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Gabrielle D. Phan April 15, 2013

# Sex(duality): Exploring Constructions of Gender in 20th Century Speculative Fiction

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**Abstract**

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I seek to explore the formation of identity and the portrayal of gender in speculative fiction, with a focus on novels written in the twentieth century. As the parameters of the genre of speculative fiction are broad, this provides the opportunity to study constructions of identity and gender in alternate societies. These novels are characterized by their fantastical, imagined content and tend to be set in an environment that is generated by the author, making it possible for one to consider a variety of ways that gender can be defined outside of what is typically presented. I aim to answer the question of the relationship between gender and identity in the absence of the conventional socially constructed gender roles that readers have come to expect from their own experiences. By studying texts in which typical expectations of gender are eliminated, such as Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness,* where the characters are genderless, an analysis of the behaviors of the characters can reveal much about what the author is implying about traits stereotyped to each gender. Such a text that lacks a strict male-female dichotomy will call into question the idea of gender as a societal construct. In the case of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland*, where a happily functioning society is dominated purely by women, expectations from each gender are reversed. Since it is told through the eyes of males, it provides an interesting juxtaposition between what is perceived as the norm and what is unnatural. Furthermore, seeing as sexuality is inextricably linked to the idea of gender, studying Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, a text in which reproduction and sexuality are controlled, will yield further insight into how gender is portrayed in an alternate society. Most importantly, by

studying these female authors and taking their own gender and the perspectives they choose to write from into consideration, this honors thesis will reveal more about the psychology of each author regarding gender roles. Through these texts it will be possible to study what constitutes the idea of identity, femininity, and masculinity in the speculative fiction genre.

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# Introduction

Speculative fiction, a predominantly male genre, has been stigmatized and portrayed as a less than serious form of literature. Although there is no clear definition of the term speculative fiction, it is widely acknowledged as a genre that encompasses fictions that deal with any sort of constructed elements such as fantasy, or futuristic details. Simultaneously distinct from and related to the genre of science fiction, speculative fiction typically deals with more humanistic aspects as opposed to technical and scientific ones that are associated with pure science fiction. Using a close, feminist reading of speculative texts from the twentieth century I argue that the conventions of this genre provide a rich context in which societal and cultural beliefs can be explored. More specifically, I will examine how these fictionalized worlds allow the reader to analyze aspects of gender identity and sexuality.

The rise of female speculative fiction authors did not occur until much later in the genre's history, but proved to be especially significant to the establishment of the genre. Speculative fiction is converted into a tool by which these female authors are able to explore the societal conventions of their time. Female authors were able to propose radical ideas without appearing threatening, seeing as the nature of speculative fiction relies heavily on the suspension of disbelief. During the twentieth century, especially during the early years, an overtly polemical work written by females would have elicited scornful responses and been widely dismissed. However, in dealing with this medium in which everything is possible, these authors are able to more widely spread unconventional ideas.

This can be seen through analysis of works of popular speculative fiction such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* (1915), Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985). Studying these texts from the beginning, middle, and end of the twentieth century allows for a wide range of issues of gender to be explored. These texts can be considered both consciousness raising (CR) novels[1] and entertaining works of speculative fiction. Although I have approached these texts chronologically, there is much conceptual overlap seeing as they universally call into question aspects of gender that were taken to be absolute truths at the time. Feminist writer Hélène Cixous discussed the idea of *Écriture féminine*, or the belief that "woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing" ("The Laugh of Medusa" 334). By focusing on these female authors who addressed the physical and intangible aspects of the female experience, gender as a whole can be explored. I will examine how even the assumed male perspective can contribute to a focus on females. The male perspective within these texts affects the expectations of femininity and masculinity and influences the reader. This perspective does two things that further enrich the text: it engages male readers of the genre and in doing so eases them into the unconventional situations being proposed in the texts. Tellingly, these two books were written in the earlier portion of the twentieth century. Furthermore, the male perspective actually provides a new way in which the female experience can be described. These points of view reveal much about what has been ingrained into the mind by society and calls these ideas into question. The male perspective in these texts grounds the work, seeing as the average reader of speculative fiction at the time would have been male.

[1] Consciousness raising novels are described in *Feminism and its Fictions* as being a work of literature that sought to brought about awareness in the reader.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* describes the eponymous society that is inhabited only by women. Following a natural disaster that left all of the women of the land at the mercy of male slaves who sought to abuse them, the women overpowered all of the males leaving a land of females. These females were able to sustain the population through asexual reproduction by parthenogenesis. Three male explorers, Vandyk Jennings, Terry Nicholson, and Jeff Margrave, venture into this strange land and learn more about the women in Herland and how their society operates without the presence of males.

*The Left Hand of Darkness* similarly utilizes the viewpoint of an outsider venturing into a new society in order to tell the story. Both *The Left Hand of Darkness* and *Herland* are significant in terms of the way they question gender roles and look closely at sexuality and reproduction in an unconventional society. Genly Ai, an individual sent to planet Winter from a world described as a futuristic version of Earth, documents his experiences socializing with the ambisexual citizens of Winter. The inhabitants of Winter, also known as Gethenians, lack distinct gender identities and sexual urges except for a period of time once a month known as kemmer. During kemmer each individual temporarily assumes the genitalia of either a male or a female depending on a random interaction of hormones and sexual urges can be fulfilled. A close examination of these alternative sexual practices will reveal as much about conventional assumptions of sexuality as they will about these new ones. In his attempts to convince the Gethenians to join a collective devoted to the unification of several worlds, Genly interacts closely with Gethenians and observes the relationship between gender identification and their society.

*The Handmaid's Tale* differs from the other works that I have chosen to study in terms of perspective. Female protagonist Offred is not an outsider to the society that she observes, but rather is a member who witnessed the formation of said society. Gilead, the area in which she lives, is depicted as being a future version of a city in the United States. Gilead is described as being a totalitarian land created after an organization devoted to implementing morality in society overthrew the government. Consequently, this society is radically reorganized and women are stripped of several freedoms and assigned to certain roles within the social structure. In Gilead rates of reproduction have rapidly declined, leading to the creation of the role of handmaid. Handmaids act as surrogates to elite couples within the society and are treated with general disdain by various members of society despite the perceived necessity of their work. Consequently, *The Handmaid's Tale* provides further insight that was initially sparked by the discussion of sexuality and reproduction in *Herland* and *The Left Hand of Darkness*. Offred serves as a handmaid to the Commander and his wife, Serena Joy. The book follows Offred's experiences with people of all levels within the society and includes her memories of what life was like before Gilead. Her presentation of the two different societies allows the reader to compare and contrast the different ways gender oppression can occur.

Through a close examination of these texts I will explore the various ways these authors used the open nature of the genre to explore conceptions of gender and its relationship to society. The authors of each of these novels created detailed, alternate worlds in which society and the individual differed greatly from what the average reader during the twentieth century would have been accustomed to. In the confines of these created worlds the authors are able to warp conventions and expectations. Speculative

fiction provides a medium through which both alternate and mainstream societies can be examined in a nonthreatening manner. As Le Guin herself spoke of the value of fictions:

> "The fantasist, whether he uses the ancient archetypes of myth and legend or the younger ones of science and technology, may be talking as seriously as any sociologist-and a good deal more directly-about human life as it is lived, and as it might be lived, and as it ought to be lived" (Bittner, *Approaches to the Fiction of Ursula K. Le Guin* 27)

By looking at the way content and literary techniques combine in these twentieth century speculative fiction texts, an appreciation for the works that extends beyond the novels' apparent entertainment value can be derived.

# Chapter 1: The Significance of Being a "Him" in Herland

In order to closely examine *Herland* and develop deeper interpretations of the text, the experiences of author Charlotte Perkins Gilman must be considered. Born in Hartford, Connecticut in 1860, Gilman lived in a period in which there was much intellectual and social upheaval. She herself experienced firsthand the limit of feminine ability, as she was able to work only in positions deemed acceptable for women. She worked as a governess, a position that was considered "nurturing" and thus acceptable for women. Constrained by her role as a mother and wife to the point of depression, Gilman developed a unique perspective on the role of women in society. Highly influenced by Darwinism and social theory, she considered herself a humanist, feminist, and social critic. An active social reformer, Gilman advocated changes for women inside the domestic sphere and in general society. Gilman felt that "to be human women must share in the totality of humanity's common life" (Gilman, *Herland* 2). She believed that in order for genuine gender equality to occur, the structure of society must be changed. Consequently, her beliefs that culture has a greater impact on development than biology influences the progression of *Herland*. While *Herland* is a work of fiction, the analysis of the individuals provided by the text provides a telling account of people's lives in this particular culture and time.

*Herland* focuses on the travels of three different males as they find and explore a remote society made up only of women. After a volcanic eruption that separated a majority of the males from the females 2,000 years ago, social upheaval resulted in a society comprised solely of women. The ancestors of the women of Herland[2] fought off the

[2] The name of the country is never mentioned so from here on out it will be referred to as Herland as it is by the narrators.

remaining males that sought to enslave them. Herland serves as an example of an idealized separatist society. [3] After a young girl miraculously gives birth to a baby girl, the women develop the ability to reproduce through parthenogenesis and are able to develop a society of only females. The story documents the interactions between the women of Herland and the visiting males who represent different outlooks held within a conventional 20th century American society. The combination of the "typical society" represented by the three travelers juxtaposed with the native experiences of the women within the society generates interesting commentary on constructions of femininity and looks into what is "natural" as opposed to what is the product of pervasive social expectations. By writing about a society where women thrive without any males, Gilman reverses what she believed was the androcentric orientation of 20th century society. This distinct break from the world that would have been commonly known by the average reader of the time allows the reader to draw comparisons between the fictional piece and the real world.

