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The Cyclical Evolution of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's Gender Discourse: Traces of Utopia and Dystopia in "The Yellow Wallpaper" and *Herland*

La evolución cíclica del discurso de género de Charlotte Perkins Gilman: rastros de utopía y distopía en "The Yellow Wallpaper" y Herland

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Abstract
This article argues that the transformation of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's gender discourse from dystopia to utopia, which is exemplified by means of the commonly perceived evolution from her tale "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892) to her novel *Herland* (1915), does not follow a linear progression from submission to feminist insurgence, but rather presents a cyclical evolution. As an author, Gilman is able to encounter spaces of creativity in displays of female insanity arising from patriarchal subjection, and instances of subjugation in idealised depictions of matriarchal communities. Both works involve manifestations of oppression and exultation, even if they were written at different stages of creativity and have usually been considered as divergent in their respective gender approach. This premise will be achieved through a comparative analysis between "The Yellow Wallpaper" and *Herland* by means of identifying thematic traces pertaining to dystopian and utopian fiction in both works.

Keywords: Utopia, Dystopia, Cyclical Evolution, Trace, Gender.

Resumen
Este artículo defiende que la transformación del discurso de género de Charlotte Perkins Gilman de la distopía a la utopía, que se ejemplifica a través de la evolución comúnmente percibida desde su narración "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892) a su novela utópica *Herland* (1915), no sigue una progresión lineal de la sumisión a la insurgencia feminista, sino que presenta, principalmente, una evolución cíclica. Como autora, Gilman es capaz de encontrar espacios de creatividad en muestras de delirio femenino derivado de la sujeción patriarcal, así como ejemplos de subyugación en descripciones idealizadas de comunidades matriarcales. Ambas obras aportan manifestaciones de opresión y de exultación, pese a pertenecer a diferentes etapas de creatividad y haber sido usualmente consideradas como divergentes en lo que atañe a su aproximación de género. Esta premisa se abordará a través del análisis comparativo entre "The Yellow Wallpaper" y *Herland* por medio de la identificación de rastros temáticos pertenecientes a la ficción distópica y utópica en ambas obras.

Palabras clave: Utopía, distopía evolución cíclica, rastro, género.

Introduction

Utopian narratives portray imaginary communities that possess nearly perfect or desirable qualities for its members and are presented as idealised and improved versions of actual societies. Nonetheless, as Lyman Tower Sargent claims, utopias are inherently contradictory, insofar as the civilisations portrayed in utopian narratives are not homogenous and often display ambivalent ideals, even to the extent of acquiring a dangerous turn despite aiming to portray the improvement of the human condition (2010: 21). In the field of feminist utopias, as Helen Tierney argues, gender is considered as socially or biologically determined (1999: 1442), and it is often proposed that gender discrimination could be overcome by either ignoring gender and establishing a society on the basis of androgynous equality or by choosing gender differentiation along separatist lines. As a forerunner suggestive of the demands for women's suffrage during the time of its publication, Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward: 2000-1887* (1888), followed by its sequel *Equality* (1897), portray a utopian social order in which equality between women and men prevails, although women are committed to a separate sphere of activity given their alleged lesser physical strength as indicative of the gender prejudices prevailing at the time.

In more recent proponents of utopian fiction, the coexistence between the sexes is orchestrated in different ways. Although Robin Anne Reid claims that utopian narratives written by men often give precedence to the coexistence between sexes rather than their separation (2004: 102), since the disconnection between sexes rather turns into a trope more commonly found in women writers' utopian fiction, there are also a series of utopian narratives envisioned by women writers that also address gender equality in societies where women and men coexist. As a case in point, in Elisabeth Mann Borghese's *My Own Utopia* (1961), children are born genderless and their maturation into women or men depends on age rather than sex. Ursula K. LeGuin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), which is listed among the first novels to be categorised as feminist science fiction, addresses androgyny and ambisexuality. In Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976), complete gender equality extends to sexuality and even birth-giving as a result of an elaborate biological machinery. As Brian Attebery claims, in contrast with utopias that depict the coexistence between sexes—and emphasise equality—there are utopian narratives that represent single-sex societies and place emphasis on difference (2000: 13), particularly after the increasing rise of lesbian movements. The portrayal of only-female societies allows for the exploration of female independence and release from patriarchy in classic utopian novels, such as Joanna Russ's *The Female Man* (1970), Shelley Singer's *The Demeter Flower* (1980), and Katherine Forrest's *Daughters of a Coral Dawn* (1984). Subsequently, Pamela Sargent's *The Shore of Women* (1986) portrays a post-nuclear society ruled by women in which men are considered outcasts, Joan Slonczewski's *A Door into Ocean* (1986) pictures an all-female society in which ecology and egalitarianism acquire a pivotal role, Sherri S. Tepper's *The Gate to Women's Country* (1988) depicts a utopian matriarchy which extols women and children living together whereas men are ostracised, Nicola Griffith's *Ammonite* (1992) unveils that the native population inhabiting a planet is entirely female, and Diana Rivers's *Journey to Zelindar: The Personal Account of Sair of Semasi* (1992) characterise women with powers

and reading-mind abilities in a society consisting exclusively of female citizens. As Elaine Showalter claims, since each generation comes to terms with a sort of "self-hatred that has alienated women writers" (1977: 11), it came a point when they resorted to the genres of fantasy and speculative fiction, and particularly, utopia, with the purpose of creating a better world for women. Following Showalter's claim, it can be argued that Charlotte Perkins Gilman's novel *Herland* (1915) became an earliest feminist utopian narrative that envisions an all-female community based on human values where women are self-sufficient insofar as they have developed a reproductive system which allows them to procreate on their own regardless of men.

