

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's Evolution of Community Thought: From *The Yellow Wallpaper* to *Herland*

Rongfei Wang¹

¹School of Foreign Languages, Zhongkai University of Agriculture and Engineering, Guangzhou, China

Correspondence: Rongfei Wang, School of Foreign Languages, Zhongkai University of Agriculture and Engineering, Guangzhou, China.

Received: February 13, 2024

Accepted: April 17, 2024

Online Published: April 28, 2024

doi:10.5539/ells.v14n2p13

URL: <https://doi.org/10.5539/ells.v14n2p13>

Abstract

Charlotte Perkins Gilman was a prominent American novelist and feminist, well-known for her works *The Yellow Wallpaper* and *Herland*, which have drawn considerable attention from scholars at home and abroad and aroused wide discussion since their publication. In most cases, the former was regarded as a classic of gender politics and the latter, a feminist utopia. Through the detailed analysis of the two works, it can be found that Gilman has interwoven the spirit of community into the two works, considering it as the right path to gaining women's equality and freedom. In *The Yellow Wallpaper*, Gilman just implicitly puts forward women alliance as a potential way to liberate women; while in *Herland*, Gilman describes the harmony between people (women) and the surroundings, between people (women) and people (men), which demonstrates that Gilman is more resolute and more confident in community and cooperation. In the meanwhile, from the two works, it can be found that Gilman's thought on community is changing and more and more progressive and that the forming of community is a more effective way to contribute to personal growth and development.

Keywords: *The Yellow Wallpaper*, *Herland*, the spirit of community, more progressive

1. Introduction

Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860–1935) was one of the most influential feminist writers, theorists, and sociologists at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. She returned to the ranks of classic authors after being “rediscovered” in the 1970s. Gilman was prolific in her lifetime, writing novels, poetry, social analysis, and political criticisms. Among Gilman's works, it was her short story *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892) that was firstly gained notice and aroused heated discussion. Since the 1970s, Foreign research and commentary on this short story have been extensive, generally interpreting it from perspectives such as Gothic terrorism, feminism/gender politics, gaze theory, spatial criticism, and narratives of madness, and viewing it as a canon of gender politics. In addition to *The Yellow Wallpaper*, Gilman's utopian novels, sociological works, and biographical pieces have also received considerable attention from researchers abroad. For example, “*Charlotte Perkins Gilman's Utopian Path*” by Kessler (1995) dedicated a chapter to briefly describing Gilman's utopian creations and criticisms between 1904–1921; Rudd and Gough (1999) collaborated on studying Gilman's works and examined the social impact of Gilman's literary creations from multiple angles in “*Charlotte Perkins Gilman: An Optimistic Reformer*”. The 2009 publication “*Feminism of Charlotte Perkins Gilman*”, with Gilman's diaries, letters, speeches, etc. as the research object, uncovered materials overlooked by critics and examined the complexity of Gilman's feminist views and her insights into male-dominated social culture.

In China, research on Gilman also began with the short novel *The Yellow Wallpaper* in the 1980s, with similar research access to that of foreign studies. Some Chinese scholars compared the “female madness image” in it with madness images in Chinese and foreign literature for contrastive and intertextual interpretations. However, Professor Dan Hansong (2019) took a different approach, starting from the “material turn” in literary studies, suggesting replacing textuality with visuality, treating the “wallpaper” as a tangible object of cognition and aesthetic appreciation, exploring the shaping of individual visual experiences by the ‘fin-de-siècle’ visual cultural context of the novel *The Yellow Wallpaper*, and Gilman's critical intervention in the aesthetic discourse of the late Victorian era. This perspective has provided new ideas for studying this classic work.

Research on Gilman's utopian works in China began in the 1990s, focusing primarily on comparative studies between Gilman's *Herland* and the “Women's Countries” depicted in classic Chinese literature such as “*Dream*