## Section 1: Perspective: Degrees of Feminism in the Protagonists

Gilman's incorporation of the perspectives of three very different males layers the text and deepens the reader's understanding of the foreign environment of Herland and of 20th century American society. Simone de Beauvoir deplored the portrayal of women in literature, claiming that males were often portrayed as the dominant norm, consequently automatically making women inferior foils. (*The Second Sex* 103) However, this common perception of women was reversed in Gilman's *Herland*. While the narrators are male, they are marginalized and serve as a means by which the women can be better understood. The

[3] Separatism is a radical form of feminism focused on a separation from males in order to clearly understand women.

travelers are outsiders to the women of Herland not only as a result of their origins, but also due to their gender. Their individual perspectives, influenced by their personal beliefs, provide the reader with a wide spectrum of opinion by which Herland can be better understood. Each male embodies a different stereotypical view on women, and their subsequent interactions with the women of Herland have varying degrees of success. As the men learn more about Herland, their experiences provide insight into society. The characters that are most flexible in terms of opinion prove to be the most adaptable and successful in this new environment, as opposed to the narrator that is firmly rooted in his preconceived notions.

Terry O. Nicholson, a womanizing misogynist, is portrayed as such in order to highlight the perils of an unaccepting point of view. As observed through the eyes of the narrator, one of his peers, Terry possesses an extreme opinion on women. His brash views openly objectify women and dehumanize them. He expresses interest in the women populated colony for sexual reasons, rather than for any sort of intellectual or social enrichment. His prediction that he will "get solid with them all-and play one bunch against another" reveals an egotistical, caustic nature (Gilman, *Herland* 8). He spews misogynistic statements casually, and his opinion that women are toys that can easily be manipulated and controlled colors his perspective of Herland.

Eventually, his inability to relinquish his preconceived notions about women causes him to be cast out of Herland. His marriage to Alima is tumultuous, as he refuses to adapt to the society of Herland and attempts to control his wife's actions. He firmly believes that the femininity he desires from her is latent and can be brought out with enough persistence. To

Terry, marriage is legitimized through the sense of possession. His marriage gave him a "keen joy of conquest" and nothing more (Gilman, *Herland* 130). Of all of the adventurers, Terry is the least able to accept the reality of women as multi-dimensional beings and never seems to experience any sort of deep connection with his wife. In fact, his interactions with his wife repeatedly mirror those of a predator and a prey. His companions notice that Alima "was some quarry he was pursuing, something to catch and conquer" (Gilman, *Herland* 93). His mental disdain and fundamental lack of understanding of women are physically manifested in his attempt to rape Alima, with the false justification that all women wish to be mastered. "He said they could of course kill him-as so many insects could" (Gilman, *Herland* 73). The specific terms he uses with regard to women reveal a pervasive misogyny that demonstrates the categorical refusal to appreciate women by any standards other than the ones he values.

On the other hand, Jeff Margrave is described as a "tender soul" and is deceived by his own sentimental underestimations of the women of Herland (Gilman, *Herland* 7). To Jeff, a society comprised only of women could be nothing else but one "blossoming with roses and babies and canaries and tidies" (Gilman, *Herland* 7). While far less abrasive than Terry's, Jeff's opinion clearly underestimates the female gender. His expectations are a reflection of the common opinion during Gilman's time that the place for the female was within the domestic sphere. Women are expected to live in "peaceful, harmonious sisterhood" (Gilman, *Herland* 8). His opinion on females both idealizes them and simplifies them. He is initially sulky due to the women's refusal to be pampered and to acquiesce to men.

However, his emotional and intellectual progression throughout the text is heightened. Jeff ultimately comes to realize that the women of Herland cannot be held to the same expectations that he originally possessed. Through logical reasoning, he is made to understand that the women of the society are as capable as any male. After Celis retorts, "'you don't like to have us [worship and wait on you]…why is it different?" he realizes that men have no advantages in this society (Gilman, *Herland* 93). After he comes to accept the logical foundation of equality by which the society operates, he embraces the way of life in Herland. He and his wife share a close bond and conceive a child together. Ultimately, he assimilates with the culture and elects not to leave when Terry is banished.

The narrator and a balance between the two extremes of Terry and Jeff, Vandyk Jennings, the most scientifically minded individual of the group, is the only one who does not underestimate the female gender. His defense of the capabilities of women is made clear even before the travelers encounter the women of Herland. Although his prediction that the men exist in a separate society within Herland is incorrect, he accurately foresees that the "women of that stage of culture are quite able to defend themselves" (Gilman, *Herland* 8). He assumes that sheer biological need necessitates the presence of males in Herland, yet genuinely believes that women can be completely self-sufficient. Gilman portrays Van as being quick to amend his judgments, as after he first sees that the women of Herland "were not young. They were not old. They were not, in the girl sense, beautiful. They were not in the least ferocious. . . . [he] had the funniest feeling . . . of being hopelessly in the wrong" (Gilman, *Herland* 19). He is cognizant of the possibility that he may have possessed incorrect assumptions as opposed to automatically assuming that the women are aberrations.

By establishing Van as the most rational-minded of the group, Gilman lends his perspective an air of credibility and makes his opinions far more respectable than those of the others. Unsurprisingly, Van is the first to adopt an expanded definition of femininity. He realizes that "'feminine charms'…are not feminine at all, but mere reflections of masculinity-developed to please us" (Gilman, *Herland* 142). Van acts a reflection of Gilman's own recognition of the lack of genuine necessity for distinction between different genders. His musings closely reflect Gilman's own personal beliefs that societal expectations have weakened females' ability to thrive and succeed as equals. He acknowledges that at times his "race-traditions" make him expect a certain response from his wife, yet works to understand and love her as an individual rather than merely as a type of woman (Gilman, *Herland* 131). Consequently, he is able to develop a closer relationship with one of the women of Herland than any of his other companions. His ability to appreciate Ellador's personal strengths allows them to develop a deep bond founded on genuine respect and affection. By providing the male with the most flexible opinion on women the happiest ending in the story, Gilman emphasizes the importance of an expanded definition of femininity.

Intriguingly enough, the outsiders' courtship of the ladies of Herland is accepted and even encouraged. The elders in Herland are curious about the "advisability of making the Great Change" back to a society of more than just females (Gilman, *Herland* 89). The opening of this perceived utopia to outside forces appears to advocate openness to the unknown and an acceptance of "otherness". Seeing as the males are the foreign individuals in the society, the potential for integration into this land is significant. Ultimately, the expulsion of the males due to Terry's oppressive ways appears to speak to the

incompatibility between societally generated expectations and a rational, perfect way of life.

Each male perspective allows the reader to approach Herland from multiple views and also study the repercussions of certain opinions common in the early 20th century. Beyond that, each of the outsiders in the text ultimately serves as a cautionary example of the dangers of narrow-minded perspectives. The range of beliefs and consequences that the men experience further exemplifies Gilman's idea that society needs to change in order for any positive social reform to occur.

## Section 2: Expectations and Reality: Unfeminine Females

Although individually the males provide insight into different gender expectations, collectively, the presence of the males in Herland provides a means by which the natural and the societally constructed can be explored. The existence of this purely female society explores concepts of whether or not femininity can even be considered a valid construction. Gilman's character development provides a historical and social analysis that can be applied beyond the confines of the text. By writing about a society where women thrive without any males, Gilman reverses what she believed was the androcentric quality of 20th century society. By assuming the perspectives of outsiders, Gilman adopts a unique mindset in order to call into question the validity of gender expectations and explore natural ability. Although each of the adventurers possesses differing degrees of opinion, they fundamentally possess certain expectations of the Herland residents. Seeing as these collective opinions are the result of living in a certain environment, they serve as a basis by which culture can be examined. By repeatedly iterating the qualities deemed typically

"feminine" and contrasting them with the reality of Herland, The women defy common social and physical expectations, as "they were not pets. They were not servants. They were not timid, inexperienced, and weak" (Gilman, *Herland* 141). Gilman draws attention to the misconceptions about physical and behavioral expectations.

The males falsely, but universally, presume that civilization presupposes the male presence. Van says with surprise upon seeing the structure and organization of Herland, "this is a civilized country…there must be men" (Gilman, *Herland* 11). This assumption not only reveals the perceived worth of males, but also actively promotes the idea that women cannot create civilization on their own. This opinion is clearly the result of a historical past of a male-dominated social structure. The division between the outsider's norm and that of the citizens of Herland is made clear by Van's statement that "when [they] say men, man manly manhood, and all the masculine derivatives, we have in the background of our minds a huge vague crowded picture of the world and all its activities" (Gilman, *Herland* 135). This brings to the forefront the issue of history and how the androcentric past has affected the perceptions of the males. The idea of masculinity is explicitly tied to the past. As a result, the ability of the women in Herland is directly associated with society's unique history of uprising and rebuilding. Gilman introduces the possibility of culture and social history as inhibiting to females, a direct reflection of the social theory values she espoused. The inflation of male worth actively suppresses the notion of female worth. In this society where women are strong and healthy, Jeff's preconceived ideas that all women are weak and must be protected are directly refuted. The mistaken belief that "if there were men [the visitors] could fight them, and if there were only women-why, there would be no obstacles at all", further exemplifies the way society has conditioned actions (Gilman, *Herland* 21).

The demand for frailty in 20th century American society makes a class of women that behaves as such, rather than the inherent frailty of females creating the stigma. In contrast, the women in this society are all described as physically fit, healthy and more than capable of performing the tasks that the male narrators prescribe to males in their society.

Societally imposed expectations explicitly extend to physical appearances too. Physical appearance plays a role greater than pure aesthetics in *Herland*. To the men, woman "in the abstract is young, and, we assume, charming. As they get older they pass off the stage, somehow, into private ownership mostly, or out of it altogether" (Gilman, *Herland* 20). The stated lack of relevance once women no longer possess the qualities deemed desirable or acceptable dictates the extent to which aspects of femininity are valued. Terry derogatorily refers to many women on the island as "aunts" or "matronly" in order to convey his opinion that they are undesirable (Gilman, *Herland* 20). Those two words are intended to connote feelings of uselessness and unattractiveness. By using a feminine identification as an insult, he makes clear the lower status of females in his mind.

