their land particularly difficult to access from the outside world. The civilization within the unscalable walls of their land is filled with strong and athletic women capable of capturing and incarcerating the three healthy young men that infiltrate their utopia. These women slowly reveal to their male guests that they have developed the ability to procreate through parthenogenesis, thus meriting the reintroduction of men to their society as nothing more than an intellectual exercise for the women. The women further demonstrate their position in the society of women trope by touring their male visitors around their completely non-competitive, fully harmonious country. The men are shocked by the lack of competition and prominence of sisterly love that creates utopic order in the society of women.

While the society of women trope remains fictional, it allows feminist writers to unify the gender through fantasy and imagine possibilities for a real society different from the flawed one that exists around them. In this fantasy, the feminine is utopic, and the masculine is the cause of distress. Though most notably seen in Gilman's *Herland* and many renditions of the Amazonian myth, other versions of this trope permeate the last century. Suzy McKee Charnas' *Holdfast Chronicles* trilogy describes an underground culture of "fems" who fight against the oppression of a male society that dominates them. While not describing completely separate societies of men and women, the culture of the fem society is distinct and exhibits elements of the society of females trope. Joanna Russ's *The Female Man* spans four alternate realities. One of these realities exemplifies the society of females in which all men died out and women procreate asexually through scientific advancement allowing lesbian relationships to produce offspring. Recently, Elizabeth Bear's novel *Carnival* depicts a matriarchal society of Amazonian women that is distrustful of the men who attempt to infiltrate their order.

In more mainstream culture, the trope continues in television and film through the Gazorpazorp planet of women in the Adult Swim animation *Rick and Morty*. In this rendition of the society of women, the women of Gazorpazorp purposefully separate from the men of their species and create a utopic order that excludes the violent aspects of their race. Finally, the most popular recent adaptation of the society of women trope can be seen in the Amazonian tradition of female utopia capitalized upon in the comic and film character of Wonder Woman.

## A PROBLEMATIC EARLY EXAMPLE: *HERLAND*

*Herland* is an example of a text heavily influenced by the imperialist moment of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century that borrows from the more progressive aspects of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's feminist philosophy. This combination is almost disorienting to the modern reader who will likely protest the story's flippant treatment of the native "savages", but appreciates the scientific approach to remaking the role of the female in a patriarchal society. Current discourse surrounding Gilman's *Herland* tends to focus on one of two themes: Gilman's racism, or Gilman's scientific approach to feminism. Though current scholarship does not define the "society of women" trope, scholars nearly touch on the trope in their critique of the racist and feminist aspects of the novel. Similar to discourse on *Herland*, Gilman's approach to feminism can be described in three themes that occur in her work: use of utopia, obsession with motherhood and the female's innate motherliness, and the racism that becomes apparent in the contrast between Gilman's feminist ideals and the way that she describes non-white cultures in her work.

Gilman's utopia imagines a world in which women are not hindered by the patriarchy. However, this society of women is, and can only be, a utopia in the confines of the science fiction genre because of the inability of humans to reproduce asexually. Gilman's vision is thus a sentimental one that preserves the idea of sisterhood and motherhood despite the lack of fatherhood or brotherhood by which to define these entities against. Andrew G. Christensen describes utopian critiques of Gilman in his discussion of the scientific approach to feminist

utopia. Christensen cites Hilary Rose, who suggests that Gilman uses the male narrator of *Herland* to “poke fun at masculinist scientific rationality” and alludes to “inherent weaknesses in any practice of science that casts itself in androcentric terms” (290). Christensen’s focus illuminates the background of Gilman’s ostentatiously scientific prose in *Herland*. He recognizes the relationship between utopian fiction and science fiction that Gilman capitalizes upon in her creation of a world completely impossible in our reality (because of its necessity for a form of non-sexual human reproduction). While Christensen attempts to explain the effect of the scientific prose Gilman employs in *Herland*, it is important to also acknowledge the sentimentality of Gilman’s society of females when dissecting the scientific utopia presented in the story. Gilman uses the scientific language of her narrator and Vandyke’s familiarity with anthropology to allow a sentimental ideal to take on the language of fact and science. Van’s anthropological art of crafting a scientific explanation for social behavior is a useful tool that Gilman employs to imagine her utopia as real.

Beyond the scientific elements, scholars have focused on the interpersonal elements of *Herland* that allows it to be a utopian society. Monika Daca’s “Female and Male Solidarity in Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *Herland*: Myths Deconstructed” focuses on the solidarity of females in *Herland*’s society of women, positing that the idealization of solidarity between the women constitutes one of the core beliefs that separates the women from their male visitors. Daca argues that the solidarity among the women of Herland—their understanding of sisterhood as a relationship beyond the patriarchal understanding of it—is the main source of utopic order in the society of females and the main source of tension between the women and their male visitors:

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. (75)

The women of Herland emphasize sisterhood as a source of solidarity that differentiates their core understanding of how civilization should be built from the patriarchal understanding of civilization contributed by their male visitors. The women thus share no indication of interest in imperialist pursuits to expand their civilization (“we are unwilling to expose our country to free communication with the rest of the world—as yet” [Gilman 156]). Rather, the women are content with their society remaining the size that it is with the level of diversity in its residents that it currently knows. In direct contrast with the contentment of the women of Herland with the state of their society, the male explorers that infiltrate their land come from the United States at the prime of American interest in imperialist expansion (“Compared with other lands and other races I knew, the United States of America had always seemed to me, speaking modestly, as good as the best of them” [Gilman 98]). The women of Herland display a great curiosity about the outside world and a voracious desire to consume as much information about other cultures as possible. However, the imperialist desire to physically explore and expand into other cultures and locations is distinctly absent from the society of women.

Imperialist ideology is present only in the men that infiltrate Herland, demonstrating Gilman’s critique of imperialism as a distinctly male pursuit. Gilman’s society of women is untroubled by the ambition of patriarchal society, instead ruled by a contentedness to make the best of the resources available in the confines of the Herland country, and to maintain peaceful order within the solidary structure of the female society. The implications of imperialist language

in the story are used instead to describe the patriarchal order of American society that the men represent in their intrusion into Herland.