In comparison with utopia, dystopian narratives usually revolve around hypothetical realities that present undesirable and even frightening qualities. Dystopian fiction often addresses themes such as oppression and control, censorship, loss of individuality, and enforcement of conformity, while they are critical of contemporary social and political systems by means of presenting an imaginary society that is even substantially worse than its actual counterpart. Nonetheless, despite the apparent opposition between utopian and dystopian narratives, literary utopias and dystopias often present some elements in common. As Gregory Claeys and Lyman Tower Sargent (1999) claim, some dystopias, which are known as anti-utopias, entail disastrous attempts to achieve utopian ideals that result in negative outcomes, thus delineating a transition based on their etymological meaning from a utopian 'no place' to a dystopian 'bad place.' As suggestive of socio-political realities, according to Claeys (2016), dystopian narratives address global dangers associated with science, social inequality, and despotic systems. Nonetheless, dystopian narratives also tackle fears and concerns at a more personal level, involving family life, personal identity, and the interaction between the individual and nature. In comparison with utopia, dystopian fiction usually explores dreadful circumstances from a rather pessimistic perspective, thus tackling issues such as dehumanisation and perpetual surveillance, although it also focuses its attention on individuals who attempt to challenge these oppressive systems.

Owing to the description of exploitive state of affairs under autocratic regimes, dystopia appears to be a particularly suitable genre to approach patriarchal communities where women live in perpetual subjection as a result of constraining gender dictates. Nonetheless, with few exceptions that acquired unprecedented popularity, such as Suzy McKee Charnas's *Walk to the End of the World* (1974), Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and Octavia E. Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (1993), fantasy novels that depict imaginary societies in which gender plays a major role have often fallen under the categorisation of utopia rather than dystopia, particularly with the rise of the second-wave feminist movement. In fact, fantasy narratives that address women's concerns as a result of patriarchal regimes have traditionally been characterised as female Gothic disregarding the fact that they display narratological elements also pertaining to fantasy and speculative fiction and, predominantly, to dystopian fiction. As a case in point, decades prior to the publication of her utopian novel *Herland*, Gilman wrote her tale "The Yellow Wallpaper," which has traditionally been considered as a gothic tale. Critics like Greg Johnson (1989) focus on the female narrator's claustrophobic and startling confinement leading to madness, while Alan Ryan (1989) highlights the presence of the ghostly female figure in the wallpaper, as defining elements in the gothic tradition.

Moreover, though, Gilman's tale "The Yellow Wallpaper" also presents features that are distinctive of dystopian fiction, since it addresses the frightening consequences of living under the subjugation of patriarchy, while it also discloses the presence of a parallel reality that diverges from the narrator's everyday existence. Furthermore, in Gilman's tale, the female narrator's subjection to enclosure and surveillance as a result of constraining medical treatment is highly evocative of dystopia.

Traditionally, it has often been assumed that utopian and dystopian narratives respectively display contrasting narratological features. Taking Christine de Pizan's *The Book of the City of Ladies* (1405) and Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516) as seminal precursors of utopia, narratives pertaining to this genre usually depict peaceful societies where equality prevails for all citizens, while residents have access to education and are allowed to think independently in a setting in which humanism and ecology become guiding principles. In contrast, dystopian fiction mostly envisions dehumanised civilisations in which information and freedom are restricted, citizens live in permanent anguish, and constant surveillance is exerted to prevent individuals from thinking autonomously. Besides, in dystopian narratives, individuals sacrifice their rights in exchange for a higher standard of living, which leads to the fantasy of living in an idealised society, even though citizens are subjected to totalitarian regulations. Nevertheless, despite the apparent opposition established between utopia and dystopia, as Eric Rabkin, Martin Greenberg and Joseph Olander (1983) claim, they share narratological elements as narratives that deal with imaginary communities from an either idealised or pessimistic perspective. It can thus be argued that utopian fiction comprises some dystopian elements, whereas dystopian fiction also presents some features pertaining to utopia. As Gregory Eck (2001) notes, insofar as utopia is based on theoretical ideals, its implementation—even if it is in the domain of fiction—is revealed to be far from ideal. Moreover, when utopia falls short of its ideals, utopian societies can easily dissolve into dystopia. Significantly, in its title, Ursula K. LeGuin's classic novel *The Dispossessed: An Ambiguous Utopia* (1974) already suggested the double-edged quality that often characterises utopian novels with a feminist perspective. Likewise, as Keith Booker claims, for the most part, the positive realities that women writers envision in their feminist utopian novels often include "dystopian warnings" (1994: 339), which unveils their latent awareness of the prevailing patriarchal structures, even in utopian writings. All in all, given the blurring boundaries distinguishing utopia from dystopia in speculative fiction that explicitly deals with gender, it becomes feasible to analyse traces of dystopia in narratives which have often been considered utopian and, conversely, it is also possible to identify traces of utopia in tales which display issues that have commonly been associated with dystopian fiction.

As has been put forward, Gilman's *Herland* has conventionally been regarded as a feminist utopian narrative, insofar as it presents features characterising utopian fiction, such as its portrayal of a society exclusively made up of women that is free of domination and conflict, and where equality, education, humanism, and respect for nature are collectively extolled and preserved. Nevertheless, despite being traditionally categorised within the genre of utopia, Gilman's novel also presents elements that are evocative of dystopia. As critics such as Kristen Egan (2011) claim, although Herland consists of a single-sex community based on separatist feminism, this exclusively female management responds to necessity rather than will, since it is as a result of cataclysm that the men were

banished from the land. In spite of being portrayed as an idyllic all-female community, it is exclusively made up of young women, and deprived of diversity and multiculturalism, while it resorts to questionable reproductive methods that bring to mind the spectre of eugenics. Furthermore, even if this society is meant to be a feasible replication of feminist ideals, it almost exclusively operates on the basis of breeding and parenting, whereas sexuality is exclusively aimed at procreation, which are premises that, paradoxically, evoke the ethics of domesticity predominant in Victorian times. Besides, given the importance that the biological role of motherhood acquires in this community, critics such as Lynne Evans (2014) go as far as to claim that this society entails a subjugating system based on biological assumptions of motherhood and femaleness which is not so far removed from the patriarchal precepts that essentialise gender conventions. Furthermore, in spite of being proclaimed as an all-female society, after coexisting with the male explorers, who are in clear minority in comparison, the female inhabitants in Herland finally embrace ideas about marriage and intersexual procreation, thus suggesting that they finally renounce their ideals for the sake of those pertaining to the men. Moreover, insofar as the narrative is told from the perspective of one of the male explorers, since Vandyck Jennings is a homodiegetic narrator, the female citizens are symbolically deprived of their own voices. These features thus contribute to undermining the utopian and feminist ideals characterising this community and reveal the subtle dystopian subtext pervading the novel.