of the Red Chamber”, “Journey to the West”, and “Flowers in the Mirror”. In 2012, the monograph “*Utopian Female Imagination – A Study of Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s Novels*” by Zeng Gui’e, systematically examined Gilman’s utopian works. It provided a comprehensive investigation of Gilman’s feminist utopian thoughts through aspects such as clothing, architecture, environment, and motherhood, representing the only in-depth case study of Gilman’s utopian works currently available in China. Recently, Qi Tao and Yang Tiantian (2021) adopted a contemporary nostalgia theory perspective to conduct an intertextual comparison between *Herland* and *With Her in Ourland*, delving into the essence of Gilman’s utopian construction and the underlying psychological and social motivations, arguing that Gilman’s “trans-temporal counterattack seems more radical, yet it actually reflects helplessness and compromise” (2021, p. 25). Chen Yi (2020) explored the relationship between language and gender in *Herland*, suggesting that after women establish new relationships with the “other”, language is no longer a tool for male coercion but rather a means to construct subjectivity for both genders based on mutual foundations. According to the collected data, current research on Gilman’s works in China still mainly focuses on *The Yellow Wallpaper and Herland*, with occasional references to the other two utopian works *Moving the Mountain* and *With Her in Ourland*. Yet, Gilman’s other works remain unexplored and unresearched for the insufficient translation.

2. The Origin and Development of Community Concept

The term “community” originated from the Latin word “communis”, which originally meant “common”. Since Plato’s publication of *The Republic*, there has been a tradition of contemplating community in Western thought. However, the unprecedented development of the concept of community began around the 18th century. Williams believes that as a term, community has a more important feature: “Unlike other terms that refer to social organizations (such as nation, ethnicity, and society), it [community] always seems to be used to evoke positive associations...” (2005, p. 76). This argument echoes the community theory of German sociologist and philosopher Tönnies, who once gave a classic definition of community in contrast to “society”: “Community means a genuine and enduring common life among human beings, while society is merely a temporary and superficial thing. Therefore, community itself must be understood as a vibrant organism, whereas society is a mechanical aggregation and artificial construct” (2019, p. 89). In *The German Ideology*, Marx introduced the concept of the “community of complete individuals” and emphasized that “only in the community does each individual have the means of developing his abilities in all directions; therefore, only in the community is personal freedom possible... In a true community, individuals obtain their freedom in a state of association through the association” (1996, p. 171). Since the 18th century, a large number of benevolent scholars and advocates have explored and promoted the concept of community, either by writing books and lecturing in fields such as philosophy and sociology or by using literary forms to present imaginations of community. In the interaction between these two approaches, the concept of community has evolved. According to Yin Qiping (2016), from Hegel to Marx, from Tönnies to Williams, the view that sees organic/intrinsic attributes as the main connotation of community has always occupied a mainstream position in the history of community thought. After Williams, influenced by Blan-Shoi, Nancy, and Miller, the literary criticism circle has increasingly questioned the organic/intrinsic attributes of community, highlighting the polysemy of the community concept.

In China, research on the concept of community has made significant contributions in political science, anthropology, sociology, and other fields. In recent years, there has been a growing trend in the study of community representation in literary works. Professor Yin Qiping is one of the pioneers in this field, focusing on the depiction of community in the works of Victorian British writers such as Hardy, Wordsworth, and Dickens, creating a series of studies on the “community” in Victorian literature. In 2022, Professor Guo Yingjian led a major National Social Science Fund project titled “*Research on the Concept of Cultural Community in American Ethnic Literature*” which successfully commenced. The project team organized a seminar series called “*The Beauty of Harmony*” centered around keywords like “community” and “cultural community”. Academics from across the country joined the discussions, significantly advancing the understanding and research of literary and cultural communities. Other scholars, such as Zhang Li (2018), who explored community representation in American left-wing feminist literature, and Li Baojie (2021), who examined community consciousness in contemporary American women’s science fiction, have undoubtedly provided valuable references and inspiration for the study of community in literary works.

Gilman lived in the late 19th and the early 20th century, a period when the concept of community was on the rise. As a renowned social activist, feminist, and writer, her works undoubtedly reflected this impulse to create a beautiful “community”. Attention to the depiction of community in her works should become a focal point and hot topic in current research on her writings. A close reading of her works reveals that Gilman’s novels fully embody the ideas and consciousness of community, and that she explores the form and content of community to

varying degrees in different works.

3. The Budding of Community Consciousness in *The Yellow Wallpaper*

The Yellow Wallpaper is a story about a young, unnamed female writer who suffers from a mild case of postpartum depression. She is placed by her doctor husband in a country villa to undergo a “rest” cure. Under her husband's all-encompassing “care” and after staring at the yellow wallpaper in the room for a long time, she eventually tears down the yellow wallpaper, climbs over her fainted husband, and walks towards “madness”/“liberation”. The academic community generally recognizes this as a classic work that exposes male hegemony and calls for women’s liberation. However, the consciousness of community within it is like a thin, almost imperceptible thread that runs through the work.