This is evident in the explorers' first encounter with the women of Herland. The three girls that first meet the men, Celis, Alima, and Ellador, are spotted hanging from the branches of a tree. The three men, imbued with their imperialist ideology, chase the girls into the tree. The first thought of the male explorers upon seeing three girls of an unfamiliar culture is to chase and apprehend the new acquaintances. When the girls climb further than the men can follow in the tree, they indicate frustration in the foiling of their pursuit to the point of near violence: "If we pushed further, the boughs would break under the double burden. We might shake them off, perhaps, but none of us was so inclined" (18). This first physical pursuit demonstrates the imperialist ideology of the culture from which the men came, but the manner in which the men continue to pursue the girls is demonstrative of the imperialist metaphor of the patriarchal order that they attempt to impose upon the society of women. Terry, frustrated that he cannot physically reach the girls in the tree, and recognizing the beauty of the girls upon closer study of their appearance, presents gifts as bait to lure them closer. Terry then offers a necklace as a shining object to buy the compliance of the girls. Terry believes the nature of women to be vain and tempted by shining jewelry, as this is what the patriarchal society he comes from depicts to be true. The interaction between Terry and the girls begins as imperialist pursuing native, and shifts to man pursuing woman. In offering a necklace as bribe to win the affections of the herlanders, he likens the actions of American men to the female objects of their affections to the actions of an imperialist agent to the native he intends to conquer.

In scenes like this first encounter, Gilman strips away the ambition in the imperialist agenda of exploration and scientific interest to demonstrate the driving force behind these

dominating pursuits: patriarchy. In Gilman's critique, it is not a country or a just group of men that attempts to colonize Herland. It is instead the grand and flawed patriarchal order of the outside world as a whole. Beyond the literal attempt to colonize Herland by their physical intrusion, Gilman uses details of the explorers' stay in Herland to show the way that small characteristics of the American culture that the men try to introduce are in fact male characteristics that are unnecessary to the society of women.

Peter Sands points to patriarchy as the primary colonizing force in *Herland* with his analysis of the male explorers' changed diets during their sojourn. Sands describes a transformation: "Their diet of meat, gotten by violence in multiple senses, is replaced by a diet of fruit, vegetables, and grains, which neither exhausts the natural resources of the tiny country nor requires the Herlanders to raise and then slaughter animals to sustain their own bodies with the bodies of other living beings" (127). Carnivorism is a male trait that amounts to, essentially, dominating another species for the gluttony of the human. According to Gilman's critique, meat is not necessary to a human diet, and can easily be substituted with a fulfilling diet of nuts and fruits. However, the men desire meat to satiate their domineering nature. This metaphor of carnivorism is parallel to the imperialist agenda: dominating another race for the sustenance of the white man. While the women of Herland have no interest in the tribes below their elevated civilization, the men come from far away to assert their dominance over the "savages."

The male trait of dominance extends from food to social standing as well. When joking about what life will be like among only women, Terry decides that when he is declared king, he will execute his friends to ensure his power: "You'll have to be beheaded, or bowstrung—or whatever the popular method of execution is" (11). In reply, Jeff asserts his subconscious bias about colonized populations when jesting about his friend's threat to execute him: "You'd have

to do it yourself, remember...no husky black slaves and mamelukes!" (11). Jeff states a popular bias in imperialist ideology, betraying his subconscious understanding of the native populations of colonized lands as rightful servants for the white man. He points to the "husky black slaves" and "mamelukes"—a term originally referring to freed Arab slaves, appropriated in Western slang to refer to simpleminded or foolish individuals—taken for granted in their usefulness to white colonizers as a tragic loss of a female civilization. Implicit in Jeff's words is the male imperialist's desire to possess a position of dominance over the male savage. Gilman indeed, in taking the male-dominates-male aspect of the imperial story out of *Herland*, forces an introspective experience for the men once they arrive in a place in which there are no other men to dominate. The domination of women comes center stage, with Terry expressing before even laying eyes on the women that "This is our find," and claiming possession of the entire civilization (7). This assumption is quickly dismantled by Gilman's civil, reasonable, and capable Herlanders. Gilman effectively thwarts the men at every attempt of domination in their journey, and in this exposes what she sees as the true underlying threat of their imperial efforts in Herland: the patriarchal order that they intend to bring with them.

The lack of imperialist agenda in the female society of the herlanders is a major contributing factor to the utopic order of the society. However, Gilman's feminism relies even more heavily upon the identity of women as mothers than the idea of female society as utopic. Indeed, the herlanders identify themselves as a people through their shared longing for motherhood and nurturing instincts. As the women attempt to describe their society to their male visitors, they show the natural inclination of all of the women of Herland toward motherhood through the language that they use to describe the genders. When finally asking their captors about the lack of men in Herland, the tutors instructing the trio in the ways of the female society

are puzzled by the terms “men” and “women”: “‘Ladies,’ Terry began, out of a clear sky, as it were, ‘are there not men in this country?’ ‘Men?’ Somel answered. ‘Like you?’ ‘Yes, men,’ Terry indicated his beard, and threw back his broad shoulders. ‘Men, real men’” (50).

It is soon shown that the confusion in this simple question is rooted in the language Terry uses. In the language of the herlanders, the terms “men” and “women” are restated in terms of motherhood. The reply from Somel to Terry’s question demonstrates this translation: “We are mothers—all of us—but there are no fathers” (Gilman 51). Rather than considering gender in the terms of social or physical characteristics, as Terry attempts to when puffing his chest and motioning toward his facial hair to describe the word “men” to his unfamiliar audience, the herlanders describe gender in terms of its reproductive use. The man is useful in his capacity as a carrier of sperm. To the herlanders, the female is only different from the male, at least linguistically, in her different role in the process of sexual reproduction. As Somel describes the herlanders’ asexual form of reproduction, it becomes clear that their society, which does not distinguish men beyond their usage in reproduction and does not require men for reproduction, truly sees minimal utility in the addition of men to their society.

The very existence of Herland as a utopic state is thus resultant of the female ability to reproduce without the assistance of the male’s sperm. It is no surprise, therefore, that the women of Herland value their roles as mothers highly. However, Gilman goes further than just describing the women as mothers by essential function. Instead, Gilman insists upon motherhood as the essential purpose of the women of Herland. Through generations of only female children inheriting characteristics from only their mother and growing up in an only female society, Gilman imagines motherhood and sisterliness to be the dominant characteristics left to the race. These traits make up the most pure and evolved form of the female gender, described by

Vandyke as a most unfamiliar relationship to the three men of science witnessing it: “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 64). Vandyke even goes so far as to note this motherhood as the epitome of woman in his narration: “These women, whose essential distinction of motherhood was the dominant note of their whole culture, were strikingly deficient in what we call ‘femininity’” (Gilman 65).

The identity of women as mothers is important to the society of women trope because it acknowledges the most important reason that the trope can only exist in fantasy: in order for a civilization to function, it must be able to replenish itself. The herlanders’ ability to reproduce without men is the only reason that their culture did not die off once they became isolated from the rest of the world. However, this obsession with the female identity as mother may become problematic. Most of the feminist criticism on Gilman’s *Herland* specifically focuses upon motherhood and the way that the herlanders’ obsession with motherhood may impact modern discussions of reproductive rights. These discussions correctly acknowledge that the essential identity of the herlanders as mothers diminishes the feminist reading of the text. Motherhood is, indeed, the primary use of women in the patriarchal society that exists outside of the confines of the society of women. By maintaining motherhood as woman’s essential function and purpose within the confines of Herland where men cannot force this limited mode of being upon her, Gilman shows her own bias. Gilman, though creating a world in which women can theoretically be anything that they want to be, as men are no longer holding them to a specific role, maintains the importance of motherhood in the identity of woman.