Conversely, Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" has often been considered a gothic tale with significant dystopian components, since it denounces the stifling confinement that a woman experiences as a result of a rest cure which her husband and doctor prescribes in order to treat her postpartum depression. Progressively, though, Gilman's tale also unveils covert traces which endow the text with utopian undertones. Gilman's narrative overtly complies with some tenets of dystopian fiction, since the female narrator's freedom is restricted, she is under constant surveillance, and she feels trapped in a patriarchal system—the institution of marriage—which allows her to enjoy a higher standard of living, but in exchange, deprives her of individuality and freedom. Given these elements, which emphasise control and oppression, critics such as Paula Treichler (1984) have interpreted the female narrator's routine of observing the wallpaper as evidence of her subjection to the patriarchal discourse, which is inscribed on the convoluted drawings in the wall that she feels obliged to observe. Nonetheless, when the female narrator manages to identify a female figure hiding behind the imaginative bars in the wallpaper, even though it might appear as a sign of alienation, it is through this symbolic epiphany that she recognises her double figure, who is also waiting to be released and escape from her confinement. Besides, her enclosure in an attic room, which is described as oppressive at intervals, also endows the narrator with privacy and is paradoxically evocative of Virginia Woolf's statement about having a room for one's own in order to write, as she declared in her extended homonymous essay published in 1929. In fact, despite her husband's orders not to give vent to her creativity, the female narrator still manages to keep a journal, thus suggesting that she is able to write after all and give voice to her thoughts and anxieties. Furthermore, the ambiguous final passage in the tale, in which the female protagonist is reluctant to unlock the door, calls into question the nature of her enclosure, while her final daring and jubilant exclamation

upon managing to release the imaginary woman from the wall give evidence of utopian undertones which counteract the most overt dystopian traits in the tale.

In early interpretations of "The Yellow Wallpaper," critics such as Carol Farley Kessler (1985) have referred to Gilman's progress towards personal utopia in her fiction. More recently, Arzu Özyön refers to Gilman's "maturation journey as a feminist writer" (2020b: 115), which started with shorter pieces like "The Yellow Wallpaper" and reached its peak with her utopian trilogy of novels initiated with *Herland*. Nevertheless, it may be argued that, despite being proclaimed a utopian novel, *Herland* comprises elements pertaining to dystopian fiction, whereas "The Yellow Wallpaper," which has often been considered as representative of female Gothic—a genre within fantasy which shares narratological elements with dystopian fiction—also exhibits features pertaining to utopian fiction. A comparative analysis between these two narratives in terms of their gender discourse, and from the perspective of utopian and dystopian fiction, will reveal similarities between both texts that disclose the cyclical evolution of Gilman's gender discourse. Furthermore, insofar as this analysis will identify utopian traces in "The Yellow Wallpaper" and dystopian elements in *Herland*, it also aims to suggest that the uncommonness of dystopias in feminist fantasy fiction may respond to the fact that they have often been entirely categorised as utopias ignoring their latent dystopian undertones. Besides, it can also be argued that narratives often categorised as pertaining to the female Gothic that are related to the notion of the marvellous, and hence, to fantasy, present narratological elements in common with dystopian fiction.

Dystopia in "The Yellow Wallpaper": alienation, patriarchal rule, dehumanisation

Critical approaches to Gilman's tale "The Yellow Wallpaper" have emphasised its representation of female oppression as a result of patriarchal domination. Given its bleak portrayal of an anguishing rest cure, which arises as a metaphor of women's subjugation to patriarchy, critics like Faye Ringel (2016) consider Gilman's narrative as one of the most renowned female gothic stories written by a New England woman, while William Hughes (2016) regards Gilman's tale as a reflection of the gender discrimination prevailing in scientific discourses during the Victorian period, whereby the physician was invariably male and exerted his authority over his female patients. Although critical interpretations have traditionally put forward the gothic elements that pervade Gilman's tale and have considered it an exponent of female Gothic owing to its claustrophobic atmosphere, its psychological insights, the important role that motherhood plays in it, and its symbolic supernatural elements, "The Yellow Wallpaper" also presents narratological components that are suggestive of dystopian fiction. When the female narrator's attention is drawn to the wallpaper, she gains entry into another dimension that symbolises the alienation that she is suffering, which may be on account of her alleged mental breakdown or as a result of the repressive medical treatment that she is undergoing. As her will becomes subjected to that of her husband and doctor, thus remaining under constant surveillance and being forbidden to give free vent to her creativity, her condition in the attic room where she is

resting brings to mind the state of symbolic depersonalisation in narratives of dystopian fiction as a result of oppressive regimes that end up in the progressive dehumanisation of the individual.

As the plot unfolds, a series of elements pertaining to dystopia are presented in Gilman's tale, particularly in passages that underscore instances of patriarchal dominance. According to Catherine Golden (2002), the female narrator's husband is associated with an androcentric outlook in resemblance with other male characters in Gilman's fiction. Despite his apparent affection towards his wife, his determination to confine her in a room and oblige her to rest, hence forbidding her to take any action and condemning her to utter passivity, conforms to a scientific approach rooted in patriarchal discourses. As the female narrator admits, "John is a physician, and *perhaps* […] *perhaps* that is one reason that I do not get well faster" (2009: 3), which paves the way for interpreting John's overprotective demeanour as a hidden display of power and authority. Moreover, judging from her words, the female narrator suggests that her husband seems to adopt an infantilising attitude towards her. In fact, she draws attention to the fact that the room where she spends her confinement must have been a nursery in former times, as she still perceives the trace of the children's presence in it, stating that "it was a nursery first […] for the windows are barred for little children" (2009: 6), which implies the subtle parallelism that the female establishes between these children and herself as a result of her husband's patronising ways.