3.1 *The Predicament of Women in the Patriarchal Society*

At the turn of the 19th and 20th century, women in American society were stereotyped as “angels at home” and strictly restricted, with little or no freedom and equality. They are like a cornered beast, fighting alone or hopelessly. Their predicament, to a certain extent, lies in the failure to establish the proper community. Based on the trends and characteristics, Tönnies (2019) categorized various forms of community into three types : blood community, geographical community, and spiritual community. The blood community is usually established on the basis of common life among family members and kinship bonds.

In *The Yellow Wallpaper*, the blood community that the female protagonist belongs to faces serious challenges and crises. Her husband and brother, both “highly respected” physicians, do not believe she is ill and publicly declare that she is only temporarily mentally depressed with a slight tendency toward hysteria. As doctors, her husband and brother hold the power of discourse. Subsequently in the story, any requests and ideas proposed by “me” are ruthlessly rejected by my husband: when “I” suggest changing rooms, he claims that the room downstairs has only one window and is too small to fit two beds, so “I” am confined to the upstairs room with repulsive yellow wallpaper and barred windows; when “I” propose visiting relatives to alleviate mental stress, he refuses under the pretext that “I” am physically too weak; when “I” tell him that “I” have not fully recovered and hope he will take “me” away from there, he initially obstructs this by claiming that the home repairs are not yet complete... He (My husband John) uses the gentlest words to control “my” every move, depriving “me” of the right to speak, leaving “me” without independence and freedom. In the blood community that “I” and my husband John have formed, “I” am always in a state of being “voiceless” and “speechless”. “My” real demands are not met by my husband’s response, and his care and love for “me” are more about maintaining his patriarchal status and authority. When “I” become aware of my own subjectivity and ultimately rips down the yellow wallpaper, climbing over John’s unconscious body, which signifies the final collapse of this family's shaky blood community. Moreover, there is a detail in the book: “It is fortunate Mary is so good with the baby, such a dear baby! And yet I cannot be with him, it makes me so nervous” (p. 174). This indicates that “I” and “my” child are being separated, which, from a scientific standpoint, could increase “my” mental stress and even exacerbate “my” condition, and which has destructive power to our blood community. Although “in the closest and most intimate interpersonal relationships, the will and spirit of kinship (blood community) can nourish itself merely by its own means, relying on pure remembrance... it still ardently seeks physical proximity to one another, striving not to be apart, because only in this way can every desire for love find its peace and tranquility” (Tönnies, 2019, p. 88). From the analysis, it can be concluded that despite having the “closest” husband and son, “I” can’t establish a strong blood community with them.

According to Tönnies (2019), the geographical community is generally depends on the situation where the members share the same land and live around the same place. In the story, John places “me” in an old country villa for treatment. Although at first, I find this “colonial mansion” to be a “haunted house”, thinking it's very “queer” because it had been “empty” for many years. The appearance of this mansion gives off a “keep out” vibe. Living in such a villa, “I” might seem as “queer”and “odd” to others as the house itself, therefore, it is not easy for me to establish new relationships with others ; moreover, the property is “quite alone,standing well back from the road, quite three miles from the village... hedges and walls and gates that lock,and lots of separate little houses for the gardeners and people” (p. 172). Living in such an unfamiliar environment, virtually cut off from the world, “I” cannot establish harmonious neighborhood relations because there are hardly any neighbors to speak of, which means no new geographical community can be formed. What is more, “I” and John are renting a country villa, far from our original home and the former neighborhood relations. I have also been advised to “rest”, not to write, not to express my inner thoughts, and have basically lost contact with the original neighborhood. “I” have broken with my former relations and haven’t established the new relations ,which rendered “me” in a state of desolation and lack of support.

