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# **I. Introduction**

Human kind is divided into the biological distinction of men and women, which also shapes our society and the way we organize our culture. But how would our world and our life look like if there was no distinction between humans into male and female? If we imagined a society where all problems related to gender were simply extinguished and it was possible to live in a society where everyone was judged by their character and not by their sex? Ursula K. Le Guin answered this question by creating a sexless planet in her novel *The Left Hand of Darkness*. However, she was not the only one to imagine a society without the restrictive and oppressive limitations gender might have for some individuals in a society. Especially the genres of utopia and dystopia present societies that have their settings in the future and take the reader into a world where the usual conventions of gender might not be applicable anymore. In a nutshell, this creation and imagination of new rules, a new society, a new order and new social roles presents the opportunity of, on the one hand, criticising the existing society, but also imagining a new, perhaps better (utopia), or even worse (dystopia) alternative.

Since the beginning of the twentieth century and the first feminist movement, the awareness that there is gender discrimination and especially female suppression in our society has become an important issue. However, still a hundred years later, it seems that a solution to the gender topic is still yet to come. There is still gender inequality, where a woman has disadvantages in many areas of public and private life and it appears to be a long and hard way for achieving full equality among the sexes. Literature has been a way to imagine how a present miserable situation could be different or even worse and how a better world might look like. This is why I chose the literary genre of utopia and dystopia, since both provide an outlook into the future.

In addition, by looking at which gender roles they have created, it is possible to detect if a solution to present problems can be found in literary role models. A utopia could present how a perfect society could be achieved; how the world should never look like can be found within a dystopia. This is the reason why I chose the literary genre of utopia and dystopia; I will hopefully find an answer to problems that are related to gender in our society or a vision of how worse the situation of inequality between men and women could become.

My diploma thesis is divided into three different parts. The first chapter deals with the literary genre of utopia where I will analyse the roles of men and women. Since a utopia is an ideal vision of society, I will try to detect if gender related problems are solved or if solutions are presented, as well as if the same gender division and role modelling is present in this utopian space as in a patriarchal society. Further, due to this possible shift in gender roles, I will also analyse whether power dynamics between the two sexes are still the same, where the male is the superior and females are subordinated to men, or if this has changed.

The second chapter will be an analysis of gender roles in a dystopia. Here I will once again show which roles men and women are assigned to in a dystopian society. Since this society is a nightmare vision of the future, it will be examined which purpose the different role models of men and women have and how this effect is achieved. Once again, I will investigate how power relations between the two sexes look like and if the usual power hierarchy of powerful men and powerless females can also be found in a dystopian society.

The last chapter addresses a different utopian, or dystopian feature, depending on how you look at it, aspect, namely the extinction of gender. I will examine how society without gender division into male and female looks like and how it is different to a bisexual society. I will investigate whether there are any stereotypical roles for the sexless citizens and which effect the missing gender has on society.

What these three chapters have in common is that I will examine in each representative book which roles men and women are assigned to and which effect that has on the society they live in. In case of utopia, it will be shown if the alternated gender roles indeed create a better society. In a dystopia, I will investigate whether the assigned roles of men and women turn the country into a nightmare vision of the future. And lastly, it should finally be concluded whether the elimination of gender would be the solution to all the problems that are related to gender and turn the society into a better place to live.

With this in mind I have chosen the novel *Herland* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, which will be my example of an utopian vision of society; *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood is the exact opposite, namely a nightmare vision of the near future and will function as the example of dystopian fiction. These two books will form the main part of this diploma thesis, not only because both are an adequate representative of those two literary genres, but also because both have a focus on gender and the roles of women and men in society. The last part is dedicated to an analysis of a novel, which presents an even more unique vision of gender combined with utopian or dystopian thought, namely the extinction of gender altogether. Science fiction author Ursula LeGuin, in her book *The Left*

*Hand of Darkness*, created a planet that is inhabited by neutral beings, with no specific gender at all. Here it will be my attempt to analyse how this way of living looks like and if and in which way a sexless society may affect the behaviour and roles of their inhabitants.

Before we can start the analysis of gender aspects in utopian and dystopian fiction, one could ask the question, why it would be interesting to even have a closer look at the various visions of gender and social roles of men and women in fiction that presents an alternative version of reality in the near future? At first the term “gender” should be clarified in order to establish a common base for further analysis and to state which aspects will be included in the following examination.

It is necessary to distinguish between the term “gender” and “sex”; “sex” denotes the biologically determined distinction between men and women, whereas the term “gender” goes a bit further. When it comes to gender, one does not only distinguish between the biological sex of male and female, but it also includes the social conventions of those two sexes. The terms “masculinity” and “femininity” include certain aspects of how men and women are ought to behave in a certain society in order to be recognised as a man or a woman (cf. Sardar & Van Loon 138; Brooker; Schechner 130-132). This distinction or categorization of men and women is far more complicated than the biological differentiation of male and female. In a society there are certain agreements, which an individual adapts since the beginning of childhood, of how a person has to perform in order to be assigned to the female or the male sex; this includes gestures, body movements, facial displays and erotic behaviour (cf. Schechner 130).

Feminist critics, such as Judith Butler, have acknowledged the fact that the body was often a passive medium where social conventions were simply inscribed, as well as the possibility for political forces to perform their strategic interests with bounding the body and constituting it as a marker of sex (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 129). Further, French philosopher Michel Foucault also notices that “the body is the inscribed surface of events” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 129). In other words, regulations of how to behave or how to look like in order to be put into the category of being male or female is derived from external notions, it is not a decision that was made by the individual person itself (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 128; Schechner 130-132). “The body was viewed as a common rack upon which different societies could inflict different norms or behaviour or personality” (Sardar & Van Loon 138-140). It is society and its norms in that particular society that tell you how you have to dress if you want to be recognized as a woman, no matter if you yourself agree with that concept or not.

If the inner truth of gender is a fabrication and if a true gender is a fantasy instituted and inscribed on the surface of bodies, then it seems that genders can be neither true nor false, but are only produced as the truth effects of a discourse of primary and stable identity. (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 136)

Judith Butler, one of the most renowned feminist philosophers, therefore, sees gender as an “intentional and performative” act of “a set of meanings [that are] already socially established” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 140). In addition, Schechner argues that this performative act does not consist of natural guidelines but of “something built and enforced by means of ‘performance’ [...]” (Schechner 130). Simone de Beauvoir’s famous quotation “One is not born, but, rather, becomes a woman” (Schechner 130) is a further example of Schechner’s and Butler’s argumentation.

In other words, there are certain rules and regulations within a society which determine the way one ought to behave as a man or a woman; however, as Butler points out, it is the individual’s decision of how to “play one’s gender” (Schechner 132). Butler further compares the performative act of gender with a theatre performance where every actor follows a known scenario (cf. Schechner 133).

However, a few problems may arise with this external regulation of individuals’ behaviour; mostly media, television, magazines or other public authorities that have become powerful by the silent agreement of the majority of the popularity, created the prescription of how a man or woman should behave or look like. Not only have they regulated feminine gestures or body movements, they have also established and prescribed the dominant sexual orientation, i.e. heterosexual, and created taboos or restrictions for any deviation from that norm (cf. Schechner 132). Butler assumes that “gender as performed in contemporary Western societies enacts a normative heterosexuality that is a major tool for enforcing a patriarchal, phallocentric social order” (Schechner 131). By this regulation of sexual behaviour, attitudes and the way an individual has to behave society puts a lot of pressure on its citizens by imposing penalties on people who are not willing to abide by those rules.

Cultures are governed by conventions that not only regulate and guarantee the production, exchange, and consumption of material goods, but also reproduce the bonds of kinship itself, which require taboos and a punitive regulation of reproduction to effect that end (homosexuality as a taboo). (Schechner 132)

This brings us closer to the issue of power relations within Western societies that can be described as a patriarchy, where men still have dominance over women (cf. Bartkowski 5-7; Sardar & VanLoon 144). Feminist movements, which started at the beginning of the

twentieth century, have commenced to question the justice of this social order and attempted to reshape the social roles in Western societies. Throughout history, women were considered to be the weaker sex, which justified the humiliation and suppression of women in public and private spheres (cf. Butler, *Psyche* 7-9).<sup>1</sup> “Early on in the contemporary women’s movement there was a governing idea, mostly untheorized, that the contaminating effects of power were tied to the work, world and politics of men” (Bartkowski 6). Emancipated women of the last few decades made attempts to establish a form of equality among the sexes, in professional and personal lives. This movement of the establishment of equal rights between men and women was quite utopian at first itself; but time has shown that it was possible to change existing patterns, even if it takes effort and time to be achieved. The beginning of every change is always a thought or a vision, a different version of how the present might look like or how it could be changed. This imagination might seem quite far-fetched or even utopian at first, but it is a necessary first step to change. It can be called utopian, since the term itself was derived from the Greek words „Somewhere non-existent“ (u-topia) and „somewhere desirable“ (eu-topia) (Matterson). The literary genre of utopia is closely connected to this form of thought and can already be traced back to the times of Plato, who considered it as “a struggle of classes, since it have always been the suppressed who were looking for an escape” (Krauss 24). But it was Thomas More with his novel *Utopia* in 1516, who introduced this way of thinking into literature. He arranged his novel like a travel narrative, which was a very common style for utopian novels before the nineteenth century, and already introduced the concept of man’s longing for a better world (cf. Davis12). The search for a better reality derived especially from an existing dissatisfaction and presents an individual’s attempt to free him/herself of “the corporative and feudal-absolutistic bondages” (Krauss 31). Irving D. Blum listed three characteristics of a literary utopia:

- (1) Utopias were ‘permeated with the feeling that society was capable of improvement. (2) A utopia was ‘composed, at least in part, of plans for improving society, and (3) formed of proposals that are impractical at the time of its writing.’ (Davis 13)

In addition, it can also be seen as a representation of a contemporary society, since a ‘better’ alternative always needs a reference to an existing discontentment or misery (cf. Davis 13). There are various ways how this vision could look like; either, it is simply an

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<sup>1</sup> „In jedem Fall nimmt die Macht, die zunächst von außen zu kommen und dem Subjekt aufgezwungen und es in die Unterwerfung zu treiben schien, eine psychische Form an, die die Selbstidentität des Subjekts ausmacht.“ (Butler, *Psyche* 9)



escapist fantasy to provide a retreat from the dissatisfaction of reality, or it could be criticism on an existing misery. Further, it is possible for an utopian novel to serve as an outline for an improved alternative society (cf. Davis 13). The main goal for a utopian writer was to diminish despair and sorrow and provide a vision of how a sense of wellbeing could be re-established (cf. Davis 19).

The base of a utopian political system is often a radical democracy with total equality among its citizens, and private property is substituted by communal ownership. The equality of all possessions should create more equality among its inhabitants; a further innovation is the obligation to work, however, which induces lower working hours for everyone (cf. Krauss 37-38).

In some utopian novels it is also possible to detect a completely different concept of family; new-borns are mostly taken away from their families and put into “pedagogic collective state institutions” (Krauss 40), where children are raised and educated by representatives of the community and all are taught the common beliefs and values of this ideal society<sup>2</sup>.

In addition, one core element of utopian fiction, although this increased after nineteenth century, is the introduction of innovative technology. A reason why this idealized version of society sometimes works more perfectly than the existing one, is the use of technical equipment which facilitates or eliminates certain problems the dissatisfying society (cf. Krauss 40).<sup>3</sup>

Technology is also the reason why utopian novels started to be closely connected to the genre of science fiction, although they were originally two independent genres. The overlap started in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when the travel narrative, which was the main literary genre of utopian fiction, became old-fashioned and the tendency towards combining utopian form of thought with science fiction grew more and more popular (cf. Ferns, *Utopia* 55; Roberts 93).

Another genre that had close ties to utopian fiction for a longer period was dystopian fiction, which did not foresee a better future, but the exact opposite, namely a suppressive and miserable alternative of contemporary society (cf. Matterson; Krysmanski 48). During the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the rise of technology has not only introduced utopian,

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<sup>2</sup> An example for this notion can be found in the utopian novel *Herland* by Perkins Gilman, as well as in *The Left Hand of Darkness* by Le Guin

<sup>3</sup> An example for this notion can be found in Marge Piercy’s novel *Woman on the Edge of Time* where technology enables humans to be created in laboratories, which in Piercy’s utopian future is the solution for some problems.

idealized visions of the future, but was also a breeding ground for “nightmare fears of technology which often led to regressive, pastoral, anti-industrial images” (Bartkowski 8). Further, dystopias also have a disposition to be a forecast of certain trends in a certain society (cf. Matterson)<sup>4</sup>.

Gender can be found in both utopian and dystopian fiction throughout its literary history; the idea of an androgynous human can already be found in Plato’s writing, although he might not have been aware of the concept of gender. Already in the nineteenth century all-female utopias found its way into this literary genre, although feminist critics condemned them as “idealiz[ing] the “true” women of the domestic sphere, not the “new” woman” (Bartkowski 5). Therefore, it is crucial to take a close look at how women and men are portrayed in a certain novel; it is important to discover which roles they represent and how the power dynamics between the two sexes may influence their status in a society.

As mentioned before, the literary genre of utopia and dystopia offer the possibility of creating an entirely new system or society, which includes gender roles as well, or it at least provides the possibility for it. Whether and how the three authors, each being a representative of either a utopia or a dystopia, utilises this chance will be the aim of this thesis. It will be analysed which gender roles in a utopia or dystopia can be found; it will be interesting to see if the author has created innovate gender roles or stuck with the traditional opposition of our own society. In addition, it will be examined how the power relations among the two sexes in this literary genre look like; here not only the relationship between men and women will be investigated, but also among the same sex, namely the affiliations of men and women among themselves. Further, as we will see later, books where no gender at all exists in an imagined society, will be taken into account; in this case it will be crucial to inspect how this community looks like and how it may be different to others societies, if at all.

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<sup>4</sup> Margaret Atwood’s novel “The Handmaid’s Tale“ serves as an example for this notion, since she herself was inspired by a group of Christian fundamentalists in the 1980s in the USA. (“Warnung vor Gilead.” *Der Spiegel* 23/1987: 210- 213)

## II. Society Without Men- The Utopian Space of *Herland*

### 1. Introduction

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's novel *Herland* is an example of a literary utopia. It tells the story of three men who, inspired by unconfirmed rumours about an all-female island, start on a journey to this mysterious place. After finding this unspecified territory, they are confronted with circumstances that shake their whole world-view and also forces them to reflect the stereotypical roles of women in their home-society, since the females they encounter do not fit into their concept of female roles. Gilman presents a unique and contrary microcosm of matriarchy, but also skilfully unveils the restricted and repressed roles of women within her society during the beginning of the twentieth century.

Influenced by Social Darwinism, which confronted the minds and world-views of the American citizens at the turn of the twentieth century, Gilman introduces certain questions, but also suggestions, about what the situation of women and men looks like and how it could be improved.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman produced, in both *Women and Economics* [1898] and *Herland* [1915], a political response to Darwinian and Spencerian evolutionism that both incorporated and resisted evolutionary arguments concerning sexual difference. (Hausman 493)

The design of an all-female matriarchy is Gilman's suggestion of how certain problems of stereotyping and role modelling of the two sexes could be solved or improved. Being "[a] serious critic of history and society [...] she tried to create a cohesive, integrated body of thought that combined feminism and socialism" (Lane, *Herland* ix). She is convinced that women are already capable of changing society and especially their own status and situation in it, if they only worked together and formed alliances, which she visualizes in her utopian novel *Herland*. "In Gilman's fiction, utopian reproductive scenarios and alternative visions of maternity are offered as blueprints for social change" (Weinbaum 272).

Gilman can be seen as a representative of the first-wave feminist movement, which commenced in the nineteenth century and lasted until the 1930s. It was their major concern to fight for the rights of women and their success included gaining women's right to vote at the beginning of the twentieth century. The outbreak of the First World War, however, restricted women again to their homes and made them dependent on their husbands. The possibility for women to work in a professional job was also hardly ever to be seen, which

was also a situation women were eager to change. Gilman's novel is situated within this time of women's struggle for independence and recognition within a society. Her utopian vision of how women are possible to take care of themselves and manage to even run a country on their own without the help of men was a clear statement that supported women's fight for their independence.

## **2. Can *Herland* Be Classified A Utopian Novel?**

Gilman's narrative structure fulfils some requirements of the literary genre of utopia. It starts with the journey of three men to a rumoured but uncharted territory in order to discover, and conquer, this yet to be discovered land (cf. Ferns, *Rewriting* 29). However, some deviations from the traditional utopian strategy, as compared to classical utopias, such as More's *Utopia*, can be detected in Gilman's outline of the story. While entering the undetected land, the adventurers discover that the access to the island is blocked by an act of nature, which is one reason why the all-female territory is so well cast off from the rest of the world. "Whereas in the conventional utopia access to the forbidden territory is very much under male control, Gilman's maternal landscape is represented as firmly in the possession of women." (Ferns, *Rewriting* 29)

Another difference to many other utopian stories is the fact that, usually, visitors are faced with problems of entering the hidden space, but are not confronted with many more difficulties to come once they have made their first encounter with the inhabitants of that utopian land. In Gilman's novel, however, the three men have little difficulty in finding a way into the female land but struggle with the situation inside it (cf. Ferns, *Rewriting* 29). This already opens the discussion for the problem the three male visitors are faced with throughout the entire novel, namely the confrontation with another type of women, who differ from the usual female concept of their society. The previous confident men are soon faced with challenges of adapting their mindsets to this new society:

What starts out with all the trappings of a tale of conventional male derring-do, [...] soon leaves its intrepid explorers feeling 'like small boys, very small boys, caught doing mischief in some gracious lady's house' (*Herland* 19). (Ferns, *Rewriting* 30)

According to Johnson-Bogart, their self-depiction as "boys" denotes, a "shift out of control, both socially and linguistically, and parallels the experience of women (girls) in men's language" (87).