The dystopian dimension is mostly laid bare in Gilman's tale when the female narrator notices the peculiar qualities of the wallpaper in the room where she is confined. As is unveiled, she admits that "this paper looks to me as if it *knew* what a vicious influence it had" (2009: 8), and she also declares that "I lie here on this great immovable bed […] and follow the pattern about by the hour" (2009: 11). As the female narrator spends her confinement in the attic room, it is suggested that the grotesque lines on the yellow wallpaper amount to the only text that she is allowed to read or write. In this respect, Heather Thomas Kirk (2000) identifies the yellow wallpaper as a symbol of decadence that used to characterise the decorative arts of the *fin-de-siècle*, as wallpaper designs and patterns, especially created by male artists like William Morris, were progressively renovated in order to suit male tastes. As Thomas Kirk further argues, the male appropriation of wallpapers underlines men's need to exert control over a generally considered feminine domain like the domestic sphere. In "The Yellow Wallpaper," the female narrator feels alienated, as she remains permanently exposed to the passive contemplation of the wall. Male authority as imprinted on the drawings and the narrator's continuous exposure to male-designed patterns situate "The Yellow Wallpaper" in intertextual connection with other feminist textualities that portray female characters entrapped within domestic spaces in rooms designed from a male perspective. Actually, according to Rae Beth Gordon (1991), scientific research at the turn of the century established associations between the interior decoration of the home and mental pathologies that befell women as a result of their confinement in the domestic sphere. It could thus be argued that the female narrator is obliged to peruse the wallpaper patterns as an allegory of her submission to patriarchal discourses, which paves the way for her entry into a dystopian dimension.

Concerns about motherhood, confinement, and mental disorders are also tackled in dystopian narratives that address women's oppressive circumstances as a result of

constraining gender discourses. Regarding Gilman's tale, critics such as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (1979) as well as Ann J. Lane (1990) have referred to the parallelism that is established in Gilman's tale, on the one hand, between the room and the womb, as origin of life, since the female narrator has recently given birth to her child and, on the other hand, between the room and the tomb, as the narrator is condemned to live a life of seclusion—a life-in-death—as she is unable to assume any creative activity. According to prevailing gender prejudices, the husband believes that, insofar as his wife has become a mother, she has already fulfilled the creative role assigned to women. However, it is implied that the fact of having given birth to her child proves to be the reason for both her depression and her subsequent confinement. The female narrator admits that "these nervous troubles are dreadfully depressing" (2009: 7) and "I cry at nothing, and cry most of the time" (2009: 11), while she also complains about her seclusion, exclaiming that "I wish John would take me away from here" (2009: 13) and that "I would hate it myself if I had to live in this room long" (2009: 6), even to the extent of considering that, "to jump out of the window would be admirable exercise, but the bars are too strong to even try" (2009: 22). Insofar as the female narrator increasingly falls into despair—and even insanity—as a result of her restrictive situation, Gilman's narrative calls to mind Victorian discourses of female hysteria. Critics like Elaine Showalter (1985) argue that the proliferation of mental disorders befalling Victorian women could be taken as a metaphor of their subjugation to medical discourses owing to the pervasive influence of patriarchal dictates.

Tropes related to personal identity, depersonalisation, and dehumanisation, which remain latent in Gilman's tale, are also commonly found in dystopian narratives. Owing to her perpetual observation of the wallpaper, her discovery of the woman concealed and entrapped in it—which is indicative of her own oppressive situation—urges the female narrator to feel both identified and alienated from this female figure in this parallel reality. As is stated, "I didn't realise for a long time what the thing was that showed behind […] but now I am quite sure it is a woman" (2009: 16). At the end of the narrative, the female narrator appears to remove the wallpaper partially with the purpose of releasing the imprisoned woman—her *alter ego*—thus evincing the eventual blending between the female narrator and the woman enclosed behind the imaginary bars on the wallpaper, which also suggests the female narrator's gradual process of depersonalisation. When the female narrator manages to liberate her double, she appears to experience a moment of exultation. However, critics like Golden (2002) and, more recently, Özyön (2020b), defend an ambiguous interpretation of the conclusion of the story, since it can be argued that patriarchy is only momentarily redeemed, but not completely destroyed.

It may thus be claimed that Gilman provides an open-ended conclusion to the story, leaving the reader uncertain to foretell the husband's reaction once he regains consciousness and finds his wife in such altered condition. Moreover, the female narrator's final exclamation in relation to her release and the impossibility of being locked back—which is the only complaint that she utters aloud—takes place when John is unconscious and unable to hear it, thus paving the way for an ambiguous outcome of the story that may call into question whether the female narrator has truly attained any liberation at all. As Golden further argues, it may even be likely that, after John awakes, the narrator will return to her state of perpetual confinement or that her husband's discovery of her mental

condition may even lead him to resort to a more severe treatment to cure his wife's disorder. As Gilman reveals in her confessional essay "Why I Wrote 'The Yellow Wallpaper'" (1913), like the female narrator in the story, the author also suffered from depression after giving birth to her daughter, Kate, and endured the same medical treatment as the female narrator in the story, insofar as Gilman's physician, Weir Mitchell—John's *alter ego* in real life—prescribed Gilman a severe rest cure. Taking for granted that John in "The Yellow Wallpaper" may respond to a fictional personification of Gilman's own physician Weir Mitchell, Jennifer Tuttle (2000) mentions that Gilman chooses not to punish John so sharply as she usually does with most of the male characters that appear in her fiction, thus allowing the female narrator's husband to exert an absent, but latent, dominion in this narrative.

Accordingly, even if "The Yellow Wallpaper" has often been categorised as representative of the female Gothic, as a fictionalisation of the author's traumatic experience, it also presents traces pertaining to dystopia. Insofar as Gilman's tale complies with the fantastic, as it metaphorically swings between the strange and the marvellous, to use Tzvetan Todorov's term, it also comprises narratological elements from speculative and, in particular, dystopian fiction, since Gilman's tale portrays a female narrator gaining entry into a parallel reality by means of the presence of a symbolic magic wallpaper. The inclusion of this alternative dimension and imagined existence paves the way for exploring issues often commonly found in dystopia, such as dominance, repression, lack of freedom, dehumanisation, and the expectation of an eventual liberation which may only turn out to be a frustrated hope of deliverance.