Katherine Fusco points to the obsession with motherhood in *Herland* as connected to the labor struggles of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, in which women were deemed mothers as an essential occupation. Lynne Evans contributes to this criticism as well, recognizing the same link between a woman's worth in *Herland* and the essential function of reproduction. These scholars argue that the importance Gilman places upon the herlanders as mothers undermines their independence and reasserts them into the frame of subjugation that women in normal, sexually reproducing societies are subject to. Though the society of women presents females as independent and interested in more than traditionally feminine things, the trope also designates motherhood as the essential function of the female in any society. With the absence of men, women still reproduce and dote upon their offspring. While care for the next generation is to be expected of any culture, the society of women does not transcend the patriarchal link of a woman's worth with her ability to reproduce.

However, what no previous scholars point to is the useful function of this obsession with motherhood to the creation of the society of females trope. It is possible that the trope allows motherhood to remain an essential part of the female identity outside of the patriarchal society. This is because the necessity for creating the next generation of citizens is not eliminated with the absence of the ability to reproduce sexually. Motherhood is used in *Herland* to present the society of females as a viable mode of existence. Though possibly unproductive in furthering the feminist perspective of the society of women as unhindered by the identities enforced upon women in a patriarchal society, motherhood allows the society of women to exist at all.

Gilman acknowledges this bias on her own part in her controversial work *Women and Economics*. Shirley Samuels explains Gilman's perspective on women as a means for reproduction in her study of "The Yellow Wallpaper": "The preface to *Women and*

*Economics* calls for an audience made up of ‘thinking women’ who will consider ‘not only their social responsibility as individuals’, but also the ‘measureless racial importance’ they have ‘as makers of men’” (104). Gilman insists upon motherhood as the essential identity of women even when arguing for a woman’s place outside of the home that the patriarchal order of man has imprisoned her in.

Beyond their identity as mothers, the women of *Herland* are portrayed as strong and independent women capable of determining their own worth and functioning in roles outside of the home. However, these women still only represent a narrow view of American society through the metaphor of imperialist aggression. Gilman’s treatment of the society of women, re-introduction of men to the society, and persistent coupling of the women in the society with their male invaders suggests an underlying unwillingness to call for a complete upheaval to the patriarchal state of her contemporary American society. Further, Gilman’s society of women reflects the well-documented racist attributes of her philosophy, given the anglicized nature of her women despite their location in South America in the middle of the jungle. Gilman’s societal criticism is, in short, problematic beyond her maintenance of the woman’s essential identity of mother in its openly racist aspects. Despite her attempts to create a utopia through the exclusion of men from her society of women, Gilman falls short of a utopic vision in her oversight of racial inequality in her vision.

When addressing Gilman’s work, most scholars find it impossible to discuss the merit of her social critique without also noting her racism. Scholarship surrounding *Herland* does not ignore the problem of Gilman’s article, “A Suggestion on the Negro Problem.” It is clear that, though a feminist, Gilman did not philosophize ahead of her time in all areas of social reform—particularly when addressing the question of race in America. In the utopic *Herland*, the women



that are deemed capable of creating such a developed society are distinctly anglicized, despite their locality in the wilds of South America. As acknowledged by Samuels, “When Gilman refers to race, she imagines the human race, yet within that last phrase lie some ingredients of the criticisms that have been made against her work for its elitism and embedded racism, especially in the utopian envisioning of her later novel *Herland* (1915)” (104).

The oversight of race in *Herland* is a major downfall that prevents the society of women described in Gilman’s novel from transcending the period of its creation at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, the trope itself survives through to the modern day in different forms that take more care to acknowledge the diversity of women in the society presented.

## A MODERN EXAMPLE: *WONDER WOMAN*

Patty Jenkins's 2017 film *Wonder Woman* demonstrates that Gilman's monumental installment of feminist literature has real implications for the way that we engage with questions of feminism and imperialism in popular culture today. This film provides a contemporary example of a female society set in the turn of the century, proving the longevity of the society of women trope in modern day art and politics. Though imperfect in its furthering of the feminist agenda in film representation, the society of women trope in *Wonder Woman* comes a long way for the insertion of positive female role models in the Hollywood superhero canon.

When Jenkins's *Wonder Woman* was released in 2017, it was the first large-budget filmed adaptation of the popular Wonder Woman comic series since the 1970s television series starring Lynda Carter. The introduction of a female to the lineup of heroes dominating the blockbuster films of the DC and Marvel cinematic universes is a leap for positive representation in film, however, Diana Prince's debut on the big screen came with both positive and negative reactions from feminist scholars. Scholarship and reactions to Jenkins's *Wonder Woman* focus firmly on the male gaze, correctly inspecting the way that the female body imbued with the power associated with a superhero affects the audience's reaction to the representation of the hero on screen.

In her critique of the film, Charlotte E. Howell correctly posits that *Wonder Woman* adaptations are faced with a more complex job than adaptations of male superheroes. A female hero in film needs to bridge a divide between the male's expectation for a superhero movie and

the female's desire for a role model and positive feminist representation. Wonder Woman is "tricky" to put on screen, according to Howell, and because of this, few studios attempt to bring her story to life. Howell recognizes the illogical lack of Wonder Woman adaptations: "In terms of recognizability and intellectual property marketability, fans regard Wonder Woman as holding equal ground with Superman and Batman. However, in terms of live-action representations, each male superhero far outnumbers the single representation of Wonder Woman before the 2011 [tv] pilot" (144). Indeed, this disparity is unfair to Diana Prince, but it is clear why the female superhero is slighted. The established politics of depicting the female body on screen directly interfere with the powerful figure of a superhero. In the Hollywood tradition, when the audience looks at a woman's body on screen, they are not used to seeing power.

Cory Albertson epitomizes the majority of academic response to the film through reiteration of Mulvey's male gaze theory. A sociologist, Albertson's filmic critique only goes so deep as to suggest that the male gaze is alive and well in Jenkins's film. However, Albertson does suggest, as reiterated by many scholars, that Gal Gadot's Diana Prince wields the gaze as her own weapon, as opposed to being counted a victim of the patriarchy's most favorite form of subjugation: "She knowingly employs an exaggerated form of femininity that serves the desires of men as a strategy to gain access to male privilege" (68). Rikke Schubart, likewise, hails Gadot's body as an achievement in female superhero representation. Rather than regaining control of the male gaze, Schubart reiterates the contributions of Albertson by focusing upon the physical manifestation of muscles on a female form in Gadot's Wonder Woman. Schubart finds the image of a female hero with actual muscles rather than the thin limbs of a model to be an important step forward for the representation of women in the superhero film industry.

