Utopian Feminism and Feminist Pedagogy: Charlotte Perkins Gilman and the Everyday Classroom[1]

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ABSTRACT

The principle components of utopian fiction and feminist pedagogy are outlined, specifically examining Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s three utopian writings, *Moving the Mountain*, *Herland*, and *With Her in Ourland*. Sociological themes from Gilman’s theoretical writings are also discussed, along with her utopian writings, to bring her theories and concepts to life. After outlining the theories and concepts in Gilman’s utopian writings, the core themes in feminist teaching are also discussed, along with resistance to such strategies. Individuals, both within the discipline of sociology and outside, are easily able to grasp Gilman’s ideas and thoughts through her use of satire on the unnecessary evils of the current social relations. The fictional accounts that Gilman uses in her utopian writings also present instructors with alternative styles through which to present sociological concepts and ideas to their students. Gilman’s style of writing allows for students to be able to contribute more to the classroom experience and become participants in the educational enterprise. This is due to the fact that Gilman calls the reader to think critically about existing social relations in order to fully understand the satire. The authors argue that this type of theorizing is beneficial to both the discipline of sociology and to students.

INTRODUCTION

Sociologists are people-watchers. They spend their lives thinking about society and our place in it. Through their writing and teaching, they push and poke at the boundaries of social meaning and rules for action. Frequently, such work is taken either too seriously or not seriously enough. In response to this political repression or popular dismissal, sociologists often use technical jargon and complicated language to make their work more inaccessible to the general public. Charlotte Perkins (Stetson) Gilman did not participate in such games. She was a sociologist who wanted people everywhere to read her ideas, and she expected them to be challenged and upset after they did so. She wanted people to know how to make society a better place for everyone (Deegan 1992: ii, unpublished manuscript introducing Gilman’s “First Class in Sociology”).

Although a sociological theorist first and foremost, Charlotte Perkins Gilman was also a gifted educator. Through her theoretical and fictional accounts, Gilman brought sociological thought and feminist issues to the people. Rather than writing solely for the academy, Gilman created interesting, accessible or “user-friendly” works that taught sociological concepts and ideals to those who may have had little knowledge of the fledgling discipline. Through her everyday writings, Gilman taught her sophisticated theories of social life on such areas as social Darwinism, feminist thought, education, childcare, religion,
and much more. As noted by Deegan (1992) above, Gilman contended that sociological principles could change the world. Although egotistical and idealistic at times, she saw herself as this change agent. “Through art, Gilman believed, we know the past, govern the present, and influence the future” (Gough & Rudd 1998:2).

While many have recognized the value of Gilman’s works (Allen 1988; Deegan 1991; Hill 1980; Lane 1990; Meyering 1989; Rossi 1973; Scharnhorst 1985 and others), sociology has been slow in claiming this early founder (Cannon 1997; Deegan 1991; Lengermann & Niebrugge-Brantley 1998). Although there have been efforts to bring her work back into sociology and sociological history, very few classical sociological theory textbooks recognize her contributions (Lengermann & Niebrugge-Brantley 1998; Ritzer 2000). While her theoretical constructs clearly warrant her inclusion, it may be helpful to consider the ways in which her works can be utilized to teach sociological and feminist theories to our students. More specifically, Gilman’s utopian fiction stands as a practical articulation of her social thought—ideas that students easily grasp through Gilman’s satire on the unnecessary evils of the current social relations.

In addition to providing students with easy to grasp social theories, Gilman also presents instructors with alternative styles in which to present sociological concepts and ideas. Currently, what takes place in the classroom closely resembles what many of the “masters” (read men) of sociological theory present in their original articulations. While the information is indeed useful, and moreover insightful, the assumption remains that those who read have nothing to do with the arguments made therein. In Gilman’s works the reader must become a part of the story—indeed, she relies on contemporary understandings of capitalism, the “American dream,” gender relations within and outside of the home, education, religion, and much more. She calls the reader to think critically about existing social relations and encourages us to move “outside of the box.” Yet this writing style also has the potential to transform teaching practices. Rather than assuming that our students have nothing to contribute to the classroom experience, Gilman demonstrates how our students can become participants in the educational enterprise.

In the following, we outline the principle components of feminist utopian fiction and feminist pedagogy. It is the combination of these two areas that makes Gilman’s work amenable to the classroom. Next, we discuss the sociological themes present in Gilman’s theoretical writings and further, how her three utopian writings, *Moving the Mountain* (1911b), *Herland* (1915) and *With Her in Ourland* (1916) bring these more esoteric concepts to life; making each an exemplary form of feminist teaching. This type of fiction is actually a more practical form of sociological analysis as Gilman intended, and ultimately each becomes more accessible to those outside of the discipline or academia. Finally, we discuss how sociology and our students stand to gain from this more “playful” theorizing.

**CORE THEMES IN EARLY FEMINIST UTOPIAN FICTION**

A truly feminist work espouses social principles and practices that would create a society free of oppression and discrimination based on sex, race, age, class, religion, and sexual orientation, thereby assuring women opportunities for personal autonomy (Freibert 1983:67).[2]

The feminist utopian genre began with Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *Herland* in 1915. However, this book was not published in monograph form until 1978 (Freibert 1983). Interestingly, Freibert compares *Herland* with three other feminist utopias written after the 60’s and develops a typology of core themes that resound throughout these works.[3]

The first core theme in feminist utopias is a shift in economic systems. Within each of the utopias examined by
Friebert, the new societies “dispense with private property but provide rooms of their own for everyone. They also furnish food, clothing, education, medical care, travel, and recreation at common expense” (1983:68). Additionally, the members of these societies create alternatives to the privatization of dining and childcare. More specifically, community dining replaces the individual kitchen and members of the community take greater responsibility for the care and education of children.

Third, is the eradication of family names. In this way, children (and women) are no longer viewed as property. The fourth key theme is related to occupational specialization. In the novels examined by Freibert (1983) women are free to move into nontraditional occupations. Finally, in these works, women are protected—they no longer live in fear of male violence, sexual or otherwise. “Through community concern” women are no longer threatened by rape and assault (Freibert 1983:68).

In addition to these core themes, Freibert (1983:69) identifies “an even deeper relationship… among the four works”. The crucial element uniting these works is “organicism.”

Each grows from a root metaphor of historic process which emphasizes the systemic interdependence of the various fragments of the social structure, and this coherence forms the basis for optimism…As the disparate elements within the system conflict and through conflict reach new integration, the society evolves to higher and higher levels of perception toward the absolute (Freibert 1983:69).

Particularly evident in Gilman’s writing (and the others) is the notion of progress through the natural forces of social evolution. However, central to this argument is the possibility of human intervention or social engineering. More specifically, Gilman like Auguste Comte, Herbert Spencer, and Emile Durkheim before her, argues that if a society understands and embraces sociological laws and insights, social problems can be avoided and indeed eliminated, thus making progress more likely. It is this notion of progress that makes Gilman’s writing exciting not only for women, but also for the larger society. Additionally, Gilman’s ideas of progress vis-à-vis new forms of sociological education have powerful implications for the classroom.