Utopia in "The Yellow Wallpaper": the female double, a room of her own, the spectre of androgyny

Although Gilman's tale comprises elements pertaining to dystopian fiction, it also includes narratological components indicative of utopia which have often remained unnoticed, since the female narrator's jubilant thoughts suggestive of utopia are intermittently juxtaposed with feelings of oppression evocative of dystopia. As Özyön argues, "The Yellow Wallpaper" displays some protofeminist traces although it cannot be described as a fully feminist piece (2020b: 116). Passages from the narrative, such as the deliverance of the woman from the wallpaper, the female narrator's recurrent suggestion that she may leave the room at will, and her final exclamation as her husband lies inert on the floor contribute to bringing to the fore utopia in the tale. Even though dystopian elements, albeit under other denominations like female Gothic or even horror, have often been identified, utopian aspects, which remain latent throughout the tale, have hardly ever been put forward, since the discourse of oppression as a result of male dominance has taken precedence in critical analyses of Gilman's tale.

The female figure concealed in the wallpaper, who stands for the female narrator's double, paves the way for identifying the protagonist's bellicose nature, which is prone to unleash her utopian ideals in spite of her apparently repressive situation. As Gilbert and Gubar (1979) mention, the female narrator's confinement in the attic room is reminiscent

of other female characters in Victorian novels, in which women who apparently personify purity and submission often find their symbolic counterparts in rebellious doubles, who are allowed to symbolically give vent to their vindications through states of severe exaltation. As a case in point, it has often been acknowledged that, owing to her confinement in the attic, the female narrator in Gilman's narrative bears resemblance with the character of Bertha Mason in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), as Edward Rochester confines his first wife once he discovers her insanity, whereas Jane is haunted and frightened by Bertha's outrageous laughter reverberating all across Thornfield. Insofar as she tries to release the imprisoned female figure on the wall, who acts as a counterpart to Bertha Mason, the female narrator also gives evidence of her longing for freedom, thus transforming the grotesque patriarchal patterns of the wallpaper from symptoms of oppression into signs of successive liberation. This gradual conversion is described as the narrator claims that the woman in the wallpaper "is subdued, quiet" (2009: 11), but she subsequently adds that, "I think that woman gets out in the daytime" (2009: 19). The intertextual relation between Brontë's novel and Gilman's tale becomes manifest owing to the latent relationship established between the female protagonists and their doubles, since, in Gilman's tale, the wallpaper metaphorically turns into a mirror and the woman hiding behind it arises as the female narrator's *alter ego*, hence reflecting her enclosure, but also her latent rebellious nature. In this respect, according to Elaine R. Hedges (1973), Gilman's tale can be described as a text of subversion against the patriarchal institution of marriage in the Victorian period.

The female narrator's turn for creativity allows her to indulge in her utopian aspirations of enjoying an alternative reality in which her ambitions will be fulfilled. Henceforth, although the female narrator's obsessive reading of the patterns in the wallpaper, and her subsequent discovery of a woman hiding behind it, may be interpreted as symptoms of a mental condition, according to Golden (2002), it turns into a kind of creative madness to which the narrator voluntarily yields, choosing it as opposed to the kind of sanity to which her husband obliges her to conform. Moreover, according to Ann Lane (1990), the discovery of an alternative female identity enables the female narrator to write openly about herself. If, as Golden (2002) suggests, the female narrator's apparent folly turns into a means of rebellion against her husband's rules, the protagonist in Gilman's tale also attempts to embrace her confinement, even admitting a certain degree of comfort, since she states, "it is a big, airy room" (2009: 5), "I quite enjoy the room" (2009: 21), and "I don't want to go outside" (2009: 23). Furthermore, as is revealed at the end of the narrative, the female narrator is able to unlock the door on her own, but she decides to lock herself in to prevent her husband from entering the room while she is removing the last traces of the wallpaper. The female protagonist appears to revert her situation as her apparent irrationality triggers her latent imagination, since, as Virginia Woolf claims, a room of one's own becomes necessary for a woman to develop her creativity. Besides, it is unveiled that the female narrator has been keeping a journal in the course of her confinement, ultimately conceding that "there is nothing to hinder my writing" (2009: 6). Accordingly, even though she acknowledges that she must not allow her husband to know, thus feeling obliged to release her creativity surreptitiously, it is asserted that the female narrator has been devoting herself to writing.

Above all, Gilman's tale displays traces of utopia upon the female narrator's exultation as the narrative draws to a close. In the final passage, the energetic actions performed by the female narrator sharply contrast with the dormant state of her husband, who has fainted and is lying on the floor. As is described, the female narrator not only questions her husband's reaction, but his apparent weakness reinforces her strength in comparison, thus wondering, "why should that man have fainted? But he did and right across my path by the wall, so that I had to creep over him every time" (2009: 23). Although John's dismay upon symbolically gazing at his wife's rebellious *alter ego*—hence discovering her latent bellicose nature—may be interpreted as evidence of his disapproval, his reaction also gives evidence of his fragility, which differs from his alleged authoritarian ways that have led to his wife's confinement. As gender dictates are eventually subverted, the metaphor of the wallpaper and its hidden figure—as an embodiment of the spectre of androgyny—is unleashed to haunt the female narrator, insofar as she feels increasingly attracted toward the woman on the wall, whereas she ignores her husband, who is lying inert on the floor. In this respect, if the woman hiding behind the wallpaper turns into the female narrator's symbolic homoerotic double, the female narrator's dilemma also involves that of the author herself. As Mary Hill (1980) points out, in her personal writings, Gilman admits that she often felt strange and not entirely feminine, especially along her intimate friendship with Martha Luther. In relation to Gilman's sexuality, interpretations of androgyny in relation to both the female narrator and her husband have led feminist theorists, such as Showalter (1985), to underscore the sexual component implied in the double figure lurking behind the wallpaper, which paves the way for envisioning a utopian dimension in the tale.

The speculative reality that lies beyond the wallpaper can thus be perceived as utopian insofar as its rebellious other is liberated and gives evidence of the female narrator's creative imagination. Despite her enclosure, the female protagonist indulges in creativity after all, she gives free vent to her thoughts, and she even feels reluctant to unlock the door disattending her husband's orders, as if the envisioned utopian world she projected finally managed to infect the Victorian domestic sphere in which she feels constrained owing to prevailing gender dictates. Certain elements throughout the narrative suggest traces that evoke utopian fiction, such as the symbolic presence of the female narrator's bellicose double figure, her reiterations that she can abandon her confinement, her statement that she engages in writing, her final resoluteness—which underscores her triumph and strength over her husband—and the spectre of androgyny, which is figuratively unleashed and destabilises gender conventions. It may thus be claimed that Gilman's tale gradually discloses the presence of a latent utopian reality that struggles to emerge and vindicate itself.