Though both Albertson and Schubart consider Gadot's image to be progressive in Jenkins's film, these critics, along with many others, are still focused primarily upon the body of the female hero in this rendition of her story. It seems that Wonder Woman as a character is linked inseparably to the male gaze in criticism. This obsession with the way that the female body is depicted on the screen when she is imbued with the kind of enhanced strength and power that is traditionally associated with the male physique is reminiscent of the way that the women of Herland are described in Gilman's turn-of-the-century novel. Though described through the lens of the male narrator, the women of Herland are praised for their fitness and strength as well as their beauty. This type of attention given to a woman's muscles is the inescapable effect of describing a strong, capable woman in the language available in a patriarchal understanding of muscles and the bodies that they belong to.

The way that Diana Prince looks is the most important feature of her representation on screen to many critics. However, her backstory and the depiction of her home are rarely given the attention that they deserve. Very few scholars acknowledge the imperialist implications of Wonder Woman's origin story when Diana's story is, indeed, the story of imperialism. Her rise to become the hero that the world knows and loves is a clash against the evil of Ares as well as the constant threat of imperialist aggression. Distracted by the muscles on the female body, critics do not acknowledge the society of women that births this strong woman.

The imperialist reading of *Wonder Woman* frames Diana's story as both a literal example of the infiltration of an imperial power into the unconquered island of Themyscira, and as a metaphor of framing the subjugation of the female in patriarchal society as a type of imperialism. In the literal sense, Themyscira is a society of relatively primitive means. The women use arrows and carry their food in the large basins of a pre-industrial society. However, it is clear that the

Amazons are intensely capable and want for little in their isolated utopia. Their city is clean and their gardens are well-kept. Their clothing is minimal, allowing for easy mobility, and their general style of appearance is a clean mixture of functional and feral (“What do these women wear into battle?” Diana remarks when seeing the impractical fashions of London women). The earth tones of the Amazons’ clothing and the thick braids in their hair recall the style of Native Americans, though their capes and occasional jewel tones recall more the fashion of an Ancient Greek civilization. Both wildness and high society are invoked in the visual representation of the Amazon women, but innovation and industry are the chief characteristics invoked in the society of man that dominates the outside world. Themyscira is depicted similarly to the way that Herland is described in Gilman’s novel. Gilman’s herlanders are first described in the practicality of their dress: “We saw short hair, hatless, loose, and shining; a suit of some light firm stuff, the closest of tunics and kneebreeches, met by trim gaiters; as bright and smooth as parrots and as unaware of danger, they swung there before us” (18). Gilman points to a particular practicality in the way that the herlanders dress and design their cities. The practicality of the herlanders’ clothing is reflected in the tight, armored dress of the Amazons, clearly designed for ease of motion rather than merely to cover and adorn the body. The simple elegance and easy strength of the herlander women are similar to the Amazons in *Wonder Woman*.

This industrial society of man infiltrates Themyscira through the invasion of the Germans in pursuit of Steve Trevor. As the imperial power of the German army breeches the shores of the Amazons’ home, they are forced to defend themselves from literal colonization. This threat of invasion is a constant worry for Hippolyta, the queen of the Amazons. As she trains her forces of warrior women, she envisions the downfall of their female utopia at the hands of the male-driven outside world. This fear can be translated to the metaphorical understanding of the threat of

colonization to Themyscira in the same way that Gilman presents imperialism as a metaphorical threat to the herlanders: the downfall of the feminist utopia at the hands of patriarchy.

The threat of the external world of patriarchal order to the women of Themyscira is parabolized in the creation story that Hippolyta and Antiope tell to a young Diana:

Long ago, when time was new and all of history was still a dream, the gods ruled the Earth, Zeus king among them. Zeus created beings over which the gods would rule. Beings born in his image, fair and good, strong and passionate. He called his creation 'man', and mankind was good. But Zeus's son grew envious of mankind and sought to corrupt his father's creation. This was Ares, the God of War. Ares poisoned men's hearts with jealousy and suspicion. He turned them against one another and war ravaged the Earth. So, the gods created us, the Amazons, to influence men's hearts with love and restore peace to the Earth. And for a brief time, there was peace.

In this first part of the creation story, Hippolyta describes the creation of the Amazons, the ideal women, as a solution to the problems created by the social order of men. The flaws that the Amazons were created to counteract are the same flaws that Gilman describes as essentially male characteristics in *Herland*. The flaws are, in *Wonder Woman*, embodied in Ares and the influence that the god of war had upon mankind.

The creation of the Amazons positions the basic nature of women as supporters of men, purposed to give love and affection and dissuade men from giving in to their more destructive tendencies. The Amazons are created themselves out of the patriarchal order of the gods—described by Hippolyta in terms of fatherhood and kingship, the chief aggressor of the story being motivated by a son's jealousy of his father's creations. The creation myth of the Amazons, in essence, describes the patriarchal status quo of the society in which the audience of the film exists. It is in this status quo that the utopia of Themyscira is then distinguished. The story is then continued, with Antiope describing the less picturesque parts of the story to the young Diana:

But it did not last. Your mother, the Amazon queen, led a revolt that freed us all from enslavement. When Zeus led the gods to our defense, Ares killed them one by one, until only Zeus himself remained.

Antiope's contribution to the creation story conditions the positivity of Hippolyta's portion.

Hippolyta frames the women Zeus created to tame men positively and implies that the two sexes live together equally once the men are swayed by the love of the Amazons. However, Antiope speaks a harsh truth about the relationship that echoes the condition of women in the patriarchal order of the audience's society: women, as the Amazons, are oppressed by the men that they serve. Antiope unveils this imbalance of power when confessing that the Amazons had to escape from enslavement under mankind and Ares. Finally, Hippolyta finishes telling young Diana the creation myth with the story of the birth of Themyscira, our utopic society of women:

Zeus used the last of his power to stop Ares, striking such a blow the god of war was forced to retreat. But Zeus knew that one day Ares might return to finish his mission: an endless war where mankind would finally destroy themselves, and us with them. So Zeus left us a weapon, one powerful enough to kill a god. With his dying breath, Zeus created this island to hide us from the outside world, somewhere Ares could not find us. And all has been quiet ever since.