In what follows, we discuss the key themes of feminist pedagogy, and how this radical teaching strategy has roots in the classical feminist/sociological thought of Charlotte Perkins Gilman. Indeed, her early works provide a foundation for studies of feminist pedagogy, sociology, and ultimately exemplify (through her utopian fiction) the very practices we wish to incorporate in our everyday teaching. In the feminist classroom students and instructors may utilize Gilman’s utopian writings to critically examine existing social structures and develop alternative visions of more equitable social relations.

**FEMINIST PEDAGOGY**

**Liberation Pedagogy and Critical Consciousness**

Scholars working in the area of feminist pedagogy offer radical critiques of traditional teaching models. Traditionally, classrooms have been bastions of androcentrism in which men have been viewed as the authority regarding knowledge and pedagogy (Agatucci 1991; Belenky, Clinchy, Colberger, and Tarule 1986; Brown 1992; hooks 1994; Korn 1991; Maher & Tetreault 1994; Scott 1993; Smith 1987; Weiler 1991). In the traditional classroom, women’s learning styles are oftentimes discredited and a male model becomes the norm. Additionally, teachers in this type of classroom (men and women) often position themselves as the authority figures who attempt to impart a portion of their vast wisdom upon their students.

Graham writes:

Such a pedagogy is predicated upon a male model of intellectual development whereby students are likened to “empty vessels” waiting to be filled with knowledge,” blank minds waiting to be inscribed (1992:5).
Students in this model are never assumed to possess knowledge; they are never given credit for what they “know” or the diverse perspectives and experiences they may bring to the classroom. These alternative knowledge claims are not valued in traditional educational models. For these reasons, feminist educators and scholars have sought to transform the classroom.

Feminist scholars writing often utilize, with some modification, an educational model developed by Paulo Freire in his exemplary work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1994). Freire continued to develop these early ideas in *Pedagogy of Freedom* (1998). In his work, Freire speaks out against what he identifies as the “banking system” of education, a model in which the teacher assumes complete control over a scarce resource, knowledge. Thus, despite radical claims to the contrary, the teacher actually perpetuates the status quo:

The teacher talks about reality as if it were motionless, static, compartmentalized, and predictable. Or else he expounds on a topic completely alien to the existential experiences of the students. His task is to “fill” the students with the contents of his narration—contents which are detached from reality, disconnected from the totality that engendered them and could give them significance. Words are emptied of their concreteness and become hollow, alienating verbocity (Freire 1994:52).

Freire calls for an alternative pedagogy, a pedagogy that connects learning to the lives of students and teachers, and empowers them to make radical social change. This revolutionary pedagogy, which Freire entitled “problem-posing education,” enables students and teachers alike to think reflexively about the world around them. “In problem-posing education, people develop their power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation” (Freire 1994:64).

Problem-posing education requires the teachers to give up their authority in the classroom and become active participants in the classroom experience. Further, in this model students and teachers work together to untangle the historical specificity of social structures and stratification. According to Freire, this understanding is the groundwork for the liberation of oppressed individuals and entire societies. Any pedagogical model that relies upon the banking system perpetuates violence and oppression and thus facilitates the creation and maintenance of an unjust society. It is for this reason that dominant groups are unlikely to advocate problem-posing education and that those interested in liberation cannot use the “master’s tools” (Lorde 1984) or the banking system to revolutionize the existing structure:

Problem-posing education does not and cannot serve the interests of the oppressor. No oppressive order could permit the oppressed to begin to question: Why? While only a revolutionary society can carry out this education in systematic terms, the revolutionary leaders need not take full power before they can employ the method. In the revolutionary process, the leaders cannot utilize the banking method as an interim measure, justified on the grounds of expediency, with the intention of later behaving in a genuinely revolutionary fashion. They must be revolutionary—that is to say, dialogical—from the outset (Freire 1994:67).

Feminists are called to bring this type of educational practice into the academy. We cannot resort to the banking system of education if we are to truly empower our students and change existing patriarchal structures.

Although Freire’s model has offered feminist teachers the tools necessary to bring liberatory education into the classroom, his work does not go without challenge. Specifically, feminist writers such as Kathleen Weiler (1991) and hooks (1994) note the sexism in Freire’s writings and his appeal to a monolithic experience of oppression. More specifically, Freire does not acknowledge the interlocking nature of oppression that creates different experiences of what might seem to be on the surface similar forms of oppression. Further, many oppressions overlap, thus creating more complex systems of
oppression. However, hooks argues that Freire’s work still has powerful implications for feminist teaching:

Freire’s sexism is indicated by the language in his early works, notwithstanding that there is so much that remains liberatory. There is no need to apologize for the sexism. Freire’s own model of critical pedagogy invites a critical interrogation of this flaw in his work. But critical interrogation is not the same as dismissal (1994:49).

Because Freire’s work asks us to be reflexive and critical of oppressive social structures and practices, he invites us to challenge his own ideas—he does not see his work as beyond a thoughtful critique. However, as hooks (1994) notes, we must use our criticism to empower, we cannot use it to silence others. As we take Freire to task for the limiting components of his work, we must articulate the ideas that have laid the groundwork for feminist pedagogy:

This emerging pedagogy does not reject the goals of justice—the end of oppression, and liberation—but frames them more specifically in the context of historically defined struggles and calls for the articulation of interests and identity on the part of the teacher and theorist as well as student (Weiler 1991:451).

It is through this inclusive theorizing and teaching that feminist classrooms have the potential to empower students and teachers alike.

Core Themes in Feminist Teaching

This emerging pedagogy does not reject the goals of justice—the end of oppression, and liberation—but frames them more specifically in the context of historically defined struggles and calls for the articulation of interests and identity on the part of the teacher and theorist as well as student (Weiler 1991:451).

While there is no singular definition of feminist pedagogy, there are some key themes that identify the practice. Kathryn Scott (1993) identifies four phenomena “that capture the essence of feminist pedagogy-in-action” (5). The following assessment occurred after teaching a graduate seminar on narrative:

I have forged an understanding of feminist pedagogy-in-action that rests on four phenomena, each necessary but none sufficient. Feminist pedagogy occurred at the juncture of (1) a reinventing of power relationships that were emancipating to teacher, learners, and subject investigated; (2) a context where community, conversation, and connected knowing flourished; (3) an understanding of knowledge as partial and incomplete; and (4) moral leadership by teachers and learners (Scott 1993:5).

These four themes capture the myriad goals of feminist pedagogy and practice and will be more fully developed below.

