Roles of Women in *Herland* and “The Tree”

“Because you are women, people will force their thinking on you, their boundaries on you. They will tell you how to dress, how to behave, who you can meet and where you can go. Don't live in the shadows of people's judgement. Make your own choices in the light of your own wisdom” (“Amitabh Bachchan’s...”). Throughout history and even today, women usually have different experiences than men in society. Sometimes, the control that men have in society can get to women’s head and make them feel lesser than men. However, some women are strong and independent and can overcome the presence of dominant men in society. In “The Tree,” there is a closer to traditional power dynamics in society in which men have the majority of control. On the other hand, women in *Herland* have all the control in their society because their country only consists of women. The difference between the society in “The Tree” and Herland society is the roles that women play, which causes women in both societies to have different outlooks on the world. In “The Tree”, men and women have unbalanced roles, which gives women an isolated outlook on the world, whereas the women in Herland do everything as a unit to function, which gives them confidence and an optimistic outlook on the world. This contrast of women’s roles in each story results in the stories having a similar purpose to show that male-dominated societies are not as functional as societies that have equality for genders.
The society in Herland is very different from any society ever known to man due to the country’s history. Herland only consists of females because terrible events occurred, and the women killed off the only men left (the slaves) because they were threatening their safety. (Gilman 47). The women of Herland had to adapt to a new lifestyle, and they had to overcome new problems without men. For example, they had to find a new way to reproduce so that their country could continue to exist. Five to ten years after the destruction of men, one of the women miraculously had a child. Two thousand years later, they had a society full of hundreds of women. These women had to work with each other to produce a smooth, functioning society.

Gilman writes, “they were sisters, and as they grew, they grew together — not by competition, but by united action” (51). The women of Herland grow as one unit, and they don’t put any individual over another:

To them the country was a unit — it was theirs. They themselves were a unit, a conscious group; they thought in terms of the community. As such, their time-sense was not limited to the hopes and ambitions of an individual life. Therefore, they habitually considered and carried out plans for improvement which might cover centuries (Gilman 67).

The women believe that everyone should work for what is best for all and that they bring a strength in their numbers. The unitary efforts of the country are important for the women to have togetherness and community.

As a result of Herland’s cohesion, the women are found to be more confident. This confidence is shown with the first interaction between the men and women. As the women were slowly approaching Van, Jeff, and Terry, the men reached out to grab the women. The women
started to run away, and the men tried to chase them down. However, the women were too fast, and the men could never get ahold of them (Gilman 36). The women were functioning as a group during the approach and escape from the men. For most of the women, it was their first time they had ever seen a man. Even though they were probably nervous, the fact that they were the ones to approach the men shows that they were confident in themselves as a whole. Also, the women did not hesitate to run away from them, so it shows that they were confident in their abilities to escape.

An optimistic outlook on the world can be seen through one of the main characters in the story, Ellador. Herland’s unique influence on Ellador makes her appear to be more intelligent and confident than other women. Bridgitte Arnold, in her review about the utopian culture of Herland, writes that “Gilman believes that the qualities seen lacking in women — order, rationality, physical strength, intelligence — are lacking only because of the underdevelopment of these and the overdevelopment of the maternal, nurturing, domestic qualities” (Arnold 307). In other words, the reason that Herland’s women stand out and are seen to be more intelligent women is because of the importance put on typical male-dominant qualities. Although they do stress the importance of motherhood, Herland teaches that qualities like order, physical strength, and intelligence (qualities usually pertaining to men) are just as important as motherly qualities, and that these qualities can belong to women. As a result, characters like Ellador seem to be more confident and courageous than women outside of Herland. For example, confidence plays a role in the relationship between Ellador and Van because Ellador is coming from a society that has not interacted with men for over 2000 years. Therefore, it takes a great amount of confidence to go out in the world and be Herland’s representative in another society like Ellador did (Gilman
Therefore, Herland’s fellowship of teaching the importance of balanced qualities gives the women, such as Ellador, the confidence to participate in society.