In order to show the lack of basis behind the expectations for feminine appearance, Gilman intentionally subverts the physical expectations of each gender. The women of Herland are described as possessing physical qualities that are typically associated with the male gender. Terry claims that "a less feminine lot [he] never saw" merely because of their physical appearance (Gilman, *Herland* 72). The travelers express discontent over the fact that the women all have short hair, having been "convinced that long hair 'belongs' to a woman" (Gilman, *Herland* 30). Conditioned to expect frailty from females, the men express surprise at the strength of the women. Although the women are "athletic-light and

powerful," the men view it as a negative trait due to their lack of familiarity with any other type of woman (Gilman, *Herland* 22). The women are even able to easily overwhelm the visitors when they perceive them as a threat. By demonstrating how the women of Herland are physically superior to the three visitors, Gilman implies that the supposed physical inferiority of women is societally constructed.

As time progresses and the males assimilate into the society, Gilman describes them as being more feminine. The women are as intrigued to hear about the visitors' society as the males are to learn about Herland. As the men listen to the history of Herland, Van comments on how they "sat, at ease; all in similar dress; [their] hair, by now, as long as [the women's hair]" (Gilman, *Herland* 45). Ironically, Jeff's complaint that he wished the women had long hair because "they would look so much more feminine" is never mentioned again as the men begin to grow long hair (Gilman, *Herland* 30). Their facial hair is the only distinguishing factor between the travelers and the women of Herland. Although initially adamant on the differences between males and females, the men generally shed their disbelief over the appearances of the women and admit, "we did not want those beards" (Gilman, *Herland* 35). Interestingly enough, the men no longer cling to the notion of the necessity for physical differences between males and females, as demonstrated by their willingness to part with the last physical manifestation of their masculinity. Gilman's decision to describe the males as being physically feminine as they gain more knowledge implies a subversion of the idea of women as being intellectually inferior to males. Similarly, by demonstrating how easily a male can have qualities typically deemed "feminine", Gilman calls into question any assumptions about each gender.

Eventually, Van and Terry find that traits that are perceived as innate and those that are created differ significantly. In fact, Gilman implies that women have the innate ability to be strong and independent. This is reinforced by the ease by which women survive and adapt to life without any male presence. Through the mention of how the ancestors of the women of Herland overthrew the remaining oppressive males of their former society, Gilman establishes the possibility of there being inherent strength in women. As critics such as Bernice Hausman will argue, "implicit in Gilman's argument is the idea that women are superior to men," (Hausman 10). While superiority is suggested in the text, it would be difficult to generalize seeing as the women outnumber the men in Herland. Rather, women can safely be described as possessing the capability of being equal to men. As Van admitted after spending more time learning about the history of Herland, "'I found that much, very much, of what I had honestly supposed to be a physiological necessity was a psychological necessity… after my ideas of what was essential had changed, that my feelings changed also'" (Gilman, *Herland* 131). Van's conception of the innate qualities of females shifts, and he is able to recognize that the definition he once held is not the genuine definition of femininity. Masculinity does not exist as an entity separate from femininity. However, due to the creation of two extremes, masculinity and femininity are regarded as markedly different. As one of the women in Herland notices, "in a bi-sexual race the distinctive feature of each sex must be intensified" (Gilman, *Herland* 89). Masculinity is ultimately a fundamentally human quality that has been historically denied to women and consequently underdeveloped in them. On the other hand, femininity, while not overtly denied to males, has been stigmatized and consequently stunted. The separatist nature of Herland allows this to be challenged. As defined by radical feminist Marilyn Frye, a separatist society is:

> Distinct from men and from institutions, relationships, roles and activities that are male-defined, male-dominated, and operating for the benefit of males and the maintenance of male privilege—this separation being initiated or maintained, at will, by women. (*The Politics of Reality* 414)

By initiating and maintaining their own society, the females of Herland are allowed to prove that they are capable of possessing a variety of qualities as opposed to being limited to what is considered appropriately feminine.

## Section 3: Parthenogenesis and Parenthood: Practical Sexual Intercourse

While conceptions of gender are generally portrayed as best when approached with an open mind throughout the text, matters become more complicated with the introduction of sexuality and motherhood. Although Terry anticipates Herland to be a mecca of sensuality, it proves to be nothing of the sort. Sexuality is largely ignored in Herland, not out of necessity due to the absence of males, but largely because the women view the act as unnecessary. This lack of sexual consciousness and freedom from the institution of sexuality mirrors reflects the concept of "a- or anti-sexuality", which would later be made popular in the early seventies (Hogeland 58). Consequently, sexuality is established as a purely social construction as opposed to something that possesses biological necessity. In marked contrast to Van's initial belief that males would exist someplace within Herland for reproductive purposes, the women reproduce through parthenogenesis and have minimal interest in sexual activity for the purpose of recreation.

As demonstrated by Terry's rakish explanation for his desire to find Herland, it is not uncommon to sexualize and fetishize women. Physical intimacy is significant to the males for a multitude of reasons, including implied submissiveness on the part of the females. Terry's attempt to force Alima into sexual intercourse reveals how sex has implications of possession that have been rooted in societal expectations. These societal expectations stem from the influence of history and it's effects on how culture is formed. Terry's actions toward Alima are aggressive in intent, because of his refusal to respect her aversion to the act. The females of Herland consider sexual intercourse an act that merits much curiosity, yet does not compel them to engage in it. The reaction of the females of Herland to sexual intercourse makes it clear that it is not a crucial element of society. Ellador claims that it is "so against nature!" and asks, "'Do other animals-in your country [do that]?'" (Gilman, *Herland* 138). Her association of sex with animals reveals her inability to consider the act one that is crucial to human nature. Psychiatrist Richard von Krafft-Ebing saw sexuality as providing the potential "for sensual pleasure and sources of physical well-being…and higher feelings of satisfaction in perpetuating the single, perishable existence, by the transmission of mental and physical attributes to a new being" (1). However, he felt that sexuality in order to satisfy lust was unacceptably primitive. This idea of healthy women as being those who don't experience sexual desire is reflected in the perception of sexuality in the society of Herland. In the absence of necessity, sexuality is perceived as being animalistic and crude.

However, the absence of heterosexuality does not leave room for issues of alternative sexual preferences to be explored. Although Gilman depicts the women as rejecting the default of heterosexuality, there is no description of relationships between

females. This omission of sexuality greatly limits the women of Herland. The men find that "there was no sex-feeling to appeal to, or practically none…those who at times manifested it as atavistic exceptions were often…denied motherhood." (Gilman, *Herland* 92). Sexual desire is viewed as aberrant and undesirable in Herland. By denying those who experience sexual desire the opportunity to obtain the highest honor of that society, the citizens of Herland uniformly create a standard for behavior. This further affirms the impact culture and general society have on behavior and thought even in an idealized society such as Herland.

Although sexual intercourse is deemed irrelevant in Herland, interestingly enough, motherhood is considered the most important role in society. However, motherhood is somewhat redefined in this society since the upbringing of children is done communally, thus eliminating the idea of the family unit. As Betty Friedan, credited with the revival of the second wave of feminism, said with regard to motherhood, "chosen motherhood is the real liberation. The choice to have a child makes the whole experience of motherhood different," (*The Feminine Mystique* 164) However, motherhood in the text is deemed an important responsibility and an honor. Although the women of Herland advocate controlled reproduction in order to limit population size, they react with horror at the thought of "destroying the unborn" (Gilman, *Herland* 112). The men promptly disassociate their society from the notion, stating, "none of us wanted these women to think that our women, of whom we boasted so proudly, were in any way inferior to them" (Gilman, *Herland* 112) In doing so, it is implied that the thought of an abortion for any reason is something that is inferior. This seems to further imprison women in their roles as mothers, as the option is treated as barbaric. This mentality positions motherhood as a prestigious

task, consequently minimizing the impression that women genuinely have the choice to bear children. Furthermore, the fact that in the absence of any social impetus to become mothers these women still yearn to bear children appears to attribute motherhood to an innate desire.

Gilman herself wrote, "only as we live, think, feel, and work outside the home, do we become humanly developed, civilized, socialized" (Gilman, *Women and Economics* 222) Gilman's own personal life and struggles with her role as a wife and a mother[4] seem to contradict the reverence with which she describes motherhood in Herland. The emotional fulfillment and satisfaction derived from being a mother is described as being the most powerful force that drives the society. Her emphasis on the role of motherhood appears to reaffirm the necessity of women being mothers and consequently restricts females.

Because sexual intercourse is not necessary for the creation of offspring in this society, the "most intense and exquisite love and longing" served as enough for childbearing to occur (Gilman, *Herland* 140). Gilman recreates the idea of what constitutes motherhood, but still idealizes it. When juxtaposed with the society's view on sexual desire, this wish for motherhood is especially significant. The women of Herland are permitted desire only in terms of motherhood. Gilman's depiction of an intense yearning to change one's fundamental identity in order to become a mother further heightens the idea of motherhood as the ultimate goal of the women of Herland. To the women of Herland "motherhood was a lodestar, and that motherhood exalted above a mere personal function, looked forward to as the highest social service, as the sacrament of a lifetime" (Gilman,

[4] Gilman was subjected to a "rest cure" in order to cure her post-partum depression. She also wrote texts such as *The Home: Its Work and Influence* in which she suggested that women were oppressed by their home lives.

*Herland* 88). In motherhood, the women of Herland sacrifice their personal identity and individuality for the sake of society. However, this collective identity in a way provides the women with a means by which they can self-identify. Van recalls one such instance in which the self is explicitly defined by the role. He recalls one of the women explaining, "'You see, we are Mothers'" and describes it "as if in that she had said it all" (Gilman, *Herland* 66). This further establishes motherhood as the norm. Furthermore, the fact that certain women are prohibited from reproducing theoretically creates a divide in society that is not explicitly addressed in the text. Although infrequently mentioned in the text, this "othering" of women who are deemed unfit to be mothers appears to be unnecessary since their offspring are can supposedly be "cured" of any negative traits. Consequently, this exclusivity further promotes the perceived superiority of motherhood while simultaneously affirming the traits in society that are valued.