Further, the behaviour of the three protagonists also stays in contrast to the usual character design of visitors in other utopian fiction. Normally, the traveller provides “uncritical transmission of information” (Ferns, *Rewriting* 31), which is not the case in *Herland*; Ferns argues that in Gilman’s novel, the confrontation of visitors and female inhabitants encourages an “active critical participation on the part of the reader” (*Rewriting* 31), which normal utopias try to avoid, when Gilman stresses the difference between two opposite societies.

According to Bartkowski, the purpose of a feminist utopia is to “seek out a past, to examine the present critically, to posit a future, and to tell a tale of and for that imagined future” (24). This notion can be found throughout the novel, as Gilman constantly refers to her present. By comparing two societies with each other, she comments on nuisances of her reality. “Gilman romps through the game of what is feminine and what is masculine, what is manly and what is womanly, what is culturally learned and what is biologically determined male-female behaviour” (Lane, *Herland* xiii). These elements will be highlighted in every chapter, in order to denote the connection with Gilman’s criticism on her actual society.

### **3. Characters**

#### **3.1. Male Protagonists In *Herland***

When it comes to character design, Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s novel is not only worth considering her creation of new female types, but also the three male protagonists. The interesting fact about these three men is that each of them represents a different attitude towards women. Not only their personality, but also their interests and skills are of a different nature.

##### **3.1.1. Rational Van**

Vandyck Jennings, short Van, is the first person narrator of the story. He considers himself a sociologist, who takes part in the expedition, not because of his skills, but merely because of his relations to Terry, who is the financial backbone of the trip (“as for me, I got in through Terry’s influence” (Gilman 5)). Van attempts to function as the voice of reason and tries to analyse the group’s encounters and relations with the women of Herland in a distanced and sober way.

He represents the sexist beliefs of Darwin and Spencer that Gilman challenged in *Women and Economics*, and being eminently 'rational', cannot deny that the astounding evolution of the Herlanders disproves all 'scientific' proofs of women's 'innately weaker sensibility'. (Hausman 495)

Already when considering the nature of the all-female land, he tries to explain it in reasonable terms and compares it to other cultures that are familiar to human kind:

You'll find it's built on a sort of matriarchal principle, [...] the men have a separate cult of their own, less socially developed than the women [...]. This is a condition known to have existed- here's just a survival. (Gilman 9)

In addition, also during their first encounter, Van tries to analyse the women's behaviour in a distanced and neutral way: "Inhabitants evidently arboreal,' I grimly suggested. 'Civilised and still arboreal- peculiar people'" (Gilman 14). He attempts to make his observations in an emotionless and scientific way.

### **3.1.2. Misogynist Terry**

The second man in this entourage is Terry O. Nicholson, who is the epitome of male stereotypes of the early twentieth century. Not only his strong and handsome physique enforces his self-confident nature, but also his interest in classified male professions, such as mechanics and electricity, confirm his status as an alpha-male and characterise him as a leading figure. The narrator also endorses this notion already at the beginning: "We never could have done the thing at all without Terry" (Gilman 5). However, it is not quite clear if this is because of his financial aid, since he is the richest of the three, or the adventurous and fearless nature of his character. His attitude towards women is also worth considering. He himself is proud of his status as a womanizer ("Terry's idea seemed to be that pretty women were just so much game and homely ones not worth considering" (Gilman 10)), which enforces his distrust in any kind of female superiority. When hearing about the danger awaiting in Herland, Terry seems rather eager to prove that he is able to conquer these mysterious women, a thing no man has ever achieved before. "'You'll see,' he insisted. 'I'll get solid with them all- [...] I'll get myself elected king in no time [...]" (Gilman 9). He is not willing to accept the fact that there might be women out there who are more powerful or stronger than men and sees himself to be the chosen one to finally introduce male superiority into this mysterious female matriarchy.

In addition, his thoughts about the future of this unknown land, after they had explored it, are of a submissive, exploitative nature, when he considers the women being his personal sexual objects:

And Terry, in his secret heart, had visions of a sort of sublimated summer resort- just Girls and Girls and Girls- [...] I could see it in his eyes as he lay there, looking at the long blue rollers slipping by, and fingering that impressive mustache of his. (Gilman 9)

His attitude towards the women of Herland derives from the construction of “the female” during the early twentieth century, and he assumes that he will encounter the same type of women in this mysterious country. This notion is confirmed when the group enters the country for the first time and it is one of Terry’s first observations of the land, which stresses his fixation on the outward appearance of women and the function they have for him: “‘Come on, boys- there were some good lookers in that bunch’” (Gilman 12).

Furthermore, Terry is the one who, for a long, is time not willing to believe that women, without the help of men, have created a fine country with skilled architecture: “‘They’ve got architects and landscape gardeners in plenty, that’s sure,’” (Gilman 15).

In addition, Terry is the only one of the three men who is willing to accept the fact that these women are not at all like those he would have liked to conquer. Already their age, although they look quite young, is not appealing to him and not dominating physically in the various sports activities is rather a violation to his male ego: “‘Never thought I’d live to be bossed by a lot of elderly lady acrobats,’” (Gilman 24). Instead of trying to adapt to this new situation and the society of Herland, Terry sees the only possibility in escape, since he is unable to conquer these females.

When the reality proves to be conspicuously different from his anticipations, it is he who leads an unsuccessful escape bid, who shows the clearest frustration with the constraints imposed on them, and who is most consistently critical of utopian society. (Ferns, *Rewriting* 31)

Moreover, Terry is not willing to accept the women as intellectual equals and does not take them seriously: “He protested, not believing her in the least, but not wishing to say so” (Gilman 32). Terry reflects the male dominant attitude towards women, which puts men at the superior end. He is not willing to accept women as true equals.

### **3.1.3. Romantic Jeff**

The third member of the group is Jeff Margrave, who presents once again different male characteristics from Van and Terry. Being a poet and botanist in his heart, he is chosen to be part of the explorers due to his profession as a doctor. His character is designed as romantic, sensitive and mild, whose interests lie more in reading poetry and being impressed by nature, than conquering or exploring uncharted territory. Also, Van describes his imaginations about the undiscovered female land as: “Jeff was a tender soul. I

think he thought that country- if there was one- was just blossoming with roses and babies and canaries and tidies, and all that sort of thing.” (Gilman 9) His attitude towards women is different from Terry’s, he shows more respect and does not have the same aggressive and conquering attitude as his companion. He “idealize[s] women in the best Southern style. He was full of chivalry and sentiment, and all that. And he was a good boy; he lived up to his ideals” (Gilman 10). Although he may be more flattering and has a less offensive way of treating women, he still possesses an old-fashioned attitude towards them, since he was “full of chivalry”. Chivalry is derived from medieval times, and idealizes women, but still considers them inactive objects, which, therefore, could also be anchored in Jeff’s state of mind.

However, during their first encounter with the natives of Herland, we see Jeff’s peaceful and reasonable attitude when he judges Terry’s aggressive attempt to catch one of the girls: “‘You shouldn’t have tried that way,’ Jeff protested. ‘They were perfectly friendly; now we’ve scared them.’” (Gilman 14) His attitude reflects his mild and reasonable nature of an observer, who does not need to demonstrate his superior male strength, and is eager to start communication with the unknown natives in a diplomatic manner.

Further, due to Jeff’s biological background, he explains certain unknown terms to the women, such as “virgin,” which is not part of their world: “‘Among mating animals, the term *virgin* is applied to the female who has not mated,’ he answered” (Gilman 32).

### **3.1.4. The Different Nature of the Three Men**

The differences between the three men’s characters is further confirmed when they enjoy their first breakfast with their new companions:

[...] Jeff with sincere admiration, Terry with that highly technical look of his, as of a past master- like a lion tamer, a serpent charmer, or some such professional. I myself was intensely interested.(Gilman 21)

It is worth noticing what the opinions and attitudes of the three men towards this uncharted territory are. They reflect Western society at the beginning of the twentieth century, as well as predominant female stereotypes existing within this society. All three men have a certain attitude towards women, which reflects the status of women during the early twentieth century. Neither of the three protagonists thinks women are capable of running a country on their own; naturally, they could not have imagined the survival of a pure female society due to the biological necessity of two sexes, but they also doubt the



possibility of a female people to survive on their own. All three of them are convinced that there are men in the country, confident that they are hiding somewhere. However, they do not believe that a threat may derive from the women, but rather from the hidden men showing up to protect their women. “‘Fraid the ladies will eat you?’ he scoffed. ‘We’re not so sure about those ladies, you know,’ drawled Jeff. ‘There may be a contingent of gentlemen with poisoned arrows or something’” (Gilman 8).

In addition, their choice of words underlines the fact that women are still objects belonging to superior male beings: “‘They may live up in the mountains yonder and *keep* the women in this part of the country- sort of a national harem!’” (Gilman 12, emphasis added) This stresses the fact that they believe that those women are less powerful than the absent men. The expression “keeping” them implies that it is not the women’s choice to remain in this country, but that they are forced to stay. Also the word “harem” denotes an oppressive situation for women, since in a harem, women are kept for entertaining purposes for men and have little rights or the chance to make decisions for themselves.

Repeatedly the reader comes across the phrase, “There must be men”, due to the fact that an all-female country does not fit into their understanding of society or culture. “‘Why, this is a *civilized* country!’ I protested. ‘There must be men’” (Gilman 11). They even believe that a male presence is necessary to keep peace within the country: “‘They would fight among themselves,’ Terry insisted. ‘Women always do. We mustn’t look to find any sort of order and organization.’” (Gilman 9)

In addition, during their first encounter with the natives of Herland, they immediately assume that the young humans in the trees must be boys, since the idea of climbing or being active is mainly associated with men within their society: “‘Gee! Look, boys!’” (Gilman 13). Further, it is not only the active movement of those humans which leads them to the assumption that it must be boys, but also their outward appearance, which does not correspond with their perception of women: “We saw short hair, hatless, loose, and shining” (Gilman 13).

### **3.1.5. Changing Attitudes**

Having spent many months in Herland, learning the local language, observing local culture and getting to know the inhabitant’s history, the men’s attitude and perception of women also starts to shift and they seem to question their own beliefs. The utopian space of Herland and especially its citizens provide the opportunity to present a new type of

woman, which can also be seen as a starting point for reflection of traditional and fixed stereotypes of women. The Herlanders present a new and different kind of woman, which startles the three men, since it does not correspond with their perception of women.

What we were slow in understanding was how these ultra-women, inheriting only from women, had eliminated not only certain masculine characteristics, which of course we did not look for, but so much of what we had always thought essentially feminine. The tradition of men as guardians and protectors had quite died out. These stalwart virgins had no men to fear and therefore no need of protection. (Gilman 39)

The shift in the three men's attitudes and expectations reflects what Gilman is trying to achieve with her novel, namely to question and possibly alter the perception and status of women in her society. Stereotypes are being questioned and the men are the projection surface of Gilman's attempt to denote that women are more than what is expected of them. It is especially due to constant close examination of routines and fixed female role models that the beliefs and attitudes of the three men begin to change. This was already visible by the quotation above and becomes more and more evident throughout the novel.

As they (the women of Herland) and their visitors learn about each other's worlds- and the men and women do learn from each other- our culture is ridiculed; with wide-eyed innocence, common sense, and reason the Herlanders expose much that is ludicrous, oppressive, and unreasonable about the way we do things, about the way we work, define gender roles, and establish social expectations. (Lane, *To Herland and Beyond* 292)

Not only does Herland create a new picture of women, but also the roles of men start to change, due to the different expectations the women have towards them. Van considers Terry's dissatisfaction as a result of the demands women are expecting from him: "I don't suppose Terry had ever lived so long with neither Love, Combat, nor Danger to employ his superabundant energies, and he was irritable" (Gilman 39). The three men are not only forced to alter their perception of women, but also the way they behave and conceive of themselves as men. Due to the strong physical force of the Herlanders and the lack of need for protection the men are excluded from displaying their masculine power, which they are used to do in their own native society.

In addition, the chance for winning the women's affection and possibly engaging in a romantic relationship that is based on love and sex seems also rather difficult or even impossible at the beginning of the novel, since concepts like conquering or having an interpersonal relation with the other sex is entirely unknown to the Herlanders. It takes a lot of effort, which especially Terry seems to struggle with, to accept the different situation and relation with those women. This, however, leaves us with the confirmation that society has created fixed role models and stereotypes for men and women which are so anchored

in the minds, not only of the three men, but also for the Herlanders. The power of society and its influence on how we think or ought to think is visible especially at the beginning of the novel.

The novel may present the mind-sets of the three men and the Herlanders as quite fixed and stable at the beginning, when the three men still have to get used to the different roles and character traits of the Herlanders, but there the encounter of the two groups also presents the opportunity that it is possible to alter those fixed stereotypes and expectations of role models.

As already mentioned, the three men slowly try to accept the differences between their traditional idea of women and the ones they are confronted with in Herland. Especially Jeff and Van are willing to accept or even prefer this type of women to the ones they are used to.

Neither Jeff nor I found it so wearing. I was so much interested intellectually that our confinement did not wear on me; and as for Jeff, bless his heart!- he enjoyed the society of that tutor of his almost as much as if she had been a girl. (Gilman 39-40)

Not only do they start to accept and even feel affection for the Herlanders, they also commence reflecting on their own perception and thoughts of what they assumed to be feminine:

These women, whose essential distinction of motherhood was the dominant note of their whole culture, were strikingly deficient in what we call 'femininity'. This led me very promptly to the conviction that those 'feminine charms' we are so fond of are not feminine at all, but mere reflected masculinity- developed to please us because they had to please us, and in no way essential to the real fulfilment of their great process. (Gilman 40)

Also Van's request for Terry, who is not willing to accept the true nature and status of the Herlanders, introduces the men's shifting perception of themselves: "Come, be a man!" (Gilman 40). Here, Van's idea of "being a man" is truly to understand, accept and not fight against the hospitable and peaceful women. Terry's idea of being a man seems to be shaken by the treatment and attention of the Herlanders. In his opinion, being masculine means not to abide by the rules of the women, which means that he cannot leave the country. Van's idea of being a man is different from Terry's, which he attempts to show him. In Van's opinion, stepping back and accepting the treatment, which is in no way hostile, is manlier, than trying to utterly fight against it: "They've been mighty good to us" (Gilman 40). The attitudes of the two men in this scene explicitly show the two different ways of thinking and acceptance of anything that does not correspond with their usual mindset.

### 3.2. Women In *Herland*

Women in Herland differ from the ones the three men are used to. They do not correspond with traditional stereotypes that can be found in Western society at the beginning of the twentieth century. Gilman especially attempts to present the differences between the two cultures by demonstrating which practices are actually culturally determined and stand in conflict with the nature of individual beings. Due to the fact that there are no men in Herland, interpersonal behaviour differs among the visitors and the inhabitants and is one of the main elements of this novel.

Once the three men have encountered the first women of Herland, they soon try to use common strategies from their own society to get to know them. The difference between the women of Herland and the women of the bi-sexual world where the three men are from is basically that the three girls they meet have never had an encounter with men before. Therefore, they are not used to strategies such as wooing, being seduced or enchanted by men. Here, Gilman tries to show that interpersonal relationships and behaviour are indeed culturally trained and not inherited by nature. Terry has experience with gaining women's affection and enchanting them with expensive, shiny objects, such as the fake diamonds he offers to the girls on the tree: " 'Have to use bait,' grinned Terry. [...] He produced from an inner pocket a little box of purple velvet [...] and out of it he drew a long sparkling thing, a necklace of big varicolored stones [...]" (Gilman 14). Unaware about the dangers an encounter with those unknown creatures might have, one of the girls is indeed intrigued with this object, however, the women are superior in this situation; since it was Terry's intention to grab the girl, fails when the girl tricked him and achieves her goal without being taken by this strong man. Almost mockingly they draw away and leave the men to listen to their "vanishing gay laughter" (Gilman 14).

One thing the three men notice from the very beginning is the different nature and personality the whole population of Herland seems to possess, which stands in contrast to the way women used to act in their society (or so it is presented). However, Weinbaum argues that

the women sport short hair, tunics, knee breeches, and gaiters and are arrayed in bright colors that give them the appearance of tropical birds. In this defeminized, animalized, and exoticized state, Herlanders are implicitly associated with period stereotypes of so-called savages. (288)

The animalistic or savage component of the first encounter with the Herlanders already denotes a theme that is intensified later in the novel, namely the reoccurring aspect of the

physical consummation of sex and the male conquest of the female. “Gilman hints that the rapist lurks in Terry’s heart, and the narrator admits that pushing further into Herland ‘was unwise of us’” (Lant 301).

