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## ***Herland* and *Out of the Silent Planet*: A Comparison of a Feminist Utopia and a Male-charactered Fantasy**

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## Mythcon 51: The Mythic, the Fantastic, and the Alien

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### Abstract

Compares both the structure and themes of *Herland* and *Out of the Silent Planet* and finds many similarities in the utopian cultures represented.

### Additional Keywords

Gilman, Charlotte Perkins. *Herland*; Lewis, C.S. *Out of the Silent Planet*; Utopias and dystopias

# *Herland and Out of the Silent Planet*

## *A Comparison of a Feminist Utopia and a Male-charactered Fantasy*

### *Melanie Rawls*

Herland is a "lost" novel of a socialist, feminist utopia; it was written in 1915 by American Charlotte Perkins Gilman, intellectual, writer, activist and lecturer on feminist issues who was well-known in her time but nearly forgotten in ours. The book was resurrected in 1979 by a feminist press.

Out of the Silent Planet is a science fantasy novel published in 1938 by Englishman C.S. Lewis, an Oxford don well-known then and now for his writing on Christianity. Considering the gap in time between the two authors, the different countries and cultures they lived in, their different interests, their wholly different intentions in penning their books, and the almost total lack of common ground in their lives, except that they were both human and both writers, it is astonishing how often you may find similar ideas and even similar scenes in the two books.

To begin: Herland tells the adventures of three men who invade a land inhabited solely by women. Silent Planet tells of the adventures of three men who invade a planet inhabited by intelligent beings who are not men.

The country of Herland is located atop a plateau on a continent not named but with vaguely South American features, such as deep jungles and barely navigable rivers in unexplored interiors. The plateau was isolated from the world centuries ago by war, revolt, earthquake and volcanic eruption. The only survivors of these catastrophes were female. Unable to depart the plateau, they looked forward to eventual extinction until one of their number miraculously becomes pregnant. This woman eventually produces five female children who inherit her ability to conceive without male participation. The inhabitants of Herland are all descendents of this parthenogenetic mother; and their entire culture is centered around bearing and raising their children, so unexpectedly given them, in an environment of peace and plenty.

Into this utopia come three young men bent on exploring a legend among the continental natives that there exists a land where no men live and from whence male visitors do not return. The young men naturally scoff at such nonsense: of course there must be men! After all, who fathers the children? Plows the fields? Erects the buildings? Makes the roads? Organizes the government? Protects the women? Who, if not men? The three are determined to lay to rest the ridiculous if intriguing legend.

The three adventurers, Terry Nicholson, Jeff Margrave and Van Jennings (Jennings narrates the story), land their airplane on the plateau and proceed on their assumption. What they find is a highly organized, highly civilized society of serenity, order and mutual cooperation between all members. The women of Herland are tall, athletic, fearless and highly intelligent. There is no crime or poverty. The inhabitants voluntarily practice population control and conservationist ecology. They have made impressive advances in the sciences, particularly medicine,

biology, botany and education. A utopia achieved without the assistance of males.

Out of the Silent Planet is the tale of an English professor kidnapped and taken to the planet Mars, called by its inhabitants Malacandra. The professor, Elwin Ransom, is taken by the villains Weston and Devine because these two mistakenly assume that the intelligent inhabitants of Mars require a human sacrifice. Ransom escapes from his captors and flees into the Malacandrian wilds where he meets the creatures of the planet, learns their language and discovers how deeply in error his fellow humans are.

Malacandra, too, is a utopia. Four intelligent species, the hrossa, the sorns (seroni), the pfifltriggi and the eldils (eldili) live harmoniously together without disease, fear of death, racism, crime, pollution, wars or oppression. There is mutual cooperation between the species for the greater good of all. All is serene and orderly.

There are similarities between the two sets of male characters in these tales beyond the fact that they make grossly erroneous assumptions about the cultures they encounter.

Gilman's Terry Nicholson corresponds with Lewis' Devine. Nicholson is described as a wealthy playboy with a taste for adventure. Both Terry and Devine live their lives in pursuit of wealth, fame and women; both are ruthless in their pursuit of these things; and neither expresses any ideology or goal in life except the acquisition of these material desires.

Jeff Margrave corresponds to Weston -- however, the similarities between the two are few. Jeff is a gentle, spiritual young man, a doctor with a poet's soul. Like Weston, though, he is a dreamer and an idealist. Jeff places women on a pedestal; this approach makes him awkward in his dealings with individual women. Weston puts Mankind on a pedestal; his dealings with people, however, are callous and contemptuous.

Van Jennings, of course, corresponds with Lewis' Ransom. Both men are academics, Van a sociologist and Ransom a philologist. Both are thoughtful, compassionate men with a strong interest in understanding rather than exploiting the alien societies they encounter.

