THE MONTESSORI METHOD AND THE EDUCATIONAL UTOPIA OF CHARLOTTE PERKINS GILMAN'S *HERLAND*

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> I believe that education, therefore, is a process of living and not a preparation for future living.
>
> —John Dewey

If education is the process of living that John Dewey describes, then a separation between living and learning should not exist. Maria Montessori agreed with John Dewey's "awareness of the developmental nature of man in an evolutionary context" (Standing xi). They strove for a form of utopia that balances social and individual needs. Maria Montessori noted, "even in the preparation of the child's environment we are faced with a serious task, for in a sense we must create a new world—the world of children" (47). Charlotte Perkins Gilman recognized the need for a utopia founded on education and subsequently created one in *Herland*, her feminist utopian tale dealing with a well-educated society of women. By merging the educational process of living with a new matriarchal civilization of women, Gilman deliberately embraced a educational experience of Maria Montessori and created the representation of a perfect utopian land where education is not the adversary, but the finest companion to the members of its civilization.

Maria Montessori told a sad story in which the effort of a child to achieve educational victory was thwarted by the ignorance of an adult. She recalled a young girl who was attempting to climb a flight of stairs when a well-intentioned nursemaid picked her up and carried her to the top (Standing 256). Montessori comments that, to the child, the most important accomplishment "was not reaching the top of the stairs *but the*

process of getting there, the difficult and exciting feat of conquering those . . . gigantic steps" (Standing 256). For Montessori's expectation of the child's ascent above the oppressive ways of the adult to be a working reality, one "thing above all else was necessary, that Western Civilization cease viewing the human situation as hierarchal—as a ladder on which our first steps take meaning only from the last" (Standing xi).

The American culture often views education as an adversarial process where the student becomes the victim of the ideals of the social machine. Montessori believed that education should be celebrated within a culture and not destroyed by it. She taught that the "basic atmosphere for the educational process is freedom" and that "liberty [is] the atmosphere in which the child is to develop" (Standing xiii). Cultures that celebrate freedom in education would, under this concept, have a better grasp on the definition of education pertinent to making that particular culture improved. Finding the relevance of education will naturally yield a more positive approach towards learning. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, education is "the process of nourishing or rearing a child or young person." Montessori alleged, "we can see that the so-called problems of education, especially those relative to individuality, character and intellectual development, have as their origin the permanent conflict between the child and the adult" (113).

Charlotte Perkins Gilman understood this conflict and its enduring effect on the child. The conflict between a child and an adult is extremely noticeable in Gilman's own upbringing, as Ann Lane noted in her biographical book, *To* Herland *and Beyond*: "The ability to struggle for and achieve independence must rest upon a sense of trust in others, which ordinarily has its roots in deep attachment to an early adult nurturing figure who gave dependable and consistent care. Such a consistent, loving, trustworthy figure Charlotte did not have" (50). In theory, trust between the two entities (adult and child) will result in the eradication of conflict. Gilman understood the overbearing pressures of having dissent with the adult figures in her life. Thus, with her creation of *Herland* and all its principles, Gilman envisioned a utopia where the abolition of conflict between mother and child is a working reality.

Montessori thought that "Slavery in children . . . elicits feelings of inferiority and total lack of dignity" (44). The children of Gilman's *Herland* do not feel inferior or undignified. They feel equality and respect, both of which develop from the mothering environment in which these children are raised. The women of Herland diligently strive to ensure the children experience safety and acceptance. On the isolated plains of Herland, the children are nourished physically, emotionally,

spiritually, and intellectually. Van, the narrator in *Herland*, makes an important observation concerning the character of the children:

> As I studied these youngsters, vigorous, joyous, eager little creatures, and their voracious appetite for life, it shook my previous ideas so thoroughly that they have never been re-established. The steady level of good health gave them all that natural stimulus we used to call "animal spirits"—an odd contradiction in terms. They found themselves in an immediate environment which was agreeable and interesting, and before them stretched the years of learning and discovery, the fascinating, endless process of education. (Gilman 103-04)

These children perceive each day as an exploration in the progression of learning. Van refers to the children as "animal spirits" who learn the world by engaging their environment. The educational world to these children is as natural as the habitat of an animal.