Hippolyta here positions men and women separately, linking them not by purpose as in the first part of the creation story. Instead, she links men and women by their fates, implying that women may not be any longer purposed to serve and save men, but the success and survival of womankind is linked to that of mankind, and therefore necessitates the interest of the Amazons in the affairs of men. The physical separation between women and men in this myth indicates a deeper separation in the relationship between womankind and mankind as well. As Hippolyta tells Diana before she leaves Themyscira with Steve Trevor, "Be careful in the world of men Diana. They do not deserve you." The Amazons, created to balance the flaws of men and contribute love to mankind in an equal partnership, are disillusioned to the nature of men and do

not trust patriarchal order any longer. The creation story of the Amazons thus serves as a justification for the creation of a society of women in Themyscira for the audience familiar with patriarchal order.

The creation myth is also essential to the moment of feminism in which the film is produced. By establishing Themyscira as a society that was born out of a patriarchy and found its utopic order upon separation from men, *Wonder Woman* sets up the society of women organically in a manner that follows the journey of the woman in real Western patriarchal society. In the creation myth of the Bible, as the Amazons are created in Hippolyta's myth, Eve is created from the flesh of man to improve the existence of Adam. With this beginning, women in our real Western society began with the essential purpose of saving men through the contribution of love and affection. In the first wave of feminism, reflected in Gilman's *Herland*, women were recognized to be confined in a society built by and for men, as Antiope acknowledges that the Amazons were enslaved by mankind. Throughout the 20th century, women revolted as in Antiope's segment of the myth to break free of the boundaries placed upon them by patriarchy. Now, in the turn of the 21st century, women may know some form of autonomy to imagine themselves free of male control, identifying with the isolated island of Themyscira. However, the patriarchal roots of modern society confine modern women still, as the threat of Ares's return oppresses the Amazons. In this sense, the modern audience can identify with the Themyscirans in *Wonder Woman* better than the Herlanders of Gilman's 20th century novel. The Themyscirans are free, for all appearances, however they are still frightened and jaded by the world of men and do not wish to re-enter it if they can avoid doing so.

With this foundation, Diana's tribe of Amazons is a quintessential "society of women." As previously established, the society of women must 1) defend itself and replenish itself



without the assistance of men, 2) be fully isolated and nearly impenetrable from the outside world, 3) have a utopic order of society untroubled by ambition, 4) be infiltrated and challenged by a man during the course of the story, and 5) engage with the woman as mother, sister, and individual. *Wonder Woman*, as a modern example of a society of women that echoes Gilman's *Herland*, displays all five characteristics of the trope. Themyscira is, indeed, well protected by the warrior women—strong and trained in battle—who inhabit it, and made isolated and nearly impenetrable by Zeus for the better protection of the Amazons, as described by Hippolyta in her bedtime story to young Diana. In another story about Diana's "birth," Hippolyta fulfills the aspect of the society of women trope that allows women to reproduce without the assistance of men: Diana is sculpted out of clay by her mother and brought to life by the gods. Through asexual production, or the absence of a male influence in the genetic make-up of a child, the powerful hero we know as Wonder Woman is created. Diana Prince is created fully from the work of female hands, and she is, consequentially, imbued with the powers of a goddess. Most importantly, in accordance with the society of women trope, the story is furthered through a clash of the genders when Steve Trevor infiltrates Themyscira. As Trevor infiltrates the country of the Amazons and introduces them to the reality of war on the other side of their magical protective barrier, he encounters the utopic order of Themysciran society and becomes intimately acquainted with the seamless run of the civilization when he is processed through the fair, faultless manner of court that the Amazons have established.

With Trevor's infiltration, a clash of the genders ensues in the battle between the Amazonians and the Germans that follow Trevor to the island. In this first battle scene of the film, small moments point to Trevor's unconscious projection of patriarchal gender expectations upon Diana in their first moments together. As the Germans storm the shore, Trevor attempts to

pull Diana, the maiden, to safety by reaching for her hand and bidding her to run for cover. He is thwarted in this, however, as Diana is already running toward cover before he has time to reach his hand out. This detail communicates the independence of the Amazon women to Trevor himself as well as the film's audience. His attempts to treat these women as he would treat a woman in his native patriarchal society are made to look ridiculous when directed at the obviously powerful, capable bodies of the Amazon warriors. Women swing from ropes and take down multiple Germans with one swing of their swords, while Trevor looks slowly around the beach and struggles to find cover.

Trevor is, indeed, ill-equipped to face the women of Themyscira in the differences that these women pose to the gender performance that he is used to. To escalate the scope of Trevor's naivety, the violent conflict between the Germans pursuing Trevor and the warrior women of Themyscira presents a true gender war. The respective fighting styles of the men and women in the confrontation speak to the difference between the genders communicated by the film. In these differences, the feminist agenda of the representation of the Amazons is furthered. While Amazons fly headlong into the melee on ropes (figure 1), the men stand still in their boats and shoot bullets from a distance. Through the literal clash of the genders, we can see the confident, fearless depiction of femininity that the society of women trope lends to a text. The women are unafraid to get dirty, while the men run around frantic, clearly confused. The women, though using tools judged by Trevor and a modern audience to be primitive ("They have guns, right?", Trevor asks Diana as the Amazons points their bows at the German army), exhibit superior skill and valor that ultimately allows them to win the battle. The disparity in power between the German men and the Amazon warriors is visually depicted when Jenkins holds an aerial shot over the field of battle, Hippolyta, the Amazonian queen, is seen in the middle of the melee in

her full, elegant gold robe (figure 2). She moves slowly and calmly, but exudes power in her positioning surrounded by the fell bodies of intruders that she defeated.



Figure 1: Amazon warriors swing from cliffs with “primitive” weapons



Figure 2: Hippolyta in battle

This scene presents a literal battle of the genders and uses imperialist language in a way similar to Gilman’s metaphor of imperialism in *Herland*. The imperialist metaphor is essentially displayed in the motivations that spur this battle: the men are invading, while the women defend their home. Similar to how Gilman’s herlanders are uninterested in the prospect of leaving their

home country to expand into the world of men, the Amazons are generally uninterested in expanding into the world outside of their own protective barrier. The imperialist ideology in *Herland* is presented through the men that infiltrate the country of Herland, demonstrating Gilman's critique of imperialism as a distinctly male pursuit. Similarly, the only character interested in leaving Themyscira for the outside world is Diana. Rather, the outside world, once made aware of Themyscira's existence, desires to enter Themyscira.

Diana betrays the society of women that she comes from by buying into the imperialist ideology introduced to her society by the German soldiers and Steve Trevor. Diana is spurred by a desire to help the patriarchal order outside of the confines of Themyscira to end their war. In this desire, Diana effectively reverses the imperialist agenda that is traditionally characteristic of the patriarchal order. Instead of men attempting to colonize Themyscira with the violence of their war, Diana attempts to colonize the external world with her belief in peace and desire to return the world to a state of brotherhood with an absence of ambition.