First, feminist teachers work to develop a classroom community that dismantles traditional power relationships between teachers, learners, and subjects of study. One way feminist teachers facilitate this type of community is by making their assumptions explicit at the outset of the course (Agatucci 1991; Brown 1992; hooks 1994). By making expectations explicit, teachers dismantle many student fears that can create resistance to feminist practices. “[Rather] than pretending that the classroom is politically neutral and unqualified fun, it is more honest and more effective to disclose the agenda, the rules, and the power relationships which pervade the classroom” (Buffington 1993:5). It is also helpful to tell students what they will encounter in everyday classroom situations. Helping them to understand the difficulties of unlearning oppression will make the process much easier for them to accept:

I let my students know that they will feel much discomfort, doubt and ambiguity; I tell them that to be shaken up is evidence of learning, of growth and of shifts in thinking. I believe that uncomfortable situations are more bearable when we know what is happening and that the discomfort will not last forever (Henry 1994:3).

Learning can be painful, but if students understand the pain and even come to expect it, they will be more likely to learn from their difficult classroom experiences. Fostering this understanding of dialogue and process is the responsibility of the
feminist teacher.

The second theme stresses the importance of developing a learning community in which the students and teachers take an active role. Student “voice” is valued in the classroom and students are encouraged to utilize strategies that foster “connected knowing.” Ideally, “connected knowing builds on the subjectivists’ conviction that the most trustworthy knowledge comes from personal experience rather than the pronouncements of authorities” (Belenky, et al. 1986:112-113). Students must take responsibility for their own learning in the feminist classroom. However, as hooks (1994) notes, feminist teachers do not give up all power in the classroom. “In effect, this will be an instance of pedagogic authority used to selectively empower social groups lacking hegemonic authority, not an abdication of power” (Weir 1991:25). The academy bestows power upon teachers and ultimately all students must receive grades. A power relationship always exists between teachers and students and it is unfair for feminist instructors to pretend that it does not exist (Buffington 1993). Despite this hierarchy, feminist teachers can utilize their power to teach students to empower themselves and create a classroom where all students are given voice:

The classroom, under this feminist model, becomes a safe environment where everyone feels nurtured and able to speak and write, where conflicts are resolved and everyone remains connected (Buffington 1993:2).

A third theme involves the recognition of knowledge as being incomplete or “partial.” In many ways, this theme highlights the value of difference and continuity. In the feminist classroom, students come to recognize that there are no absolute truths and the teacher may not have all the answers (Scott 1993). Students learn that they must work together to develop partial understanding about a topic, but that this knowledge is always subject to change. Scott writes:

The paradox of knowing is that we can never find truth; if we think we have found truth, we stop knowing. How could this be so? Because “truth” derives its meaning from a context that is only partial, a “lens” through which meaning is illuminated and a knower who can never be completely disinterested or objective (1993:7).

Much of the learning students have to do involves “unlearning” systems of domination and oppression (hooks 1994). Students learn that knowledge is socially constructed and that we must listen to the many unique voices that come into our classrooms. We, as feminist teachers, facilitate more accurate understandings when we allow many different voices to speak out—this necessarily includes our own.

The fourth theme that emerged from research on feminist teaching strategies was the importance of fostering responsibility and moral leadership within the feminist classroom and in our everyday lives outside of the classroom. In this model students and teachers are encouraged to take responsibility for creating a safe atmosphere in which individuals feel free to give voice to their experiences and concerns. However, more than this, “feminist pedagogy as moral leadership suggests that what we do as educators is reflected in how we live our lives” (Scott 1993:9). What we bring into the classroom has an impact on our students. Can we expect our students to take social responsibility outside of the classroom if we as educators do not offer them an example? We must bring our activist experiences into the classroom as well as our “knowledge.”

**Resistance to Feminist Teaching**

There is nothing “safe” about engaging students in rigorous critical ways. It seems to me that to be able to speak of safety in the “belly of the beast” reveals race and class privilege. Only a certain elite has the privilege of cultivating a safe place in mainstream institutions that perpetuate the very inequities which we fight against as feminist educators (Henry 1994:2).
Adopting a feminist pedagogical stance is essential if we are to empower our students. However, not all students, colleagues, or educational institutions will be receptive to this transformation (Heald 1989; Henkin 1994; Henry 1994; hooks 1994, Murphy 1992; Roychoudhury, Tippins, and Nichols 1994; Weir 1991). What is it about this educational style that is so difficult to accept or embrace? For teachers, resistance seems to arise from a loss of security and authority. For students, breaking free from the “banking system” of education (Freire 1994) is also threatening because this is what they experience in the majority of their classrooms. In addition, students are forced to grapple with some painful issues in the feminist classroom. Dealing with these issues is difficult for both students and teachers, but they must be faced head on if we are to transform oppressive, and indeed static, educational models.

First, we must consider the ways in which feminist teaching strategies come to be perceived as threatening to the security and authority of educators. Initially, many instructors walk into the classroom hoping to be liked by their students. Moreover, they may want their students to tell them what “good” teaching is or believe that they already know based on traditional models. However, in the feminist classroom students are asked to take on greater responsibility for their learning and to talk about issues that may be quite upsetting for them. This may negatively impact teaching evaluations. In *Teaching to Transgress* (1994) hooks states that “in reconceptualizing engaged pedagogy I had to realize that our purpose here [in the classroom] isn’t really to feel good. Maybe we will enjoy certain classes, but it will usually be difficult” (154). Feminist pedagogy calls on the teachers to recognize that they are doing good work despite negative feedback. However, this knowledge must come from within each individual teacher. This is much different than the traditional system—a short tradition in fact—which relies on peer reviews and student evaluations (hooks 1994).

Students may also identify emotional and political work with “bad” teaching. Again, students do not have enough experience with this type of teaching:

> Schooling, I am reminded again, is not understood by students to be about questions, but answers…The related expectation that the content is separate from the learner also makes feminism’s insistence that the “personal is political” more radical…and more threatening (Heald 1989:22).

Students, unaccustomed to this style of teaching do not necessarily recognize the value in questioning dominant assumptions and promoting individual understandings and knowledge. This new style is viewed as suspect, and therefore as irrelevant. Additionally, because the change is discomforting to students, they may actually back away before the effects of this new style can be felt. Heald (1989) describes the quandary feminists encounter when faced with introducing alternatives to existing knowledge transmission systems: “One part of me says that if white males are offended by what I do then I must be doing something right. Another part of me adjusts my teaching style to try to avoid hostility” (23). It is difficult to walk into the classroom and know that you are working to enhance critical consciousness, while facing the fact that said work may not be immediately valued by students. “It may be six months or a year, even two years later, that they realize the importance of what they have learned” (hooks 1994:153). Given the few external rewards for good teaching, it is a wonder that feminist and other liberation pedagogues attempt this work at all.

Another threat to teachers is the potential loss of authority in the classroom. In the feminist classroom teachers are viewed as facilitators of discussion and “connected knowing.” The feminist teacher never presumes to have all of the answers. The “separate knower” (Graham 1992) does not have to give up this stance and never seeks situations that may threaten her/his credentials:
The separate knower as separate teacher is, like the scientist, elevated above the realm of ordinary human beings. What he says must be “true” because he has said it. He presents to his students only the products of his thinking, hiding from them the process of gestation, creating the impression that only professors can formulate theories and that such accomplishments are unattainable by the multitude (Graham 1992:7).