While the women can self-identify through motherhood, the roles of males in the process are notably absent. Although the males naturally assume that they are crucial to society due to their contribution to the creation of future generations, reproduction through parthenogenesis highlights the power and self-sufficiency of the females even in the absence of men. Although the idea of desire being a sufficient catalyst for birth is outlandish by the medical and social standards of Gilman's time period, its impact on the mentality of the women of Herland is striking. Similarly, through the suggestion of spontaneous reproduction Gilman suggests that in the absence of any sort of constricting force women can overcome a variety of obstacles on their own. As mentioned above, the restriction of those who can and cannot reproduce generates a distinct hierarchy of values

that is passed on from generation to generation. This selective reproduction further solidifies the qualities that the women appreciate.

However, towards the end of the text when the visitors learn more about the history and ways of the land, Herland is no longer considered an aberrant society. It is through logical discussions with the citizens of Herland that they come to recognize the limitations in their ways of thinking. The portrayal of this change in opinion as the logical result of rational discussion provides a bridge for readers to understand this radical way of thinking. The visitors' eventual acceptance of a way of life distinct from the one they know references the impact of culture on knowledge. In this alternative society, history greatly impacts social structure and expectations. The associations of "the word WOMAN called up all that big background, so far as they had gone in social development; and the word MAN meant to them only MALE-the sex" (Gilman, *Herland* 137). In the absence of any male structure for the past 2,000 years, the women of Herland are able to generate their own conception of self. Their history largely dictates the way gender, and consequently sexuality, is construed.

The "us" and "them" mentality prevalent in the text heightens the dichotomy between Herland and the average American societies from which the males were supposed to originate. The clear deviation from the norm provides a marked contrast to 20th century American society by which human behavior can be judged. However, by using the perspective of three relatable males, Gilman provides a lens through which Herland can be understood. Understanding that the readers at the time would be predominately privileged males, Gilman's work of fiction allows readers to explore issues of society and gender in an

unconventional and unthreatening manner. The acceptance of the genre as the product of imagination allows for radical ideas to be presented without facing as much opposition as a polemical text would. Seeing as the unconventional and innovative ideas addressed in the book are made more palatable by the safe disguise of adventure fiction, her writing contributes to the encouragement of alternative thought and promotes the eventual revamping of a value system.

# Chapter 2: Living in the Left: Singularity and Sexuality

Even in the absence of gender, issues of femininity and masculinity can be explored. As demonstrated in Ursula Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*, the perceived necessity of categorization complicates the understanding of the individual. One of a series known as the Hainish Cycle, *The Left Hand of Darkness* describes the journey of a man from a futuristic version of Earth as he visits new lands in an attempt to have them join a multi-world alliance. Although the text appears to emphasize the political and social negotiations, the inextricable relationship between society and sexuality allows for a deeper understanding of gender issues. The text focuses on events that occur on Planet Gethen, also known as "Winter", a society of individuals that are neither males nor females.[5] The Gethenians experience sexual desires once a month and spend a few days of the month as either a male or a female depending on hormonal dominance. The repercussions of a mainly genderless people extend to the social structure, and the lack of extremes marks the pervasive search for balance in the text. Gethen's complete lack of dualities causes the main narrator Genly Ai, and consequently the reader, to reflect upon the interplay between gender and humanity. Genly spends time in both Karhide and Orgoreyn, two separate areas of Gethen.[6] Genly's observations extend to the division between males and females that he recognizes as existing in his own society. As a member of "Terra" a planet that is representative of the future of Earth, Genly has perspectives on humanity that are familiar to the reader. However, the narrative inclusion of the perspective of Therem Estraven, who

[5] Although the people of Gethen are ambisexual, the male pronoun will be used to describe citizens in keeping with Le Guin's writing style. She thought that the inclusion of a created pronoun would unnecessarily complicate the text, a claim that she later amended.

[6] The citizens of Karhide and Orgoreyn are physiologically the same and for the purposes of this paper are referred to collectively as Gethenians.

is a native of the Gethenian kingdom of Karhide, adds a deeper level of understanding that also serves to unite the two seemingly disparate cultures. Sent to Winter in order to attempt to convince the people to join the Ekumen, a coalition of 83 other different worlds, Genly struggles to achieve universal harmony while still respecting the individual differences of each world. Genly and Estraven, an exiled politician, come to eventually understand each other as they bond in their mutual rejection from society and eventually convince the Karhide government to join the Ekumen.

"Tormer's Lay," a popular Gethenian poem, that begins "Light is the left hand of darkness and darkness the right hand of light" reveals the belief that opposites are required to create a complete being (Le Guin, *Left Hand of Darkness* 168). This is mirrored in the text, through the existence of the citizens of Gethen and the uniting of two seemingly disparate cultures in the unlikely friendship between Genly and Estraven. Dualities are not shunned in this society, unlike in Genly's society, but are viewed as complimentary to one another. This Taoist-inspired belief is a clear reflection of Le Guin's own viewpoints, as evidenced by her interview on the feminine and the Tao with fellow author Brenda Peterson. She believed in the complimentary relationship between the seeming opposite yin and the yang. As Le Guin observed, "It's become so deep in me, it's so much a part of my fiber and my work" (Le Guin). However, this viewpoint is complicated by the fact that the Gethen society is perceived as being balanced due to the lack of war and strife, which, as in *Herland*, is attributed to the elimination of gender divisions. As initially addressed in *Herland*, the idea of war is associated with the masculine aspects of the individual. Contrarily, malice and conflict are manifested in a subtler manner, as opposed to being completely eliminated, calling into question the validity of a balanced greater good.

Le Guin's own thoughts are manifested in the figure of the narrator, who is described as being an extension of herself: "If I could have said it nonmetaphorically, I would not have written all these words, this novel; and Genly Ai would never have sat down at my desk and used up my ink and typewriter ribbon" ("Language of the Night" 52). Further evidence of the genre of speculative fiction as a vehicle for a message, Le Guin's text explores a question that dominated the second-wave of feminism: how important is gender? A close examination of the text will break down qualities ascribed to each gender and analyze whether or not these ideas are legitimate. Beginning with an examination of sexuality, it is possible to see that the absence of strict gender roles frees the individual from limitations expected from certain genders. In studying the perspective of the narrator as an outsider to this society it is possible to further see the extent of the influence society has on gender expectations. This influence can be applied to both the Gethenian society and the society that would have been deemed typical in the 20th century. From there, in studying the contradictions within the text it is possible to study the limitations of the Gethenian society as perhaps unwittingly imposed by the author.

## Section 1: Sexuality and Society: First Comes Sex, Then Comes Society

The absence of clear gender identification proves to be as socially significant as its presence. Sexuality bears a significant impact on the construction of society within Winter. The success of Genly's mission on the planet of Gethen depends heavily on the response of the natives. Consequently, to best negotiate with them and promote the cause of the Ekumen, he must understand their sexual habits, a key aspect of their society. The difference between perception and experience is made clear by the Terran's realization that, "[Gethenian sexuality] fascinates us, but it rules the Gethenians, dominates them" (Le

Guin*, Left Hand of Darkness* 68). Physiologically, Gethenians are neither male nor female. However, this state changes during a brief period of time each month when hormonal dominance makes each individual a male or a female briefly in order for reproduction to occur. Each individual has the potential to both impregnate and conceive at some point during their lives. As observed by Ong Tot Oppong, one of the first researchers sent to Gethen to study the people:

> The sexual cycle averages 26 to 28 days (they tend to speak of it as 26 days, approximating it to the lunar cycle). For 21 or 22 days the individual is *somer*, sexually inactive, latent. On about the 18th day hormonal changes are initiated by the pituitary control, and on the 22nd or 23rd day the individual enters *kemmer*, estrus. In this first phase of kemmer (Karh. *secher*) he remains completely androgynous. Gender, and potency, is not attained in isolation. A Gethenian in first - phase kemmer, if kept along or with others not in kemmer, remains incapable of coitus. Yet the sexual impulse is tremendously strong in this phase, controlling the entire personality, subjecting all other drives to its imperative. When the individual finds a partner in kemmer, hormonal secretion is further stimulated (most importantly by touch - secretion? scent?) until in one partner either a male or female hormone dominance is established. (Le Guin, *Left Hand of Darkness* 67)

This complex yet temporary assuming of biological gender dictates all aspects of life in Gethen. Although sexuality within Gethen is limited, it is widely accepted. The period in which somer-kemmer occurs is considered a holiday of sorts for individuals from all levels of society. Genly himself notices that “the structure of their societies, the management of

their industry, agriculture, commerce, the size of their settlements, the subjects of their stories, everything is shaped to fit the somer-kemmer cycle" (Le Guin, *Left Hand of Darkness* 68). The existence of kemmerhouses, locations where individuals can find a sexual partner to mate with, reveals the importance of sexual reproduction in Gethian society. Sexuality becomes an equalizing force in the society, because no individual is ever turned away from a kemmerhouse. Sexuality lacks a stigma and is respected as an integral component of the self. The lack of a strict male/female dichotomy in Gethen is less narrowing and allows individuals to behave in any manner without being constrained by expectations of their sex. Genly notes that "there is no division of humanity into strong/weak halves" (Le Guin, *Left Hand of Darkness* 13).

Furthermore, the biological aspects of Gethenian reproduction are equally democratic, since one person can be a male for one period of kemmer, and then be identified as a female for the next. The development of an individual into either a male or a female appears to be arbitrary and unpredictable. Thus, with the equal potential of each individual to assume each sexual identity, no distinction between the two is made. Consequently, there can presumably be no gender discrimination since each individual has the opportunity to experience each gender. As seen earlier in *Herland*, the creation of the fictional world of Gethen further allows the reader to challenge assumptions about gender. Historically, women in the type of society the reader would deem typical or familiar have been relegated to the task of motherhood with the justification of a presumed biological basis. The elimination of this perceived exclusivity theoretically allows for a new form of self-identification beyond what has been expected by society, allowing a more comprehensive development of the public and the private aspects of each individual.

Furthermore, sexual desire become the driving force of the being, and alters the individual's personality and behaviors. Because each individual can be either male or female, sexuality is the universally driving force of the individual and Gethenian society as a whole. Sexuality is of equal importance to each individual, making it a pillar of the society.