More importantly, perhaps, both are able to lay aside pride and achieve humility enough to accept the knowledge that the assumptions they have always lived with are just that -- assumptions and not facts. They are able to adapt and behave accordingly.

It is in comparisons of Herland with the "outside" world and the planet Malacandra with Earth that the two writers, Gilman and Lewis, make their astonishingly similar observations.

In both books, males make similar assumptions

about the supposedly primitive "natives" of Malacandra and the females of Herland. The males assume ignorance, superstition and unsophistication because they see no evidence of vast industries, teeming cities, agribusiness or universities. They assume that a pastoral peace (and a lack of progress-oriented males) means cultures approximately bronze age or lower: they have equated civilization with elaborate technology. Thus they approach the "natives":

"Have to use bait," grinned Terry. "I don't know about you fellows, but I came prepared." He produced from an inner pocket a little box of purple velvet, that opened with a snap — and out of it he drew a long sparkling thing, a necklace of big varicolored stones that would have been worth a million if real ones. He held it up, swung it, glittering in the sun, offered it first to one, then to another... (Herland, p.16)

...to Ransom's intense discomfort, Weston at this point whipped out of his pocket a brightly colored necklace of beads, the undoubted work of Mr. Woolworth, and began dangling it in front of the faces of his guards, turning slowly round and round repeating, 'Pretty, pretty! see! see!' (Out of the Silent Planet, p. 127-8)

The reaction of the Herlanders and the Malacandrians to these antics is the same: laughter.

Both groups of men work under the assumption that the so-called primitives can be frightened by threats -- the women because all women are frightened by men and the Malacandrians because "natives" are always frightened by the evidence of superior "civilization" -- and then conciliated by the offer of eye-catching trinkets. The fact that these "primitives" wholly outnumber the invaders and do not, in fact, appear to be attracted by beads, intimidated by bluster or easily conciliated is a reality that dawns upon these men only very slowly and only after they have been efficiently disarmed and treated like naughty children.

In their attempts to describe the advanced nature of their civilizations, the invaders of Herland and the invaders of Malacandra mention the same features. Both groups are social Darwinists:

... I explained that the laws of nature require a struggle for existence, and in a struggle the fittest survive, and the unfit perish. In our economic struggle, I continued, there is always plenty of opportunity for the fittest to reach the top, which they did, in great numbers... where there was severe economic pressure the lowest classes of course felt it the worst... (Herland, p. 63)

"To you I may seem a vulgar robber (says Weston), but I bear on my shoulders the destiny of the human race. Your tribal life with its stone-age weapons and bee-hive huts, its primitive coracles and elementary social structure, has nothing to compare with our civilization -- with our science, medicine and law, our armies, our architecture, our commerce, and our transport system... Our right to supersede you is the right of the higher over the lower.

... Life... has ruthlessly broken down all obstacles and liquidated all features and to-day in her highest form -- civilized man -- ... she presses forward... (Silent Planet, p. 135-6)

Ransom and Van, however, are reluctant to reveal to the utopians the more unsavory aspects of our world. As they discuss our "superior" advances, both come to realize that many of these advances come out of great misery or lead to great misery -- that we would not have such "superior" medical facilities if we did not have such high levels of disease and injury; that our legal systems indicate strife and disharmony among peoples; and that our superior weapons are only more efficient ways to oppress and kill. The utopians, living in peace and health, have no need for such institutions and weapons.

Strikingly similar in tone and result are these attempts by the invaders to explain their societies to the "primitives". When the invaders try to reduce our complex institutions and artifacts to language the Herlanders and Malacandrians can understand, the resulting simplifications reveal the horrors underlying modern civilization.

The manner in which Herlanders and Malacandrians regard death is parallel. Both groups of people view death as the natural culmination of life, and find the notion of fearing death or attempting to escape what cannot be escaped quite peculiar indeed.

Weston's purpose for coming to Malacandra is to stake out future territory for mankind when earth is no longer habitable. His plan is for mankind to jump from world to world and star to star, fleeing death, preserving itself. The Oyarsa or ruler of Malacandra finds this concept absurd -- cannot Weston see that death overtakes all in the end, the living and worlds alike?

"... but one thing we left behind us ... fear. And with fear, murder and rebellion. The weakest of my people does not fear death. It is the Bent One, the lord of your world, who wastes your lives and befouls them with flying from what you know will overtake you in the end." (Silent Planet, p. 140)

Van, attempting to explain to the Herlander Ellador the concept of eternity, is baffled by the fact that the Herlanders have no such concept in their religion.

"What does your religion teach about eternity?"

"Nothing," said Ellador. "What is eternity?"

"... life going on forever."

"Oh -- we see that, of course. Life does go on forever, all about us."

"But eternal life goes on without dying."

"The same person?"

... I could see her practical mind heaping up all the people and hurriedly reassured her (thinks Van).