The feminist teacher, on the other hand, leaves her/himself open to risk and allows students to view learning as an unending process—a process in which the learner becomes actively involved and the teacher stands back. Additionally, learning becomes a community activity. Giving up the role of the “all-knowing” authority figure may be difficult, but essential if we are to transform the existing system.

In addition to negative student reactions and self-doubt, feminist teachers must also contend with negative peer evaluations of their teaching. Connected knowing and learning have not been valued within the academy. As hooks notes:

One of the ways you can be written off quickly as a professor by colleagues who are suspicious of progressive pedagogy is to allow your students, or yourself, to talk about experience; sharing personal narratives yet linking that knowledge with academic information really enhances our capacity to know (1994:148).

While feminist teachers understand the value of this connected knowing practice, many colleagues will consider it to be “therapy” or “entertainment” rather than “true” learning. Colleagues may assume that if you are having a good time in the classroom, you must be doing something wrong (hooks 1994). This can be discouraging, but what is the solution? Just as we are called to engage in dialogue with our students, we are also encouraged to be in constant contact and communication with other feminist teachers. The “banking system” has become entrenched within the academy and it will take some patience to “unlearn” this oppressive system. These dialogues may be quite difficult or risky at first; however, “this risk is ultimately less threatening than a continued attachment to and support of existing systems of domination…” (hooks 1994:131).

In what follows, we will document the theoretical premises in Gilman’s work that are clearly related to feminist pedagogical practices. More specifically, we discuss the ways in which Gilman’s theories of gender equality, home life, and the progressive education of children will ultimately lead to the transformation of U.S. society. Following this, we will offer an analysis of Gilman’s more whimsical utopian fiction and how this fiction is actually a form of feminist practice designed to accomplish outside of the classroom what many feminist pedagogues have tried to implement within the wall of academe.

**SOCIOCLOGICAL THOUGHT AND GILMAN’S UTOPIAN FICTION**

Gilman considered herself to be a sociologist first and foremost. Additionally, we may now identify her as a feminist scholar (although she would have despised the label given its many negative connotations and the troubling images it invokes). In many ways she is the forerunner of feminist pedagogical techniques despite the fact that much of her work has been ignored (particularly in sociology). While a great deal of Gilman’s work is indeed “playful,” Gilman used this fictional work to reach a wider audience, or “student body.” She recognized the need for extensive social reform, particularly in the area of gender equality, but realized that not all had access to more “scholarly” materials. For this reason, Gilman utilized a fictional stage to present her ideas to the general populous (in addition to her tireless work on the lecture circuit). However, throughout her fictional works and prose, Gilman never wavered in her sociological mandates or vision. What follows is a thematic account of her theories of social progress and pathology. This serves as an introduction to her more accessible sociological utopian fiction.

**The Individual and Society**

For Gilman, society was a part of the living world and was subject to the workings of natural law as much as any
other life form. Studied scientifically, rationally, and objectively, human life was as dynamic as any other (Magner 1978:77).

Gilman, a social Darwinist and organicist, believed in the power of the scientific method to uncover the natural laws governing society. For Gilman, as for many other social scientists during her lifetime, society is made up of specialized, yet interdependent parts. As individuals, we are called to contribute to the larger social good and in fact, we must consider these contributions our social duty. It is this sense of “duty” or independence that separates human beings from animals and makes the possibility of socially engineered evolution a reality (Gilman 1904). More specifically, Gilman argued that individuals could actively engage in positive evolutionary practices once they understood the laws governing social life.

Individual happiness is not Gilman’s primary concern. She makes the case, quite convincingly, that individual happiness can only be derived from social health. In fact, if the society is in good health (measured via the progress of the economic system and the treatment of women and children) individuals will also fare well. As individuals are allowed to specialize in vocations to which they are best suited, society will naturally progress. However, individuals must be reminded of their larger social obligations. In her poem, “Little Cell,” Gilman (1899:25-26) encourages all members of the social body to do their part, yet recognize their limitations:

Little Cell! Little Cell! with a heart as big as heaven,
Remember that you are but a part!
This great longing in your soul
Is the longing of the whole,
And your work is not done with your heart!

Don’t imagine, Little Cell,
That the work you do so well
Is the only work the world needs to do!
You are wanted in your place
For the growing of the race,
But the growing does not all depend on you!

Little Cell! Little Cell! with a race’s whole ambition,
Remember there are others growing too!
You’ve been noble, you’ve been strong;
Rest a while and come along;
Let the world take a turn and carry you!

While Gilman argues that individuals are nothing by themselves; thus advocating the supremacy of the social body or society, she acknowledges that, “…the consciousness of one man can inspire and lift and stimulate others” (1904:31). However, what is of note here is that individual consciousness can work to inspire or retard the growth of the social organism. Through the development and perpetuation of “unhealthy” or “false” social laws or ideologies individuals can actually stunt the progress of normal social advancement.

**Ideology, Social Evolution and Social Pathology**

As noted above, Gilman argues that individuals can halt the natural progression of human progress. Through the construction of specific ideological beliefs and practices, society can indeed become stagnant or decline. Gilman’s explanations of social pathology, although quite simple on the surface, are actually quite complex. She believed that the
religious system interacts with the androcentric culture to create disruptive evolutionary forces. According to Gilman, these two systems work together as an interlocking system of oppression, the net effects being much greater than those of each taken separately. Although Gilman explicates the independent effects of each in her works, *The Man-Made World* (1911a) and *His Religion and Hers* (1923), she continuously alludes to the much stronger interaction. More specifically, Gilman argues that androcentric cultural and religious beliefs negatively impact economic life vis-à-vis the sexual division of labor, domestic life, and the education and care of children.

According to Gilman, men have been allowed to create the world, while women have been limited to life in the home. Gilman was directly involved in discussions of public and private spheres and the necessary contributions of men and women to each. Further, she acknowledged the damage this division creates for the larger social body. Without the equal contributions of women to the public sphere, society stagnates as one-half of the world’s population is refused comment on the workings of social life (1898; 1911a). The effects of this limitation can be felt in each major social institution (e.g., the family, education, economics, politics, etc.). Until women are free, society will not progress.

Gilman further argues that androcentrism, or a focus on the masculine at the expense of more positive “human” (not feminist) traits is the direct result of male-based religious ideologies. Gilman identifies three laws of living and notes the negative influence of religion: 1) self-preservation; 2) race preservation; and 3) improvement (or social progress). The impact of religion on social progress is most important to our understanding of Gilman’s social thought. Gilman contends that religion, particularly Christianity, keeps our minds focused on the past and on socially constructed concepts of right and wrong. Moreover, religion is a hindrance to the development of critical thinking skills and positive social advancement. When we study, memorize, and live by outdated ideas we stagnate.

According to Gilman, masculine-based religious ideologies have developed and advanced conflict oriented social theories. “Having the minds of men only, heavily overmasculinized by long surrender to impulses originally natural, some of these early thinkers inevitably staged the universe as a conflict” (Gilman 1923:220). This belief in conflict is not surprising given the long focus on ancient beliefs and the exclusion of women from this most important branch of social thought. It “is the pressure of wrong ideas” that is responsible for this conflict (Gilman 1923:222).