For example, due to a lack of gender expectations, the method of gaining social status differs from the way in which individuals of the 20th century would be accustomed. Aggression is depicted as a means by which individuals can commonly express themselves. Furthermore, aggression is attributed to the division of equality between males and females, a concept believed to have been eliminated in Gethen along with gender separation. As a result of the ambisexual nature of the Gethenians, rape, exploitation and the Oedipus complex are familiar to narrator Genly Ai but nonexistent in Gethen. Genly's acknowledgement that gender differences and expectations guide much of typical society does not seem to apply in Gethen. At the heart of social interactions in Gethen is Shifrethgor, a complex verbal code. Shifrethgor allows individuals to either resolve issues or demonstrate social superiority over one another through behavior and speech. Although sexuality greatly impacts Gethenian society, the division into two gendered opposites is irrelevant to the individual and Gethenian society as a whole. In a sense, sexuality is separated from any explicit form of gender by being universal.

## Section 2: Perspective and Perception: The Role of the Narrator

As seen in Gilman's *Herland*, the perspective of the narrator is crucial to the framing of the novel. As a female author adopting the tone of a male narrator, Le Guin appears to be perpetuating the dominance of the male voice in literature. However, it could be argued that the male voice would appeal to a broader range of readers, thus better promoting the

meaning behind the text and providing the potential for more introspective thought. She explicitly states that she chose a male narrator because she thought the male readers would "loathe the book, would be unsettled and unnerved by it...[she] thought it would be easier for them if they had a man—and a rather stupid and bigoted man actually—to work with and sort of be changed" (Bittner 25). In addition, by choosing a male as a protagonist, Le Guin actually marginalizes the male experience by thrusting Genly into a role in which he is not the model example of the norm. Genly Ai's full name, potentially a reference to his self-absorbed focus "I", eventually represents the "eye" as he becomes more open to the new culture and enlightened. Genly, like the males of *Herland*, is considered an outsider by the society that he visits. The narrator is as much an alien to this strange world as the Gethenian culture is to him. This provides a shift in perspective, seeing as the typically male point of view is no longer commonly accepted. Not only does Le Guin bring questions of the necessity of gender identification to the forefront of the reader's mind, but she also calls into question the prevalence of male dominance. Genly comes to the planet of Winter to convince the citizens to join an alliance advocating "the augmentation of the complexity and intensity of the field of intelligent life. The enrichment of harmony and the greater glory of God" (Le Guin*, Left Hand of Darkness* 25). However, his own thoughts concerning the citizens of Gethen are less open to cultural enrichment. The eventual reconciliation of the conflict between mission and mentality provides the reader with an opportunity to grow alongside the narrator.

Genly's perceptions of the Gethenians reflect the concept of "otherness" as described by Simone de Beauvoir. By mentally viewing the citizens as objects of study, Genly treats them as "others" that are separate from his own values and understandings. Due to Genly's

position as a representative from Terra, his observations are projected as neutral yet are still colored by his own conceptions of socio-sexual norms. Genly's resistance to the idea of the people of Gethen is undoubtedly influenced by the presumed factual information on Winter provided by female Ong Tot Oppong. The inclusion of this perspective marks one of the few inclusions of an overtly female presence. A copy of the field notes created by such a researcher says, "It seems likely that they were an experiment…will anything else explain Gethenian sexual physiology? Accident, possible; natural selection, hardly. Their ambisexuality has little to no adaptive value" (Le Guin, *Left Hand of Darkness* 65). The relegation of the Gethenians to a subcategory of humans reveals a disdain for them. This proves to be especially interesting considering the fact that Ong Tot Oppong is a female observing the Gethenians. The creation of a sense of "otherness" based on physiology is reminiscent of the polarization between males and females that was supposedly rooted in physical differences. Furthermore, her immediate assumption that their sexual physiology is not beneficial marks a preference for what Genly assumes to be the norm, where as in actuality the Gethenians experience many benefits from their unique state. As mentioned above, Gethenians possess a maximized reproductive success. By deciding to present overtly biased information in the form of facts, Le Guin suggests a reevaluation of the established norm.

Furthermore, Genly's expectations of each gender cause him to project typically feminine or masculine characteristics on the members of Gethen although they are androgynous. He is unable to separate identity and behavior from femininity or masculinity. As he attempts to understand Gethen culture, he realizes that his "efforts took the form of self-consciously seeing a Gethenian first as a man, then as a woman, forcing

[Estraven] into those categories so irrelevant to his nature and so essential to mine" (Le Guin, *Left Hand of Darkness* 9). His ability to understand is inextricably linked to categorization, although his idea of categorization lacks the equality that Le Guin espouses. Furthermore, his expectations affect his treatment of Estraven. His discomfiture with the unknown causes him to be unable to connect with Estraven on a fundamental level. He claims that "Estraven's performance had been womanly, all charm and tact and lack of substance, specious and adroit" (Le Guin, *Left Hand of Darkness* 9). Genly's categorization not only reveals the pervasive necessity for separations, but also reveals his perceived weakness of females. Furthermore, this blinds him from realizing that Estraven's intentions are genuine. The inclusion of Estraven's perspective allows the reader to see Genly's folly in disparaging Estraven for possessing traits he considers unnatural for a male, which is how he identifies Estraven. Similarly, any action of the King of Karhide that Genly doesn't like is described with reference to femininity. The King's laugh is "shrilly like an angry old woman" and he is "sullen as an old she-otter" (Le Guin, *Left Hand of Darkness* 23). Although referred to as a male by the narrator, it is interesting to see that the king is deliberately referred to in association with the female pronoun when engaging in negatively perceived behavior as opposed to any male comparison. Prior to that the use of the male pronoun dominates descriptions of his behavior. Genly's attitude towards Estraven, the King, and Gethenians as a whole reveals that when individuals are categorized into distinct groups, a particular type of individual must be established or viewed as being dominant to the other.

This change is shocking to Genly, as his conceptions of human desires are formed by gender. Ong Tot Oppong reports, "A man wants his virility regarded. A woman wants her femininity appreciated... [in Gethen] one is respected and judged only as a human being. It

is an appalling experience" (Le Guin, *Left Hand of Darkness* 13). In Winter each individual can be praised for both his or her virility and femininity, as opposed to being forced to behave in a certain manner. Although he admits that the absence of familiar roles allows for a more cohesive analysis of the individual, he finds this change unappealing. The fact that a more equitable arrangement is shocking to Ong Tot Oppong emphasizes the discomfort caused by a reevaluation of established norms. The immersion in a culture of where otherness is the norm causes Genly to reevaluate his own society. As he explains to the Estraven:

> I suppose the most important thing, the heaviest single factor in one's life, is whether one's born male or female. In most societies it determines one's expectations, activities, outlook, ethics, manners—almost everything. Vocabulary. Semiotic usages. Clothing. Even food. Women... women tend to eat less... It's extremely hard to separate the innate differences from the learned ones. Even where women participate equally with men in the society, they still after all do all the childbearing, and so most of the child rearing. (Le Guin, *Left Hand of Darkness* 168)

His role as an outsider also provides cause for introspection and analysis of the society of Terra. By answering the questions of the Gethen natives, Genly comes to realize that where gender divisions exist, "It's extremely hard to separate the innate differences from the learned ones" (Le Guin, *Left Hand of Darkness* 168). Genly's own musings as the narrator of the text inspire similar thought in the reader. Through repeated explanations of culture, Le Guin brings to the forefront of consciousness aspects of society that may be generalized or

blindly accepted as pure fact. Furthermore, when Genly is asked to define what a woman is, he is unable to do so. Although he possesses several expectations of what a female should be, he cannot convey this information clearly to the people of Gethen. Consequently, Le Guin acknowledges the ambiguous nature of what constitutes gender identification.

Although Genly's status as an outsider causes him to view Gethenians as aberrant, the Gethenians possess the same opinion of Genly. They view his permanent state of sexual self-identification as a male with distaste. When told that all of the individuals living on Terra are permanently either male or female, the leader of Karhide refers to them as "a society of perverts" (Le Guin, *Left Hand of Darkness* 26). The perspective of the leader of Karhide calls into question the reason behind polarized differences between males and females, since the society views sexual identification as fluctuating. Furthermore, his rejection of Genly on the basis of perceived strangeness shows how the familiar will always be preferred and accepted. This reversal of norms allows readers to view society from another perspective. As further testament to the significance of societally generated norms, Genly begins to view his own peers as strangers after spending an extended amount of time in Gethen. He gradually has become accustomed to the people of Winter, thus changing his perception of what the norm is. When he sees men and women from Earth after convincing the people of Gethen to join the Ekumen, he describes his fellow Terrans as "a troupe of great, strange animals, of two different species," a marked difference from the idealized way he portrayed them to the Gethenians (Le Guin, *Left Hand of Darkness* 212). After a lack of exposure to the Terrans for an extended period of time, Genly's perception of what is usual has been noticeably altered. Le Guin describes how the familiar breeds the norm, which can be often limiting.

## Section 3: Conflict and Contradictions in Gethenian Culture

Le Guin claims, "science fiction is not prescriptive; it is descriptive" (*Left Hand of Darkness* 1). However, the representation of certain components of *The Left Hand of Darkness* appears to advocate a certain behavior or form of action. Consequently, it is important to analyze the aspects of the text that conflict with the harmonious implementation of dualities as being complimentary to one another in order to get a deeper understanding of the text. Ultimately, the lack of established superiority of either Terran society to Gethen society or vice versa reveals the imperfections of culture as opposed to any inherent gender issues. Le Guin appears to negate the supremacy of a gender-free society due to the necessary collaborative effort between Genly and Estraven. The fact that Gethenian society exiled Estraven and that the King of Karhide doesn't trust the Ekumen out of fear of lessening his own power suggests that the elimination will not remove several of the issues that plague society. As the story proceeds, it is revealed that the planet of Winter is plagued by several social ills that were perceived as being eliminated. In direct opposition to the previously mentioned claim that war cannot exist in the absence of gender roles, the King of Karhide's sibling is shown to influence the King to the point where Karhide is on the verge of wars due to national aggression. While this may call into question the true worth of a lack of gender divisions, it also suggests that some qualities are innate in individuals regardless of gender identification. Although presented as having a great impact on the Gethenian way of life, gender neutrality has limits to the extent that it changes Gethenian society. While Le Guin calls into question established gender norms, there is the suggestion that a lack of gender identification may not alter society in a clearly positive manner. In keeping with Le Guin's desire to analyze humanity as opposed to any

explicit sort of gender, it can be seen that any sort of otherness will inevitably encounter opposition.