After their failed escape, the three men expect a rather harsh and more restrictive treatment, which they are accustomed to from their own society. They expect to be imprisoned once again and their freedom to be even more limited. Instead, the opposite occurs, namely that the women do not lead them back with anaesthetics, as they did on their arrival, but use another strategy, namely their power in size, which appeals to the men’s common sense and achieves its goal in the end.

In addition, their manner is shown in more detail to the men, when Van observes:

Here were my five familiar companions, all good-natured as could be, seeming to have no worse feeling than a mild triumph as of winning some simple game; and even that they politely suppressed.” (Gilman 30)

The three men seem to expect some male behaviour in the women, since real men are missing in the country. Their expectations about harsher punishment reflect their culturally trained behaviour of punishment and imprisonment, which is, however, practised by men in their society. The duties of judges, policemen and guards are only performed by men and they have transferred their experience to the guards of Herland, who are women, though. And here, Gilman attempts to present the differences between the two sexes. The Herlanders act rationally, since they are aware of the fact that they outnumber the visitors and are physically superior to them and attempt to use another strategy of connecting with this unknown group of people.

After the escaped prisoners are taken back to the village. The women now use the strategy of cooperation, as do the men, which is the starting point for the actual investigation and description of the country. With the use of modesty, which could actually be seen as a culturally trained virtue, the women speak with the men and ask questions about their origins and their country: “We have been waiting, you see, for you to be able to speak freely with us, and teach us about your country and the rest of the world. You know so much, you see, and we know only our land” (Gilman 32). The women soon realize that with the help of this strategy the chance for success appears to be higher. Here, we can see a virtue, where it does not seem clear, if it is culturally trained or simply lying in a human’s nature. Modesty goes together with their mild-mannered nature, which seems to determine their whole race: “Her look was frankly kind as always, her tone quite simple” (Gilman 32). No aggression or brutal behaviour towards the men is visible; the nature of

the female population seems to be peaceful and reasonable: “They had the evenest tempers, the most perfect patience and good nature [...] afterward I found it a common trait” (Gilman 32).

Through the novel’s portrait of women as intelligent, scientific, educable, physically able, and politically savvy, it rejects existing gender logic and models an alternative woman-centered community that challenges the status quo. (Weinbaum 285)

The way the female population is presented at the beginning is to promote the picture of them being an independent, curious, reasonable and rational people who have managed to construct a society, which is, when it comes to architecture, agriculture and technology, as well advanced, as any other society, if not even more lightly developed.

### **3.2.1. Motherhood Defining Society and Power Relations in Herland**

Due to the lack of men and their common origin, since all the Herlanders are descended from one mother, and the women of Herland see themselves as sisters and mothers. They see motherhood as one of their most important purposes in life and devote their whole country to it.

Already at the beginning of their history, when they founded and re-established the country, the first and most important concern was to create a society where all women are equal and the way society is structured has the overall purpose of maintaining the health and well-being of the community and does not put an individual in a higher position. There is no visible hierarchy in Herland, the profession and status of each woman is equally, merely their job is different. However, Connell argues that “collective life is primary, [...] yet, individuals thrive” (19). Their whole devotion from the beginning of their country is to “plan and build for their children” (Gilman 40). So, motherhood and the well-being of their progeny is the first and most important principle, which defines the way society is structured. “Life was, to them, just the long cycle of motherhood” (Gilman 40).

Motherhood and having the best interest for their children is also dominating their way of thinking, when “every step of [their] advance is always considered in its effect on them-on the race” (Gilman 44). Here, the term “race” mainly refers to the children, which will eventually become mothers themselves. Their thinking is focussed on the survival of the children, which will be the future of their race.

In addition, the strong sense of community and motherhood is also reflected in their distrust towards the three men being in contact with the younger women of Herland. They are less afraid of the potential physical threat the three men might pose on the younger

ones, they are rather convinced that- in any case of misunderstanding or accident,- the bond of the Herlanders would vanquish the three males. Here, the first element of power is visible. In a bi-sexual society, it is men who are more powerful than women. They are the ones who construct fixed roles for women. In Herland, it is quite the opposite, not only because of the physical superiority of the women, but because of their even more powerful sense of community. Human motherhood, as the Herlanders call it, is a “far higher and deeper union of [their] social growth” (Gilman 44). Community and communal understanding is what enlarges their power and their dominion. They do not consider themselves as individuals, as e.g. men and women do in bi-sexual societies, but rather see themselves as mothers and sisters, which creates a bond between all of them and may even erase the whole concept of individuality, which seems to be unnecessary. “If, by any accident, you did harm any one of us, you would have to face a million mothers” (Gilman 44). Connell asserts that Gilman emphasises the communal aspect of Herland to “highlight the problems inherent in the individualistic tendencies in American society and to suggest remedies” (23).

In Herland, the power dynamics are reversed. The usually more powerful men are forced to accept a subordinate role and the women possess the status of being the stronger sex, also due to their strong sense of community. This notion is also confirmed by the fact that the three men are not allowed to use scissors, which are one of the few items that could be used as a weapon in Herland: “Being at last considered sufficiently *tamed* and trained to be trusted with scissors, we barbered ourselves as best we could” (Gilman 48, emphasis added). Also the word “tamed” is usually used in context with animals, which reflects the significantly low status of the three men in Herland. They are not considered of equal status but are seen as objects, which need to be trained before they are fit for contact with the other inhabitants of Herland. “In this feminist utopia, the mission of keeping insurgents down is women’s” (Weinbaum 291).

Reasoning and decision-making in connection with what is best for the future of their children and their race is probably one of their most powerful character traits. By analysis of how many inhabitants their country can hold, they make reasonable decisions, which enables them to secure their race without having to abandon their standard of health, comfort and peace.

You see, they were Mothers, not in our sense of helpless, involuntary fecundity, forced to fill and overfill the land, every land, and then see their children suffer, sin, and die, fighting horribly with one another; but in the sense of Conscious Makers of People. (Gilman 45)

This especially stands in contrast to the three men's society, where the notion of sacrifice for the common good is only to be found in the military and in matters of war. In Herland, it is quite different, namely that they actively take the decision and sacrifice to construct their nature by refusing to have as many children as they can.

The idea of motherhood also stands in contrast to the three men's concept of motherhood. Although they idolize their mothers, as was previously mentioned, the idea of a caring mother is a bit different:

We are used to seeing what we call 'a mother' completely wrapped up in her own pink bundle of fascinating babyhood, and taking but the faintest theoretic interest in anybody else's bundle, to say nothing of the common needs of *all* the bundles. (Gilman 46)

The difference between the two types of mothers lies in the sense of community. In the bisexual community, the well-being and the comfort of the individual and the pride in one's own child is primary, whereas the mothers in Herland see all of the new-borns as everyone's child.

## **4. Differences Between the Two Societies**

One of the core elements of this novel is the difference between and comparison of the world of Herland and the society the three men come from. Gilman sometimes compares these two worlds in a sarcastic and even mocking way. Her innocent women continuously ask questions and scrutinize their origins or their meaning. However, these comparisons are always of educational nature and the narrator includes them in order to influence our thinking, as is the case with the narrator's changing attitude (cf. Lant 294). The way Herlanders construct their society is always in connection to the well being of their race. The comparison of the two societies also brings forward how the female sex is treated in Herland and in the society of the three men. By comparison of the two societies, Gilman shows that the status of women in the mixed-sex society is quite different to Herland.

### **4.1. Food and Architecture**

The architecture of Herland represents the fact that mechanical constructions, such as roads or houses are not a dominion of men, since the women have achieved to create perfect buildings for themselves, without the help of any men:

'What a perfect road! [...] The road was some sort of hard manufactured stuff, sloped slightly to shed rain, with every curve and grade and gutter as perfect as if it were Europe's best.' (Gilman 15)



Gilman designs the utopian space of Herland with an infrastructure as best as any European city's and attempts to present a community which is not savage or backward in development but rather very advanced. Gilman alters the image of women who are not able to achieve the same as men, which the attitude of the three men represents. Gilman even compares the United States to the architecture of Herland, when the narrator remarks that the houses of California are worse than the ones the women have created themselves.

When it comes to food, the communal nature of the women of Herland is displayed, when they state that they got rid of cattle and dogs, due to the space and food they needed for themselves: ““We do not want them anymore. They took up too much room- we need all our land to feed our people. It is such a little country you know”” (Gilman 33).

In addition, the way that animals are treated in the food industry in the bi-sexual society is different from Herland: “It took some time to make clear to those three sweet-faced women the process which robs the cow of her calf, and the calf of its true food” (Gilman 33). Here, Van's choice to use “rob” shows that the men do not really appreciate the way food is produced in their country. He already reflects the growing doubts about their own civilization, when they start to compare it to the Herlanders. The attitude of their own race's survival being more important than semi-luxury food, e.g. meat, represents the women's reasonable decision-making, which stands in contrast to the society of the men.

## **4.2. Professional Life**

One striking difference between the two societies is the status of women within the professional sphere. In Herland, as already mentioned earlier, it is not only every woman's right and every woman's duty to work in order to maintain the quality and the functioning of their country. Further, they work without the negative connotations and constraints that are found in the men's society: “No man would work unless he had to” (Gilman 41). In Herland, this is quite different since the women see the overall purpose behind their work while the men attempt to justify the purpose of work in their society with the masculine idea of competition. The three men themselves admit that this element is of male nature: “the world's work was different- that had to be done by men, and required the competitive element” (Gilman 41). However, the men also admit that this element is not necessarily a positive one, but assume its necessity, without ever having questioned it. The men are once again confronted with values and fixed behaviour of their own society, which stands in contrast to Herland and proves that even areas, which are supposedly not linked to gender,

such as the idea of competition, are indeed of a sex-differentiated origin. The lack of competition in Herland seems rather to improve enjoyment of work and once again forces the three men to question their social concepts.

### **4.3. Construction of a New Society**

As already mentioned, the Herlanders actively decide how many inhabitants their country can hold and the community has agreed on working together to achieve this goal. However, another element, which is a part of this controlled birth and population strategy, is that they actively choose which woman is allowed to have a baby and which one should refuse to contribute to Herland's population. The women of Herland do not follow the path of nature, which includes defects in physiology, intellect and health, but rather choose to forbid women who are suffering from one of these defects to reproduce themselves. "They were a clean-bred, vigorous lot, having the best of care, the most perfect living conditions always" (Gilman 47). The discipline and willingness to sacrifice one's own chance for motherhood with the notion to serve the "greater good" is quite unique in Herland, and hardly to be found in the three men's society, which makes it hard for them to understand this concept at first. The nation of Herland can therefore be seen as constructed rather than purely natural. However, in comparison to the bi-sexual society, where the individual's will and choice are more important than the idea of community and obtaining the same standard and quality, the ideas of the Herlanders seem to be quite superior. This silent criticism can be found within the novel, when Van describes what the Herlanders have achieved by their choice to design their country in this way:

And how did those women meet it? Not by a 'struggle for existence' which would result in an everlasting writhing mass of underbred people trying to get ahead of one another- some few on top, temporarily, many constantly crushed out underneath, a hopeless substratum of paupers and degenerates, and no serenity or peace for anyone, no possibility for really noble qualities among the people at large. (Gilman 45)

Here, Van criticises his own country, where the condition corresponds exactly to his expectations of what might happen to the Herlanders, if they were to follow this path to over-population.

In addition, with the creation of a new country and a new society, the women of Herland have introduced a new language, which differs not only by the foreign aspect of a different grammar structure or vocabulary, but also by exclusion of any terms or words that denote anything that is male. Due to the fact that there are no men in their country, they

have excluded the whole concept of men and ideas that are closely connected to the interpersonal relation with the two sexes, which also includes its termination. As an example, terms like “virgin, wife, home” are not concepts that the women of Herland are familiar with, these words include a broader understanding of sexual relations or marriage, which is, of course due to the missing male aspect, not present in Herland.

In addition, a more difficult problem the men have to face is the missing concept of manhood in general.

It took me a long time to realize- Terry never did realize- how little it meant to them. When we say *men, man, manly, manhood*, and all the other masculine derivatives, we have in the background of our minds a huge vague crowded picture of the world and all its activities. To grow up and ‘be a man’, to ‘act like a man’- the meaning and connotation is wide indeed. [...] But to these women, in the unbroken sweep of this two-thousand-year-old feminine civilization, the word *woman* called up all that big background, so far as they had gone in social development; and the word *man* meant to them only *male*- the sex. (Gilman 86)

Here, Van denotes a phenomenon that can be found in any culture, namely that gender is constructed and that every sex has to abide by those guidelines that society prescribes. Simone de Beauvoir’s famous quotation “One is not born, but, rather, becomes a woman” (Schechner 130), exactly points to this problem. The three men are confronted with the insight that they will never be treated the same as men, as they are in their home-society. The women of Herland are not familiar with the concept of “being male or acting like a man” and therefore never expect or simply value them whenever they behave like “real men”.

The prevalence of the female sex and also the construction of this society represent female dominance, which also slowly enters the minds of the three men. Van even appropriates idioms to female omnipresence when he thinks: “I was inclined to believe that there had to be something, so I took the *bull* by the horns- the *cow*, I should say!- and asked Somel” (Gilman 53, emphasis added). The exchange of the male term “bull” with the appropriate female equivalent “cow” reflects that Van commences to realize that the female sex deserves an equal representation in language. He seems to realise that men are not always the superior sex and acknowledges the female presence. Already the fact that this notion has entered his way of thinking and not in the active communication with women denotes a great shift in his mindset. Johnson-Bogart also asserts that Gilman’s utopian vision of gender equality can only be commenced by a change in the way of thinking (88-89).

#### 4.4. Marriage

In a novel like *Herland*, naturally, there are differences in the concepts related to the bi-sexual nature, such as “family”, “marriage”, “sex” and “home”. Due to the fact that there are no men and therefore no opportunity in this country to perform or possess any of these objects or ideas, the mental concept of notion is different from the three men’s expectations. When the three men decide to marry a Herlander, they are confronted with the absence of home, sex and the possessive aspect of marriage, which they realize are only in existence due to the constructed assumption of what life for a married couple looks like.

The first problem occurs when they struggle to demonstrate to the Herlanders what a “home” is. The repressive aspect that a woman is confined to a house and is not supposed to pursue a professional job to be independent from her husband is also explained to the Herlanders.

‘Staying in it? All the time?’ asked Ellador. ‘Not imprisoned, surely!’ ‘Of course not! Living there- naturally,’ he [Terry] answered. ‘What does she do there- all the time?’ Alima demanded. ‘What is her work?’ Then Terry patiently explained again that our women did not work- with reservations. (Gilman 63)

This passage shows how the Herlanders innocently question the ways and behaviours of the three men’s society as a whole. It is exactly by this way of examination that the three men reflect on their country, and fixed concepts and ideas as well. Therefore, also the notion of a home is a social construct, which, however, is still repressive for women, since they are confined to the enclosed space of the house. “‘Our work takes us all around the country,’ explained Celis. ‘We cannot live in one place all the time’” (Gilman 63). This idea stands in contrast to the way the women in *Herland* live their life, when the three fiancées explain that they do not stay in one place, but need to be mobile due to their professional jobs. “Women’s work is not solely in the home, Gilman argued, but also in building a better society and ultimately reproducing a racially ‘pure’ nation” (Weinbaum 272).

In addition, the concept of marriage does not only differ in *Herland* due to the lack of a sexual component to it, but rather because the possessive aspect is also not familiar to the Herlanders: “We had, as it were, all the pleasures of courtship carried right on; but we had no sense of- perhaps it may be called possession” (Gilman 80). Here we can read another criticism of bi-sexual societie, when the concept of marriage is presented. In *Herland*, the three married women carry out their lives as they have before; the three men, however,

miss a certain aspect, which they denote as “solitude à deux” (Gilman 79). Not only are they referring to the sexual intercourse that is missing, but also to the “special” treatment these three men long for. But what exactly this missing element is, the three men are not sure themselves. Lant argues that the sexual component and especially the rape of women is an essential element that is banned from Herland, which triggers the problems of the three men within their marriages. “Women do not exist to be entered, conquered, or taken: they exist as agents of their own experience” (Lant 292).

Here, the contrast between the concept of marriage, which is passed down from generation to the next, has become fixed in the minds of Van, Terry and Jeff. So one could ask what this notion is and, whether it is actually necessary if they cannot even name it. They do not really complain about housekeeping duties or the fact that they want to share a house with their wives. Rather they would like to set boundaries and demonstrate that these women belong to them. This notion is also visible when they attempt to persuade their fiancées to take their surnames, which the females refuse due to the fact that they do not recognize any purpose behind it. And truly, the reason behind the woman’s duty to change her name is to denote that she belongs to a man, which once again is only a possessive aspect. “As to the names, Alima, frank soul that she was, asked what good it would do. [...] ‘Mrs. T.O. Nicholson. That shows everyone that you are my wife’” (Gilman 75).

Gilman- being the voice of the Herlanders- tries to demonstrate, by this different kind of marriage, the actual negative attachments a marriage can have for a women in a bi-sexual country. The woman seems to lose her independence and becomes the property of a man, which is denoted by the adoption of the male surname and confinement to the household. Gilman’s major concern is to “reconstruct[...] in our minds the position of women under conditions of economic independence” (Lant 292).