To remedy this most grievous social ill society must turn to life-based, futuristic oriented religious thought and it is essential that women are active in its creation. Early religious beliefs were founded not on facts, “but on impulses, feelings, and experiences” (Gilman 1923:249). This is a much more humanist interpretation of religion. Gilman argues that the female of the human species naturally looked to life and the joy of human work, not death for her religion. Rather than viewing life as eternal conflict, power and struggle, we might elevate women’s views in the construction of a more natural and “healthy” social reality. According to Gilman, social motherhood, women’s equality, and more human centered religious beliefs will change our perceptions of current social conditions (Gilman 1923).

**Sociological Vision and Social Change**

Gilman did not merely theorize the need for social change; she had a vision of what that change might look like. While she did play with her social thought in her utopian novels, as I will discuss more fully in the following section, she also offered more practical solutions for eliminating the pathologies she saw in everyday life. The key areas of change identified...
by Gilman included the unnatural subordination of women vis-à-vis the “sexuo-economic relation,” the inefficiencies and myths of domestic life, and the improper care and education of children.

First, according to Gilman, women achieve their social status from men, and thus are prohibited from making more human contributions to society through their labor. She does not argue that women do not work; rather, she contends that women marry and then work in the home to ensure their economic survival—in actuality they are parasites and a drain on the social body (Gilman 1898). The main point for Gilman is that women cannot support themselves with the work they do nor can do they contribute to the larger social good. They are isolated in the home providing inadequate and inefficient care for others. It is this unnatural relation that must be changed if society is to advance. However, there are powerful ideological forces that keep the relationship in place.

Next, the isolation of women from the public sphere is justified by the myths surrounding the domestic life or the home (Gilman 1903). Gilman outlines the following myths as part of this complex ideology: 1) the privacy of the home, 2) the sanctity of the home; 3) the “economy” of the home; and 4) the maternal instinct. According to Gilman, while the home may be privatized in terms of the labor within, it is in no way a sanctuary for the individual. We cannot continue to worship an institution that no longer meets our needs. Individuals suffer within these homes and must be freed from the tyranny and abuse contained within. Additionally, these homes are not efficient. The labor of many is duplicated within the home and could be more easily conducted by trained professionals for a community of families. Finally, women struggle to achieve their ultimate calling—to become the perfect mother. However, we have assumed that this calling is innate and that women are in no need of maternal education. Yet the results of this fallacy are easily seen in the poor nutritional plans and haphazard educational attempts of many mothers. Family members suffer at the hands of well-intentioned, but uneducated mothers. These devastating conditions were at one time easily hidden, but this is no longer the case. The social problems created in the home are spilling out into society.

Freeing women from the confines of the home is the first step according to Gilman. “If all house service was professionalized, done by trained specialists with proper organization and mechanical conveniences, we could release the labor power of 80 percent of our women” (Gilman 1917:127). As individuals begin to think in terms of the greater social good, the home takes on a different cultural meaning. We will utilize the home as a place of rest and nurturance, but it will no longer isolate individuals from social life. When society begins to meet the needs of individuals rather than the needs of capitalism or men, the home can perform its natural human function.

Finally, Gilman discusses the proper care and education of children. The key to successful child rearing is what Gilman terms, “social parentage.” Individual parents do the best they can, but this is not enough. As a society, the United States fails to care for their children. “The individual parents do fairly well; but the collective parents, who constitute society, fail shamefully in their collective duties” (Gilman 1901:279). For Gilman, socialized childcare and education are central and the state must become intricately involved in this component of social health:

As now society provides the school for the young citizen, on the ground of public advantage, without regard to the inability of the parent, so we must learn to provide a far richer and more complete education, and all else that the parent falls short in, because it is necessary for the good of society, and because we love our children (1901:298).

Additionally, we must examine our educational methods. We must create the type of environments that nurture our children at each stage of their development, moving from creativity and play to the development of critical thinking and social
consciousness (Maloney 1998). We must design appropriate child-safe spaces and also the curriculum that nurture these most important social members. However, these changes require us to understand and respect children. It is their growth and development that in many ways provides the model for Gilman’s social vision.

GILMAN’S UTOPIAN SOCIAL THOUGHT, PLAY, AND THE CLASSROOM

The aforementioned themes are central to an understanding of Gilman’s work. However, these themes resound throughout the body of her fictional works as well. In this way, Gilman worked to reach a wider audience and to bring her theories to life in the imagination of her readers. In many ways, she grounds her work in hope that accessible sociological writings (i.e., her utopian fiction) will result in the awaking of individuals to the possibility of social change and progress—indeed, through the development of her imaginary “social citizens” one is allowed to witness the creation of the “sociological imagination” identified much later by C. Wright Mills. In many ways this is also the goal of the feminist classroom.

In what follows, we discuss the ways that Gilman’s sociological goals are linked with feminist pedagogy and early feminist utopian writing. More specifically, we discuss how Gilman’s “fun” sociology and feminism go beyond her own goals for social transformation in empowering our students to rethink the oppressive social relations that Gilman describes and also in their ability to awaken our students to the power of the “sociological imagination.” By offering possible alternatives to capitalism, privatized housework and childcare, and patriarchal social relations (core themes in feminist utopian fiction), Gilman’s works can be utilized as a powerful and accessible pedagogical device for enhancing the critical thinking skills of our students regardless of disciplinary boundaries. This is true of her more explicit sociological theories as noted above, and also of her more playful, and indeed less threatening, utopian fiction. It is to these works and their relationship to feminist pedagogical themes that we now turn.

Through an examination of three of Gilman’s most powerful utopian fictions, Moving the Mountain (1911), Herland (1915), and With Her in Ourland (1916) I will demonstrate the potential for empowerment in fictional “fun” and its potential for transforming the traditional classroom encounter. As Deegan notes, these works are actually a sociological transformation of Gilman’s female sociology from nonfiction to fiction. Gilman linked the languages of “social science” and systematic observation with creativity and literary imagination. Her sociological innovation and imagination make unique contributions to the sociology of knowledge (Deegan 1997:41).

Gilman understood the power of feminist utopian fiction and used this genre to articulate her sociological insights to the world. But we are not to be limited by Gilman’s vision—we can use her “method” to create a more effective and engaged classroom community.

Remembering that feminist educators attempt to create more egalitarian and empowering relationships between students, teacher, and subjects of study; alter traditional classroom encounters through the development of learning communities and connected knowing; foster the understanding that learning is an unending process and that knowledge and ideas are necessarily partial and incomplete; and recognize the obligation to be moral role-models for their students, we can now examine the ways in which Gilman’s work embodies these tenets.

**Feminist Utopias: Fear, Resistance, and the Creation of Community**

Although Gilman determined that women’s contributions are essential to social progress, she was not insensitive to the fears these new ideas create. Change does not come without resistance. Like many contemporary scholars of feminist
pedagogy, Gilman understood the necessity of dealing with these fears at the outset. Without extensive discussions of these
fears, individuals (men and women) will continue to resist gender equality and social reform. This was evidenced in the
discussion of resistance to feminist teaching methods as well.