Although the eventual bonding between Estraven and Genly appears to support the Taoist notion of opposites being complementary, in actuality Estraven and Genly cannot be considered opposites. This stems from the difficulty of identifying Estraven. As neither a male nor a female, Estraven cannot be directly juxtaposed with Genly, because Genly identifies himself as distinctly male. Similarly, although Genly thinks of Estraven as "both and one," in actuality Estraven is more of "one" than he is both according to Gethen standards (Le Guin, *Left Hand of Darkness* 177). His duality arguably makes him separate from the polarized ends as opposed to the middle ground between the two. "In a sense, women are more alien to me than you are. With you I share one sex, anyhow," remarks Estraven (Le Guin, *Left Hand of Darkness* 169). As a Gethenian Estraven doesn't actually quite self identify as both male and female. It is Genly that categorizes him as both. Estraven is neither female nor male as opposed to being a synthesis of both, making it difficult to fairly compare him to Terran standards of identification.

Although acceptance appears to be the root of the emotional connection between Genly and Estraven, I argue that the friendship stemmed from necessity for survival as opposed to a genuine acceptance of one other. As a result of their mutual dependence, Genly and Estraven are forced to put their differences aside. Genly describes their bond as "a friendship so much needed by us both in our exile, and already so well proved in the days and nights of our better journey, that it might as well be called, now as later, love" (Le Guin, *Left Hand of Darkness* 178). Genly is aware that the friendship was the consequence of

necessity, suggesting that any growth he may have been perceived as having done is disingenuous. The manner in which he defines their relationship as a form of love makes their connection seem like more of an afterthought rather than a life-altering experience. Consequently, their relationship can be seen as the catalyst to understanding as opposed to understanding breeding a relationship. Arguably, this weakens the significance of Genly's acceptance of Estraven. Furthermore, Genly's understanding of Estraven is based on a summation of Estraven's qualities as opposed to an appreciation of him as a whole being. Consequently, they are engaged in the less powerful of the two modes of understanding, making their relationship less about the acceptance of different gendered culture than it is about the dependence on a single individual. Although Genly's adventures speak to a personal change within a politically charged climate, his success in convincing the Gethenians to join the Ekumen does not necessarily stem from a greater acceptance of the Gethenians as a whole. Genly's personal growth is further questioned by his "othering" of the Terrans he sees again. He sees a Gethenian physician's face as "not a man's face and not a woman's, a human fact…familiar, right" (Le Guin, *Left Hand of Darkness* 212). Genly's perceived acceptance of the Gethenians is truly described as being the result of familiarity, or else he would have been able to accept the Terrans as equal to the Gethenians. Rather than speaking to Genly's personal growth and acceptance of differences, Le Guin appears to perpetuate the notion that the familiar will always seem right.

Despite her attempts to portray Gethenians as ambisexual, diction actively prevents the citizens from being viewed as anything but primarily male. The prevalent use of the male pronoun throughout the text emphasizes masculinity and detracts from the perception that the people of Gethen are gender neutral. Critics, such as Alexei Panshin,

have denounced the text for the use of the masculine pronoun. Although Le Guin originally felt that "the masculine pronoun…is less defined, less specific" in actuality readers "continually forget that the Karhider is not a man, but a manwoman" (Le Guin, *Left Hand of Darkness* 69). The default use of the male pronoun to describe individuals such as King Argaven of Karhide primes the reader to consistently view the citizens through the lens of masculinity. When Genly refers to the King of Argaven by saying, "my lord," the relationship between masculinity and power appears to be reestablished (Le Guin, *Left Hand of Darkness* 28). Ong Tot Oppong, a female, explicitly refers to the Gethenians as males too, further complicating the ability for the reader to identify the Gethenians as anything but men. However, from this disconnect stems yet another opportunity to study the way society has conditioned individuals to perceive genders.

Similarly, although Le Guin sought to create a world where gender and sexuality were open and free, her characters are locked into heterosexuality. The presumption that during somer-kemmer one partner must possess female genitalia and the other must possess a male physiology reinforces the notion of purely male-female relationships. Le Guin establishes this as the norm by presenting the body as being "triggered by [the partner's] change" (Le Guin, *Left Hand of Darkness* 67). Even in the absence of socially constructed gender roles, Le Guin's characters and their sexuality are trapped by biology. Similarly, as Estraven is in kemmer next to Genly, Genly states that "for [Genly and Estraven] to meet sexually would be for [them] to meet once more as aliens" (Le Guin, *Left Hand of Darkness* 178). Le Guin not only uses homosexuality to reestablish the difference between the two but in doing so also appears to espouse a strictly heterosexual form of sexuality.

*The Left Hand of Darkness* appears to eliminate the viewpoint of childrearing as being a dominant activity for only females due to the potential for all individuals to be both a father and a mother. However, the portrayal of Gethenians as valuing a child "of their flesh" more than those that they have fathered appears to reinforce the limited notion of motherhood as biologically imperative to women (Le Guin, *Left Hand of Darkness* 91). The King is obsessed with having a child from his own body at the risk of his health despite already being the father to seven children. The inclusion of this desire does not possess significance for the progression of the story, yet helps delineate the values of the Gethenian society. In a similar emphasis on the importance of actually carrying and bearing children, Estraven is portrayed as being closer to the child that he birthed. In his exile Estraven continues to stay in contact with that child with little mention of the other two that he fathered.

Furthermore, while there is mention of children, there is a lack of emphasis on actual childrearing or any other private interactions among individuals. Although the construction of this imagined society provides room for a thorough examination of the impact of a genderless people, the novel is at times criticized for falling short on its exploration of the private implications of such an existence. Le Guin admits that her conception of Estraven as an individual fails in part because she finds that "one does not see Estraven as a mother, with his children, in any role in which we automatically perceive as "female": and therefore, we tend to see him as a man" (*Dancing at the Edge* 14). The portrayal of Estraven as predominantly a politician has affected the manner in which people perceive him as a character. However, critics, such as Stanislaw Lem, who claim that "the male element has remained victorious over the female," do so largely due to the

pervasive belief that a depiction of the political makes the text more masculine than feminine (24). Critics such as Lem who would argue that the inclusion of government and people who are involved in politics in the text leads to the neglect of femininity fail to consider the possibility of femininity in politics. The assumption that the text is masculine stems in part from the preconceived notions of what critics deem feminine and masculine. As shown by the response of critics to *The Left Hand of Darkness*, the background of the reader is inextricable from the interpretation of the text. Response to Le Guin's text consequently provides further reflection on what constitutes sexual identity.

In keeping with the general style of speculative fiction, the premise behind the text calls for a certain degree of suspension of disbelief. However, the lack of complete synchronicity permits the reader of *The Left Hand of Darkness* to experience an alternate environment in a relatively familiar manner. Le Guin's desire to eliminate gender ultimately allows the reader "to find out what was left. Whatever was left would be, presumably, simply human. It would define the area that is shared by men and women alike" (Le Guin, *Dancing at the Edge* 9). Likewise, *Herland* is able to isolate aspects of humanity through a community of only women. In this sense, Le Guin is able to raise important issues of gender and its relationship to society and the individual.

# Chapter 3: Handling the Handmaid's Tale: an Examination of Gender Oppression

In opposition to Gilman's *Herland*, the society created by Margaret Atwood in *The Handmaid's Tale* is distinctly dystopian. Although both works effectively serve as critiques of established gender roles, Atwood's text hyperbolizes existing aspects of society in order to caution against complacency whereas Gilman provides an alternative, presumably superior, existence. Having lived during the Holocaust and World War II, Atwood was no stranger to the destruction and ills of society. Although women's rights had experienced advances from the 1920s through the 1970s, towards the 1980s some began to view this progress as direct opposition to important values[7] (Jadwin, "Cultural and Historical Context" 24). The rise of the Moral Majority was considered a threat to the development of women's rights at the time. Atwood's experiences in Afghanistan in 1978 and her fear of the rise of fundamentalist theocratic movements and totalitarianism heightened her desire to bring awareness to those who expressed disbelief at the possibility of such events occurring in the United States (Jadwin ,"Cultural and Historical Context" 24). The events that Atwood writes about in the text have already occurred in the real world, a testament to her desire to warn the reader of the dangers that exist in current society. By utilizing authentic historical events and magnifying them, Atwood highlights chilling aspects of life. As Atwood said, "history proves that what we have been in the past we could be again" (Atwood "Note to the Reader" 2).

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[7] The Equal Rights Amendment which stated, "*equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex"* and would have established gender equality was rejected in 1979. Some viewed the feminist movement as being in direct opposition with Christian and family values.

Set in the Republic of Gilead, a future version of Cambridge, Massachusetts, the text explores the life and livelihood of protagonist Offred[8]. After the institution of the new government Offred was separated from her husband and child and given a new role in society. As a "first generation" woman who has experienced life before, during, and after the military uprising that led to the formation of the Republic of Gilead, Offred provides astute observations on this new way of life. The text predominantly takes the form of Offred's recorded diary entries, but it is revealed later in the text that these events have already occurred in the past and are being analyzed by academics in the distant future. The military coup that led to the generation of the Republic Gilead sought to transform society into a place of safety, morality, and virtue. In the process, the Gileadeans stripped the citizens of several rights and liberties. The change resulted in the creation of a distinct hierarchy in society, with women subordinate to men. However, within this structure exists another system of categorization that separates women according to their value in society. Women are categorized as Wives, Daughters, Handmaids, Aunts, Marthas, Econowives, Unwomen, or Jezebels. Due to a decrease in population attributed to declining fertility, Offred works as a Handmaid to a Commander, a ranked individual in this new society, and his wife Serena Joy. Her role as a handmaid means that she acts as both a sexual and birthing surrogate for them. The text contains her remembrances of the past and her experiences in this new society. Offred's personal narrative provides a framework by which issues of gender oppression can be further explored. Parallel to the popular second-wave feminist slogan, in *The Handmaid's Tale*, "the personal is political."