#### **4.5. Herlanders vs. Women of Bi-sexual Societies**

One distinct difference between women in Herland and women in the three men’s society is outward appearance. The three men have a fixed concept of what women are supposed to look like. The short hair and strong physical nature of the Herlanders does not fit their idealized picture of a woman. Here, the social aspect of gender is once again visible, namely that a woman is not recognized as female just by her sexual distinction, but rather by her social performance, which includes clothing and looks.

An element that differentiates the women of Herland from the females of the bi-sexual world is the lack of razors, which denotes the lack of necessity for preparing the women's bodies for physical attraction of men. The reason why women shave their body hair is merely to appeal to the male sex and not because of a natural necessity. The lack of razors and the unnecessary physical attractiveness of the Herlanders towards men represent also the constraints of women in the three men's world. Once again we see another restriction, where the way they shape and present their bodies is again fixed to the demands of men. This element is not to be found in Herland, which further stresses the constraints of women in the bi-sexual world.

In addition, another crucial difference between the two kinds of women is knowledge and use of fashion:

Terry asked them if they used feathers for their hats and they seemed amused at the idea. He made a few sketches of our women's hats, with plumes and quills and those various tickling things that stick out so far; and they were eagerly interested, as at everything about our women. (Gilman 34)

Women in Herland are not familiar with the notion of fashion. So, it can be argued that fashion of the women of the men's society is merely in use to appear beautiful and interesting to men.

In addition, the clothing of the Herlanders is also quite different; their clothes seem to fulfil a practical purpose, instead of flattering body shape. Their dresses promote physical comfort and do not restrict them in their movement:

The garments were simple in the extreme, and absolutely comfortable, physically,[...] there was a one-piece cotton undergarment, thin and soft, that reached over the knees and shoulders, something like the one-piece pyjamas some fellows wear, and a kind of half-hose, that came up to just under the knee and stayed there- had elastic tops of their own, and covered the edges of the first. (Gilman 20)

Van gives two hints about who wears these kinds of clothes in his society, either as a pyjama, which means that they are not worn in public, or by a "fellow", seeming that these clothes are exclusively worn by men.

The Herlanders are very practical when it comes to clothing. As for the mentioned hats, they only wear them "for shade when working in the sun" (Gilman 34) and they adapt their clothing according to seasons and weather: "In cold weather they wore caps or hoods" (Gilman 34). Here, one distinct difference between the two societies is presented, namely that, in Herland, clothes are chosen for their functionality, in contrast to the men's society where women use dresses to present their beauty and clothes define themselves. "[...] [T]here was shown the action of a practical intelligence, coupled with fine artistic feeling,

and, apparently untrammelled by any injurious influences” (Gilman 48). The three men have, as previously mentioned, criticised the outward appearance of the Herlanders, which also goes back to their choice of clothing. The men are used to women wearing form-fitting dresses in order to appeal to the male sex, which is not the case in Herland. Another interesting aspect added by the Herlander’s questions is the fact that men do not wear clothes for decorative purposes. Here, Gilman adds an aspect, which can be found throughout the novel. She questions cultural conventions that prescribe different clothing guidelines for the sexes. “We hastened to assure her that they did not- drew for them our kind of headgear” (Gilman 34). The innocent and unaware nature of the Herlanders actually unveils the cultural conventions that are already so fixed in the minds of the men that they do not even question or think about it. The difference in clothing for men and women is anchored in the men’s minds, which was culturally taught to them by the whole of society. Here, the reference to Judith Butler’s theory that gender and its prescriptions of how to behave and dress are created by society, is exemplified.

According to Bennett, Gilman is very much interested in the possibility of the private side which clothing represents in order to criticize and test the limits, restrictions and freedom this area offers (38). In *Herland*, especially this private space belongs to the women who set the rules and guidelines of how the men are supposed to dress and have cast off the restrictive clothes that are used in a bi-sexual society to appeal to men. In Herland, the utilitarian aspect of the clothing is retained. This could be seen as further criticism by Gilman as bi-sexual societies prescribe to dress in a particular way in order for a woman to be fully recognized as such. See also the three men’s, and especially Terry’s, attitude towards the Herlanders at first, when men do not even recognize the Herlanders as women due to their short hair and neutral clothing.

Terry gives an example of the status and the place where a women is confined to in his society: ““We do not allow our women to work. Women are loved- idolized- honoured- kept in the home to care for the children”” (Gilman 41) Terry, the most traditional of the three, who is not willing to accept another social role for women, is the mouthpiece for the majority of the population of his society. He attributes an inactive and static role for women, which are not part of the public and official life, but are silenced and confined to the space of home, where the man is needed for financial support and therefore, forces the woman into dependence. Hence, it is not the unwillingness and refusal of women to work and attempt to make money on their own and become independent, but need to be afraid of losing their status as “real” women in Terry’s society. “With few exceptions, over the past

twenty years readers of *Herland* have celebrated this utopia as subversive of the most deeply entrenched patriarchal views on women and thus as a prototype for contemporary feminism” (Weinbaum 285). Since, men only appreciate, honour and idolize women, who are inactive and static, it seems impossible to be recognized as a woman, if one enters the world of work. Her only duty is to take care of the children, which Gilman tries to criticise in this novel, and also in her active career as a feminist critic in her time at the beginning of the twentieth century. “Gilman was best known as the author of *Women and Economics*, a serious and sweeping analysis of the history, sociology, and political economy of the female sex” (Lane, *Herland* V). According to Connell, Gilman tries to reform the social status and position of women, and thought that if their condition was improved, than the “society as a whole would benefit” (20).

## **5. Criticism on the Utopian Aspect in *Herland***

Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s all female utopia may have been celebrated as a prototype for feminist views and hopes for how society could be changed by the bonding of women and the creation of a whole different society, however, there are critics who claim that this idealized utopian space creates a picture of genealogical pride in a pure pedigree. This notion is especially confirmed by the Herlanders control of which woman is allowed to bear a child and their attempt to exclude any defects from being reproduced.

Further, Lant argues that although Gilman tries to create a utopian space where female suffering and sexual combat are missing, the whole novel is “built upon conflict and sexual conquest” (299). Lant asserts that Gilman has failed to achieve the presentation of a world without men, which facilitates the lives of women, due to the fact that they do not have to deal with the powerful and repressive sexual aspect. She thinks that “*Herland* is permeated with aggressive, assaultive, and threatening sexuality” (299). This notion is especially presented in the conflicts that arise during the marriage of the three men with the Herlanders. Especially Terry is a representative of a male sexual force. He is constantly putting pressure on his wife, which is also the final the reason why the men have to leave Herland. Already at the beginning of the novel, Van calls the idea of an all-female land “attractive”: “There was something attractive to a bunch of unattached young men in finding an undiscovered country of a strictly Amazonian nature” (Gilman 7); the adjective “attractive” usually belongs to the semantic field of sexual attraction and normally denotes the outward appearance of a person. In connection to the discovery of an uncharted female



utopian space, the intentions of the three men to also conquer the women in a sexual way, is made clear by Van's choice of word (cf. Lant 299). However, Terry is another source of conflict when it comes to marriage and sexuality; the whole story is linked to courtship and the physical consummation of marriage, rather than of actual love or marriage (Lant 301).

## 6. Conclusion

The analysis of the novel *Herland* has shown that this utopia presents a space where it is possible for women to possess a different status and different roles than in a patriarchal, Western society. They are able to escape fixed roles models of the patriarchal system and live a different and independent life. However, this outlet is only possible within the confined space of this all-female society. The way Gilman structured this novel is to demonstrate the world the three men come from first as it stands for the bi-sexual world in general, but especially for the American twentieth century society in particular, which represents Gilman's worldview. She constructs the world of the three men as oppressive and repressive for women and highlights its counterparts in Herland, which always provides a better situation and status for women.

Gilman includes three different types of men, who all possess different attitudes towards women; Terry being the misogynist and aggressive macho type, who does not believe in any equality or even superiority of women. She constructs the character of the narrator Van in a reasonable way and presents him as one man coming from a repressive background, but eager to learn new ways of behaviour and willing to restrict his own needs in order to appreciate the different life style of the Herlanders. Gilman presented the third man, Jeff, again in a different way, namely as a man who worships women, be it the women of Herland or the women of his society. His character does not develop much in this novel, but he becomes even fonder of the Herlanders and idolizes them.

However, the analysis of this novel has shown that at the core of the book there is a comparison between the two different societies. The women of Herland continuously ask the three men about the customs of their society and question them; especially about different social constructs.

One aspect being questioned is the whole organisational nature of women; whether if they are capable of surviving without men. The men's assuring nature at the beginning that a society is only possible with the help of males, confirms the attitude of twentieth century society, which restricted women in the male space of work. Gilman attempts to proof them

all wrong and creates a society that is even better when it comes to architecture, community, food production and social hierarchy. The men constantly remind themselves that the way the Herlanders construct their society is in many ways better than their own and they come to critically reflect their own culture, which they increasingly reject.

In addition, Gilman reveals certain repressive attitudes towards women, such as the oppressive aspect of clothing and outward appearance. Due to the different looks of the Herlanders, the three men even refuse to accept them as women at first, since they did not correspond with their expectations of women. Here, the aspect that the (female) gender is only a construct of society, which prescribes its inhabitants of how they have to behave and dress in order to be recognized as a certain gender, is highlighted.

Further, Gilman unveils more areas connected to the interpersonal relations of the two sexes, such as the concepts of home and marriage. By presenting a lack of knowledge about these constructs in Herland, the idea that those basic ideas of society are actually related to gender is revealed. Gilman once again stresses the misogynist and oppressive aspect of these institutions and presents ways of how they could be changed, by the way the Herlanders are treating those aspects.

However, although Gilman tries to present a better future or alternative way of living and a solution to the oppressive situation women find themselves in, some critics have uttered concerns about the true nature of her novel. Although she tries to exclude the oppressive sexual aspect, the novel is traversed by sexual allusions and the necessity of sex in order to maintain a functioning relationship between men and women. In addition, the Herlanders attempt to exclude every possible defect from their society, which promotes a picture of genetic purity rather than of the appreciation of nature.

In my opinion, Gilman tries to present in Herland, an advice or suggestions of how life for women could be improved, which she mostly achieves by constant comparison of the bi-sexual society with Herland. By continuous highlighting of the customs of the Herlanders, she denotes the bi-sexual society as inferior and this is the message the novel tries to convey, in my opinion. She radically rejects every notion of the society of the three men and denotes that the Herlandian way is the only right one. Although this notion is very radical and also omits many positive aspects of the bi-sexual society, it seems that Gilman, being a “true” feminist and one of the founding mothers of the first wave of the feminist movement, may have seen a need to exaggerate and negatively present reality in order to enable women to escape their oppressive status in society.

### **III. Women Deprived of Power- *The Handmaid's Tale***

#### **1. Overview**

Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale* set in 1985 is a totalitarian Christian fundamentalist state with a population divided according to their functions in society. After a nuclear war, not only the former government of the United States was replaced by this new oppressive system, but also the roles for men and women have changed drastically. Due to the previous nuclear pollution, the country suffers from a severe decline in birth rates and therefore has declared a woman's capability of bearing children is her only reason for existence. Society in general is characterized by an oppressive caste system, which divides the population according to their function. Especially women have suffered from this rapid change, for they are now subordinate to men and have little rights on their own. Those women, whose solitary function is to give birth to a child are known as Handmaids. They do not live an independent life, but belong to men of high social rank, called Commanders of the Faithful in Gilead, the totalitarian Christian state. Due to widespread infertility of their legitimate Wives of a Commander, the state provides them with opportunity for a childless couple to make use of a Handmaid, who will attempt, together with the Commander, to provide the family with an offspring. Offred is the main protagonist in *The Handmaid's Tale* and is a Handmaid herself. The first-person narrative, presented from her perspective, gives the reader a personal and subjective report of what everyday life in Gilead looks like.

#### **2. What Classifies *The Handmaid's Tale* as a Dystopian Novel?**

As already mentioned in the Introduction, dystopian fiction is considered to be the opposite of utopian fiction, namely a nightmare vision of the future. Gilead, the totalitarian Christian fundamentalist state of Atwood's novel, is set in the near future and presents a society which struggles with a decline in its birth rate due to a preceding nuclear war which left the majority of the population infertile. However, exactly which elements of Atwood's novel classify it as dystopian?

If we take a close look at narrative structure, the setting and design of society, we soon realize that it is "a cautionary vision of what might happen if certain attitudes are carried to extremes" (Miner 149). Ketterer argues that

[m]any of the features of Gilead are familiar to the reader of dystopian fiction: the lack of freedom, the constant surveillance, the routine, the failed escape attempt (in this case by Offred's friend, identified by her real name, Moira), and an underground movement (in this case called Mayday). (*Atwood* 211)

However, there are critics who claim that Atwood's novel does not meet all requirements of dystopian fiction, since it includes certain utopian elements as well. As we will see later, Offred, the main protagonist of *The Handmaid's Tale*, may be the victim of this totalitarian society, however, she still possesses a certain amount of hope, which stands contrary to a dystopian outlook. Raffaella Baccolini therefore prefers to call Atwood's novel a

*critical dystopia* because the dystopian narration encapsulates utopian hope in the choice of time setting, the personalities of the protagonist's mother and Moira (her lesbian friend), Offred's thoughts, the use of the epistolary genre, and the open ending (qtd. in Mohr 232, emphasis added)

This inclusion of utopian hope, however, does not turn the novel into a utopian novel, since the majority of its setting, narrative structure, character design and policy guidelines belong to the genre of dystopia. Moyland argues that in comparison to a utopia, the dystopian novel opens with the character already being within a dystopian society and its structure is not designed like a journey, where a visitor finds an ideal society by chance, as it would be the case with a literary utopia (cf. Tolan 147). If we compare this with *The Handmaid's Tale*, we soon realize that the first scene is already located within the society of Gilead; further, the main protagonist does not travel to a distant place, as would be common in utopian fiction, but struggles to escape from her dystopian society.

What can be said for Atwood's novel now, is that it does include certain aspects of utopian fiction within its basic nightmare vision of Gilead. Mohr further states that

*The Handmaid's Tale* can be read as a transgressive utopian dystopia, since a utopian subtext is interwoven into the dystopian narrative of *The Handmaid's Tale* and because there are various hints in the novel pointing towards a transgression of binarisms that critics have so far overlooked. (Mohr 232)

Those binarisms are not only the distinction between men and women but also the opposition between geographical opponents, such as the United States and Canada, or psychological antagonisms of the self and the other (cf. Mohr 233). However, the focus here will be on gender division since the dichotomy of male and female is a central aspect of Atwood's novel.

The influence of dystopian elements in *The Handmaid's Tale*, as Atwood states herself, were not only inspired by the feminist movements of the 1980s, but especially twentieth

century totalitarian regimes, and American Puritanism (cf. Tolan 150). Further, inspired by a real Christian fundamentalist group in New Jersey in the 1980s (cf. “Warnung vor Gilead” 210), Atwood’s “speculative fiction” (“Warnung vor Gilead” 210), as the author herself calls it, is a hypothesis of what would happen if their biblical interpretations were put into practise (cf. Ketterer, *Atwood* 212). The Christian rulers decided to follow the Bible, where Hagar, a handmaid of Abram, served as a child bearer to his infertile wife. This biblical prototype is effectuated in Gilead’s society. “The ‘what if’ has shifted from a terrain bright with daydreams to a mute field of nightmarish whispers” (Bartkowski 133). These elements were, according to Tolan, an influence to Atwood’s design of dystopian Gilead and served as her starting point to a nightmare vision of what might happen if those thoughts were fully realized.

### **3. Hierarchy Between Men and Women**

According to Judith Butler’s theory of performativity, it is society which designs and prescribes the roles of men and women. In a dystopia, it is, therefore, worthwhile to look at the behaviour of men and women to discover how certain positions in society women and men are assigned to and how this affects their status within society itself. The genres of utopia or dystopia enables the reader to visualize what the future or a worst-case scenario might look like, which could serve as a warning against current trends or attitudes if not ridicule them.

It is essential to determine whether women and men even have the possibility to “play [their] gender”, (Schechner 132) as Judith Butler calls it, in a dystopian totalitarian system like Gilead. Margaret Atwood’s nightmare vision points out that people might not be able to decide for themselves how exactly they want to be perceived by society as a whole, if the government’s regulations are too strict or consequences of not abiding by the rules are too harsh. The opportunity of a literary dystopia, since it presents an imagined alternative of the present, is now to determine how far the design of gender could change and which effects this could have on the lives of men and women in a dystopian society.

After the government of the former United States is overthrown by Christian fundamentalists, the roles of men and especially women changed dramatically. People are divided into groups according to their function within the society and it seems rather impossible for any inhabitant to escape his/her once appointed duty.

The ruling class of newly founded Gilead is constituted by the Commanders of the Faithful, who are not only the ones who make all the decisions within the society, but are

also the only male caste who is allowed to live in a household with a Wife, Marthas, housekeepers, Guardians for protection and a Handmaid, in case the Wife is unable to bear children. In Offred's tale, it is Fred who is the representative of the Commander; he has the right to possess a Handmaid, due to his professional status and the fact that his Wife is unable to produce any descendants, either because of his or her infertility.