An animal that has the freedom to live in its natural condition functions with an intuition free from the oppression of additional abnormal entities. A society should allow a child to learn in the same "natural" state; however, this was not the case in most cultures. The oppression of the uneducated has never been indigenous to any one group of people. Montessori had "the clearest evidence of the ubiquity of this oppression" (Standing 253). She hoped that a child would realize learning has meaning and take ownership of that meaning, ultimately resulting in that child's freedom. As for Montessori's thoughts, "Everywhere her ideas, on being put into practice, [acted] as a liberating force, setting free a new type of child, in place of the one hitherto oppressed and misunderstood" (Standing 252). This liberating freedom resounds throughout Herland. Somel, a teacher of the men, articulates the following way of life to Van:

> "We try most earnestly for two powers," Somel continued. "The two that seem to us basically necessary for all noble life: a clear, far-reaching judgment, and a strong well-used will. We spend our best efforts, all through childhood and youth, in developing these faculties, individual judgment and will." (Gilman 106)

The citizens of Herland affirm they are not forcing the children to assimilate into the culture by tyranny, but rather by the children's acceptance of the culture peacefully. No conflict exists between the adults and children of Herland.

Any conflict among children and adults can impede the educational process. With this idea of conflict, Van compares the youth of America with those of Herland. He offers that the "nation-loved children of theirs compared with the average in our country as the most perfectly cultivated, richly developed roses compare with--tumbleweeds. Yet they did not SEEM 'cultivated' at all—it had all become a natural condition" (Gilman 72). Van notes that the love of the nation towards its children is the catalyst for such a deep and meaningful education, unlike the "tumbleweeds" of the American educational system. This stems from the fact that the women of Herland view their mission of education as a position of honor. They approach this mission with a genuine love towards the children; and by so doing, guarantee a stronger future for their culture. "Motherhood—yes, that is, maternity, to bear a child. But education is our highest art, only allowed to our highest artists" (Gilman 82). It is especially interesting that the women of Herland rank education higher than motherhood. This honor given to the teacher is one of reasons there is an absence of conflict in Herland.

The role of the teacher regarding what the *Oxford English Dictionary* calls the "the process of 'bringing up' (young persons)" and overseeing the delineation of "the manner in which a person has been brought up" is designated only to the highest of the high in Herland. The citizens of Herland give great care into the selection of each teacher. "The care of babies involves education, and is entrusted only to the most fit" (Gilman 83). Van expands further on the role of the educator in Herland when he remarks,

> The Herland child was born not only into a world carefully prepared, full of the most fascinating materials and opportunities to learn, but into the society of plentiful numbers of teachers, teachers born and trained, whose business it was to accompany the children along that, to us, impossible thing--the royal road to learning. (Gilman 107)

The use of the term "royal" lends credence to the power of the teacher. These teachers implement the matriarchal attributes necessary for the nurturing of children. In Herland, a land without the patriarchal system of competition and ego, the women were allowed to implement the

nurturing, caring environment each child needs to grow, not the environment of force and intimidation present in most patriarchal systems.

Montessori observed that this delicate balance between adult and child hinged on the power of the teacher to be a positive or negative influence in education. She noted that "the fundamental problem in education is not an educational problem at all: it is a social one. It consists in the establishment of a new and better relationship between the two great sections of society—children and adults" (Standing 251). Gilman took the idea that education is weakened by delicate social bonds and created a solution for the inhabitants of her novel, *Herland*. In her life, Gilman sets out to obtain the following goal:

> [T]o draw upon anthropology, biology, history, sociology, ethics, and philosophy to comprehend the contours of human evolution and human society in order to create a humane social order. She [Gilman], along with other intellectuals of her time, sought to understand the world in order to change it. (Lane 230)

And change the world she did, at least for the fictional Herlandian citizens. The children of Herland are allowed individual rights all the while realizing the ambition of a better society. It is through the teachers that this ambition is realized.