3.2 Forming Women Spiritual Community—the Road to Women's Self-Redemption

Faced with the collapse of the blood community and the disconnection of the geographical community, “I” in *The Yellow Wallpaper* could only spend most of the time in the room, staring at the yellow wallpaper, daydreaming. At first, “I” was extremely repulsed by this yellow paper; its pattern, color, and smell all made me extremely uncomfortable. “I never saw a worse paper in my life. One of those sprawling, flamboyant patterns committing every artistic sin... The color is repellent, almost revolting: a smouldering unclean yellow, strangely faded by the slow-turning sunlight...” (p.173) But gradually, under the influence of female experience, “I” discovered that behind the pattern of the yellow wallpaper, there were women hidden, wanting to escape but in vain. “They get through, and then the pattern strangles them off and turns them upside down, and make their eyes white” (p. 183). How similar our plights are: yearning for freedom, yet in a “confined” situation. Therefore, “I” was determined to liberate the women trapped within the yellow wallpaper. “Friendship (spiritual community) is independent of kinship and neighborhood relations; it is conditioned and results from people’s consistent work and ways of thinking” (Tönnies, 2019, p. 89). Thus, “I” formed an invisible alliance with the women in the yellow wallpaper, uniting and helping each other with the goal of dismantling the “bars” that prevented our freedom. “As soon as it was moonlight and that poor thing began to crawl and shake the pattern, I got up and ran to help her... I pulled and she shook. I shook and she pulled and before morning we had peeled off yards of that paper” (p. 185). “I” removed the wallpaper, allowing the woman behind it to see the light of day again, and “I” also climbed over my unconscious husband John, gaining freedom. Through “my” experience, Gilman subtly points out a path of freedom for women under the suppression and control of patriarchal culture: women should unite, refuse to identify with the male power value order, form a female spiritual community, support and love each other, and collectively sustain one another.

At the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century, women were imprisoned in the “panopticon”, with every move under strict surveillance. Under such circumstances, the blood community based on kinship gives way to the dignity and despotism of patriarchy, and cannot bring comfort and security to women; as “caged birds” under the patriarchy, their main range of activities is the family and kitchen, lacking necessary communication and exchange with the outside world, unable to establish close contact with the land, and it is difficult for the geo-community based on neighborhood relations to be established; in patriarchal culture, if women want to gain freedom and rights, obtain discourse power, they can only unite, starting from common needs and demands, set up consistent goals, and establish a spiritual community based on friendship. Only in this way, may they possibly break through the barriers and gain new life. Due to the limitations of Gilman’s era, although she was progressive in consciousness and thought, her ideas about the establishment of female spiritual community in *The Yellow Wallpaper* were more of an imagination, and her thinking about community was basically in its infancy and germination state, but this kind of thinking was already valuable and of great epoch-making value and modern significance.

4. The Establishment of a Harmonious Community in *Herland*

In *Herland*, three American men intruded into a country of women. Contrary to their imagination, in this “Land of Women”, civilization is highly developed, people are self-sufficient, and the city is as neat and beautiful as a garden, with nature and humans forming a closely connected community of shared destiny.

4.1 The Harmonious Coexistence Between Humans and Their Surroundings

In the three men’s stereotyped thoughts, the women in *Herland* would be disorganized and their surroundings must be in a mess. They believe the women “would fight among themselves...” (p. 10) and there is not any sort of order and organization. But to their surprise, this land is “in a state of perfect cultivation, where even the forests looked as if they were cared for; a land that looked like an enormous park...an enormous garden” (p. 13). What’s more, some of the trees are food-bearing, and the others are splendid hardwood. Jeff, the botanist, holds that this is not a forest, but a truck farm. “These towering trees were under as careful cultivation as so many cabbages” (p. 16). From the description it can be seen that the people (women) in *Herland* make full use of the forest resources and form an unbreakable bond with nature. The people and nature constitute a big life community, in which they are equal and are in a state of interaction and interchange.

When the three men moved through the woods, they saw birds, “some gorgeous, some musical, all so tame that it seemed almost to contradict our theory of cultivation” (p. 16). It can be seen that in *Herland*, birds are not afraid of people and people don’t kill birds. They both are creatures in the life community and in the ecosystem. When the three girls appeared, they were on the trees. But here the trees are not just a shelter, they are more like their house. When the three girls met the three strange men who were chasing after them and studying them, they “in turn, with no more terror than a set of frolicsome children in a game of tag, sat as lightly as so many big birds on

their precarious perches and frankly, curiously, stared at us” (p. 17). It is clear that the girls are just like the birds in the woods, and they regard the forest as their own territory, their own home, so they don't feel frightened as had been expected. In the following description, the author compared the girls “as bright and smooth as parrots and as unaware of the danger, they swung there before us, wholly at ease...” (p. 17). The three girls, as the representatives of the people of *Herland*, are very relaxed in the woods, which indicates that the people treat forest (nature) as their home and paradise, where they inhabit with ease. The people are creatures of nature and they can integrate themselves into it. When the three men attempted to chase and snatch the three girls, they failed. The three girls “dropped from the ends...fleeing away in the wide-open reaches of the forest...we might as well chased with antelopes...across a wide meadow, three bright-hued figures were running swiftly”(p. 19). In those sentences, the three girls are like antelopes, with incredible swiftness, which indicates that the girls are just like wild creatures in nature and have formed affinity with nature. They have formed a very harmonious relationship with nature.