While all the roles of women in Herland have equal importance, the gender roles found in “The Tree” are much different. María Luisa Bombal, the author of “The Tree,” uses gender roles represented in the 1940’s that are realistic to Latin America during that time. The 1940’s were an important time in the women’s movement, with women’s suffrage and other rights being the main focus of women. Corinne Pernet, a faculty member at the University of Geneva, says that “by the late 1930s and 1940s, their [Chiliean feminists] discourse shifted to emphasize that women's equality and political rights were the cornerstone of democracy, an ideal for all countries” (Pernet 664). At this time, women were trying to push for equal rights because they were basically forced into the roles they played in society by men. Similar to Latin America society of the 1940’s, the society in “The Tree” believes that men have control over women and determine the role that women play in society. Therefore, the society of Latin America influenced the story of Bombal’s “The Tree.”

In “The Tree,” the unbalance of gender roles is shown with Brígida. In the beginning of the story, Brígida’s memory of her father is a clear example of how society in “The Tree” functions. Bombal writes, “she received little attention from her father, for dealing with the other five daughters reduced him to such a perplexed and worn-out state that he preferred to ease his burden by insisting upon her feeble-mindedness” (10). As a result, Brígida felt like she was in isolation because of how she was treated by her father. Also, there is an instability found in the marriage between Brígida and Luis. For example, Luis tells Brígida that their trip to Europe has been postponed due to his new business ventures. Then, he continues to tell her that she should
spend the summer on her father’s ranch because of the rising heat in Buenos Aires and that he would visit her occasionally (Bombal 11). Luis tried to control Brígida by telling her what to do, which makes her feel lost and confused. Therefore, men and women have unbalanced gender roles in “The Tree.”

Due to men determining the roles women have in society, women feel isolated in “The Tree.” These events of Luis postponing their trip to Europe and the father mistreating Brígida makes her feel isolated. Just like any women, Brígida expects to be loved and cared for, but Luis and the society in “The Tree” make her feel that her existence is less relevant than men’s. For a successful friendship or marriage, the partners needs to act and function as a team; however, Brígida and Luis do not show togetherness or teamwork. Because of the absence of a team effort, Brígida questions her marriage:

Brígida intuitively senses that the fundamental problem in their relationship is that of communication and that Luis may also be at fault: he never really listens when she speaks and fobs her off with mechanical smiles and caresses. Again she wonders why he married her and speculates that perhaps he never thought of her as a unique human being, choosing her more out of habit or out of a desire to cement his friendship with her father (Scott 6).

Brígida is ignored when she talks to her husband about her feelings, which makes her feel unwanted. Furthermore, her marriage and her relationship with other men in her life make her feel like she’s in isolation compared to the rest of society because she’s not allowed to have an active role in society. As a result, she has an isolated outlook on the world and society because of the effects of unbalanced gender roles.
When comparing the gender roles in each story, a conclusion can be drawn that the purpose of both stories is to show that male-dominated societies are not as functional as societies that have equality for genders. In *Herland*, women’s roles are all equally valued in society. Thus, all the women in *Herland* equally contribute to their country. Gilman states that the women lived “in a big bright lovely world, full of the most interesting and enchanting things to learn about and to do” (86). Therefore, the equal contribution of women produces an appreciative and functional society in *Herland*. On the other hand, the roles of women are not as valuable to society as men’s roles in “The Tree.” Because women feel less valuable and do not have the same opportunities as men, women have an isolated outlook on society. As a result, the male-dominated society found in “The Tree” is not very functional.

In “The Tree” and *Herland*, women are valued differently in society. In “The Tree,” the roles of men and women are unbalanced, which make society male-dominated. Consequently, women have an isolated outlook on the world because men have dominance over them. On the other hand, women work as a unit and have roles of equal importance in *Herland*. As a result, women of *Herland* are more confident and optimistic than women found in the society of “The Tree.” When contrasting the roles of women in each society, it is revealed that both of these stories tell a whole other purpose of why male-dominated societies are not as functional as societies that have equality for genders. In other words, both stories aim to convince readers that women are as individual and as valuable as men. When comparing these stories to today’s society, there are still stereotypes about gender that exist. For example, there are stereotypes like women are the ones that should do the home chores and take care of children, so many people believe that men still have dominance over women. Overall, today’s society is pretty functional,
so it contradicts the point of the two stories to show that male-dominated societies are not as strong as societies that have equal roles for genders.
Works Cited