While scholars such as Schubart and Albertson focus on the image of the Amazon warrior, the imperial perspective reveals a much deeper contribution to feminist study than the embrace of the male gaze. Through Diana's roots in the independent island of Themyscira, *Wonder Woman* provides a strong example of productive representation of women and female relationships. In addition, the society of women trope is modernized in *Wonder Woman* from the racist rendition seen in Gilman's *Herland* through the introduction of diversity to the sisterhood of the women of Themyscira. This positive image can be seen in the first depiction of Themyscira in the film.

A small Diana runs through the streets of a village, filled with tall, beautiful, and diverse women (figure 3). These women are all portrayed, in their short screen time, as intensely capable

and community-minded. Their city is well-kept, the women in the streets all greet Diana kindly, the friendly citizens all bustle about their work with purpose, and the women stand straight-backed with clean dress and grooming. There is, in short, no strife or disorder in the home of the Amazons. As it is revealed where the young Diana is running to, the audience sees the extent of the interconnectedness of the Amazons hinted at in their physical appearance. Diana looks out upon a grotto filled with Amazon warriors in the midst of training. In slow motion, the camera follows as a long-limbed, elegant woman tosses a sword a long distance to be caught gracefully by another warrior. The synergy communicated in this visual introduction of the Amazon women is the ultimate expression of the society of women trope in modern film. Young Diana, standing above the grotto, looks wistfully upon the scene, longing to be a full part of this community (figure 4).



*Figure 3: A young Diana runs through Themyscira streets*





Figure 4: A young Diana gazes at the Amazon community

The film here departs from the example of Charlotte Perkins Gilman with the insertion of diversity into the society of women trope. While community between females in film is indeed rare, rarer still is the diversity of the women in this community—though the Amazons are tall and beautiful without variation, all races are represented in the actors that line the streets of Themyscira. A society of so many diverse and capable women without pettiness or strife is surely a positive contribution to the Hollywood canon that takes a wide leap away from the anglicized community of the *Herland* text.

Indeed, the society of women trope presents a strong bond between females, posits strength and order as the dominant characteristics of female nature, and provides space for individuality in tandem with community. As with *Herland*, however, the film struggles with unproductive gender stereotypes even as it presents these productive images. Chiefly, the obsession with motherhood is a theme in *Wonder Woman* that clouds the feminist interpretation of Diana's depiction. As discussed in detail through the example of Gilman's *Herland*, Gilman's depiction of the society of women treats motherhood as an essential function of women in any society. *Wonder Woman* modernizes this theme of motherhood slightly and depicts motherhood

as a privilege and motherliness as an identity that is praised in the Amazonian community. The kindness of the community of Themyscira toward Diana is representative of their cohesive, peaceful existence without the complicating influence of testosterone. This community care for Diana is also a reflection of *Herland's* communal mothering, in which all the women of the society of females assist in bringing up the children that their society produces. However, *Wonder Woman* departs from Gilman's example when Hippolyta reveals that Diana is the only child in Themyscira.

In *Herland*, the women are allowed the opportunity to act as a mother to the community's children as a reward for good behavior, and their right to conceive their own child is restricted to only some women in order to keep the population of the country at a maintainable volume. The women of Herland are bonded through a universal valuing of motherhood that allows the communal act of mothering to function and allows the society to use the right to motherhood as motivation for good behavior. In *Wonder Woman*, a similar value of motherhood shows through in Hippolyta's protectiveness over young Diana and the intense interest taken by the rest of the Amazons in the actions of the child. Despite their clear care for the child, the fact that Diana is the only child in Themyscira prevents this society of women from basing their identity as a people upon their motherliness in the same way that the Herlanders do. The women of Themyscira are not motivated to care for Diana in order to satisfy the established order of their society and earn the right to be mothers themselves, as in Gilman's novel. Themyscirans have no hope of becoming mothers themselves, and so delight upon Diana as the one chance at motherliness that they may ever have. Motherhood in *Herland* is progressively framed, as it serves as a reward and essential duty of the citizens of Herland to best create the utopic order and

provide for the future of their society. The women of *Herland* are motherly because it is best for their society. The Amazonian women of *Wonder Women* are motherly because they are women.

This importance placed upon the identity of the woman as mother, in the modern context, undermines the independence of the women in the female society and reasserts them into the frame of subjugation that women in sexually reproducing societies are subject to. The Amazons in *Wonder Woman* do not have the same concern for the next generation of their society as the Herlanders do in Gilman's novel. Though it is not explicitly stated how the women of Themyscira age or replenish their society, the concern for procreation simply does not exist in their civilization. Instead, they are simply joyed by the child that is gifted to them by Zeus, and demonstrate a motherly affection for Diana as a child. The creation of Diana, the only child in Themyscira, is a gift bestowed. Because there is no necessity for reproduction in *Wonder Woman*, the motherliness of the women is gratuitous and proves to serve no purpose beyond reminding the audience of the traits inscribed upon women in the patriarchal society. In short, women are not mothers in *Wonder Woman* in order to ensure the continuance of their society. They are mothers because this is what the patriarchal society that the audience of the film belongs to expects of women. Further than this, the myth of Diana's birth serves as a "I wished for you so much so that I sculpted you from clay myself and begged Zeus to give you life." The trait of motherly affection is thus valued in the society of the Amazons, but not an essential function of their society. They are merely pleased by the thought of children and yearn for the act of motherhood that is nearly lost from the male-less land of Themyscira. This feminine lust for children is demonstrated by Diana when she enters the outside world and sees children for the first time. Though Diana is fiercely capable and demonstrates a motivation more complex than a simple motherly need to protect her people, this powerful woman is distracted by the children



that she sees in the streets of London. As Trevor leads her to confront the powerful men in charge of the British war efforts, Diana is fully consumed by the sight of a child that they pass by. Her composure, stoic and determined (figure 5), seconds later melts to utter joy at the thought of babies (figure 6, seconds later), and is regained quickly once the passing child is out of sight. This scene and the doting of the Amazons upon young Diana demonstrate the importance that the society of women trope, even in modern renditions as recent as 2017, place upon women as mothers in any society, regardless of the influence of men. More important, however, is the needlessness of the motherly affection of the women of Themyscira for the utopic order of their society. Their motherliness is a vestige of the patriarchal worldview seeping into the utopic vision of a society of women.