When the three men came close to the town, they exclaimed, “what a perfect road! What a heavenly country!” (p. 20). The town is constructed like a garden. “On either side a double row of trees shaded the footpaths; between the tree bushes or vines, all fruit-bearing, now and then seats and little wayside fountains; everywhere flowers” (p. 20). No wonder the three “intruders” came to the conclusion that “here was evidently a people highly skilled, efficient, caring for their country as a florist cares for his costliest orchids” (p. 20). When compared with other American towns with offensive mess man made in the face of nature, this place was built mostly of a sort of dull rose-colored stone, with here and there some clear white houses; and it lay abroad among the green groves and gardens like a broken rosary of pink coral. What is more, there is no dirt, no smoke and no noise. “Everything was beauty, order, perfect cleanness, and the pleasantest sense of home over it all” (p. 21). It can be found that the women in *Herland* have formed a harmonious relationship with the town as well, each of them making contributions to their own well-being. Therefore, it is safe to say that their land (including the forest and the town) is like a big community, in which the people (women) live happily, learn eagerly and develop themselves sound. They don't need to depend on men any longer and they don't need to please them.

4.2 The Harmony Among People and in the Society of Herland

Van read through the historical records and knew the “history” of *Herland*. Actually, it is “herstory” rather than “history”. Two thousand years ago, for existence, “the young women, instead of submitting, rose in sheer desperation and slew their brutal conquerors...they set to work, to bury the dead, to plow and sow, to care for another” (p. 57). It can be seen that at the very beginning, the girls in *Herland* has formed alliance for survival. To live a better life, they learn new trades and work together, “growing stronger and wise and more and more mutually attached” (p. 58). It is safe to say that they have built a community in which they live together, develop and grow with a common vision. When Van tried to construct the real position of the ancient women in *Herland*, he concluded that “left alone in that terrific orphanhood, they had clung together, supporting one another and their little sisters, and developing unknown powers in the stress of new necessity” (p. 58). It can be seen that in this community with “organic attribute”, some of them teaching, some of them learning, they live a harmonious life. The existence of such a community is gravely doubted by Terry, who has formed deeply a stereotype concerning women. In his mind, women can't organize and are frightfully jealous. While from the history/herstory, it can be seen at the very establishment of *Herland*, the women in it are quite different, with the spirit of community deeply embedded in, for which peace and harmony prevails in this community.

In addition, the responsibility of rearing children in *Herland* is not on a single mother, but on a group of women. “They began at once to plan and build for their children, all the strength and intelligence of the whole of them devoted to that one thing” (p. 61). It seems that the women in *Herland* have formed a blood community, and taking care of the girl kids have become their top priority. Some of them may give birth to kids, but they will not raise them; while some may not give birth to kids, but if they are skillful at raising kids, they can raise the kids and become their mothers. “They had no enemies; they themselves were all sisters and friends. The land was fair before them, and a great future began to form itself in their minds...they were sisters, and as they grew, they grew together—not by competition, but by united action” (p. 62). For the interests of the kids, they developed all this close inter-service. Because the children need spinsters and weavers, farmers and gardeners, carpenters and masons, as well as mothers, so they developed the corresponding skills and became specialized. That is to say, in the community of *Herland*, the great vision is to rear children well, with all the women being the members of the community, they are working hard to realize this. And in the process of this, they learn, help and grow together and develop the skills they are specialized in. They actually have made their own self-actualization.

Though *Herland* is a place full of women and girls, men are not repelled. Actually, the women in *Herland* have tried to learn something they don't know from the three men with modesty and are always friendly to them.