Montessori stated that "anything that inhibits the growth of the child is particularly grave because it can influence the entire construct of the personality that must ultimately emerge" (34). The personality of the teacher must be nurturing enough to form a character in the child that is compassionate, caring, and civilized. Montessori also introduced her notion of *cere molle*, or "soft wax." She presented this thought of malleability: "Now the concept inherent in the definition of *cera molle* is correct: the error lies in the fact that the educator believes that he must shape the child. On the contrary, the child must shape *himself*; this is a basic principle, for the child is truly self-animated even in the means by which he expresses himself" (34). Montessori warned of the dangers of rigid instructional methods which could actually misshape the child and permanently alter his future.

Charlotte Gilman struggled through the rigid linear approaches to education as well. "Her teachers, she said, were initially impressed with her intelligence but were soon disappointed in her performance because she did not flourish under the rigid routines that restricted her imagination" (Lane 59). Perhaps it is because of these struggles that

Gilman was so attracted to the concept of an educational utopian society where teachers nurture autonomy instead of repealing it. In Gilman's utopia, the children are never forced into a certain path of education by their teachers. The model of oppression is lacking in Herland because the educated do not oppress the uneducated on these plains. The women cultivate the mind and body so that ignorance is calmly eliminated. The peaceful intervention of the teacher is addressed by Montessori when she noted that "by uprooting this immense and universal evil [the oppression of the child by the adult], we should at the same time be destroying the seeds of all other forms of injustice which arise out of it" (Standing 253). If what Montessori says here is true, then all wars and crimes against man would cease. In *Herland*, Gilman removes the part of the equation that has traditionally acted as the participant of all injustice, the man.

Because of man's absence, peace prevails throughout Herland. This peace comes from the colossal sense of community offered in this elevated landscape. Van notes the following:

> They began at once to plan and built for their children, all the strength and intelligence of the whole of them devoted to that one thing. Each girl, of course, was reared in full knowledge of her Crowning Office, and they had, even then, very high ideas of the molding powers of the mother, as well as those of education. (Gilman 59)

The children were molded within the parameters of the Herlandian culture. Each child received a "crowning office" where pride and self-worth were not just spoken, but enacted. For each child to be the recipient of a crowning office, the idea of competition must be removed. The ideals presented to these children were such things as "Beauty, Health, Strength, Intellect, [and] Goodness" (Gilman 59). Most educational systems inspire a sense of ruthlessness in the children. These systems rely on the fundamentals of grades and dominance, certainly not the concept of goodness. Van also notes that "the babies and little children never felt the pressure of that 'forcible feeding' of the mind that we call 'education'" (Gilman 95). The handicapping of education is the forced feeding of the student. A child could be famished, yet if the food does not have meaning, she will not eat it. The teacher must train the child to know that the food is relevant and nutritious.

The nutrition of education must also have practical outcomes. Education must not be empty calories. It should be, as the *Oxford English*

Dictionary describes it, "The systematic instruction, schooling or training given to the young in preparation for the work of life" ("Education" 44). The teacher must prepare the student for the physical endeavor of life. Charlotte Gilman took interest in physical exertion early in her life. She noticed that "she loved more subjects than she excelled in, particularly poetry and calisthenics" (Lane 59). Her love of calisthenics probably came from "Dr. Studley, a woman physician who taught hygiene, [who] instantly converted Charlotte to a regime of cold baths, exercise, fresh air, and dress reform" (Lane 59). Gilman became increasingly aware of the liberating nature of exercise as well as the educational value it contained. Charlotte lived "in a culture that valued frailty in women, [but] took delight and pleasure in her robust health and her strong body" (Lane 59). This strength allowed her independence, an independence she in turn established in the women of *Herland*.

Van observed that the Herlandian citizens "had faced the problems of education and so solved them that their children grew up as naturally as young trees; learning through every sense; taught continuously but unconsciously—never knowing they were being educated" (Gilman 95). To the citizens of Herland, education is entirely a natural achievement, similar to breathing. The use of repetition and daily activities programmed the minds of these children to accept learning in whatever form it should appear. Regarding the use of activity as an educational means, Montessori felt that "a felicitous environment that guides the children and offers them the means to exercise their own faculties permits the teacher to absent herself temporarily. The creation of such an environment is already the realization of great progress" (Montessori 75). Montessori introduced the premise that a truly effective educational environment is one where the teacher doesn't really teach, the lessons do. The child learns more meaningful and enduring lessons through activity than if an instructor stood before her and "taught." In *Herland*, Van struggled with this concept. After all, he was educated in a system that teaches submission and survival. He decided to seek out Somel, his teacher in this feminine culture.