*Figure 5: Diana stoically discusses war*



*Figure 6: Diana melts at the sight of a baby*

In addition to the essential value of woman as mother, the film falls short of delivering a full feminist agenda through the love story that Diana engages in with Steve Trevor. While the simple insertion of romance into Diana's journey is not in itself a detriment to her role as a positive role model for women, this love story in the film uses the society of women trope to betray the feminist agenda. Diana abandons her society of women for a man and is fully distracted by the desire for male affection. This is exemplified in the opening sequence that

shows Diana, in the present day, visiting the Louvre museum. In a small room, she opens a briefcase, containing a special photograph that she, evidentially, requested access to. The walls surrounding Diana encase relics that resemble the Wonder Woman garb—rusted shields and armored bodices (figure 7). These relics, to the viewer familiar with Diana’s backstory and her origin as an Amazonian woman, are deduced to be remnants of the tribe of warrior women that she grew up with. Surrounded by remembrances of the past and the ancient artifacts of her people, Diana gazes upon the only photograph of herself and her lover, Steve Trevor. The betrayal of the sisterly bond among the women of Themyscira comes from the environment in which Diana views this photograph. Surrounded by the objects that survive the society of women that crafted her into the powerful, independent woman that she exemplifies, Diana is distracted by a man.



*Figure 7: Modern day Diana works among artifacts*

The dream of female society without the oppression of men has lasted through the 20<sup>th</sup> century and is firmly planted in the pop culture of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Through Patty Jenkins’ notable film adaptation of *Wonder Women*, societies of women are portrayed ideally, much like in their predecessor texts from the first wave feminists of the previous century. However, even in

these utopic societies, strife comes with the infiltration of a man. As Diana says in the voice over that begins the film, “And mankind...mankind is a different story all together”. Men, presented as the aggressors in the patriarchal order similar to the aggressions of the imperialists in a colonial order, are indeed a different story all together. Diana is unfamiliar with the ways of men, and in her story she not only experiences the input of the patriarchy on her individual journey for self-actualization, but also witnesses the infiltration of the all-female society of Themyscira by the outside empire of patriarchy.

In continuation of the themes presented in the 2017 film, Jenkins’s sequel to *Wonder Woman*, *Wonder Woman 1984*, continues the first film’s interest in the idealism of an all-female society. However, this film contradicts the allocation of less desirable societal traits, such as competition, jealousy, and desire, as other traits determined by Gilman in her earlier novel to be essentially masculine. Similar to the feminist downfall of the first film, *1984* sees Diana’s power fall to the dominance of desire for heterosexual romance and satisfaction. The film, though presenting female friendship in the scientific duo of Diana Prince and Barbara Minerva, prioritizes romance with the male as the primary social influence in the female’s internal satisfaction. Steve Trevor remains Diana’s relationship priority despite her upbringing in a society of women characterized by shared appreciation for sisterhood and community.

The betrayal of the society of women and the ideal of solidarity is rectified in *1984* with Diana’s ultimate sacrifice at the climax of the film. Diana decides that the sacrifice of her power is not worth re-gaining her lost love, Steve Trevor. Diana, as her voice is broadcast to the world, declares that the sacrifice required to regain her greatest desire—the actualization of a lost romantic love that had haunted her for nearly seventy years—was not worth the reward. In the end, the power of female society, female actualization, and self-reliance is deemed more

important than romantic interest. However, romance is deemed an ultimate sacrifice that Diana may never truly come to terms with. She may never, indeed, be fully self-actualized without the possession of her male lover.

## CONCLUSION

The society of women is a trope of feminist fiction that allows writers to imagine a world in which the influence of patriarchy has not hindered the ability of women to reach their full potential. This trope, drawing from the Amazonian myth and spanning cultures and generations, holds a power that remains relevant in every wave of feminism. The society of women is defined by its isolation, ability to defend and replenish itself without the assistance of men, utopic order, sisterly and motherly love, and momentary infiltration by the men of the outside world. Though not every effective example of the trope must meet all of these criteria, the metaphor of imperialism must be communicated to fully capitalize upon this trope. In essence, the society of women is a community of women untroubled by ambition and uninterested in the imperialist ideal of expansion. The idea of imperialism, in the society of women, is instead a metaphor that describes the insistence of patriarchal order on entering the feminist sphere.

Through the society of women trope in modern culture, we can see the continuation of the metaphor of imperialism in social realms outside of actual empire and colonization. Through this metaphor, subjugated populations reclaim the narrative and use the power of utopic representation in media to present a version of the world in which they identify less with the oppressed, and more with the empowered. This mode of studying the utopic and feminist threads of seemingly disparate texts is far from exhausted.

Questions that remain to be answered include those posed by the introduction of men and romance to the society of women trope. Though this study explores the re-introduction of men to

the society of women as a staple of the trope, the question remains why this reintroduction must occur. The re-introduction of men serves in part to contrast the matriarchal order with the patriarchy of the outside world, but the insistence of societies of women upon the usefulness of men indicates more. Furthermore, it seems that with the re-introduction of men into the society, stories implementing this trope often include romance between members of the society of women and the men that infiltrate the society, as with Trevor and Diana's relationship in *Wonder Woman* and Van and Ellador's relationship in *Herland*. This romance, as briefly discussed, can serve to undermine the ability of women to be actualized without a relationship with a male to define themselves by. Finally, there is still much work to be done on the question of motherhood in societies of women and the role that reproduction plays in the essential identity of women. Founded in Gilman's *Herland*, motherhood remains the constant that defines womanhood in the society of women despite the absence of men to enforce this ideal.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman considers motherhood when she responds to Rudyard Kipling's poem "The Female of the Species" in her own poem titled "More Females of the Species." Gilman posits in this poem that not only is the female of the species mighty in her ability to give birth, despite Kipling's reminder that the threat of death that accompanies the feat:

In the baleful human infant this ferocity we spy,  
It glares in bloodshot fury from the maiden's dewy eye,  
But the really deadly female, when you see her at her best,  
Has two babies at her petticoat and a suckling at her breast. (29-32)

The female, Gilman supplements, is mighty in her motherhood—that natural capacity to tame fear and violence and replace it with the peace of motherly love. She presents the image of the attentive mother, with children about her like an army, as an image to spark fear into the hearts of men.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman, as a founding author in the trope of the society of women in utopian literature, insists upon the trait of motherliness as an essential quality of the female of the species. Even in the fictional situation where the female is created asexually and raised in a society unencumbered by the influence of men, motherhood remains a pillar of the female essence. The question that I ask in light of this stubborn support of motherhood is this: why must a woman be motherly in a society in which she does not need to be a mother? Without the patriarchal mode of society, women do not need to remain in the home and raise children to ensure the future success of the civilization. The texts of *Herland* and *Wonder Woman*, however, insist that women without men to force domesticity upon them still gravitate toward motherhood as a piece of their essential being.