Utopia in *Herland*: feminist ideals, matriarchy, women's language

If the female narrator in "The Yellow Wallpaper" discovers the woman hiding at the other end of the wallpaper and, by attempting to release her, she also intends to unleash her repressed self, hence underscoring traces of utopia in the tale, according to Kessler

(2000), Gilman's later novel *Herland* responds to the writer's vision of a utopian place in which women could find their own selves at a collective level. Gilman's utopian novel portrays an all-female society that is self-sufficient, as it has developed its own reproductive system, while it has also created its own language, which no longer reflects the patriarchal mindset. Besides, it consists of a highly-advanced society that is grounded in the importance of collectivity to the extent that the female community becomes the basis of a civilisation in which motherhood and education are regarded as shared concerns among all its members.

Some elements that have categorised Gilman's novel as an early epitome of utopian feminist fiction are rooted in the author's philosophical volumes as well as in her early fantasy fiction. Critics like Kessler (2000) regard *Herland* as the fictional translation of the idealist precepts that Gilman presented in *Women and Economics* (1898), in which the author proved how economic dependence made women subjected to patriarchy, thus deterring general social evolution and human progress. In this volume, Gilman unfolds the patriarchal elements that hamper the advancement onto a more egalitarian society, such as the fact that men submit women through non-remunerative domestic work once they get married, hence giving way to the rare presence of women in the public sphere, which contributes to perpetuating the separation of spheres along gender dictates. As reflective of Gilman's disagreement with patriarchal social arrangements, in her utopian novel, marriage, work assignation on the basis of gender and the separation of spheres are proscribed, since the all-female society described in *Herland* is entirely grounded in a matriarchal regime. In addition to *Women and Economics* (1898), Gilman's later philosophical works also determined her vision of the utopian society that would ultimately be portrayed in *Herland*. In *Concerning the Children* (1900), Gilman envisioned motherhood as a kind of professional collective institution, albeit exclusively implemented by expert mothers and caretakers; in *The Home: Its Work and Influence* (1903), Gilman complained about isolated families living in one house and defended the need of having shared households which may contribute to establishing networks between female communities and, in *Human Work* (1900), Gilman outlined her socialist ideology, defending a socialist theory based on mutual support, whereby individuals who are proficient experts in different areas contribute to attaining common benefits. In particular, in her volume *The Man-Made World* (1911), Gilman mentioned the significant influence that Lester Frank Ward's *Gynaecocentric Theory* (1903) exerted on her, which later on found correlation in her utopian views on matriarchy displayed in *Herland*. According to Ward, women originated prior to men so that the female figure arises as the primary archetype of the human race, although the family unit subsequently became androcentric and the prehistoric period of female supremacy declined, hence giving way to patriarchy. These ideals of collective motherhood, shared households, and mutual support for the general benefit of humankind are replicated in *Herland*, inasmuch as they arise as the basic tenets underlying Gilman's notion of a utopian matriarchy in the novel.

Although it has been commonly believed that Gilman's utopian imagination unleashed in her later years of creativity—mostly as a result of her personal experiences living in an all-female community in Chicago, which found reflection in her ideological works—it is suggested that her writings began to display utopian features even much earlier. Critics like Kessler (2000) claim that the short stories that Gilman wrote during

her childhood may be taken as the origin of her utopian ambitions, which she was to develop in her later trilogy of novels comprising *Moving the Mountain* (1911), *Herland* (1915), and *With Her in Ourland* (1916). Insofar as anthropologist Marina Werner (1996) contends that utopia beats strongly in the heart of fairy tales, it may be argued that the unreal worlds and universes of fantasy that Gilman projected in the fairy tales that she wrote as a child exerted a significant influence on her subsequent utopian writings. In her autobiography, published posthumously in 1935, Gilman admits that she used to give free vent to her imagination in order to escape to fantasy worlds where she could be "the most beautiful, the wisest, the best person in the world, the most talented in music, painting, literature, sculpture—why not, when one was dreaming?" (1991: 23). As a case in point, Gilman's short story "A Dream" already foretells a utopian fairyland similar to *Herland* in which the female heroine finds herself alone in a forest while she hears different voices coming from the trees above. A similar passage is evoked at the onset of Gilman's utopian novel, even if it is reversed, as three male explorers arrive in the land and hear the voices of the three females hiding in the trees. In another fantasy tale, "A Fairy Story," Gilman depicts a society in which women have an active role to play in the public sphere, although they live in another planet prior to the creation of Earth. In her early stories, Gilman usually gives priority to good deeds often implemented by female protagonists in contrast with male characters, who are commonly portrayed in a more disadvantaged manner and, as Kessler further explains (2000), Gilman's early tendency to eulogise girls and denigrate boys also finds its correlation in the author's later utopian novel. The self-created universes of fantasy and mirth that Gilman envisioned at an early stage were thus recovered and developed in her later utopian novels.

Henceforth, arising from her philosophical thoughts as an adult and her fantasy pieces as a child, her utopian novel *Herland* turns into Gilman's literary reification of her humanist ideals. According to Özyön, Gilman's feminist utopian novel envisions a matriarchal society based on egalitarianism, communal life, and sisterhood that extols the ideals of cultural feminism, which gives precedence to cultural, rather than political, transformation (2020a: 96). As the plot of *Herland* unfolds, it is almost by chance that three male explorers arrive in this landscape, exclusively inhabited by women, although they immediately aim to explore it. As a result of cataclysm, which erased men from the land, nature found its way and women were able to reproduce on their own without men's intervention. Women have developed their own reproductive system and can procreate through parthenogenesis, which renders them autonomous from the male sex and grants them control over their own bodies. As an advanced civilisation, they embrace an ethics of equality, social collectivism, and commitment to non-violence, since, as the male explorers admit upon arriving in this foreign land, "everything was beauty, order, perfect cleanness" while it exuded "the pleasantness sense of home over it all" (1998: 16). Besides, these men, who are characterised as outsiders, declare that "here was evidently a people highly skilled, efficient" (1998: 15), which challenges the gender prejudices that urge them to take for granted that other men may also inhabit the land. Moreover, it is declared that the female inhabitants in Herland possess a resolute personality and an athletic physique that enable them to have specialised jobs and subdue the three male explorers, who are mostly depicted as helpless in comparison and in clear disadvantage with respect to an overwhelming multitude of women.