Another male group are the Eyes, whose function it is to surveil and control the inhabitants of Gilead. Their identity is mostly unknown, which should underline their omnipresence and their means to detect any crime or uprising still in its early stages (cf. Dunn).

Then there are the Angels, who fight as soldiers in Gilead's war. They are highly respected in this society and have the possibility to settle down and get married after they have performed their duty on the battlefield. They are not physically present in Offred's world, we only hear about them, e.g.: on the radio or when stories about them are told.

The last group a man can belong to are the Guardians of the Faith. They are a lower class of soldiers, since they do not serve on the battlefield during the war, but remain within a society and perform tasks such as guarding roadblocks or standing sentinel over a Commander's house.

The Guardians aren't real soldiers. They're used for routine policing and other menial functions, digging up the Commander's Wife's garden for instance, and they're either stupid or older or disabled or very young, apart from the ones that are Eyes incognito. (Atwood 30)

Although men, apparently, have their assigned roles and only have little chance to break free from their destination, they are not as oppressed as women. They still have the opportunity to get married and choose their partner for themselves, although it is easier for men in higher positions than for those in lower ones. Further, they hold more active positions than women, who appear quite passive at first or have little chance to appear in public. However, the novel's focus is clearly on the perspective of women, since there is little known about male insights. It is assumed from their higher status compared to women, that they enjoy more rights and freedoms compared to their female counterpart. Due to the fact that women are banned from most professions, men even took over professional areas that had been the domain of women. This is evident during the scene at the doctor's office: "The *nurse* records our names and the numbers from our passes on the Compudoc, to see if we are who we are supposed to be. *He's* six feet tall, about forty, a diagonal scar across his cheek" (Atwood 69, emphasis added). The previous stereotypical

female position is now performed by a man, which clearly shows that women's space is banned from the public area and restricted to the household or child bearing.

Hence, women in the state of Gilead are even more restricted than men; the probably highest position for a woman is to be the Wife of a Commander. The Wife's duty, however, is merely to give birth to children, if she is still fertile and able to produce a healthy progeny. Apart from that, there are not many tasks a Wife has to fulfil, except for being a representative companion to her husband; it is not usual for a Wife to have a steady job (cf. Hachtel 65). Furthermore, not every woman has the option of marrying a Commander and, thus, becoming a Wife. Merely daughters of other Commanders, born either by a Wife or a Handmaid, are allowed to contract a marriage with a man of the ruling class. They are assigned to dress in blue, which can be seen as an allusion to the Virgin Mary, the woman of highest rank in the bible.

The colour white is worn by the aforementioned Daughters. Their destiny is predetermined, since their duty is to marry a man of higher rank and therefore become a Wife. Due to the infertility and low birth rate in Gilead, every child and every young adult is celebrated with great joy and society rejoices their coming of age when they will be able to get married themselves. During the marriage scene, where all the Handmaids, Wives and Marthas come together, it is clear that these marriages are arranged as well and that even high ranking women cannot choose their partners on their own. In addition, they enter into the bond of marriage at a very early age, which makes it clear that it is once again the power of men which forces the young girls to marry someone they barely know.

Now comes the main item. Twenty Angels enter, newly returned from the fronts, newly decorated, accompanied by their honour guard, marching one-two one-two into the central open space. Attention, at ease. And now the twenty veiled daughters, in white, come shyly forward, their mothers holding their elbows. It's mothers, not fathers, who give away daughters these days and help with the arrangement of the marriages. The marriages are of course arranged. These girls haven't been allowed to be alone with a man for years[...]. (Atwood 231)

Another social role of women is to become an Aunt, who is a Handmaid's teacher. They are obliged to dress in brown and live a celibate life in close companionship with other Aunts. Mostly elderly women, or ones who are unable to bear children themselves, but have not committed any further crimes, may take the opportunity to work as an Aunt and pass the values and duties of being a Handmaid on from one generation to the next. It is their duty to present the position of a Handmaid as positively as possible, including influencing women's opinions, trying to manipulate them into believing being a Handmaid is a honourable and rewarding profession. It is their duty to "disseminate the doctrine

among women, exercising a matriarchal power which is disguised as a spirit of camaraderie, similar to that of the army” (Somacarrera 53). Although it is men who created the position of the Handmaids, it is the obligation of the Aunts to convince and brainwash young women, who are destined to become Handmaids, in order to maintain the ruling system and possibly increase the low birth rate.

Another social position for infertile or elderly women is to be a Martha. This name is of biblical origin as well, and denotes a position, which is intended to serve the upper class. Marthas, who dress in green, take care of a Commander’s household, and take care of the Handmaids by preparing food or taking care of their personal hygiene. They are subordinate to the Wives and other men, but still have more rights than Handmaids or illegitimate women, who will be explained later. Although their position is rather low in status, marked by their dress in green, they do have a certain power among each other. Exchanging unofficial information is prohibited in Gilead, still, they gossip in order to receive information of other houses and families:

The Marthas know things, they talk among themselves, passing the unofficial news from house to house. Like me, they listen at doors, no doubt, and see things even with their eyes averted. I’ve heard them at it sometimes, caught whiffs of their private conversations (Atwood 21).

Econowives form another group of women, who are married to men of lower positions. They do not possess Marthas or Guardians; it is their duty to take care of the house. Furthermore, it is not usual for a man of lower position to have a Handmaid, therefore, it is the Econowife’s responsibility to bear a child as well. Due to their various functions they do not wear one colour, but their dress is made of stripes in a mix of red, blue and green (cf. Atwood 34).

The most deprived position a woman of Gilead can find herself in is the one of a Handmaid. The leaders of Gilead have introduced a number of strategies in order to force women into being Handmaids. So called “gender crimes”, which means having had abortions or a divorce before the Christian fundamentalists took over the state, can force a woman into becoming a Handmaid. Their position does not include many rights or a private life. In fact, compared to other already restricted women, the Handmaids seem to have almost no rights at all.

Most obvious is the fact that they are not allowed to keep their birth name. They are obliged to adopt their Commander’s name with the prefix “of”, as in “Offred”, where Fred, her Commander’s name and “of” are put together (cf. Bartkowski 135). Although they have a room on their own, every resident of the house is allowed to enter at any time. “Yet



this is not truly a room of her own, just as the Handmaids' very names—all patronymics—are not their own” (Dunn). In addition, their apparel is also more unique and restrictive than those of other women in Gilead. Not only are they forced to dress all in red, which provides others the opportunity of recognizing them already from a distance, their whole dress is shaped like a nun’s habit; however, the most repressive and distinguishing part of their clothing is their hat. Attached to their bonnet are white wings on either side, which force the Handmaid to look straight ahead the entire time. This not only restricts their visibility, which is a drastic interference in their personal freedom, but it also prevents other members of society of seeing them as real fellow humans. “The nunlike habit works to desexualize the Handmaid, recalling chaste servants of God and concealing the woman's face and body from men who might find her sexually attractive” (Dunn). However, this is quite contradictory in itself, since the Handmaid’s only function is of sexual nature, which the colour red also represents. “The moment conforms to feminist theories of the male gaze, which reduces women to *objects* (often sexualized ones) rather than active, individual *subjects*” (Dunn). The colour also refers to the loss of blood during birth, but also to the whole process of propagation and therefore “retains historical connotations of both sexual allure and sexual shame” (Dunn).

Moreover, the government explicitly threatens Handmaids into their position by publicly announcing the alternative of being stigmatized and excluded from society. So called “Unwomen” or “Illegitimate” women are sent off to the “Colonies”, where they have to take care of toxic waste; in other words, a verdict to become an Unwoman can be compared to a death sentence. The government promotes the fact that being in a colony is the worst thing that can happen and only silent obedience can prevent this punishment. “Go to the colonies, Rita said. They have the choice. With the Unwomen, and starve to death and Lord knows what all? said Cora. Catch you.” (Atwood 20)

All of this tells us that women are more restricted not only in their clothing, behaviour and personal freedom, but also in their possibility to become active citizens. Men have created an environment, which is crossed by public and private surveillance accompanied by severe punishment for those who are not willing to abide by these provisions. Public hangings and “Salvagings”<sup>5</sup> are quite common in Gilead, which serves to enforce fear in its inhabitants in order to secure their constant obedience. Women are merely restricted to the

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<sup>5</sup> During a Salvaging, a criminal, either a man or a woman who has been found guilty, is publically executed, sometimes even by the citizens themselves.

private sphere; they can be found within their own or their friends' houses, but never in the actual public space, where decision-making takes place.

Feminist critics and theorists have explored how such binaries form the foundation of patriarchal societies, especially as they tend to promote a hierarchy in which one term, usually that coded as female, is subordinate to the other, usually that coded as male. (Dunn)

Further, language is a powerful device, which is used to distinguish men and women from one another, but also to ensure stability by oppression within this totalitarian society. Firstly, there are particular names that are given to every social position to ensure their identification and differentiation from each other. Secondly, the Handmaids are compelled to whisper during their conversations, since they are forbidden to communicate with each other.

Furthermore, the citizens of Gilead call their clothes habits. "Habits are hard to break." (Atwood 34) Although the word "habit" is also an official term for a nun's clothing, the fact that this word is used, underlines the fact that in this system nothing should be changed, but rather be fixed within the minds of its population.

We might ask ourselves how it is possible for a woman to give up her personal life, become a Handmaid and fully believe in such a repressive system, taking away all her rights and status as a free woman. It is a very wise scheme of the government to use women themselves to enslave their female victims who are about to become Handmaids. They use strategies of brainwashing, like repetition of phrases, to persuade them of their own fault, in case bad things had happened to them in the past and that it was their behaviour which led to the status quo (cf. Somacarrera: 52).

It's Janine, telling about how she was gang-raped at fourteen and had an abortion. [...] But whose fault was it? Aunt Helena says, holding up one plump finger. *Her* fault, *her* fault, *her* fault, we chant in unison. *Who* led them on? Aunt Helena beams, pleased with us. *She* did. *She* did. *She* did. Why did God allow such a terrible thing to happen? Teach her a *lesson*. Teach her a *lesson*. Teach her a *lesson*. [...] We meant it, which is the bad part. I used to think well of myself. I didn't then. (Atwood 81-82)

Exactly those stories and the way they are interpreted which enforce a feeling of guilt in women and the need for redemption. The Aunts, perfectly effective in their interpretation and communication of Christian values, immediately know which thoughts have to be implanted into the women's minds in order to lower their self-esteem and thereby make them vulnerable and facilitate acceptance of their new situation. "A thing is valued [...], only if it is rare and hard to get. We want you to be valued, girls. [...] We are hers to define, we must suffer her adjectives." (Atwood 124)

The drastic division of men and women's status and its influence on their daily lives shall be further explained in a detailed analysis of the main character and her situation within the society of Gilead.

#### **4. Offred's Life As an Example For the Situation Of Women In Gilead**

The overall life of a Handmaid has already been mentioned in the previous chapter, however, by analysing the character of Offred specifically, it is possible to gain further knowledge about the position of the Handmaids within the society of Gilead and which effect it has on the role of women in general. Offred's inner personal life gives us many possibilities to discover what the situation is really like for women, apart from the official public attitude in Gilead. At first, the situation of a Handmaid within a household shall be taken into account, which already presents the opportunity to classify her social status within the society of Gilead:

"A chair, a table, a lamp. [...] There must have been a chandelier, once. They've removed anything you could tie a rope to." (Atwood 17) The ruling class of Gilead is promoting the picture that it is a woman's punishment and duty to act as a Handmaid and that she should be happy having the opportunity to serve mankind and receiving a second chance. "Where I am is not a prison but a privilege, as Aunt Lydia said, who was in love with either/or" (Atwood 18). However, already at the beginning, the reader can hear the thoughts of suicide, which reoccur throughout the novel, as well as the omnipresent fact that the Handmaids have no opportunity at all to make a single choice for themselves. "Does each of us have the same print, the same chair, the same white curtains, I wonder? Government issue?" (Atwood 17) The fact that suicide is still an option for escape for Offred, stresses that she cannot be happy with her current position. "It's those other escapes, the ones you can open in yourself, given a cutting edge, [what they're afraid of]" (Atwood 17).

Further, her physical position during meetings of the inhabitant of the house indicates her status within this social hierarchy: "A sitting room in which I never sit, but stand or kneel only" Kneeling is the position of servants or subordinates; the position of the Handmaids within the microcosm of the house is therefore not equal to those of other residents in the house. The position of the Commander's Wife is different: "I wonder whether or not the Commander's Wife is in the sitting room. She doesn't always sit. Sometimes I can hear her pacing back and forth, a heavy step and then a light one, and the soft tap of her cane on the dusty-rose carpet." (Atwood 19) The fact that the wife herself

can decide whether to sit or stand is more than the Handmaid is entitled to, which puts her in a superior position filled with more power. Even if it seems a trivial decision; it is one the Handmaid cannot make for herself.

In addition, there is also a difference in nutrition for the different women in the household. Due to the fact that Offred's body must be healthy and in good shape to be the perfect womb for their progeny, also her food and diet are regulated. She is not allowed to consume any unhealthy foods, such as coffee or alcohol, whereas the Wife is allowed to consume anything she wants (cf. Sceats 111). It is especially this restriction that stands in contrast to Offred's previous life, which she remembers at times and which also stands for the freedom she enjoyed in previous times (cf. Sceats 111).

It seems early in her account that Offred has accepted her fate and that she does not really feel a necessity to change things: "Given our wings, our blinkers, it's hard to look up, hard to get the full view, of the sky, of anything. But we can do it, a little at a time, a quick move of the head, up and down, to the side and back. We have learned to see the world in gasps." (Atwood 40) Although one might argue that it is already a quite daring action for the Handmaids to even move their head more than they are allowed to, they are still within the legal boundaries and accept the fact that they have to wear a veil with wings on their heads. Offred's voice is not fierce or angry enough to seem really upset about this fact. It appears that she has come to terms with her fate and does not want to complain about it or try to alter her situation. The reader is hardly ever confronted with complaints about her present situation, or negative remarks about the society of Gilead. Offred merely reflects what she observes in her small, restricted world. Not even in her thoughts, she allows herself to think about her fate in a negative way. Her voice is not mad, nor angry; it seems she has come to accept her fate and merely speaks about past times in a very sentimental and melancholic way. This also reflects the status of her voice in public. She is not allowed to raise her voice, nor even utter her thoughts in everyday life. Her thoughts and her voice are restricted to her own head, since she is not even permitted to speak in public. Such passages also show that the new system succeeded in changing society's ways, since most of the citizens either do not dare to rebel against it or have simply accepted the new situation. However, this inaction and perceived accordance within the population enables the government to further proceed with its previous measures.

There are only few moments at the beginning of the novel where the true and suppressed nature of Offred shines through her wall of self-denial, acceptance and fear: "Silver, you might call it [the Commander's hair] if you were being kind. I don't feel like

being kind” (Atwood 67). Only later in the novel, when the relationship between her and the Commander becomes slightly more intimate, she even dares to speak up to him, who actually possesses much more power over her: “Don’t do that again, I said to him the next time we were alone. Do what? he said. Try to touch me like that, when we’re ... when she’s there” (Atwood 171).

In addition, she even feels sorry for the other female victims of society, which shows her compassionate feelings of solidarity: “But I also felt guilty about her [Serena Joy]. I felt I was an intruder, in a territory that ought to have been hers” (Atwood 170).

Another crucial scene that gives further insight about the opinions and attitudes of Offred and the other Handmaids is when Offred and Ofglen, another Handmaid, have an encounter with Japanese tourists:

I can’t help staring. It’s been a long time since I’ve seen skirts that short on women. [...] Their heads are uncovered and their hair too is exposed, in all its darkness and sexuality. [...] I stop walking. Ofglen stops beside me and I know that she too cannot take her eyes off these women. We are fascinated, but also repelled. They seem undressed. It has taken so little time to change our minds, about things like this. (Atwood 38)

The government’s brainwashing strategies were successful; within a small number of years (it is not actually stated how much times has passed between the former life in the United States and the current life of Offred) the mindsets of the two Handmaids have changed drastically. Previously, they had worn exactly the same clothes themselves and now they judge other women for their different style of clothing (cf. Bartkowski 150). Wearing high heels and short skirts “[...] seem[ed] so obviously designed to make women into appropriately formed bodies for the demands of culture now distant in time and space from the one she knew” (Bartkowski 150).

In addition, clothes represents a form of freedom; in Gilead, women and men are forced to wear what is being prescribed and they do not have any chance to criticize, complain or alter their dresses due to their fear of consequences. However, the scene with the Japanese tourists shows that they do not even want to dress differently anymore. They have taken over the whole mentality of the system, namely that it is a woman’s virtue to promote chastity. However, Barbé-Hammer argues that “Offred makes an error here which is all the more troubling because of its familiarity; she mistakes the outward appearance of freedom for the thing itself. Her misguided equation of western fashion with feminine liberation.” (43-44)

In the Handmaids’ case, it is especially the Aunts who indoctrinate them with this official attitude of the government; they act as its mouthpiece of society: “Modesty is

invisibility, said Aunt Lydia. Never forget it. To be seen- to be *seen*- is to be- her voice trembled- penetrated. What you must be, girls, is impenetrable.” (Atwood 38-39)

The Aunts are represented ironically, of course. They are not nurturing maternal or sisterly figures, but rather operate as agents of Gilead's oppressive patriarchal regime, a ‘crack female control agency’ (320). (Dunn)

Further, when the interpreter of the Japanese tourists asks Offred and Ofglen whether they are happy, Offred answers: “‘Yes, we are very happy,’ I murmur. I have to say something. What else can I say?” (Atwood 39) This utterance is a first proof that Offred is not content with her position of being a Handmaid or that the concept of “happiness” does not actually have a place in Gilead. The question of happiness is replaced by necessity, which means for women to make sacrifices.