It is clear that, whatever the reasoning, women in the fiction of our society, even when imagined to be free, still retain the semblance of patriarchal influence through their affinity for motherliness. The question of why this is still remains to be clear. What is clear, however, is Gilman's understanding of motherhood as a strength available only to the female, rather than a shackle placed upon her by her male counterpart in the patriarchal order. The woman is not confined by the children suckling at her breast, but rather empowered in her ability to grow the next generation without fear. Gilman presents a mother as a fearsome rival to the male of the species.

It is thus possible to see why Gilman envisions her society of strong females, capable of athletic and intellectual feats more challenging than can be bested by the average man, as a society of mothers. The society of women trope in literature and film envisages a utopic order of women that are not only successful without the influence of men, but thrive because of the absence of the patriarchal order imposed on the society of our real world. Rooted in the

imperialist moment of the first wave feminists, the society of women remains a staple of feminist media that effectively describes the battle of the sexes in a way that is ultimately productive and empowers the female.



## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Albertson, Cory. "The New Wonder Woman." *Contexts*, vol. 15, no. 3, 2016, pp. 66–69. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/26370414](http://www.jstor.org/stable/26370414).
- Awkward-Rich, Cameron. "The Fiction of Ethnography in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's Herland." *Science Fiction Studies*, vol. 43, no. 2, July 2016, pp. 331–350.
- Bergman, Jill. *Charlotte Perkins Gilman and a Woman's Place in America*. U of Alabama P, 2017. *EBSCOhost*, [search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=mzh&AN=2017306459&site=ehost-live](http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=mzh&AN=2017306459&site=ehost-live).
- Christensen, Andrew G. "Charlotte Perkins Gilman's Herland and the Tradition of the Scientific Utopia." *Utopian Studies: Journal of the Society for Utopian Studies*, vol. 28, no. 2, 2017, pp. 286–304. *EBSCOhost*, doi:10.5325/utopianstudies.28.2.0286.
- Daca, Monika. "Female and Male Solidarity in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's Herland: Myths Deconstructed." *Beyond Philology: An International Journal of Linguistics, Literary Studies and English Language Teaching*, vol. 14, no. 4, 2017, pp. 65–79. *EBSCOhost*, [search.ebscohost.com.auth.lib.niu.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=mzh&AN=2018395196&site=ehost-live](http://search.ebscohost.com.auth.lib.niu.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=mzh&AN=2018395196&site=ehost-live).
- Daca, Monika. "Female Verticality, Male Horizontality: On Genderized Spaces and Unequal Border Crossings in the Prose of Kate Chopin and Charlotte Perkins Gilman." *Beyond Philology: An International Journal of Linguistics, Literary Studies and English*

- Language Teaching*, vol. 14, no. 2, 2017, pp. 55–68. *EBSCOhost*,  
search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=mzh&AN=2018395214&site=ehost-  
live.
- Evans, Lynne. “‘You See, Children Were the Raison d’Être’: The Reproductive Futurism of  
Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *Herland*.” *Canadian Review of American Studies/Revue  
Canadienne d’Etudes Américaines*, vol. 44, no. 2, 2014, pp. 302–319. *EBSCOhost*,  
search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=mzh&AN=2014383161&site=ehost-  
live.
- Fusco, Katherine. “Systems, Not Men: Producing People in Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s  
*Herland*.” *Studies in the Novel*, vol. 41, no. 4, 2009, pp. 418–434. *JSTOR*,  
[www.jstor.org/stable/29533951](http://www.jstor.org/stable/29533951). Accessed 2 Oct. 2020.
- Gilman, Charlotte Perkins. “A Suggestion on the Negro Problem.” *American Journal of  
Sociology*, vol. 14, July 1908.
- Gilman, Charlotte Perkins. *Herland. The Yellow Wallpaper, Herland, and Other Stories*. Penguin  
Classics, 2019.
- Gilman, Charlotte Perkins. “Matriatism.” *The Yellow Wallpaper, Herland, and Other Stories*.  
Penguin Classics, 2019.
- Gilman, Charlotte Perkins. “More Females of the Species.” *The Yellow Wallpaper, Herland, and  
Other Stories*. Penguin Classics, 2019.
- Howell, Charlotte E. “‘Tricky’ Connotations: Wonder Woman as DC’s Brand Disruptor.”  
*Cinema Journal*, vol. 55, no. 1, 2015, pp. 141–149., [www.jstor.org/stable/43653491](http://www.jstor.org/stable/43653491).
- Jenkins, Patty, director. *Wonder Woman 1984*. Performance by Gal Gadot, Warner Bros, 2020.
- Jenkins, Patty, director. *Wonder Woman*. Performance by Gal Gadot, Warner Bros, 2017.

- Jones, Libby Falk and Sarah Webster Goodwin. *Feminism, Utopia, and Narrative*. U of Tennessee P, 1990. <https://archive.org/details/feminismutopiana00jone/mode/1up>
- Paravantes, Andrew James. "The Awakenings of Charlotte Perkins Gilman." *Utopian Studies: Journal of the Society for Utopian Studies*, vol. 30, no. 3, 2019, pp. 505–530. *EBSCOhost*, [search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=mzh&AN=201916663055&site=ehost-live](https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=mzh&AN=201916663055&site=ehost-live).
- Prebel, Julie. "Female Paranoia: A Defense against Patriarchy in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 'The Yellow WallPaper.'" *Paranoia, Fear, and Alienation*, edited by Kimberly Drake, Salem Press; Grey House Publishing, 2017, pp. 18–36. *EBSCOhost*, [search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=mzh&AN=2017400288&site=ehost-live](https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=mzh&AN=2017400288&site=ehost-live).
- Rieder, John. *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction*. Wesleyan UP, 2008.
- Samuels, Shirley. "How Turn of the Century Feminism Finds Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 'The Yellow Wallpaper.'" *Feminist Moments: Reading Feminist Texts*, edited by Katherine Smits and Susan Bruce, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015, pp. 99–106. *EBSCOhost*, [search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=mzh&AN=2017396969&site=ehost-live](https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=mzh&AN=2017396969&site=ehost-live).
- Sands, Peter. "Cannibal Tropes in Gilman's Narrative of Discovery: The Food That Fuels the Nation." *Utopian Studies*, vol. 26, no. 1, 2015, pp. 125–142. JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/10.5325/utopianstudies.26.1.0125](http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5325/utopianstudies.26.1.0125).

Schubart, Rikke. "Bulk, Breast, and Beauty: Negotiating the Superhero Body in Gal Gadot's

Wonder Woman." *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies*, vol. 33, no. 2, Apr 2019, pp. 160-172.

Sutton-Ramspeck, Beth. "New Textual Discoveries and Recovered Passages in Charlotte Perkins

Gilman's Herland." *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, vol. 34, no. 2, 2015, pp. 403–410. *EBSCOhost*,

[search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=mzh&AN=2016870404&site=ehost-live](http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=mzh&AN=2016870404&site=ehost-live).