After years of evolution, the utopian all-female society portrayed in *Herland* has also developed its own language. As the male explorers adjust to the female community, they feel compelled to learn their language in order to communicate with them and gain insight into their own reality. The language that is spoken in Herland contrasts with the androcentric legacy inherent in the language of the three male explorers, which conversely emphasises domination and difference along gender lines. As is described, when the male explorers listen to the women speak for the first time, they notice, "there was a torrent of soft talk tossed back and forth; no savage sing-song, but clear musical fluent speech" (1998: 13). During their learning process, the explorers must undergo a period of silence and seclusion which prevents them from playing an active role in the community. As a result of their symbolic re-education through the tuition of three highly-qualified female tutors, the three male explorers are eventually allowed to talk to the female citizens in a series of public lectures. Nevertheless, Vandyck ironically confesses that they prefer keeping quiet as regards certain aspects of their own history insofar as they feel ashamed to share them with the inhabitants of this highly-civilised land.

Gilman's utopian novel reflects her ideals of a community entirely made up of women, which the author had devised in her philosophical treaties and in the fairy tales that she wrote as a child. This utopian society, which is entirely ruled by women, consists of a highly-advanced civilisation that is based on humanist values, such as equality and shared efforts for the benefit of all its members. Insofar as this community possesses its own regulations and even speaks its own language, the male explorers feel alienated in a land which they perceive as literally foreign, until they adjust their ways to those of the female inhabitants in order to find their way within the confines of this exclusively female society.

Dystopia in *Herland*: patriarchal views, marriage, motherhood

Even though Gilman's novel *Herland* portrays a utopian society as a fictional counterpart to the author's philosophical ideas and early fantasy pieces, it also presents some elements that are highly evocative of dystopian fiction and that have often been overlooked. As Özyön claims, although Gilman's utopian novel envisions a matriarchal regime grounded in egalitarianism and sisterhood, this matriarchal order is established out of necessity rather than on purpose (2020b, 121), insofar as it is the result of a natural disaster which banished most of the men in the land. Furthermore, this matriarchal society mainly consists of young women, since older women and mothers were killed in the slave insurrection that ensued, while young women, who are described as "infuriated virgins" (1998: 47), felt compelled to slay the male insurgents. Besides, as a result of the arrival of the three male explorers, some other dystopian components begin to take shape, such as the latent menace posed by male domination, which ultimately gives way to the adoption of alien traditions in the community like marriage and the final surrender to intersexual relationships with the view to improve the species.

These traces of dystopia that remain latent in *Herland* find their roots in notions about the ways to ensure gender equality in society that Gilman addresses in her

philosophical writings. As Joanne Karpinski (2000) claims, it is possible to identify Gilman's contradictory discourse in her fight to achieve equality between men and women in the workplace, insofar as the author does not take for granted that work implies a salary and she does not encourage women to emulate and occupy men's position in the public sphere. It can thus be inferred that Gilman remained inevitably influenced by the prevailing Victorian precepts about gender, which creatively translate into her fiction as traces that evoke dystopia.

Gilman rejected being categorised as strictly 'feminist,' hence preferring, instead, the epithet 'humanist' insofar as the author believed that the main focus should be placed on the human qualities that both sexes share, thus contending that gender difference had so far attracted too much attention. Accordingly, Gilman defended that progress was unattainable without the shared collaboration between women and men. Nonetheless, these humanist ideals appear to find dystopian replication in *Herland*, inasmuch as the male explorers reveal their patriarchal mindset, which contrasts with that of the female community. As the novel focalises on Vandyck, as a sociologist, he presents a mediating position between the attitudes that he encounters in this all-female civilisation and those of his male partners: Terry Margrave personifying the last remnants of patriarchy, which are anathema to this matriarchal society, and Jeff Jennings defending a romantic and idealised vision of women as angels of the house. Even before their arrival, gender prejudices are soon brought to the fore, since, upon knowing that it is a community exclusively comprising women, the male explores assume that, "we mustn't look to find any sort of order and organisation […] we mustn't look for inventions and progress; it'll be awfully primitive" (1998: 7). Besides, the male explorers admit that "there was something attractive to a bunch of unattached young men in finding an undiscovered country of a strictly Amazonian nature" (1998: 5), which suggests a patriarchal and dominating approach that brings to mind a colonising mindset. In fact, Vandyck admits that "our first violence had made it necessary to keep us safeguarded for a while" (1998: 38), thus revealing their intention to resort to violence if needed in order to impose their rule. It is thus implied that the peaceful existence of this all-female society is disrupted upon the arrival of the male explorers, as they intend to exert their male domination against their female hosts.

Insofar as the narrative focalises on the character of Vandyck, this female society is portrayed from the perspective of the other, thus considering this female community as inherently alienating. Owing to their patriarchal views, the male explorers realise that the women populating Herland no longer present the qualities that they "had always thought essentially feminine" (1998: 49). As the male explorers gain insight into the women's competence to rule their land, they also notice that, from their male perspective, the female inhabitants present traits that they perceive as masculine, particularly in terms of their physical appearance and behaviour. Accordingly, it is implied that, in order to play the role of rulers, women are alleged to adopt a masculinised demeanour and disguise their femininity, which reveals latent traces of dystopia that disclose the assumption that, in order to exert power, women must adopt attitudes conventionally associated with men.