Another indication that Offred is not content or happy with her situation are her thoughts while watching the Commander from her window: “If I could spit, out the window, or throw something, the cushion for instance, I might be able to hit him.” (Atwood 67) Even the thoughts of harming someone indicate that she is secretly angry with him, since he is the one who hired a Handmaid, and he is a man from the ruling class, which means that in some way he is responsible for her and society’s present situation. The fact that she cannot express any thoughts of doubt or anger towards him further displeases her, since he has the position like a boss over her, in other words, it is his decision whether she can stay in the house or will be sent to the colonies, which gives him a missive amount of power over her life (cf. Bartkowski 146).

However, some lines later, Offred’s thoughts reflect the opinion the government wants her to have, again. Forgetting her anger and sorrow, she tries to convince herself that this is her destiny and new life now: “I ought to feel hatred for this man. I know I ought to feel it, but it isn’t what I do feel. What I feel is more complicated than that. I don’t know what to call it. It isn’t love.” (Atwood 68) The contrast between those conflicting thoughts represent exactly the dilemma Offred, and the other women in Gilead, are facing. On the one hand they are not content with their situation but on the other hand they also have no choice to alter their situation. The regime of Gilead organizes society in a way that makes it impossible for women to speak their mind, utter what they really think in public or even form alliances which may change their suppressed situation.

## 5. Female Power Relations

Another fact, which needs to be taken into consideration, is the relation between women among each other. Due to constant surveillance and the continual threat of the Eyes, whose identity is always unknown, the alliance of women is heavily influenced. There does not seem to be any sympathy among the Wives and the Handmaids, which is shown by the hostile behaviour of the Wives towards their red competitors. “To the infertile Wife, the Handmaid would seem a competitor for her husband's affection and sexual desire, and, ultimately, for the highly prized role of mother” (Dunn). In a society where the role of a mother is the highest possible achievement for a woman, it is not surprising that a Wife can feel threatened by her fertile competitor. However, by taking a closer look at the relation between the two, it soon becomes apparent that men, who have created this situation in the first place, again influence this conflict. Due to the introduction of the profession of the Handmaid, the implementation of the drastic need of increasing the birth rates and the glorified status of new born babies and their mothers, have put enormous pressure on women to fulfill this task. If they do not succeed in bearing a child and therefore contribute their share to society, they have failed in the eyes of the public. (cf. Dunn)

In addition, the Marthas, who neither benefit nor see themselves as threatened by the Handmaids directly, do not show any sympathy for them either, although they do seem to form a sort of alliance among each other, emphasized especially by their communal criminal action of gossiping. The Marthas serve as a platform for the public brainwashing of judging and condemning Handmaids. They mirror the public opinion that Handmaids deserve their social position and do not realize that it is men and the ruling class who have come up with “gender crimes” in the first place and therefore made it possible for women to be sentenced to serve *mankind*.

Her face might be kindly if she would smile. But the frown isn't personal: it's the red dress she disapproves of, and what it stands for. She thinks I may be catching, like a disease or any form of bad luck. [...]Anyways, they're doing it for us all, said Cora, or so they say. If I hadn't of got my tubes tied, it could of been me, say I was ten years younger. It's not that bad. It's not what you'd call hard work. (Atwood 20)

Even among Handmaids, who should actually share their devastation and futile situation, envy is more present than actual sympathy. Due to the fact that it is also the

Handmaid's life that depends on her futility, jealousy for another woman who has already achieved that goal is spread among the Handmaids themselves:

As we wait in our double line, the door opens and two more women come in, both in the red dresses and white wings of the Handmaids. One of them is vastly pregnant; her belly, under her loose garment, swells triumphantly. There is a shifting in the room, a murmur, an escape of breath; [...] She's a magic presence to us, an object of envy and desire, we covet her.[...]. (Atwood 36)

But where does this attitude of women towards being a Handmaid come from? As already mentioned before, the government introduced "gender crimes" in order to sentence women to work as Handmaids. However, female cooperation and the suitable mindset that needs to be involved in order to secure a permanent obedience by the Handmaids is passed on to them by the Aunts during their education at Red Cross Centres. The Aunts not only use euphemisms in order to influence women's thoughts ("Think of yourself as seeds, and right then her voice of those women who used to teach ballet classes to children, and who would say, Arms up in the air now; let's pretend we're trees." (Atwood 28)), they also cause the Handmaids to be frightened, in order to increase their disposition to accept the need of their obedience and their cooperation within the system: "There is more than one kind of freedom, said Aunt Lydia. Freedom to and freedom from. In the days of anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are being given freedom from. Don't underrate it." (Atwood 34).

One instrument, which made it easy for the Christian fundamentalists to overthrow the previous government, was addressing the female sense of security, apparently it was difficult for women to feel secure in times before Gilead. Once again, the Aunts at the Red Cross Centre bring this notion forward in order to promote the concept of Gilead and highlight the improved condition for women these days. During the display of a porn movie, that stresses the brutal manners of men towards women in the time before, Offred thinks of her own fears, as a young woman:

Though I never ran at night; and in the daytime, only beside well-frequented roads. Women were not protected then. I remember the rules, rules that were never spelled out but that every woman knew: don't open your door to a stranger, even if he says he is the police. [...] Keep the locks on and keep going. [...] Don't go into a Laundromat, by yourself, at night. (Atwood 34)

Atwood introduces a very ambivalent fact, when describing the original situation- before the introduction of several restrictions for men and women- as dangerous; (cf. Sheckels 78). It is true that Gilead bans, pornography and all objectifying images of women, including not only sexually offensive pictures and movies, but also fashion magazines, which promote a distorted picture of the female body (cf. Tolan 151). Even Offred's



mother and her friend Moira, two true feminists and visionaries of utopian life for women, join in the burning of those offensive magazines. “At this point, Atwood questions the validity of any political or philosophical system that is prepared to limit basic freedoms in the pursuit of its goal” (Tolan 151-152). Already Offred herself notes, while talking to her friend Moira that the problem of women being the object and victim of men cannot be solved by simply shutting everyone (and especially men) out. The solution Gilead offers may seem to be an improvement of the security of women, as they try to promote, however, “the enjoyment is minimal, because, in restricting the liberties of men, the women have not found liberation” (Tolan 153).

If this repressive system evokes the oppression of women, then one possible solution of escaping this miserable situation is that women could form alliances among themselves and rebel against it. The one notion that all women share is their oppression by men, which should actually be a reason for them to feel connected to each other and attempt to escape their miserable situation together. Atwood includes this notion when she introduces the secret underground organisation “Mayday”, which attempts to help women in danger (such as Offred in the end, when the secret love affair with Nick becomes public) and tries to undermine the oppressive system of Gilead. “Mayday” does not only focus on the fate of women, but also on the minority of men, who do not support the government and attempt to work against it. However, the most oppressed citizens are still women and if they formed alliances and worked together in order to overthrow the government, they would certainly be successful due to men’s dependence on their child bearing ability.

However, the government makes sure that this will never happen and already smothers any thoughts and forms of alliance by promoting distrust and fear among women themselves. “We aren’t allowed to go there [town] except in twos. This is supposed to be for our protection, though the notion is absurd: we are well protected already. The truth is that she is my spy, as I am hers” (Atwood 29). Not only does this prevent any possibility of alliance among women, since it is dangerous to utter any kind of criticism; it also makes any form of friendship or companionship extremely difficult. Gilead enforces isolation of women in order to secure its totalitarian regime. It is assumed that friendship could serve as a first step to rebellion and a threat to overthrow the repressive system.

Also, while shopping, where women have the chance to meet other companions, fear of seeming too friendly with someone else is omnipresent:

Nobody talks much, though there is a rustling, and the women's heads move furtively from side to side: here shopping, is where you might see someone you know. [...] It's hard to imagine now, having a friend. (Atwood 35)

The government prohibits talk and friendship among women and keeps them isolated; but women especially in that situation have accepted that fact and abide by the regulations of the government (cf. Bartkowski 147).

## **6. Power Dynamics Between Men And Women**

The analysis of the situation and the status of women and men have shown that there are immense differences between the two sexes, not only when it comes to their personal freedom, but also in terms of their limited and oppressed status within society. In this chapter, the power dynamics between the two sexes will be taken into consideration. Do they enjoy equal rights or is there an imbalance where one sex enjoys more freedom or even oppresses the other side? This analysis should commence with the question of how men have achieved to claim dominance over women and how they managed to deprive the female sex of all its power.

The first step, which triggered the dependence of women on men, is the event when all the bank accounts of women were blocked and they were not able to be in charge of their own money and salary anymore.

In almost a single stroke, the appropriation of women's labor secured the place of the new government of Gilead after the old was overthrown. All the bank accounts and credit cards marked 'F' were deactivated, immobilizing women in the midst of daily routine. (Bartkowski 145)

Financial independence was taken away from the female sex, which made it impossible for them to live a life as a single woman. They were in need of a male partner, who would provide them with money, which gave men enormous power over the destiny of women. "We'll get through it, he said, hugging me. You don't know what it's like, I said. [...] I thought, already he's starting to patronize me" (Atwood 188).

The next step in this disempowerment is the loss of jobs, which is linked to financial dependence as well. Now they were deprived of almost all of their independence, not only their financial status depended on men, but their professional life was also taken away from them without them being able to interfere or to have a say in this matter. "This is a major change from the earlier stages of their relationship, when both Offred and her husband had taken equality between the genders for granted." (Dunn)

The government takes its ideas from the bible, which serves as “the chief source of female repression. Words are corrupted, perverted, or presented out of context to establish a man’s holy vision of women” (Bomarito 105). In this way, they hand the responsibility to a greater power, the men of the ruling class promote the fact that they merely follow the instructions of God. This is what gives them more power and justifies their right to change women’s life and force them into their restricted positions.

Probably the most powerful device of men to ensure the oppressed position of women is their construction of a state of paranoia. The ruling class and government consist entirely of men, who made the decision of how women are ought to behave, and they also made sure that women follow these regulations (cf. Barbé-Hammer 46). In order to ensure female obedience, they have created a society of constant surveillance. This is not only achieved by visible observation, as for example by guards who stand at gates or monitor houses, but rather by the concept of the Eyes (cf. Dunn; Somacarrera 52; Sheckels 81). Already Michel Foucault noticed the power of such an invisible policing institution: “a centralised police, exerci[se]s a permanent, exhaustive surveillance which makes all things visible by becoming itself invisible.” (Somacarrera 52-53) As already mentioned before, the profession of an Eye can be carried out by simply everyone, men as well as women, however, their identity is always unknown. This presents the greatest opportunity for the state to secure the power over its citizens. “Constant surveillance fosters an atmosphere of paranoia” (Dunn).

Also Offred acts as a spy, when she gossips about the situation in the other Handmaids’ houses: “Ofglen get’s steak, though, and that’s the second time this week. I’ll tell that to the Marthas: it’s the kind of thing they enjoy hearing about. [...] such bits of petty gossip give them the opportunity for pride or discontent” (Atwood 37). Offred would like to be part of their community in order to escape her isolation. She is even willing to gossip, which is illegal, and tries to form a bond with two women who openly despise her.

The power of men over women is further secured by a tattoo on the Handmaids’ ankle; it makes it almost impossible for them to escape their destiny and their status. The roles of women are stable, once they are assigned a duty or position, they cannot escape their social function (cf. Bartkowski 151).

Offred’s tale of her everyday life in Gilead presents some scenes where the power of men over women is confirmed. During the shopping scene, the dominion and power of the guarding men is demonstrated: “‘Quiet,’ says one of the Guardians behind the counter, and we hush like schoolgirls” (Atwood 36). The choice of the word “schoolgirls” also

demonstrates their status; they do not even consider themselves as independent women whose right it is to talk to each other in a normal volume, but rather as naughty students, who are rebuked by their teacher if they were gossiping too loud during a lesson. The difference, however, is the fact that they are in an ordinary everyday situation where men in charge, who follow orders imposed by the ruling men of the government, prohibit their attempt for communication and conversation with each other.

Further, even the doctor, who should actually act as a person one can confide in, uses his power to sexually harass Offred. Pretending that he can help her to become pregnant, it is not quite sure if he actually really wants to help her or if he is just taking advantage of his position and tries to sexually interact with a Handmaid, who is an object of desire in Gilead: “‘It’s time. Today or tomorrow would do it, why waste it? It’d only take a minute, honey” (Atwood 71). Being aware of the fact that they can report the Handmaid’s infertility to the regimes, doctor’s have a great amount of power over them, which they use to their own advantage.

However, one aspect, which should not be left unnoticed, is the fact that in Gilead there are more means of power and oppression than merely among men and women. As Gilead is a totalitarian regime, there is a fixed hierarchy in which all men and women have their position. In other words, there are women who have the privilege to be in a higher position, e.g. a Commander’s Wife, and there are men who are lower in social status, an example here would be the Guardians who serve the Commanders. Therefore, women cannot only be oppressed by men but also by other women who rank higher in terms of social status (cf. Somacarrera 53).

An example for this notion can be found when we take the relationship between Serena Joy, the Commander’s Wife, and Offred, her Handmaid. Serena Joy is of a higher social position than Offred, which she already notices when she first arrives at the house: “She had a cigarette, and she put it between her lips and gripped it there while she lit it. [...] The cigarettes must have come from the black market, I thought, and this gave me hope. [...] She then was a woman who might bend the rules” (Atwood 24). The fact that she is able to attain illegal goods, demonstrates her relative power over women, and some men as well.

In addition, Serena Joy does have a certain amount of power over Offred. Due to the fact that she is the Commander’s Wife, it will always be her opinion and attitude which will be acknowledged (“the transgressions of women in the household, whether Martha or Handmaid, are supposed to be under the jurisdiction of the Wives alone” (Atwood 170)), which gives her enormous possibilities how to treat and behave towards Offred: “I want to

see as little of you as possible, she said. I expect you feel the same way about me. [...] Yes, Ma'am, I said. Don't call me Ma'am, she said irritably" (Atwood 24-25). Although Offred previously had a different attitude about the potential relationship with this woman in her new household, it is Serena Joy who has the power to lay down the rules of how Offred has to behave.

Serena Joy's power is further composed by the fact that she "is in control, of the [birth-giving] process and thus of the product." (Somacarrera 53) After a baby is born, it will be given to Serena Joy, who will become the official mother of this new-born and she will also be the one who earns the official glory and honour by everyone else, although she has physically not participated at all in this event.

Later in the story, after the Wife realizes that her husband might be infertile and that the outlook for an offspring is rather unpromising, it is her who looks for a potential donor and father for the desperately needed child. After she had found the only real possibility for an unnoticed affair, namely with their chauffeur Nick, it is once again her assistance that encourages him and Offred to start having illegal encounters. This secret affair is even fulfilled without the other inhabitants knowing about it, or rather it is another proof for the Wife's power to control everyone else in the house, including the Marthas and her husband, since she does not really fear any encounters during the first night when the secret mission first takes place:

She'll wait for me then, in case there's trouble; in case Cora and Rita [the Marthas] wake up, no one knows why, come in from their room at the back of the kitchen. What will she say to them? That she couldn't sleep. [...] She'll be adroit enough to lie well, I can see that. (Atwood 272)

However, Offred has a certain amount of power over Serena Joy as well. Her power is however revealed in another way, namely by having a sexual relationship with the Commander later in the book. The status of Serena Joy of the dominant woman in the household and in the marriage loses more and more of its power, when the relationship of Offred and the Commander becomes more and more intimate ("Also: I now had power over her, of a kind, although she didn't know it" (Atwood 171)) (cf. Somacarrera 53). In general, it can be said that

Wives tolerate legalized adultery to gain a baby; handmaids tolerate their monthly penetration to gain temporary comforts and avoid certain death in the colonies; the commanders tolerate some restrictions on their sexual behavior to gain both progeny and power. (Sheckels 83)

## 7. Hope For Men and Women In Gilead?

Already the opening scene of Atwood's novel presents the combination of the narrator's conflicted feelings between past, present and future:

We slept in what had once been the gymnasium. [...] I thought I could smell, faintly like an afterimage, the pungent scent of sweat [...] and perfume from the watching girls. [...] Dances would have been held there. [...] There was old sex in the room and loneliness, and expectation, of something without a shape or name. (Atwood 13)

So, the novel starts with memories about the past, or rather the composition of the blending between the remains of former times, which are still visible, since the old buildings invoke feelings and link the character still has from former times and the new function or new life style that the protagonist is facing now. However, it soon becomes clear that the previous emotional attachments with objects and places and the current state of mind are not compatible anymore; it becomes evident that there has been a change. However, the word "expectation" evokes the feeling that the protagonist's present situation is not the one she wants to be in. Rather, it provokes the notion that there are feelings of "expectations" within the character herself. These assumptions can, however, only be confirmed at the end of the novel, where it becomes clear that there are some emotions within Offred which long for a change in her and especially her situation as a Handmaid. Glenn Willmott recognizes this as: "a series of memories, images and desires [which are] yearnings for the future lodged between the memories and experiences of people and places that are, that were, and that were no longer what they had been." (Willmott 169) This desire, evoked by memories, can only be satisfied in the end, by an element, which is common to dystopian fiction, namely the forms of resistance. In Atwood's novel it is an underground movement is called "Mayday" and represents the peak of hope for both the protagonist and the reader. It stands for the possibility of escape and yearning that is so desperately needed within a totalitarian system. With the secret underground organisation, the previously mentioned binarism of geographical opponents, namely between the United States and Canada, becomes important, due to the fact that this peak of hope is situated within the country of Canada, which is geographically close and still has a non-totalitarian government and presents the opportunity of leaving the regime of Gilead. The members of the Mayday movement belong to both sexes, since the Handmaid Ofglen, who introduces Offred to the secret organisation, and possibly Nick, the chauffeur and secret lover of Offred, could be a member, this, however, remains unsure throughout the novel. Just like the Eyes, also the identity of the members of the resistance are always unknown. "Those who oppose

Gilead's patriarchal regime must find other ways to rebel against and undermine it.” (Dunn) However, it is important for a dystopian novel, and also for the reader to maintain a certain aspect of hope in order to understand why it is possible for its inhabitants to continue a life full of misery, which is represented by the Handmaids. As already mentioned at the beginning, Offred's life is accompanied by continuing thoughts of suicide, and it is possible that she is not the only woman in Gilead who possesses these thoughts. However, it could be a reason why women endure their existence of not possessing any rights at all and living the life of a prisoner, if it were not for the thought of hope. “[I]t is hope in the register of an enslaved female voice in fiction [...]” (Bartkowski 134).