In her more scholarly work Gilman addresses this issue head on: “To put the most natural question first—what will
men lose by it [women’s equality]?” (1911a:255). Gilman recognized the value of dialogue. What an invaluable question.
She offers individuals the opportunity to talk about their fears and thus eliminates a certain level of resistance. Gilman
understands that within a patriarchal capitalist society, individuals are afraid of giving up privilege. She does not believe
that women’s equality will harm men or the family. Further, she does not wish to feminize the social world or reestablish the
matriarchate. Rather, her aim is a more humanized society, which also has the potential to liberate men. However, she
realizes that despite her claims to the contrary, people are afraid of change. Thus, she works to allay these fears:

The woman, free at last, intelligent, recognizing her real place and responsibility in life as a human being, will be not
less but more efficient as a mother. She will understand that in the line of physical evolution motherhood is the
highest process; and that her work, as a contribution to an improved race, must always involve this great function.
She will see that the right parentage is the purpose of the whole schema of sex relationship, and act accordingly
(1911a:256).

It is not a question of interfering with or punishing men; still less of interfering with or punishing women; but purely a
matter of changed education and opportunity for every child (1911a:257).

Both men and women stand to gain from the equality of the sexes. Each will contribute to what Gilman considers the
highest social calling—the role of parenthood. This social equality will bring about changes in all social institutions, and
rightly so. However, Gilman believes that men are justified in fearing the leadership of women in their present evolutionary
or oppressed state. Hence, she calls for equal leadership from men and women after women have become more “human” or
social creatures.

Interestingly, we believe that Gilman utilizes the utopian genre to make her progressive social theories more palatable
to the general society. Many of the theoretical constructs explicated above were present in her fictional writings as well.
However, her weapons of change were humor and sarcasm—Gilman understood the power of the fantastic in presenting her
seemingly more outrageous ideas. She encourages “active critical participation on the part of the reader” (Ferns 1998:31),
challenging us to move beyond our fears of social change and to imagine the possibilities foretold in her more scholarly
works. To move her plan forward, she creates societies in which any of these ideas are possible—societies that force us to
recognize the immediacy and seriousness of her goal, societies that resemble our own and could be foretelling of a more
progressive and indeed, positive future.

**Utopian Thought and the Sociological Imagination**

In her utopian writings, *Moving the Mountain* (1911b), *Herland* (1915), and *With Her in Ourland* (1916), Gilman
works to create for the reader an image of the ideal society. She dares to imagine a more perfect world—at times through
the eyes of a character who has known nothing else and then travels to the less than perfect (according to Gilman) United
States society at the turn of the twentieth century—just imagine it! She uses these types of contrasts to force the reader into
an active examination of their own surroundings and social conditions. By juxtaposing the “real” with the dream or unreal,
Gilman encourages her students to look beyond the present and imagine, and indeed, envision a more progressive society.
To Gilman, the vision is quite real, yet she is able to neutralize the reader’s fear of such elaborate changes by weaving such
an entertaining and positive outcome for both the society and her characters. Ultimately, the reader can imagine living in such a world, which naturally leads to the understanding of such societies as being possible and desired—this is Gilman’s primary consideration in the furthering of sociological thought. By becoming active in the reading (which one must always do in Gilman’s work) one becomes connected to the idea of creating a better society.

In *Moving the Mountain* (1911b), Gilman writes of the protagonist, John who, after being lost for thirty years in Tibet, is found only to discover a radically altered or improved American society. Gilman tours John and the reader through this new creation presenting in a fantastical fashion the vision of her social thought and the potential of a properly guided social evolution—one that John and again, the reader have difficulty accepting.

*Herland* (1915) offers the reader an imaginary utopia, an isolated land of women presented through the eyes of the three male protagonists—a sociologist, an athletic man of leisure with a penchant for exploring the unknown, and a doctor. The travelers discover a society in which women have evolved in such a way as to no longer need men—at least the more “masculinized” male represented by the three. They have developed industry, social education, social motherhood, clothing, and family life designed to enhance the lives of individuals and ultimately the advancement of the Herlander society (the name given them by the three men). Obviously such a society forces the three travelers to rethink, indeed reconsider, the “progress” of social life in the United States, their home—ultimately the reader must do the same.

Although *Herland* (1911b) is an imaginary utopia, Gilman offers *With Her in Ourland* (1916) the sequel as a realistic critique of U.S. society. In this account Gilman tracks the experiences of Elador, one of the central figures of *Herland* who marries the sociologist, Van, and travels back to the “real” world with him. She is shocked by her discoveries and is continuously dismayed as she compares life in the United States to the more evolved society of Herland. Elador’s forthright critiques oftentimes offend Van, but offer readers a more accessible version of Gilman’s social thought. Not surprisingly, Elador’s concerns mirror those expressed by Gilman in her more scholarly sociological works.

Each of these works elaborate on the social pathologies and their solutions identified earlier in this work. More specifically, Gilman uses her fictional work to explain the importance of social health and collective-mindedness, the power of dominant ideologies, although outdated, and their limiting impact on the social body, and the necessity of freeing women and properly educating children. These are the most important lessons Gilman hoped to impart upon the readers of her works.

**Individualism and Collective Living: A Lesson in Unlearning**

First, Gilman addresses the importance of the “collective” in social life in each of these utopian works. This is evidenced in *Moving the Mountain* as John’s sister Nellie attempts to explain the changes in regards to individualism:

…behaving better in our early days was a small personal affair; either a pathetically inadequate failure, self-righteous success in doing what one could. All personal—personal! …That was precisely what kept us so small and bad, so miserably confined and discouraged. Like a lot of well-meaning soldiers imagining that their evolutions were “a personal affair”—or an orchestra plaintively protesting that if each man played a correct tune of his own choosing, the result would be perfect! Dear! dear! No, Sir…that’s just where we changed our minds! Humanity has come alive, I tell you and we have reason to be proud of our race! (Gilman 1911b:46-47).

The difference between the present and past social conditions is the value on the health of the social body and the recognition that individuals must always work for the good of the whole—it is futile to hope that isolated individuals will have any lasting impact on the society. What is needed is concerted effort on the part of the whole. Interestingly, like many
today, John is not able to absorb this “radical” way of thinking and rejects Nellie’s explanation. It is not until much later in the story when John finds his unmarried cousin Drusilla isolated from the “new society” living on a mountain farm that he understands the toll the old ways take on individual lives, particularly those of women:

She had practically no education—only a few years in a country school in childhood, and almost no reading, writing, conversation, any sort of knowledge of the life of the world about her. And here she lived, meek, patient, helpless, with neither complaint nor desire, endlessly working to make comfortable the parents who must some day leave her alone... (Gilman 1911b:288).