"Oh no, indeed, not here -- hereafter..."

"It seems to me to be a singularly foolish idea," she said calmly. "And if true, most disagreeable." (Herland, p. 116-7)

Van goes on to protest — does she want to go out like a candle? Ellador replied that naturally she wants her children and her children's children to live, but as for personal immortality — why would she want this?

On the surface, Ellador's argument sounds like Weston's in its interest in the continuance of posterity. However, Ellador is concerned about real people, people whom she expects will also accept their personal mortality. Weston has no personal interest in anybody.

Lewis differs from Gilman in that he believes in the afterlife. Herlanders expect no afterlife and, as Ellador indicated, view the continuance of Life as the natural cycle of life and death repeated, believing that all living and all reward must be part of this life.

Neither Herlander culture nor Malacandrian culture practices burial. Herlanders do not have the space for cemeteries, and don't understand why a dead body is put into the ground to decay. They cremate their dead (Herland, Introduction, p. xv). The Oyarsa of Malacandra "unmakes" the bodies of the dead. In both cultures, "Death is not preceded by dread not followed by corruption." (Silent Planet, p. 159)

Herlanders and Malacandrians share similar views on sexual continence and love. Van tries to convince Ellador, whom he engages to marry (the Herlanders see "marriage" as a great experiment, an opening to new possibilities and a reunion with the male half of the species), that there are more uses to the sexual union of marriage than "mere parentage." He speaks rhapsodically of the power of permanently mated love as the source of all creativity and other "higher, nobler" activity. Ellador has doubts:

"Are you sure?" she asked gently. "... Among your people do you find high and lasting affection appearing in proportion to this indulgence?"

Of course (thinks Van) I knew about those monogamous birds and beasts too, that mate for life and show every sign of mutual affection, without ever having stretched the sex relationship beyond its original range...

"Do you mean," she asked quite calmly, "... That with you, when people marry, they go right on doing this in season and out of season, with no thought of children at all?" (Herland, p. 125-7)

Naturally Van, by this time, has faltered in his argument. He knows too well the poverty, disease and crime rooted in overpopulation. Ellador rejects his notions of romantic love expressed in terms of sex "in and out of season" as contrary to the population control needs of Herland and as an unnecessary specialization of a natural function.

Following is an excerpt of Ransom's conversation with the Malacandrian Hyoui, a hross, and the subject of love, sex and population control.

"Hyoui, if you had more and more young, would Maleldil (God) broaden the handramit (the habitat of the hrossa) and make enough plants for them all?"

"... But why should we have more young?"

"Ransom found this difficult. At last he said: "Is the begetting of young not a

pleasure among the hrossa?"

"A very great one, Hman (man). This is what we call love."

"If a thing is pleasurable, a hman wants it again. He might want the pleasure more often than the number of young that could be fed."

"... "You mean," he (Hyoui) said slowly, "that he might do it not only in one or two years in his life but again?"

"Yes."

"But why? Would he want his dinner all day or want to sleep after he had slept?..."

Ransom pondered this. Here, unless Hyoui was deceiving him, was a species naturally continent, naturally monogamous. And yet, was it so strange? Some animals, he knew, had regular breeding seasons; and if nature could perform the miracle of turning the sexual impulse outward at all, why could she not go further and fix it, not morally but instinctively, to a single object? He even remembered dimly having heard that some terrestrial animals, some of the 'lower' animals, were naturally monogamous. Among the hrossa, anyway, it was obvious that unlimited breeding and promiscuity were as rare as the rarest perversions. At last it dawned on him that it was not they, but his own species, that were the puzzle. That the hrossa should have such instincts was mildly surprising; but how it came that the instincts of the hrossa so closely resembled the unattained ideals of that far-divided species Man whose instincts were so deplorably different?" (Silent Planet, 72-4)

Clearly Gilman and Lewis share a utopian ideal, the difference being that Gilman believed that humans could be raised and educated to behave continentally while Lewis believed that humans are instinctively incontinent with the corollary that they probably cannot be educated out of this behavior to any great degree. Both authors seem to agree, however, that overpopulation is a source of much of the world's misery, and that mankind would do well to address the problem.

In the end, of course, there is an expulsion from the two Edens. (In Gilman's tale, one of the men, Jeff, remains with his Herland wife on the plateau, while Van's Herland wife Ellador ventures with him into the "outside" world.) Van, like Ransom, has committed no crime but is willing to accompany his criminal companion out of compassion and homesickness. Terry is the criminal; like Weston and Devine he attempts to violently force his point of view upon the utopians. Devine "steals" gold; Weston prepares genocide. Both, in their fear, commit murder. For his part, Terry attempts to rape his Herlander wife. Of course, in his own terms, he is attempting to assert his "husbandly" rights and force his wife to perform her "wifely" duties. (Terry is particularly contemptuous of the high regard Herlanders have for parenthood and feels he is regarded as a stud animal. This is ironic, as he comes from a culture that purports to believe that motherhood is a woman's highest calling and that siring children is evidence of masculinity.)