Somel explained the culture of "doing" and its equality with "thinking." Van asked her this question: "If they loved to do it, how could it be educational?" (Gilman 104). This question highlights Van's perplexity of the Herland culture. The tortuous American system of education Van grew up in believed that education should never be entertaining and enjoyable. Somel offered her best defense of the idea that education can indeed be enjoyable. She explained to Van that

> "Our theory is this . . . Here is a young human being. The mind is as natural a thing as the body, a thing that grows, a thing to use and enjoy. We seek to nourish, to stimulate, to exercise the mind of a child as we do the body. There are the two main divisions in education--you have those of course?--the things it is necessary to know, and the things it is necessary to do." (Gilman 104)

The "knowing and "doing" in the society of Herland is achieved through the playing of games that unite the physical with the mental. These games constantly develop to avoid habit and ensure the game does not lose its effectiveness. Somel informs Van that the citizens of Herland "have been working for some sixteen hundred years, devising better and better games for children" (Gilman 106). Van recalls his childhood and "the 'material' devised by Signora Montessori" which were embedded into his conscious (Gilman 106). Regardless of these memories, Van still has difficulty accepting the innovative nature of the Herlandian education.

The non-traditional aspects of Herlandian education stem in large part from the elimination of division among the various educational components. When education is divided and categorized, certain portions are not pursued as religiously as others, leading to a stagnant system. Montessori addressed the inert nature of education with a simple observation relating to "a discord between the adult and the child which has been going on 'undisturbed for thousands of years'" (Standing 253). What the children want to learn, the teachers don't want to teach. Some educational experts emphasize certain core subjects over others. The antithesis of this favoritism is Herland. Everything works together just as harmoniously as the adults and children. Disciplines such as "the drama, the dance, music, religion, and education were all very close together; and instead of developing them in detached lines, they had kept the connection" (Gilman 99-100). The biggest divisional emphasis in the traditional educational institution is the most noticeable division of all, gender.

Each gender develops certain powers within a culture. This development of powers is called education. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines education as a "culture or development of powers, formation of character, as contrasting with the imparting of mere knowledge or skill." Terry makes a biting statement about the matriarchal culture of Herland when he proclaims he is "sick and tired of being educated . . . Fancy going to a dame school—at our age. I want to Get Out!" (Gilman 32). Terry obviously feels the absence of male influence in this efficient

educational organization. Terry is really missing what the male influence would bring to Herland, competition. The male visitors to Herland perceive that these women "had no enemies; they themselves were all sisters and friends" (Gilman 59). So the conclusion must be that without competition, education in exists in its purest form, learning.

Martha Cutter observes, "In Gilman's text . . . the destruction of gender norms and the construction of a new theory of language are crucially interlinked." Once gender labels are removed, so too is the competition between the students. The elevation of one group over another simply doesn't exist in Herland. Even with the insertion of three males, the community maintains camaraderie and wholesomeness. Of the practice of naming objects, Cutter presents the notion that "Naming practices, for example, reflect not a separation between subject and object, male and female, as they do under patriarchy, but an integration into the community as well as defining of self" (Cutter). The community of Herland is integrated fully because the language doesn't declare an identity superior in relation to another. It simply exists completely amalgamated. The language of the land helps preserve order because the "Herlandian language transforms the men who enter Herland, inscribing them into an order where they can no longer control the world by controlling the word" (Cutter). The men are subject to a matriarchal system that protects all females, not just the strong ones. This matriarchal system is built on the development of character as it pertains to the whole, not exclusively the individual.

Montessori observed a group of young children cleaning up after a meal. She declared that "the child does not consider work done for others as deserving a reward; it is the work itself that rewards the most ambitious child" (50). Montessori's observation proves that the child can be unselfish when it comes to getting rewards for work completed. So the conduct manifested in this system benefits the culture as a whole. Not one child is better than the other in Montessori's example. Such is the case with the children of Herland. It's the adult men who have the issue.