Interestingly the lesson is learned through his comparison of Drusilla with her more modern counterparts:

I thought of them, those busy, vigorous, eager, active women, of whom no one would ever predicate either youth or age; they were just women, permanently, as men were men. I thought of their wide, free lives, their absorbing work and many minor interests, and the big, smooth, beautiful, moving world in which they lived, and my heart went out to Drusilla as to a baby in a well (Gilman 1911b:289).

However, John learns more than sympathy from this lesson. He marries Drusilla and watches as her life is transformed as she comes alive in the new world. He comes to love the new world because of the possibilities and freedom it affords for his “spinster” wife. All of the changes he witnessed during his travels were not enough to change his mind initially.

“Unlearning” outmoded or dysfunctional societal ideals, such as individualism can be quite painful. However, John offers Gilman’s readers (or our students) an opportunity to see how these types of changes take place and also the inner-struggles such thinking engenders. She never claims that the process is easy, but alludes to the idea of process as she forces her characters to grapple with alternative ideals and goals and to continuously grapple with their conclusions.

Ideaology and Social Pathology: Untangling the Old and Embracing the Future

Next, Gilman stresses the power of ideology in shaping social life. More specifically, she discusses the negative force of androcentric cultural values and religious beliefs and their facilitation of social pathology. Most importantly, she notes that seemingly “civilized” societies cling to the past in order to explain the present despite the fact that the explanations are no longer useful or even accurate. In Herland Van attempts to explain the purpose and origins of the Christian religion to Elador and finds that she has no concept of such “past-mindedness”: “What I cannot understand...is your preservation of such a very ancient state of mind. This patriarchal idea you tell me is thousands of years old?” (Gilman 1915:113). In Herland the women are future oriented with an emphasis on living rather than what is to occur in the afterlife. Additionally, as beliefs, theories, and laws progress, they are changed: “We have no laws over a hundred years old, and most of them are under twenty” (Gilman 1915:63). Progress is the center of everyday life, not tradition.

Again, however, Gilman recognizes the difficulty in implementing and teaching the new ways. This is evident in Moving the Mountain as Nellie attempts to reconcile the changes John is experiencing in the new world with his previous understanding of what social life should be. She acknowledges his resistance and encourages him to press on:

Our world has changed in these thirty years, more than the change between what it used to be and what people used to imagine about Heaven. Here is the first thing you’ve got to do—mentally. You must understand, clearly, in your human consciousness, that the objection and distaste you feel is only in your personal consciousness. Everything is better; there is far more comfort, pleasure, peace of mind; a richer, swifter growth, a higher happier life in every way; and yet, you won’t like it because your...reactions are all tuned to earlier conditions. If you can understand this and see over your own personal—attitudes it will not be long before a real convincing sense of joy, of life, will follow the intellectual perception that things are better (Gilman 1911b:43-44).
Again, Gilman is pleading for reason and patience. As individuals are properly educated, they will come to recognize the inevitability of her plan—we cannot deny progress. However, as always with Gilman, the learner must discover this for him/herself.

In *With Her in Ourland* (1916) Gilman offers the reader another chance at thinking through such changes. After returning from Herland with Elador, Van is forced to reconsider the status of women in the United States—he is obliged to consider his complicity in a society that has systematically oppressed women. Indeed, his discussion of feminism (with Elador) illustrates this point:

Seeing women who were People and that they were People *because* they were women, not in spite of it. Seeing that what we had called “womanliness” was a mere excess of sex, not the essential part of it at all. When I came back here and compared our women with yours—well, it was a blow (1916:66).

We men, having all human power in our hands, have used it to warp and check the growth of women. We, by choice and selection, by law and religion, by enforced ignorance, by heavy overcultivation of sex, have made the kind of woman we so made by nature, that that is what it was to be a woman. Then we heaped our scornful abuse upon her ages and ages of it, the majority of men in all nations still looking down on women. And then, as if that was not enough—really, my dear, I’m not joking, I’m ashamed, as if I’d done it myself—we, in our superior freedom, our monopoly of education, with the law in our hands, both to make and execute, with every conceivable advantage—we have blamed women for the sins of the world (1916:67).

Yet Gilman works to resolve this tension for the male antagonist (and other men as well), ultimately conferring the responsibility to make change on the women:

Don’t be too hard on Mr. Man…What you say is true enough, but so are other things. What puzzles me most is not at all the background of explanation, but what ails the women *now*. Here, even here in America, *now*. They have had some education for several generations, numbers of them have time to think, some few have money—I cannot be reconciled to the women Van (1916:67)!  

While Elador/Gilman may be placing too much responsibility on the women, she indeed offers men the opportunity to acknowledge their participation in women’s oppression, yet relieving them of total responsibility for change. Again, it is difficult, and perhaps painful, for individuals to recognize their position in the power structure—particularly as their privilege is obtained at the expense of others. Gilman softens “the blow” thus making sociological ideals more palatable to the reader.

*The Future of Women and Children*

Finally, she addresses the importance of women’s liberation from the private sphere and the importance of social education in rearing children—for Gilman, these are the cornerstones of social progress. However, she is in all actuality arguing for the creation of a truly “human” society. As noted earlier all of society stands to gain from the elevated status of women and children.

Again turning to *Moving the Mountain*, we find that changes in the social structure seemingly baffle John. His brother-in-law, Owen, attempts to explain the current idea of marriage for the “New Lifers” as Gilman refers to them (and their religion):

You can only think about women in some sort of relation to men, of a change in kind; whereas what has happened is a change in *degree*. We still have monogamous marriages, on a much purer and more lasting plane than a generation ago; but the word “wife” does not mean what it used to…[Now] she does not “belong” to anyone in that old sense. She is the wife of her husband in that she is his true lover, and that their marriage is legally recorded; but her life and work does not belong to him. He has no right to her “services” any more. A woman who is in a business…does not
give it up when she marries (Gilman 1911b:102-103).

Initially, John does not realize that his sister has married—she never told him about this facet of her life, as it is not perceived by Nellie as her defining role or “master status.” Precisely because Nellie is successful (college president) and has not changed her name John assumes that she is unmarried. John has much to learn about this alternative society and women’s roles—what was once considered natural (i.e., women’s maternal and domestic roles) is now viewed as a social construction.

Interestingly, Gilman does not do away with motherhood in any of her utopias. For Gilman, motherhood is a woman’s highest calling. However, she does not place the burden of parentage solely on women. Instead, she calls upon the members of the social body to share in the important task of raising and educating children, the future of humanity. In Herland, many women are mothers. Yet they do not believe that all women are equally capable. While all who reproduce (via parthenogenesis) are allowed to be mothers, they are not allowed to be the primary influence on their children. Somel, Van’s tutor on the history and culture of Herland explained that “[t]he care of babies involves education, and is entrusted only to the most fit” (Gilman 1915:83). Mothering on Herland is viewed as an art and a calling requiring both great skill and talent:

You see, almost every woman values her maternity above everything else. Each girl holds it close and dear, an exquisite joy, a crowing honor, the most intimate, most personal, most precious thing. That is, the child-rearing has come to be with us a culture so profoundly studied, practiced with such subtlety and skill, that the more we love our children, the less we are willing to trust that process to unskilled hands—even our own (Gilman 1915:83).