[8] Offred is a moniker given to her post-uprising. Her birth name is never revealed.

## Section 1: False Freedoms: Lives without Liberty

The regime was able to overthrow the existing government and create Gilead under the guise of providing protection and a "return to traditional values" (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 47). In this sense, Atwood calls into question the relationship between liberation and safety. This false justification allows the reader to approach the various forms and guises that female oppression can take. However, despite the dystopian nature of Gilead, the past is not glorified as being an idyllic time. Offred's role as a liminal Gileadean, caught between the new government and her memories of the old society cause her to reflect upon the differences between the two societies. Her name, Offred, a synthesis of the word "of" and "Fred", quite literally reflects the stripping of her identity. As a patronymic, her identity is created on the basis of the man who owns her. Keeping with her desire to magnify aspects of conventional society, certain Western names still reflect this patronymic quality.

She recalls the passive, unapparent ways that women experienced oppression in the pre-Gilead society.

> "Women were not protected then. I remember the rules, rules that were never spelled out but that every woman knew: Don't open your door to a stranger…don't stop on the road to help a motorist…keep the locks on and keep going. If anyone whistles, don't turn to look." (Atwood*, The Handmaid's Tale* 33)

Although the women possessed financial freedoms and other liberties denied to them in Gilead, the women were unable to be completely equal in a society where danger from males lurked around every corner. Despite this perceived threat, Offred admits, "I think

about laundromats. What I wore to them, what I put into them…I think about having such control" (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 33). The inclusion of nostalgia even in the absence of safety allows Atwood to criticize the flaws in both Gilead and pre-Gileadean society. In highlighting the flaws in both societies, Atwood calls attention to the various forms of oppression that can exist.

However, on the other end of the extreme, the women sacrifice their freedoms for the illusion of protection. The solutions proposed by the new Gileadean society both critique existing problems, and breed new issues. In the new society, women are supposed to be valued, treasured, and protected from the dangers of society. However, women are denied access to their bank accounts and are financially dependent on the males of the household. As critic Chinmoy Banerjee said, "all civil liberties have been abolished…surveillance, torture, deportation, and public and secret executions [have] been established" ("Alice in Disneyland" 156). Violence has been replaced by another form of danger, one that is institutionalized. In the process of the turnover, Offred muses upon the changes in her marriage when she says, "we are not each other's, anymore. Instead, I am his" (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 87). Consequently, it is shown that in Gilead, identity is exchanged for protection. Her admission of the danger of the past combined with an air of wistfulness further deepens the question of whether freedom or safety should take precedent, and whether or not these things are mutually exclusive.

The Aunts justify the changes and herald them as being beneficial, claiming, "there is more than one kind of freedom...Freedom to and freedom from. In the days of anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are being given freedom from. Don't underrate it" (Atwood, *The*

*Handmaid's Tale* 33). The Aunts presume that the freedoms are interchangeable, and both equally appealing. In the inclusion of theses different forms of freedom, Atwood gives the chance for readers to question whether or not they should be binary.

However, any safety promised by the government is revealed as being false. Women face distrust and are still the victims of violence, seeing as Offred remembers when a woman was shot while she "was fumbling in her robe, for her pass, and they thought she was hunting for a bomb. They thought she was a man in disguise. There have been such incidents" (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 29). Although Aunt Lydia would claim that pre-Gilead life suffered because "[it was] a society dying of too much choice," the people in Gilead are literally dying due to their lack of choices (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 34). Supposedly by outlawing smut and pornography and limiting sexual relationships the government of Gilead is protecting the women from being taken advantage of by males. However, in their attempts to desexualize women, they do the opposite. By objectifying and quite literally commodifying the women they subject women to a new form of sexual exploitation. However discreetly, the male guards assigned to the handmaids often leer at their bodies. Furthermore, the doctors that oversee the handmaidens' checkups proposition them under the guise of helping them. Given their new, subordinate positions in society the women find it difficult to refuse or even respond. Similarly, Offred reflects upon a time when her daughter was almost kidnapped in a supermarket. Ironically, in the new society of Gilead the taking of children is actively condoned with the establishment of handmaidens.

While more obscured, several of the dangers the women of Gilead faced exist in this society and they have much less personal freedom. The commentary on these opposing freedoms provides deeper thought into the condition of liberty and safety. By juxtaposing Offred's standard of living in Gilead with her former lifestyle in the United States, Atwood plays with the idea of what truly constitutes freedom of the self. In doing so, she is able to address the multiple ways femininity can be oppressed.

## Section 2: Obscuring the Body and the Truth: Feminine Physicality and Sexuality in the Handmaid's Tale

Atwood's text is extremely rooted in the physical. The body is quite literally a commodity, since women are hired for their fertility. Consequently, the body is stigmatized in order to keep the women in submission. As a result, the handmaids, arguably the most sexualized women of Gilead, are forced to keep their bodies covered from head to toe by red cloth and "white wings…to keep [them] from seeing, but also from being seen" (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 14). The scarlet covering combined with the white wings provide a striking visual reflection of how the handmaids are viewed by society. While the garments are intended to obscure, the vibrant redness and the hyper sexuality it connotes distinguishes them from those of the others. In this sense, women are simultaneously visually isolated and suppressed. The red cloth represents the blood of the womb and the handmaid's responsibility of fertility. The habits draw attention to the handmaid's sexuality while attempting to desexualize them. The false purity afforded to them by the full body coverage and white wings obscures their identities and their ability to participate in

society. Atwood's description of their clothing highlights the dual nature of sexuality in Gilead. While it is needed, it is also paradoxically shamed and reduced.

Intriguingly, despite the mixed messages from society Offred's self-identity is tied to her body and she objectifies herself to a certain degree. Prior to being a handmaid she admits that she "used to think of [her] body as an instrument, of pleasure, or a means of transportation, or an implement for the accomplishment of [her] will" (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 88). However, while Offred's objectification of herself is symbolic of her ownership over her being, her body eventually becomes the possession of society. She distances herself from her body, not looking at it when she cleans herself, and noticing her clothing in the mirror as opposed to paying attention to her actual self. Atwood demonstrates how Offred begins to identify with herself in the same way the men of society are expected to see her. The majority of text in which she describes herself she focuses on the mandatory uniform of the handmaids, making it clear that she has lost her own sense of self in her immersion in this new society.

In spite of all of the restrictions placed on her, Offred is in a sense able to liberate herself through her body. She exerts minor control over guardsmen even with her fully covered body. "I move my hips a little…I enjoy the power; power of a dog bone, passive but there," she says as she teases the young guards (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 31). She manipulates the controls the government has set on sexuality and her image in order to gain a small degree of power. Although this act ultimately does not improve her status, this small display of rebellion gives her comfort. Her sexual affair with Nick, a low level employee within the Commander's home, marks her attempt to liberate herself sexually.

She differentiates this sexual affair from the ritualized copulation with the Commander by describing the act in more tender terms. In a society where reproduction has been mechanized, affection has become a rarity, and consequently is valued. As a result, her sexual affair with Nick is deemed different from the one she has with the Commander. By engaging in this illicit affair, Offred is able to gain a degree of control over her own body. However, the extent to which this is genuine liberation is called into question by the fact that Serena Joy originally orchestrated their interactions in an attempt to gain a child.

Sexuality in Gilead is stigmatized and made perverted. The ceremonial act of reproduction is desexualized and mechanical. The women who engage in sexual activity for pleasure are shunned and considered Jezebels. While the men are supposed to be denied pleasure too, they are technically allowed to go to the brothels where the Jezebels work. These sanctioned clubs establish the double standard of sexuality that exists between men and women even in the purported absence of sexuality.

In an interview Atwood commented on the role of reproduction in current society, saying, “I’d followed events in Romania, where women were forced by the Ceausescu regime to have babies, and also in China, where they were forced not to” (Atwood, Interview). Her observations of her own society are translated to the text too, seeing as women in Gilead and their worth are inextricably linked to their fertility. This desire for offspring dominates the formation of society, as the women are socially categorized by their ability to reproduce. Despite fertility being a valued resource in Gilead, the women are held captive by their ability to reproduce.

The relationship between reproduction and power is complex. Despite the fact that Gilead is portrayed as being highly advanced in terms of technology, reproduction is the one factor that the government cannot directly control. As the result of being an uncontrollable necessity, reproduction is both valued and disrespected. While the handmaids are presumably pampered and live comfortable lifestyles, they lack genuine power. Their wombs enslave them, as the limited amount of freedom that they have is linked directly to their abilities to reproduce. Furthermore, survival is directly linked to fertility. As Offred comments when she sees a pregnant handmaid, "she's a flag on a hilltop, showing us what can still be done: we too can be saved" (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 35). Offred's overt mention of being saved exposes the limitations of females within Gilead. Should the handmaid's fail to reproduce they face exile from society and other physical hardships. Consequently, the self is heavily defined by the body in Gilead. As Offred fails to reproduce again, she internalizes the problem and states, "I have failed once again to fulfill the expectations of others, which have become my own" (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 164) The bodily expectations of society have such a deep impact on her that she begins to define herself by her ability to meet the demands of Gileadean society. Freedom comes from surrendering the body and the womb to society.

The Handmaids are objectified by their sexuality. The clinical approach to reproduction consequently eliminates any humanity or identity from the process. In the Ceremony that is intended to lead to the creation of a child, Offred is reduced to nothing more than a womb.