None of the criminals repents his act, nor even recognizes that he has done something wrong. Each believes that his "rights" and desires supersede those of the utopians. Terry believes that he has a right to



sex. Weston believes he has a right to the lands of Malacandra. Devine believes that the planet's gold is his for the taking.

The judgement of the utopians is not death or imprisonment for these outrages. It is simply the decision, which they are capable of enforcing, that the miscreants must go home.

It is remarkable that these two writers from different eras produced such similar writing. They also approached the issue of the role of women in the scheme of things quite differently. Gilman wrote and spoke from the perspective of social reform of the status and treatment of women. Lewis considered the matter of women from a religious and symbolic aspect, such as is demonstrated in his works That Hideous Strength, Till We Have Faces and the Narnia stories. Historically, the two approaches have as often come to radically opposite conclusions as they have come to similar conclusions.

In fact, reading these books together gives support to the feminists' claim that their concerns are not just "female" concerns, but are -- or should be -- concerns of the entire human race. Peace, a more equitable distribution of goods, true community amongst peoples, an harmonious co-existence with nature, freedom from oppressions -- all these and more were achieved in Herland and on Malacandra. It should be discomfiting to realize that Gilman's Herlanders are not aliens at all, but humans, albeit female. Yet men, the normal young men of our culture, respond to them as if they were extraterrestrial as Martians.

The juxtaposed reading of these two books, Herland and Out of the Silent Planet, provides much food for thought. We see that men and women are indeed quite different, perhaps as alien to one another as a Martian would be to a terrestrial. And yet, how clearly they share similar fantasies.

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Wentworth, continued from page 44

feminine natures could give him. Instead, he slowly descends, giving up his masculinity as he simultaneously warps and misuses his femininity. Finally, his grip on reality and on his unconscious gone, he, in the words of Jung, is "caught and entangled in aimless experience, and the judging intellect with its categorization proves itself powerless... It is a moment of collapse. We sink into a final depth." [17]

#### Notes

[1] C.G. Jung, The Development of Personality. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 19 ), p. 198.

[2] Violet Staub De Laszlo, ed. The Basic Writings of C.G. Jung. (New York: Modern Library, 1959), p. 315.

[3] De Laszlo, p. 309.

[4] C.G. Jung, The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious. Bollingen edition (New York: Pantheon Books, 1959), p. 70.

[5] De Laszlo, p. 313.

[6] Charles Williams, Descent into Hell. (New York: Pellegrini and Cudahy, 1949) All further quotations from this book will be followed by pagination within parentheses.

[7] De Laszlo, p. 274.

[8] Frieda Fordham, An Introduction to Jung's Psychology. (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1953, rpt. 1964), p. 54.

[10] De Laszlo, p. 159.

[11] Fordham, p. 54.

[12] It should be noted that not only does Wentworth's valuation of a personal relationship demonstrate his anima's increasing control, but also the traits which characterize that relationship. Devotion, intuition, dependency, and eroticism are also all traditionally feminine traits.

[13] De Laszlo, p. 314.

[14] Fordham, p. 54.

[15] Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious, p. 67.

[16] *ibid.*, p. 71.

[17] De Laszlo, p. 316.

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Tales Newly Told, continued from page 36

dialogue. David Sullivan, a young Lady Gregory fan, is accidentally gifted with second sight and becomes involved in the affairs of the Sidhe. He gains the enmity of Ailill Windmaster, a Loki-like figure in Tir na nOg. When David's little brother is replaced by a changeling, and his Uncle Dale is struck by a fairy dart, he and his close friends Alec McLean and Liz Hughes (is this meant to be a union of Irish, Scottish, and Welsh?) must openly challenge the Sidhe and undergo the champion's ordeal. The depiction of the Otherworld's crystalline beauty is quite effective; it is the Sidhe themselves, as characters, who pose a problem. They follow Lady Gregory's model too closely, and as such become mere literary icons, too predictable to engage our imagination as great Otherworld powers. In contrast, we have the wild fluid, protean face of Faerie appearing in the mountain storm that besets David when he first issues his challenge. Here is the true, perilous spirit of the Otherworld, and the cardboard-cutout figures of the Irish "gods" make a poor showing in its light. One wishes that Deitz had done something more daring, perhaps made an original, dynamic blend of the Irish material and the Cherokee mythology he also claims as a source.

As it is, Windmaster's Bane is a well-told young-adult novel that could have aspired to something more. Since David Sullivan does not seem to have come to the end of his adventures, we may eventually be allowed to scale those heights we have as yet only glimpsed from afar.