Again, motherhood is recognized as not only valuable, but as essential to the progress of a society. When removed from patriarchal economic relations and religion, women focus on the importance of life and nurturing of the young, as they are the future of humanity.

In With Her in Ourland (1916) Gilman offers a critique of existing home life in the United States, arguing that women have much to contribute. While motherhood is inherently valuable in Herland, she argues that the United States must also move in this direction. This is evident in Elador’s discussion with Van:

Your children grow up in charge of home-bound mothers who recognize no interest, ambition, or duty outside the home—except to get to heaven if they can. These home-bound women are man-suckers; all they get he must give them, and they want a good deal…It is not only this relentless economic pressure, though. What underlies it and accounts for it all is the limitation of idea! You think Home, you talk Home, where you should from earliest childhood be seeing life in terms of community (1916:45).

Although certainly a critique of existing social arrangements, Elador also offers Van (and the reader) practical solutions to these problems:

Definite training in democratic thought, feeling and action, from infancy. An economic administration of common resources under which the home would cease to be a burden and become an unconscious source of happiness and comfort. And, of course, the socialization of home industry (1916:45).

Accordingly, in both Herland and Moving the Mountain, education is a lifelong process that goes beyond socialization into the existing society. Rather, education functions as the foundation for both order and change or progress. Early on, children begin to learn in the least intrusive ways possible. They are taught to feel secure in their explorations of everyday life. They play within safe buildings and are exposed to nature early on—they are never kept from the elements unless it is for their safety. As children grow they are taught the laws, customs, and so on, but they are also taught to
question the existing structure and to make adjustments as necessary. Tradition and obedience are not the major foci in this more progressive education. Instead, students are taught to be creative and imaginative and to work for the larger social good. In this way, knowledge is not viewed as something one obtains once and for all, but is always partial and continuous. Somel explains the Herlanders’ views on education as follows:

Our theory is this…Here is a young human being. The mind is as natural a thing as the body, a thing that grows, a thing to use and to enjoy. We seek to nourish, to stimulate, to exercise the mind of a child as we do the body. There are two main divisions in education…the things it is necessary to know, and the things it is necessary to do…Our general plan is this: In the matter of feeding the mind, or furnishing information, we use our best powers to meet the natural appetite of a healthy young brain; not to overfeed it, to provide such amount and variety of impressions as seem most welcome to each child. That is the easiest part. The other division is in arranging a properly graduated series of exercises which will best develop each mind; the common faculties we all have, and most carefully, the especial faculties some of us have. You do this also, do you not? (Gilman 1915:105).

It is this final question that forces Van to reexamine the educational process and to imagine a far superior alternative. In his questioning Van feels discomfort; however, it is this discomfort that leads to critical thinking for both Van and the reader.

**The Learner as Knower and Doer**

As is part of Gilman’s plan, the reader becomes an intricate part of her utopian vision. As the reader comes to imagine alternatives to current social arrangements, seeds for Gilman’s “real” social vision are planted. While the characters in these three utopian fictions all do the “imagining” for us, they cannot convey their vision without effort from the reader—this is active learning at its finest. Despite resistance to change, Gilman achieves her goal. Potentially without their knowing it (which may be best at the outset) readers begin to see with their own eyes what a more progressive society might be like. While Gilman paints the fictional account, she also encourages creativity in our own constructions of progress.

Obviously, this type of learning/doing resonates with current ideas about feminist teaching. Contrary to more traditional methods, the liberation/feminist pedagogue encourages students to become part of the learning process. As Gilman argues in her own views on education, progressive learning cannot become static or rote. One must always strive to engage the student/learner in the process of knowing and becoming something more—more than what the teacher has to transmit, something that is unique to each individual experience.

**DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

It is evident that Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s utopian fiction and social thought are very closely linked to feminist pedagogical strategies. Indeed, Gilman’s own pedagogical goals can be identified as predecessors of the feminist pedagogical techniques advocated by feminist teachers and scholars today. Although flawed in very central ways (as will be discussed in greater detail below), particularly concerning her views on race, social class, and sexuality, her work inspires contemporary feminists to make the classroom an exciting, active, and challenging community.

However, as noted previously, many scholars, teachers, and students resist teaching and learning that is “fun.” This may be why sociologists and other sociologists have ignored Gilman’s more theoretical works and also her utopian fiction. Yet, these fictional writings are the very works that make her theories accessible to the average person. Gilman sought through her “fun” writings to challenge us to imagine her utopians as reality, and to work to make them more possible. Although serious in her endeavors, Gilman recognized the power of playful writings, in this case her utopian visions
presented in *Moving the Mountain* (1911b); *Herland* (1915); and *With Her in Ourland* (1916).

Despite the fact that Gilman writes in an accessible format designed to reach both scholars and the average citizen, her work is flawed in a number of serious ways. First, when writing of “women,” it is essential to note that Gilman does not view all women as equal. There are race and social class biases in most of her theoretical writings and fiction. Writing from a middle-class perspective (although poor much of her life) Gilman often blames the poor for their plight. Although she advocates equality, she does not believe that all are, equally deserving when it comes to economic survival. In “A Suggestion on the Negro Problem” she advocates segregation and the idea that African Americans are inferior to their white counterparts. Following in this vein, she is equally nationalist and often reacts negatively to immigrants encouraging the U.S. to limit the immigration of inferior races. Additionally, Gilman’s writing is overtly heterosexist. Again, she does not include all women—in this case lesbian or bisexual women. Further, gay men would also be excluded from her utopian vision. Even in *Herland* (1915) she creates a land of only women but the women are “sisters” only. It appears that women do not need intimate or sexual relations at all unless men are present—and only then for “natural” reproductive purposes. Finally, while she writes of the oppressive conditions of the home, she does not believe that all women are equally oppressed by household labor. More specifically, when arguing for the training and employment of domestic workers, she is more than willing to place African Americans or immigrants in these roles—indeed, housework can be “fulfilling” if one has the inborn capacity to perform such labor.

We believe it is clear from the above examples that we cannot simply hand students Gilman’s writings and expect them to be “liberated” in the classroom. Rather, as liberatory educators we have the responsibility to encourage a critique of all readings without dismissing them. Gilman had much to say about oppression, but she did not have the final word. Teaching students to go beyond the reading to find new answers is also a part of feminist pedagogy.

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ENDNOTES

[1] This work is partially adapted from Julie Harms Cannon’s 1997 dissertation, “Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s Contributions to Classical Sociology (successfully defended dissertation, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, advisor Helen A. Moore). We would like to extend our sincere appreciation to committee members and colleagues whose comments enhanced the dissertation and ultimately this final project.

[2] Although Gilman was a feminist writer, she was not in favor of equality for all. It is important to note that Gilman addresses racism in her utopian fictions, and she does attempt to resolve these issues in her theoretical works, however, she never overcomes this problem. She wrote from a white, middle class perspective and did not include the struggles of minority women and men as part of her struggles.


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