This possibility of freedom or escape is highly dangerous and even seems futile at times, since there are examples of failure, as is the case with Ofglen and another man, who is murdered during a “Salvaging”. However, the open ending, where Offred is conducted away by potential members of the Mayday movement and the fact that her tapes prove her escape, confirmed by “Historical Notes”, leaves the reader with the gratified feeling that there is the chance of escape. In addition, the novel also presents a final chapter, entitled “Historical Notes”, which satisfies the readers' curiosity of the fate of not only Offred, but also of the whole totalitarian regime. This last chapter is particularly important, because it confirms the notion of hope in the reader. We all know, that one day the regime will fall and all the Handmaids and suppressed women will be released.

Although the situation for women in Gilead is overall repressive, there is a female “utopian” space, at least according to its “inhabitants”, which is also an example of how horribly the regime has oppressed women, if they are seeking refuge in an area, which is to other women anything but idealistic at all. The secret brothel “Jezebel's”<sup>6</sup> is a space where Commanders have the opportunity to visit prostitutes and engage in extra-marital relations. Once again, the status of men and women are different again, since men are paying for the services of women, which makes the females the slaves of men once more; however, Jezebel's presents another opportunity for women, which is denied to them in the normal life in Gilead. Offred's friend Moira, who is the voice of radical feminism in the time before the totalitarian state, finds refuge in this actually anti-feminist setting. Although “both a ‘Jezebel’ and a Handmaid, [is] an accessory and object of patriarchal authority

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<sup>6</sup> The name Jezebel also has a biblical origin, where Jezebel, daughter of Ithobal, king of Tyre, refused to worship Yahweh and helped to overthrow a Jezreelite sheikh. Therefore, her name refers to idolatry, false prophetess and her figure stands for the idea of an abandoned woman. (cf. Encyclopaedia Britannica)

rather than a subject in her own right” (Dunn), the women who are working and living in the brothel do enjoy a certain amount of freedom that other females do not.

Know what they call this place, among themselves? Jezebel’s. The Aunts figure we’re all damned anyway, they’ve given up on us, so it doesn’t matter what sort of vice we get up to, and the Commanders don’t give a piss what we do in our off time. (Atwood 262)

Compared to the social status of a Handmaid, who is monitored constantly, not only her behaviour and free time is regulated, but also her freedom of choice when it comes to food and drinks is limited, which is not the case for the prostitutes of Jezebel’s. “They even give you face cream. [...]The food’s not bad and there’s drink and drugs, if you want it, and we only work nights.” (Atwood 261) As was already noted before, the Handmaids are clearly restricted in their choice of food, which is also a restraint of their personal freedom. This stays in contrast to the situation of the women in Jezebel’s; they have the opportunity to eat different and even unhealthy food and are even entitled to drink alcohol. These women enjoy a certain amount of more freedom than any Handmaid does (cf. Sceats 113).

Moirra has had to accept the passive role on the other side of this binary opposition: “Give in, go along, save her skin. That is what it comes down to” (Atwood 261). It seems that it is not possible for women in Gilead to live a content and independent life, without having to cut back on some parts of their previous lives. Although Moira, who is a professed lesbian, has to endure having sexual interactions with men, she still sees her personal paradise in living in the brothel: “Anyway, look at it this way: it’s not so bad, there’s lots of women around. Butch paradise, you might call it” (Atwood 261). This secret, but definitely not safe, haven presents an alternative community for women in the regime of Gilead. “Ironically, in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, resistance to the rules of the Gileadean regime is provided by the regime itself in the existence of clubs like Jezebel’s, where the Commanders entertain themselves with ‘loose’ women” (Somacarrera 54). Therefore, it is possible to consider Jezebel’s one of the few opportunities for women to live a rather independent and even content life, if they have been awarded the status of a Handmaid or an “Unwoman”. However, this life is, although it may present some more freedom for women, still rather restrictive. They are not allowed to leave this place, unless they are picked up by a black van, which means being gathered up by men or even the secret police, they have to engage in sexual interactions with men, even though they may not even like it and they are still under the dominance of others, like the Aunts in this case, who run the brothel. Even the fact that such a place is, in comparison to the other positions of women in Gilead, a “paradise” is quite bizarre, since it is still one of the most repressive



and humiliating institutions that exist for women. Here, it is possible to conclude that the position for women is quite hopeless, given the fact that they have to take refuge in a brothel, which is not really an acceptable alternative to the oppressive life within the regime of Gilead.

Does Atwood then present a better future or a solution for the miserable situation of women in Gilead? “Pieixoto’s prissy academic jokes and the laughter they elicit from his audience provide evidence that sexist attitudes still persist” (Ketterer, *Atwood* 214). Even her outlook into the future, as presented by the symposium in 2195, does not present a utopian future either. Although the terrifying society of Gilead is not in existence anymore, the citizens of Atwood’s post-totalitarian future do not seem to be much better off than the misogynist inhabitants of Gilead. Atwood’s mood and attitude towards men and the situation of women is still rather pessimistic. Even two hundred years later, she cannot imagine a world with equal rights for women (note that a man is a speaker and not a woman) or conversations without sexist references. However, Ketterer suggests that “Atwood here seems [...] intent on lightly or resignedly satirizing human foible and vanity, and the decorum of academic discourse.” (*Atwood* 214)

## **8. Conclusion**

What can we conclude from Margaret Atwood’s presentation of the roles of men and women within the society of Gilead?

As we have seen in the previous analysis, there is a drastic and rather oppressive distinction between the position of men and women in Gilead. Women are shoved into a passive positions, which makes them objects of male desire and power. Almost all of their rights are taken away from them, even before the previous government is overthrown and Gilead introduced. The status of men and women is organized according to a certain hierarchy, which has similarities to medieval times, where the ruling class has all the power and the lowest class is deprived of all rights and has to endure the most pain. Also there is a further difference among women and men themselves. One might think that due to the restricted and oppressed position of women, one solution to escape their misery is to form bonds among each other. However, there is a further hierarchy, where the Wives enjoy certain more rights, than the Handmaids, who are the representatives of the lowest class.

The analysis of power dynamics has shown that there are differences in power relations not only between men and women, but also among the sexes themselves in the society of Gilead. At first, there are men and women of higher and lower social status. Although the situation for women is again different from the status of men, there is no equality between the two sexes. Women are restricted to the household and are not able to hold a job; they have been assigned new professions, which focus on their body, such as the Handmaids' task of being a child bearer. Some simply have representative functions, such as the Wives, who merely serve as the official partner of a Commander, but actually they do not have any task, where they need to produce something.

Further, the way those power dynamics come into existence are also worth noticing. Due to the brainwashing by the government, on the one hand by the Aunts, who indoctrinate the Handmaids with their new function and convince them of the official beliefs and attitudes of Gilead. On the other hand, there are the sophisticated structures of this Christian fundamentalist regime, where the omnipresent threat of the Eyes, the secret security system, has indoctrinated the fear of being denounced as a traitor. This has brainwashed the whole of society and convinced its inhabitants that criticism is illegal and should be avoided, even amongst people of the same social status, since it is possible that anyone could be a spy and report any illegal action to the government. Thereby, a feeling of isolation is promoted and enforced by this social hierarchy within Gilead, which makes it possible for the regime to persist, although it oppresses more than half of its population.

Margaret Atwood presents an example of how bad the situation for mankind could become. Inspired by tendencies that the author herself witnessed within the United States in the 1980s, she gives an outlook of what life would look like if those ideas were carried out the way those Christian fundamentalists imagine it. The genre of utopia or dystopia makes it possible to visualize of how the future or how the worst-case scenario might look like, which could serve as a warning against current trends or attitudes and can even ridicule them.

The way Margaret Atwood presents the situation of men and women in *The Handmaid's Tale* reminds us of their situation some hundred years ago. During medieval times or feudalism, people lived in a similar social hierarchy as in this novel. However, one should not forget the fact that Atwood describes a totalitarian regime, which could still be found throughout the twentieth century, which means that the threat of transforming a democratic state into an oppressive system where the rights of its citizens are restricted, is actually not so far fetched.

The only hope for actually enjoying life and surviving Gilead seems to be the brothel Jezebel's; however, this outlook is more than ironic, since the once denounced most humiliating place for women within a society, is now supposed to be the secret heaven within the hell of Gilead. Atwood's choice to put Moira, the loudest feminist voice throughout the novel, into the position of a prostitute, the exact opposite of an independent woman, also represents the futility of any resistance within Gilead. It is arguable whether her failed escape has actually improved her condition or has made it even worse and she has come to terms with accepting her fate.

The unofficial resistance movement "Mayday" is now the final and ultimate beacon of hope for those inhabitants who have been accused of gender crimes or have already been assigned the position of a Handmaid.

To conclude, this chapter has unearthed the various social roles men and women can possess within a totalitarian state. Due to the narrative style of the novel, which presents the view of a normal everyday life of an oppressed inhabitant, it is possible to gain clear insights into social structure, hierarchy and the status of its inhabitants. I have argued that women are oppressed and restricted by powerful men in this society, where even men in the lowest social position still enjoy a higher status and reputation than women in this society. In my opinion, Atwood's novel can certainly be read as a warning against current trends that the author experienced herself during the 1980s in the United States and could be seen as the vision of which effects such a set of mind could have on the lives of its inhabitants. This novel further shows how easy it might be for a society to be turned into an oppressive and totalitarian system without the possibility of the majority of its citizens to actually prevent it. I mentioned the various strategies of brainwashing and the volition of cooperation of women to oppress other women, which is one of the core instruments of the regime in order to suppress its citizens. Missing alliances among the repressed sex itself are also quite shocking, since one might assume that the humiliated women could foster a form of sympathy for the situation of other females, which is not the case or even the opposite, namely unspoken hatred and condemnation. In my opinion, this is one of the many reasons why this regime was so successful in suppressing its citizens, and especially women, I have also argued that Atwood still includes some elements of hope which should not only help the protagonist to escape this society, but which also serves as a beacon of hope for the reader, in my opinion. Although Atwood presents a rather negative view or vision of the future, she still includes hints of an escape or at least presents ways of how this miserable and oppressive life of women could be alleviated. Her nightmarish outlook

for the future becomes even more terrifying, if one is aware of her inspirations and influences, which were taken from real events in the past. Although hope of the destruction of this totalitarian regime is the last thing we read, what Margaret Atwood's novel leaves us with is a mixture of fear and discontent, since the author has shown how easy and quick it is possible for a society to be overturned.

## IV. Androgyny, Power and Hierarchy in *The Left Hand of Darkness*

### 1. Introduction

The last chapter of this diploma thesis will be dealing with a novel that has introduced a different aspect when it comes to gender, namely that it extinguished the two sexes and created a society where its inhabitants can be classified as androgynies. Ursula K. Le Guin's science fiction novel *The Left Hand of Darkness* takes the reader to planet Winter, which only consists of snow and ice, and presents a world that is primarily striking due to its different gender constructions. The citizens on Winter do not possess a sex which would put them into the category of male or female, but live their life as neuters, therefore everyone is sexless. Only for a few days once a month, the inhabitants have the possibility to separate themselves into males and females, in order to reproduce themselves. The narrator Genly Ai, who visits this foreign planet, tells the story of his journey and includes a detailed description of how life on Gethen (the word for Winter used by its citizens) looks like in regard to the missing gender distinction.<sup>7</sup>

The question that now arises, when one comes to think about a world without gender distinctions, is if this world is different to the society we live in. It will be interesting to determine if life on Winter, especially the way the country is run, is different in any way, due to the missing sex distinctions. The reason why this aspect and novel was chosen for the last chapter with regard to the previous two, is basically if the solution to gender based problems can be found by simply deleting the binary sex oppositions, or if this society does not differ from the one we are used to. It shall also be discussed whether this novel can be categorized as a utopia or dystopia, since it is arguable whether all the problems can be solved by simply eliminating the assumed source of the problem.

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<sup>7</sup> The idea that the alternation of the normally quite fixed biological sex determination could solve problems that go together with gender stereotyping or social constructs, cannot only be found in Le Guin's novel. Marge Piercy also imagined, in her story *Woman on the Edge of Time*, a future without any gender distinction, including also the extinction of gender based terminology, such as the male and female dichotomy in language. She envisions the elimination of gender as a positive solution, which she presents in a utopian space that abolished war, racism, homophobia and gender related problems and inequalities. In addition, a similar aspect of gender can be found in Angela Carter's novel *The Passion of New Eve*, where the narrator and main character undergoes a gender transformation. The novel tells the experience of a previously misogynist male character, who is transformed into a woman, who then is forced to endure problems and humiliations the female is exposed to in a patriarchal society. Carter's novel attempts to present both sides, the oppressive male attitude, as well as the vulnerable and oppressed female body.

## 2. Le Guin's Construction of an Androgynous World

The novel takes the reader through the eyes of Genly Ai to planet Winter. At first the male narrator is faced with problems of identifying and categorizing the inhabitants of Gethen, the native word for this planet. He comes from a world with two different sexes, where gender divisions define the identity and cultural guidelines in society. The assigned roles and stereotypes for men and women are firmly attributed to the two sexes and are also anchored in the mind of Genly Ai, when he travels to Gethen. This fixed mindset is also visible in the way he perceives Winter, since he struggles at first to adapt to the different role models and status of the citizens of this planet. In his mind, he still tries to put them into the category of male and female, which is not possible, since the whole society is structured in a different way than he is used to. Due to the lack of gender division, there is no stereotypical assign to the professions in Winter, i.e. there are no jobs that primarily males or females are attributed to.

Genly Ai comes from a world where the biological sex is visible and sex can be consumed the whole time, which stands in contrast to the sexual behaviour of Gethen. Although they do not possess a sex most of the time, there are a few days during the lunar cycle, where citizens are able to perform the sexual act and can become a woman or a man. However, an individual can become both sexes at different times, they can become a woman at one time and the next time they can be a man. Therefore, it is also possible for one Gethenian to be a mother once and be a father in another occasion. This fact also underlines the flexibility of the roles of Gethen and the lack of fixed or attributed functions of its inhabitants. Pamela J. Annas also argues that due to the fact that anyone can bear a child, the division of labour to an individual sex is not given, since there are no fixed gender distinctions (150).

However, Genly Ai does not only struggle with his own problems of recognizing the Gethenians as neuters, he is also confronted with a different perception of his own sex by the inhabitants of Winter. He sees himself as male, but is not recognized as a man by these citizens, which includes the way he is perceived.

The First Mobile, if one is sent, must be warned that unless he is very self-assured, or senile, his pride will suffer. A man wants his virility regarded, a woman wants her femininity appreciated, however indirect and subtle the indications of regard and appreciation. (Le Guin, *Left Hand* 101)

The distinction between male and female and its categorization also involves how someone is behaving towards a certain gender. The male being usually the superior sex, especially

in the Genly Ai's society, also includes the kind of respect and attitude that a male is confronted with. These elements are missing in Gethen, where no hierarchy between the citizens can be found and, therefore, the narrator is also not treated in a different way. Annas also confirms this notion when she writes that Genly Ai is struggling with "his own self-image as well, since the Gethenians judge him without sex-based preconceptions" (151).