As the novel comes to an end, the women in Herland succumb to marriage under the influence of the male explorers, which arises as further evidence of how dystopia gradually displaces utopia in the novel. Although the inhabitants in this all-female

community have developed their own reproductive system and have never considered the possibility of getting married, they are finally persuaded that intersexual marriage may contribute to improving the species in their land. As is stated, the male narrator claims that, in relation to the women in this community, "of marriage as a ceremony they knew nothing" (1998: 80), even adding that "these women have never been mastered" (1998: 80), hence envisioning marriage as a way to subdue women. Besides, as a representative of autocratic patriarchy, Terry even goes as far as to claim that "a wife is the woman who belongs to a man" (1998: 100). Although the possibility of marriage was never contemplated in this all-female community, at the request of the male explorers, three women from the community accept to get married, thus ironically evoking the end of a fairy tale. Terry marries Alima, a rebellious girl who is reluctant to succumb to his will, Jeff marries Celis and they become the first couple to have a child born out of man and woman, and Vandyck falls in love with Ellador, while he confesses that he believes their marriage is the only one based on love. Insofar as the women accept to embrace the institution of marriage in order to procreate, it is implied that they gradually surrender to the male management of society and acquiesce to leave behind the foundations of their female administration, even including their self-sufficient system of procreation.

An account that sheds light on the women's acceptance to get married lies in the importance that motherhood acquires in this all-female community whose foundations revolve around maternity. As Ellador unveils to Vandyck, when men were banished from their land, "the miracle happened—one of these young women bore a child—of course they all thought there must be a man somewhere, but none was found—then they decided it must be a direct gift from the gods" (1998: 48). Although motherhood plays a pivotal role in this female community, it is envisioned as a shared responsibility that is only bestowed upon those women who are considered to be most suitable, since the role of mother is perceived as a collective duty that concerns the whole community. Maternity is thus given priority over everything else to the extent that, as the male explorers find out, the women in this community cannot think that sex may respond to other purposes except that of procreation and, accordingly, reproduction is completely disassociated from sexual allure. The approach to female sexuality as inextricably linked to maternity is rooted in the cultural context of Victorian ethics in which Gilman was educated. Hence, even though *Herland* portrays a utopian society of matriarchy envisioned as an alternative to patriarchy, motherhood is conferred such transcendence that it acquires dystopian dimensions. Furthermore, despite being a highly-advanced society, their conception of maternity raises issues to be called into question. Mothers and daughters are separated from each other since only proficient carers are allowed to fulfil this role, while mothers are only allowed to give birth to one daughter unless they prove to be especially skilled for the role. Insofar as the portrayal of motherhood brings to mind eugenics, dystopian traces lying at the core of this utopian all-female community emerge to the surface.

The utopian society portrayed in *Herland* at the onset of the narrative, which stands in contrast with the gender prejudices displayed by the male explorers, is gradually subverted by the dystopian traits that also characterise this all-female community, but also by the pervasive influence that the three male explorers and their patriarchal mindset exert on the female inhabitants in the land. In spite of their initial reluctance, the women succumb to marriage and intersexual relationships even if their acquiescence responds to

their willingness to improve their community. Furthermore, the main couple, comprising the male narrator and his wife Ellador, decide to abandon the land and return to Vandyck's country of origin, thus suggesting that this all-female civilisation may eventually transform into a society comprising both men and women. Insofar as dystopian traces are brought to the fore in exchange for some utopian traits, Gilman's cyclical evolution of her gender discourse is also revealed in her most celebrated utopian novel.

Conclusion

The apparent divergence between the presence of dystopia in "The Yellow Wallpaper" and of utopia in *Herland* should not be considered contradictory, since both utopian and dystopian features can be retraced in both works. The female narrator's creative folly and her attempt to release the woman entrapped in the wallpaper are suggestive of an allegory of artistic creativity in "The Yellow Wallpaper," thus revealing traces of utopia despite its more evident dystopian elements. Correspondingly, the cult to motherhood and the eventual surrender to marriage in *Herland* imply that the all-female society portrayed in Gilman's novel may not be as idealistic as it seems, hence disclosing covert dystopian qualities in spite of its explicit utopian traits.

Henceforth, although it may be argued that "The Yellow Wallpaper" mostly revolves around women's oppression, whereas *Herland* portrays an all-female community in which women exert their rule in the absence of men, each narrative comprises both utopian and dystopian elements that give evidence of the cyclical evolution of Gilman's gender discourse. The ongoing evolution of Gilman's approach to gender, which finds correlation in utopian and dystopian instances in her fiction, was influenced by apparently opposing notions that remained latent throughout her life as a woman and as a writer. The cultural legacy of Gilman's historical context and the middle-class ethics prevailing in New England at the time was counteracted by the author's close friendship with leading feminists, as well as her coexistence in the community of Hull House with Jane Addams and other activists. Gilman's two marriages, which were indicative of the transition between her domestic submission with Walter Stetson and her creative liberation with Houghton Gilman, also exerted influence on her approach to her domestic and literary spheres as a woman writer. From a personal perspective, her propensity to depression was counterbalanced by her confident demeanour in her public lectures, thus displaying seemingly oppositional narrative voices that intermingled with one another. Her attitude towards motherhood, which she conceived as the origin and future of human progress, was counteracted by her response of blaming maternity for her condition. Gilman's sexuality, even if not explicitly declared, also echoes this cyclical progression as reflected in her two marriages and her veiled homoerotic relationships with other women. Furthermore, despite the fact that she took an active role to defend women's rights during her lifetime, Gilman's literary and philosophical works were not re-discovered critically by feminists until the decade of the early 1970s, hence also revealing a cyclical evolution in the reception of her works. These apparent disparities between Gilman's attitude and personality intermittently find reflection in the dystopian and utopian traces that pervade her fiction.

Insofar as dystopian traits juxtapose with utopian elements in Gilman's writings, instead of interpreting both terms as antagonistic, utopia and dystopia should be regarded as existing within a continuous circle, as the former remains implicit in the latter. If "The Yellow Wallpaper" initially presents a dystopian picture in which a woman falls prey to domestic confinement in a patriarchal context, the discovery of the woman hiding behind the wallpaper as a sign of the female narrator's creativity also arises as a sign of utopian subversion. Correspondingly, although *Herland* presents a utopian matriarchal society, when this community abandons its all-female precepts to surrender to patriarchal institutions, it also displays traces that are indicative of dystopian fiction. It could thus be claimed that the pulse between elements pertaining to utopia and dystopia underscores a tendency towards a cyclical evolution of Gilman's gender discourse which can be identified both in her early and later fiction.

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