When the three men were captured by the women in *Herland*, there were no deaths or killings, they were slumbered by anesthesia—a relatively safe way. When they refreshed, they were treated as guests. When the three men tried to escape from *Herland*, they were recaptured and they thought they would be imprisoned or confined, but “nothing of the kind happened” (p. 44). They were treated as “truants” only and it seems that the people in *Herland* quite understood their truancy. From those experiences, it can be seen that the people in *Herland* is quite peace-loving and they seldom resort to violence and mortal weapons. To better communicate, the three men were appointed three tutors. Except Terry, who were too stubborn and too deep-rooted in his own prejudices and stereotypes, the other two men, Van and Jeff developed a harmonious relationship with their tutors, and found that one of the things most impressive about the women was “the absence of irritability” (p. 48) and that was a “common trait” (p. 48). Jeff said he loved his tutor Zava like an aunt; Van and his tutor Somel were as chummy as could be—the best of friends. The two men and their tutors learned each other and communicated well; yet even his tutor Moadine was patient and courteous, Terry still can’t form a harmonious relationship, which is closely related to Terry’s chauvinist idea and prejudices. It can be seen that the people in *Herland* are friendly and not afraid of men or strangers, and that all they want is to learn and then make their own country better. In the text, the three men even had their wives, the three girls they met at the very start. Jeff idolized and worshiped women and he and his wife Celis were happy and they even had the first baby who had both a father and a mother in *Herland*. Van and his wife Ellador had “already a very deep, restful feeling, as if they had always had “one another” (p. 103). They learned from each other, talked with each other and discussed some issues together, and at the ending of the text, Ellador and Van left *Herland* and went to America for more learning so as to improve *Herland*. While Terry, who always thought that women “enjoyed being mastered”, tried to control and conquer his wife Alima, he failed and was expelled from *Herland* forever. To people in *Herland*, they are not afraid of the people from outside, they have their perceptions and they never treat “intruders” as enemies, instead, they entertain outsiders as guests and friends and are always ready to learn from them. From that sense, we regard *Herland* more as a community including women and men than only a sisterhood or motherhood.

In *Herland*, Gilman describes a beautiful community, in which the women not only love their surroundings, construct their homes as gardens, and actually integrate themselves into their surroundings, but also cooperate with each other, grow and develop together, with the same vision. They develop collaboration and alliance among women, and endeavour to form harmonious relationship with men so as to gain more wit and inspiration.

5. Conclusion

Through the detailed analysis of Gilman’s works *The Yellow Wallpaper* and *Herland*, it can be seen that the spirit of community was deeply embedded in the two works, and the evolution of Gilman’s views on community can be exhibited as well. In *The Yellow Wallpaper*, Gilman started to see the power of women alliance, but it seemed that she was not so confident about forming community as a way to liberate women in the patriarchal society. Though the woman narrator and the other women behind the yellow wallpaper worked together, and successfully ripped the yellow wallpaper off the wall, the woman narrator paid the price of being mad. She may get freedom at one time but she still can’t get out of the worldly “prison”. Though not so obvious, **but** the view “girls help girls” is actually interwoven in the text. In *Herland*, Gilman is more confident and she regards community as a powerful tool to solve many problems. The community in *Herland* is not just a sisterhood, but a more open-minded alliance which forms harmonious relationships not only among the members within, but also with the surroundings. What is more, such an alliance is not completely isolated and it also admits men as its members. What it advocates is harmony, peace and mutual development, and learning plays a pivotal role in it. It can be said that Gilman’s view on community has progressed a lot in the novel *Herland* and she has a deeper understanding of and greater confidence in community. The perspective of community has shed some new light on the interpretation of Gilman’s works and given some insight into Gilman’s thoughts and concepts, meanwhile, the evolution of Gilman’s view on community can be seen clearly.

Acknowledgments

Not applicable.

Authors’ contributions

Not applicable.

Funding

This work was supported by Guangzhou Philosophy and Social Science Planning Project in 2022: *Research on Community Writing in the works of Charlotte Perkins Gilman* [project number 2022GZGJ270].

Competing interests

Not applicable.

Informed consent

Obtained.

Ethics approval

The Publication Ethics Committee of the Canadian Center of Science and Education.

The journal's policies adhere to the Core Practices established by the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE).

Provenance and peer review

Not commissioned; externally double-blind peer reviewed.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

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Notes

This thesis is funded by Guangzhou Philosophy and Social Science Planning Project in 2022: *Research on Community Writing in the works of Charlotte Perkins Gilman* (No. 2022GZGJ270).

All the quotes of *The Yellow Wallpaper* and *Herland* are taken from *Herland and Selected Stories Charlotte Perkins Gilman* (Edited and with an Introduction by Barbara H. Solomon and a New Afterword by Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz). New York: the Penguin Group, 2014.

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