The problem the men have with the system of Herland is simply that this culture has benefited without them. This concept amazes Van as he notes that "this people, steadily developing in mental capacity, in will power, in social devotion, had been playing with the arts and sciences—as far as they knew them—for a good many centuries now with inevitable success" (Gilman 72). This utopian system of success prevalent in Herland has also occurred in various incarnations of educational philosophy in recent years.

Portions of society have argued that single-sex education reduces the quality of education received by both genders. The establishment of a single-sex educational system is one of the most controversial concepts in gender arguments. For example, Diane Pollard noted, "The establishment of single-sex classes as a vehicle to enhance academic achievement among girls was in large part a reaction to the realization that access to educational experiences via mixed-sex classes did not necessarily result in equity of educational opportunity." Pollard introduces the idea that "the establishment of single-sex classes has stemmed from a broader attempt to implement culturally centered educational models." Society today is not as extremely gender biased as that of Gilman's lifetime. In the times of Women's Suffrage, Gilman imagined a world in Herland where women were given the opportunity to be ambitious due to the comfort and equality among its natives. Herland does not have to deal with the problems of gender inequalities and bias. Herland allowed an opportunity for gender to be a culture unto itself.

If gender is its own recognized culture, then an obvious benefit is opportunity within this culture through education. Van comments on the opportunities of the women of Herland by stating "We boast a good deal of our 'high level of general intelligence' and our 'compulsory public education,' but in proportion to their opportunities they were far better educated than our people" (Gilman 64-5). Perhaps education is opportunity in the greatest logic of the word. The more opportunity for education an individual receives, the greater her education will survive. Opportunity begins when obstacles end. Arguably one of the greatest obstacles to the education of women is the patriarchal definition that has been forced on it. Montessori noted, "Observing these children—healthy, tranquil, innocent, sensitive, full of love and joy, always ready to help others—I have been forced to reflect upon the amount of human energy wasted because of an ancient error and great sin that disseminated injustice to the very roots of mankind" (120). She of course is referencing the fall of man. The sin of greed and the struggle to rule over the meek has, and will continue, to plague the generations of humanity. However, in the mind of Charlotte Perkins Gilman, there can be a world without the conflict of gender. Gilman understood the ideas of Montessori to hold that "Whenever one section of society is deprived of its rights by another, there always results a tension, which issues in a struggle of reaction against the injustice felt by the oppressed" (Standing 253). The women of Herland have formed a character and a power that define them as a culture of unity through the education of their culture. Van observed that

> very early they recognized the need of improvement as well as of mere repetition, and devoted their combined intelligence to that problem—how to make the best kind of people. First this was merely the hope of bearing better ones, and then they recognized that however the children differed at birth, the real growth lay later—through education. (Gilman 59)

The women wanted a better world and they labored toward that desire with every ounce of their being. Van is ashamed of his culture and its approach to education as it compares with that of Herland. The yearning to better the culture as a whole didn't exist in the world of Herland for the visiting men. The world they came from was a world bent on improving the individual at the expense of other members of the society. Of the three prominent men who appear in this world, all found themselves helpless when confronted by a unified society of women: Jeff sought to blend and observe the land according to the traditions of science; Terry, on the other hand, wanted to conquer. Van sought as much information as he could absorb about this culture as any good sociologist might. But even in the face of their attempt to introduce patriarchal ideas, the women remained unified. The men were rendered asunder by the mere education of the women of Herland, who redefined the system of egalitarianism.

The term "education" is possibly one of the most powerful terms in the language of mankind. The uneducated individual must submit to the stronger educated entity. Maria Montessori spent her life implementing her methods and best practices to create a better system of education in the world. The world Montessori labored in remained in constant clash among its members, specifically the adults and the children. Montessori optimistically predicted that through the abolition of conflict among the weak and the strong that

> A new image of the child has emerged from this discovery, which has been a beam of light to guide us on the road to a new education. The child demonstrates, along with his innocence, courage and faith in himself and is endowed with a moral force that also has a social direction. At the same time, those defects that one struggled in vain to discourage with education—that is, misbehavior, destructiveness, lying, shyness, fear and, in

> general, all those that are contingent upon the posture of defense—have disappeared. (Montessori 114-15)

Charlotte Perkins Gilman took this "beam of light" and placed it in a fictitious utopian land where education conquers the evils of gender conflict, oppression, and weakness. The name of this land is Herland.

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