> "My red skirt is hitched up to my waist, though no higher. Below it the Commander is fucking. What he is fucking is the lower part of my body. I do not say making love, because this is not what he's doing. Copulating too would be inaccurate, because it would imply two people and only one is involved." (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 110)

There is a complex interplay between the physically and symbolically exposed and covered elements. Her body is still symbolically obscured during this process. The only part of Offred that is actually exposed is the portion that is considered useful to the Commander and Serena Joy. Although Offred is to a certain extent physically exposed, the Commander and Serena Joy are not exposed to her identity as an individual. The Ceremony is decidedly one sided, as Offred lacks any real identity throughout the process. In this way, Atwood creates a form of dichotomy between the genuine self and the physical self.

The Wives that inherit the children after they are born also find their self-worth linked to the idea of parenthood. Although the women who take control of the child after it is born are not actively involved in the birthing process, they too gain a modicum of prestige and power from the state of motherhood. During the birthing process the Wives are pampered as much as, if not more than, the pregnant handmaid. The rarity of childbirth makes children a commodity that demonstrates power and status. The children are wanted at various levels of society, making it clear that a human can be considered a possession.

The Gileadean society's refusal to consider the possibility that the males may be sterile places an unfair reproductive burden on the females, as they face expulsion from society if they are deemed incapable of reproduction. The males merely receive another

handmaid in order to attempt reproduction yet again. The vast difference between the male experience and the female experience in terms of reproduction further shows how the women are trapped by their ability to reproduce. The handmaids have to fear for their lives and pray to have a child that they cannot keep in order to spare themselves. Fertility is a false hope in this society, as the only options are death and an extremely limited life. The women are truly made disposable once their bodies are no longer seen as fertile and useful.

## Section 3: Fighting Females: Feminist Thought and Frictions

As much as Gileadean society claims to promote safety and collective happiness, the structure of society undermines any real possibility of any communal happiness. Atwood questions extreme conservatism and also inspires thought into some of the thoughts espoused by feminists and liberals throughout *The Handmaid's Tale*. Her text includes the ideologies behind a wide range of historical feminist movements. Tensions exist between the different women in Gilead regardless of position in society. In response to the rise of the concept of separatist feminism, Atwood calls into question the feminist belief that women prefer each other's company above all. While at face value the men in Gilead possess all of the power, in actuality, the women are the ones who make the society truly unpleasant for one another. The divisive actions between women are the root of the disparity in power in Gilead, as they are incapable and unwilling to unite with one another. At the implementation of the new government, the women failed to unite and each attempted to survive in her own way. Offred muses upon her generation's complacency and how in passivity they allowed the implementation of this oppressive rule this to occur. The women of Gilead uphold the power of patriarchy through their actions to one another.

Offred reflects upon a discussion she had with her husband prior to the upheaval in which they discuss the meaning of the word fraternize and how it "means to behave like a brother…there was no corresponding word that meant to behave like a sister" (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 18). This conversation appears to be a reflection of the lifestyle in Gilead. At all levels of society, the complicity of the women upholds the patriarchy in the society.

This is most explicitly seen in the character of Aunt Lydia. The position of an Aunt within the society is intended to indoctrinate and reeducate the women to the ways of Gilead. Ironically, these women possess none of the matronly qualities that the term "aunt" connotes. The Aunts even use electric cattle prods to keep the handmaid's obedient and compliant, revealing that violence from women to other women is acceptable in this society. These women pervasively represent the government and work to actively suppress any individual thoughts that may upset the established hierarchy in the society. It is never made clear as to whether the majority of the aunts are acting out of self-preservation or out of genuine agreement with this new ideology. Critics such as Fiona Tolan have often attributed Atwood's inclusion of such a figure to her desire to critique the ideas of early fundamentalist Christians and those who sought to preserve the purity of femininity (*Feminism and Fiction* 153). As an active participant in the reeducation of the women, the Aunts repeat governmental slogans that stay in the minds of even the most skeptical women. They host Testifyings in which all of the women verbally abuse one another for past occurrences. "Her fault, her fault, her fault" the women are led to collectively chant when asked who is to blame for the gang rape of Janine, a fellow

handmaid (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 86). An active division amongst the females is encouraged and promoted. The Aunts reinforce the same authority that suppresses them.

Rita, a Martha in the Commander's household, further exemplifies the tension amongst women of different classes. As a Martha she is relegated to doing housework. She is unsympathetic to Offred's situation and views her work as immoral, righteously claiming that "she wouldn't debase herself like that" (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 16). Her disdain for handmaids further isolates Offred and reveals the mental stigma of sexuality that Rita holds. To her, any form of sexual behavior, including one imposed by society, is no better than prostitution. The description of women that judge other women proves to be directly related to the unpleasant nature of society. Offred muses on how much more pleasant life would be with some sort of genuine company or friendship. However, her position in society and the intolerance of the other females makes it impossible for her to achieve this small comfort.

Resentment and hatred exist amongst the handmaids themselves. A pregnant woman seen at the marketplace needs protection and escorts because "now that she's the carrier of life, she is closer to death" (Atwood, The Handmaid's Tale 35). Despite the fact that the majority of the handmaids do not enjoy their work, they are caught up in their roles and at times become jealous of the handmaids that do become pregnant. Although the Aunts lead the Testifyings, the handmaids find themselves genuinely influenced by their actions, as Offred admits after verbally abusing Janine, "we meant it" (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 87).

The relationship between the Handmaid and the Wife is a very complicated one based on the interplay between latent power and status. Although Offred and Serena Joy are frequently at odds with one another, she refers to Serena Joy as "myself, my obverse" (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 107). Serena Joy is quite literally the face of Offred, seeing as Offred exists merely to serve her needs. Despite this presumed unity in being, they are unable to actually assist one another. The handmaid and the wife typically engage in an uneasy, necessary relationship. It is established that the infertile wife is often fearful of the handmaid's sexual power over their husbands and envious of their consequent fertility. During the Ceremony, Serena Joy holds Offred's hands, which is "supposed to signify that [they] are one flesh, one being. What it really means is that she is in control, of the process and thus of the product" (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 109). Should a handmaid become pregnant the Wife is also treated as if she is pregnant. However, there is an undercurrent of competition in this moment of presumed unity. The tension between the two eliminates any possibility for resistance. She even goes so far as to withhold information about Offred's daughter from before the uprising in order to manipulate her behavior. Serena Joy's own desperate bid for any sort of power or status in the society causes her to perpetuate the objectification of Offred.

The divisiveness espoused by even those who proclaim a love for women, such as Offred's mother, appears contradictory to their stated goals. Offred's mother rejects her and is disappointed by Offred's happy marriage. Offred's mother possessed ideals similar to separatist feminism and believe that society would genuinely be better if it comprised of only women. Ironically enough, she fought for the removal of pornography saying that it was degrading to women. Although pornography is banned in this new society women are

still degraded. As Offred calls attention to the flaws in this society, she philosophically addresses her mother saying, "you wanted a woman's culture. Well now there is one. It isn't what you meant, but it exists" (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 146). Atwood ironically creates an imperfect society that still technically fulfills the qualifications of what feminists such as Offred's mother would have wanted. Offred's mother and her inability to accept Offred on any terms besides the ones that she sets highlights the tension between women in the text. Ironically, Atwood appears to be discounting this form of feminism as being as oppressive. In creating such a complex character, Atwood allows for a comparison of values to occur.

The individual is demonstrated as being an inadvertent supporter of the patriarchal system as shown when Offred illicitly begins meeting with the Commander in his office. Although she already surrenders her body to him during the Ceremony, her clothed presence in the absence of his wife's knowledge reinforces the power he has over her. In sacrificing herself to him in all forms, she actively betrays Serena Joy in order to reap personal and material gains. Furthermore, her actions reaffirm the Commander's control over her.

Similar feminine divisiveness exists outside of the text as feminist and literary critics find fault with Offred's existence as a protagonist and presumed heroine. Her abandonment of Mayday and her involvement with Nick sparked much criticism. Although her relationship with Nick is arguably a means for her to find independence, its reliance on a male figure is disapproved of. Her method of personal survival is hotly debated over whether or not it further supports the patriarchy of Gilead. Critic Sandra Tomc comments

that the book addresses “models of autonomy for women that many feminists would consider too dangerously androcentric and heterosexist to be of much value” (“The Missionary Position” 91). The discussion that Atwood’s description of Offred caused provides an ironic reflection of the feminine animosity addressed in the text.

Atwood’s integration of history in a literary form known for the imaginary makes a more potent argument against unexamined behavior that oppresses. Both patriarchy and feminism is under the lens of observation. As critic Lucy M. Freibert stated, Atwood “pushes late twentieth century ideological conflicts to what she considers their logical conclusions” (“Control and Creativity” 284). A cautionary tale against several extremes, her exploration of conservative and liberal values alike provides much material for consideration.

# Conclusion

By focusing on works from the twentieth century, a crucial time in which feminist theory developed and many social revolutions occurred, it becomes possible to explore how the genre serves as more than purely entertainment. Each author drew from the world around them and created a new form of society that held up a lens to a variety of aspects that were generally unquestioned. As Linda Alcoff's article discussing feminist theory of the 1980's stated, "When women become feminists the crucial thing that has occurred is not that they have learned any new facts about the world but that they come to view those facts from a different position" (*Feminism and Fictions* 433) This understanding of 20th century feminism was reflected in the literature of the time, as the texts I have studied closely examine societies from different perspectives. Although feminism of the late 20th century made remarkable progress, literature written by women was still more widely accepted if it took the form of fiction as opposed to non-fiction. The feminist movement was not hindered by this genre limitation. In fact, the fictional nature of the medium allowed women authors to write texts that were perceived as abstract, rather than explicit criticisms of society. As shown by a close inspection of the worlds depicted in *Herland*, *The Left Hand of Darkness*, and *The Handmaid's Tale*, issues of gender, sexuality, reproduction can be reexamined.

Speculative fiction, while presumably distant from reality, engages the reader's critical analysis skills through the comparison of the new to existing knowledge. By looking at these texts I have been able to study how the genre and various authors' use of the medium has contributed to the spread of new ideas and promotion of alternate thought during the twentieth century.

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