The narrator's struggle with the acceptance of this androgynous society is also visible through the pronouns he uses when he refers to the citizens of Gethen. At the beginning of his journey, Genly Ai still perceives the population of Gethen as neuters, which is visible through the first reference during a conversation with a Gethenian. He refers to his interlocutor as "person" and not as man or woman: "I remark to the person on my left, 'It's hot. It's really hot'" (Le Guin, *Left Hand* 4). However, a few lines further his attitude changes. He primarily uses "he" and perceives the Gethenians as male, which also shapes the way the reader perceives this foreign planet. Although especially the division into a superior male and an inferior female should actually be avoided in this sexless society, the narrator is not able to shake off his stigmatized patriarchal mindset, which shapes his perception of the Gethenians. "We see this androgynous society through the eyes of a biological and culturally conditioned male" (Annas 151). This is also confirmed by his address of the sovereign of Gethen, whom he calls "king": "and among them is *King* Argaven XV" (Le Guin, *Left Hand* 3, emphasis added). The mindset of Genly Ai, which is shaped by a patriarchal society, does not imagine a female to be the head of the state, although this is also in a bisexual society not very uncommon.

In addition, the narrator's attitude of how he is addressing and perceiving changes, when he has introduced the name of a certain person. As already mentioned before, he denoted and called the Gethenian who was standing next to him as a "person on my left". As soon as he introduces this inhabitant of Winter as "Estraven", he suddenly only refers to him as male: "Wiping sweat from his dark forehead the man- *man* I must say, having said *he* and *his*- the man answers [...]" (Le Guin, *Left Hand* 5).

Genly Ai may be aware of his misuse of the reference and use of pronouns:

I tried to, but my efforts took the form of self-consciously seeing a Gethenian first as a man, then as a woman, forcing him into those categories so irrelevant to his nature and so essential to my own. (Le Guin, *Left Hand* 12)

However, he seems to be clueless of how to properly refer to them. The unfortunate fact that derives from the use of the masculine pronoun is that the whole planet seems to be

male. Ketterer also supports this notion: “In fact a reader’s sense of the reality of the Gethenians as androgynes is lost from the moment when Ai as narrator elects to use masculine pronouns to refer to them” (Le Guin & Ketterer, *Response to* 144)

In comparison to the language of the Gethenians, it is possible to determine how they refer to each other, since they do not have the categories of male and female, like Genly Ai. They may refer to the narrator as “Mr. Ai” (Le Guin, *Left Hand* 8, emphasis added), which, however, probably derives from his explanation of gender and his male sex. At first it seems that they are aware of the missing gender distinctions and have found a solution of how to address other Gethenians without denoting them as male or female. Sometimes, when they are referring to other Gethenians, they simply use the official name and avoid the use of personal pronouns. Further, they are utilizing the plural, also in order to avoid the denouncing of a certain gender: “Things aren’t as they were in our *grandparents’* days, are they?” (Le Guin, *Left Hand* 9, emphasis added). By this usage of language, they attempt to circumvent the necessity of the overuse of gender-based pronouns, but they also do not manage to entirely avoid it. As an example, during a conversation with Genly Ai, Estraven calls the head of the state “king” and refers to him as “he” (Le Guin, *Left Hand* 15-22). Being a very close companion and consultant of Genly Ai, it could now be argued that this use of gender related pronouns, derives from the constant contact between the Gethenian and the extra terrestrial visitor. One must also not forget that it is Genly Ai, who is telling the story and maybe also inserting the gender based language in order to appeal to the reader, who is used to this kind of language. However, it would have been interesting to see how the Gethenians solved the problem of gender determination, since the sexless society bears actually a great potential of solving gender related problems.

However, this extinction of culturally determined categorization of women and men is what *The Left Hand of Darkness* is trying to achieve. Women and men are categorized according to the gender and roles for them in society are determined by their sex. The elimination of gender and the introduction of androgyny are primarily used to alter the fixed mindset of gender determination and to create a society where the identity is shaped by an individual’s personality. “These attempts to move from sexual polarization to androgyny are analogous to a movement in thought from dualism to a dialectical synthesis” (Annas 151). The idea of androgyny offers, therefore, an opportunity to develop oneself without the predetermined gender restrictions. Carolyn Heilbrun gives a definition of androgyny as



a condition under which the characteristics of the sexes and the human impulses expressed by men and women are not rigidly assigned [...] Androgyny suggests a spirit of reconciliation between the sexes [...]. (Annas 151)

So, the abolition of gender in Gethen could be seen as an opportunity for its citizens to be judged primarily on their identity and personality and they are able to express and unfold themselves in a way that is not connected or restricted by gender division. Therefore, it will be interesting to analyse how the individuals and the society of Gethen looks like and how it differs from a patriarchal society or a bi-sexual world, since apparently problems that are related to gender should be omitted then.

However, Genly Ai's attitude and his reference to the Gethenians as well as his categorizing them as male or female also push him to his own limits of imagination. Although he seems to be in need of referring to them as women or men, exactly the Gethenian's absence of gender does not allow this final conclusion. During one of the first private conversations with Estraven, the narrator is denoting his problem of an appropriate gender definition:

Thus as I sipped my smoking sour beer I thought at the table Estraven's performance had been womanly, all charm and tact and lack of substance, specious and adroit. Was it in fact perhaps this soft supple femininity that I disliked and distrusted in him? For it was impossible to think of him as a woman, that dark, ironic, powerful presence near me in the firelit darkness, and yet whenever I thought of him as a man I felt a sense of falseness, or imposture [...]. His voice was soft and rather resonant but not deep, scarcely a man's voice, but scarcely a woman's voice either... (Le Guin, *Left Hand* 12-13)

The narrator is not only faced with problems of how he should perceive the inhabitants of Winter, but he is also confronted with the issue of trust. Genly Ai's inability to trust Estraven derives from the characteristics this Gethenian possesses, which in Ai's world would belong to two different persons with different gender. In his eyes, Estraven possesses female and male qualities, which does not fit into his patriarchal mindset. Genly Ai already states the reason for his categorization himself, when he mentions Estraven's *performance*. As Judith Butler already denoted that gender is an "intentional and performative" act of "a set of meanings [that are] already socially established" (Butler 140). On Winter, there are no cultural conventions of how people are ought to behave and act, since there are no gender distinctions. Therefore, it is of course possible for one person to possess female or male characteristics. However, in the Gethenian's eyes, these attributes are not gender related, the relation derives from Genly Ai's account.

Above it was mentioned that Genly Ai, coming from a patriarchal society, is a culturally conditioned male. However, his attitude even shows misogynist traits and a very

hostile and negative attitude towards women. This notion derives from his thoughts and attitudes towards the Gethenians and especially from the characteristics he attributes to be male or female. At various stages in the novel, he considers the strong and good attributes to be male and denotes the bad qualities of a person to be female. This notion first comes up when he describes Estraven: he describes his performance as “womanly, all charm and tact and lack of substance, specious and adroit” (Le Guin, *Left Hand* 13). However, he cannot fully perceive him as a woman, since his character also includes a “dark, ironic, powerful presence”, which he assumes to be male characteristics. Another example for his negative attitude towards women can be found during his conversation with King Argaven. Genly Ai’s first negative impression of the king immediately evokes a female connotation: “He laughed shrilly like an *angry woman* pretending to be amused” (Le Guin, *Left Hand* 33, emphasis added). This citation does not only stress the comparison to a female character, but also adds the fact that the king might be hiding something or attempting to deceive him, which in this case Genly Ai also seems to interpret as a female characteristic. A further example of the comparison of the negative characteristics of the king with a female can be found a few lines later: “Argaven stood there sullen as an old *she-otter* in a cage, swinging back and forth, from foot to foot, back and forth, baring his teeth in a grin of pain” (Le Guin, *Left Hand* 37, emphasis added).

However, the encounter with Argaven is not the only occasion where we can hear misogynist remarks from Genly Ai. When he describes his landlady he refers to “her” as: “He was the superintendent of my island; I thought of him as my landlady, for he had fat buttocks that wagged as he walked, and a soft face, and a prying, spying, ignoble, kindly nature” (Le Guin, *Left Hand* 50). The unattractive nature of his superintendent’s body evokes a female mental picture; it seems impossible for Genly Ai to attribute something unattractive or negative to the male sex, which manifests the nature of his patriarchal mindset. Another example can be found when Genly Ai is thinking about the reasons why Gethenians do not start a war: “They lacked, it seemed, the capacity to *mobilize*. They behaved like animals, in that respect; or like women” (Le Guin, *Left Hand* 51). Here, the narrator is even comparing the female sex with animals, which are lower than humans and especially lower than men. What he excludes here is that war is actually nothing that one could be proud of and that the peace and truce on Winter is actually a utopian aspect of that world and something the Gethenians can be proud of.

## 2.1. *Kemmer*- A Different Sexuality?

As already mentioned before, there is a short period within every month, called *kemmer*, where the Gethenians become sexually active and are possible to change themselves into a male or a female. They can only transform themselves into a woman or man if they find an equal partner at the beginning of the phase of *kemmer*. This notion makes rape for example impossible, a very positive side effect of *kemmer*. Gethenians can however only transform into a woman or a man, but not into two persons of the same sex, which will be discussed later. The aspect, which will be examined here, is the social acceptance and norms that come along with *kemmer*. During the first stage of *kemmer* a Gethenian experiences an intense sexual feeling, which needs to be fulfilled and the Gethenian is eagerly looking for a partner. There are now several ways of how this sexual drive can be fulfilled. There is an institution, which is almost equal to the concept of marriage, which is called “vowing *kemmering*”. Almost every aspect can be compared to a traditional Christian marriage; two Gethenians swear an oath to be faithful and to be monogamous. Just as in a Christian marriage, divorce is not accepted in Gethen; the two *kemmerings* will only be separated by death of one the *kemmering*. Also, they cannot vow *kemmering* more than once, which can be compared to the Christian’s disbelief in divorce and remarriage. In this case, the difference to the construct of a marriage in a patriarchal, bi-sexual country cannot be detected. “Vowing *kemmering*” is nothing else but a simple, normal Christian wedding.

However, there are also other ways to satisfy the sexual needs of the Gethenians. Apart from simply meeting another person who is in the first phase of *kemmer*, there are certain houses, where promiscuity among males and females are not forbidden or restricted. In those houses, anyone can fulfil their sexual desires without any further restrictions. Also this promiscuity is not a new concept, since it can be found in other cultures as well.

One notion, which is, however, striking, is the aspect of incest. The sexual activity among siblings is not prohibited, only the contact between two generations, such as a parent with a child, is forbidden. The legal aspect of incest is therefore the only difference in sexuality compared to a bisexual society.

When it comes to sexuality during the phase of *kemmer*, the people of Gethen do not seem to be very different than a population of a bisexual society. They have the institution of vowing *kemmering*, which is equal to a normal marriage, and they fulfil their promiscuity in maybe even a more open and less restrictive manner, since the taboo for sex

seems to be missing. The topic of following one's sexual drives seems not to be regarded as wrong, as might be the case in other bisexual societies. Everyone on Winter understands the natural longings during the first phase of kemmer and no one judges anyone for their pursuit. Therefore, an advantage of the androgynous society is definitely the open attitude towards sex and the absence of taboos. In addition, another advantage is the inability of rape, since a person who is in the first phase of kemmer needs to find a second person, who is also in accordance with performing the sexual act. "There is no unconsenting sex, no rape. As with most mammals other than man, coitus can be performed only by mutual invitation and consent; otherwise it is not possible" (Le Guin, *Left Hand* 100).

Here, the potential of creating also a new way of reproduction is not fulfilled. It could have been the possibility of creating an androgynous society with a novel way of reproduction, which is, however, not the case. The narration attempts however to highlight the moments of sexual inactivity, which seem to be the more valued days during a human life. "The kemmer phenomenon fascinates all of us Investigators, of course. It fascinates us, but it rules the Gethenians, dominates them" (Le Guin, *Left Hand* 99). During the phase of kemmer, the Gethenians are described to only fulfil their sexual needs and neglect the rest of their life. "The structure of their societies, the management of their industry, agriculture, commerce, the size of their settlements, the subjects of their stories, everything is shaped to fit the somer-kemmer cycle" (Le Guin, *Left Hand* 99). The narration highlights the separation of sexuality and public, everyday life.

Therefore, it can be said that during the sexual phase of the Gethenians, they are not as different as they would be in a bisexual society, except for the elimination of certain negative traits, such as rape, but otherwise including diverse aspects, such as the legalization of incest. Unfortunately, the revolutionary aspect of creating a new way of reproduction is not fulfilled.

### **3. Gethen- a Utopian Space?**

Ursula K. Le Guin mentions in her Introduction to *The Left Hand of Darkness* that

[t]he purpose of a thought-experiment, as the term was used by Schrödinger and other physicists, is not to predict the future- indeed Schrödinger's famous thought-experiment goes to show that the 'future', on the quantum level, *cannot* be predicted- but to describe reality, the present world. (Le Guin, *Left Hand* xiv)

Le Guin here proposes that the genre of science fiction might produce and include thoughts and ideas that cannot be found in present reality, but are not predictions about the future that actually will occur. What the future will bring, no one can say. It was therefore not Le Guin's purpose, as she states herself, to prescribe what the future will bring, but rather turn the present situation into another setting and hence comment on the present reality. When regarding her novel *The Left Hand of Darkness*, the reader is confronted with a setting on another planet, a different calendar system and different physiological possibilities. However, although she proposes not to create an alternate future, but merely a criticism on reality disguised in a so different setting that one would not recognize it as the actual world and society on earth. Therefore, it is necessary to take a closer look at life and society of Gethen in order to determine if Le Guin's vision of a sexless country might actually create a utopian space, or if the society does not actually differ that much from the one we or Genly Ai comes from.

### 3.1. Androgyny and War

The picture that Genly Ai draws of Winter is quite ambivalent; the reader hears his statements about the absence of war, but actually there is an omnipresent feeling of the threat of an outbreak of a fight between the nations of Karhide (the territory where the narrator commences his tale and journey) and Orgoreyn (the second largest state on Gethen). Throughout the novel, the reader is at various times confronted with the fact that apparently there is no war on Gethen.

[O]n Gethen nothing led to war. Quarrels, murders, feuds, forays, vendettas, assassinations, tortures and abominations, all these were in their repertory of human accomplishments; but they did not go to war. They lacked, it seemed, the capacity to *mobilize*. (Le Guin, *Left Hand* 50-51)

Now, one can argue if this peaceful nature really goes back to the absence of gender, which seems to be a special characteristic of the Gethenians and a severe reason for many differences to Genly Ai's society. The inability to mobilize, which the narrator states as one reason for the lack of war, cannot entirely be traced back to the gender topic. This rather goes back to the fact that progress and technological advances are very slow and take much more time to develop than on other planets, which could be a reason for their inability to mobilize.

As the narrator has mentioned in this citation, is that the society of Gethen is not free of crime, even on the contrary. Murders and vendettas, as he argues, are part of Winter,

however, do not seem to include the emotional aspect as in Genly Ai's society. However, although the idea of war is not present in Karhide, the risk of a commencing war is omnipresent, which the prime minister Estraven confirms: "You know that Karhide and Orgoreyn have a dispute concerning a stretch of our border in the high North Fall near Sassinoth" (Le Guin, *Left Hand* 16). This dispute over a territory would eventually lead to war in other worlds, such as in Genly Ai's society, and carries a threatening aspect for the future with it. This notion is confirmed when Estraven is exiled as a traitor and Tibe, his successor follows a different strategy with dealing with this problem: "Tibe evidently was going to press Karhide's claim to that region: precisely the kind of action which, on any other world at this stage of civilization, would lead to war" (Le Guin, *Left Hand* 50-51). Here, a connection to gender could be drawn; Estraven is a rather ambivalent character, since throughout the whole book he appears to be a male, who performs male duties, but nevertheless includes various female characteristics, which the narrator observes. His female, mild character might be the reason why he was trying to prevent a war and remain peaceful. Tibe, Estraven's successor after he had been exiled, however, is the opposite of Estraven and pushes the country to war, which could rather be seen as a male attitude and way of thinking.

The notion of violence and fear is also omnipresent on Winter, since already the palace of the king is a "product of centuries of paranoia" (Le Guin, *Left Hand* 11). David Ketterer also argues that the absence of war might actually be derived to the absent sexual differentiation, which is also confirmed by Genly Ai:

Did the Ancient Hainish postulate that continuous sexual capacity and organized social aggression, neither of which are attributes of any mammal but man, are cause and effect? Or, like Tumass Song Angot, did they consider war to be a purely masculine displacement-activity, a vast Rape, and therefore in their experiment eliminate the masculinity that rapes and the femininity that is raped? (Le Guin, *Left Hand* 102)

The question now arises, if the reason for a war-less society really derives from the fact that the 'weaker' sex, namely the female that can be raped, is simply eliminated? What can definitely be said is that the roles of the superior and powerful are not as clearly distributed as in a bi-sexual society. The female is most of the time considered to be weaker and inferior to the male, who possesses more power over her, which is also demonstrated by the act of rape during wartime. The elimination of gender therefore, also removes this power dimension from a society. There is no division into superior and inferior and powerful and powerless, which could be one of the main reasons for the absence of war.

This hypothesis is at least confirmed by Genly Ai in the citation above, which also Ketterer suggests (*New Worlds* 82).

In addition, in a patriarchal society, it is mostly the males who fight in a war and on the battlefield; the women perform other duties that are necessary during a war, namely the support of the homeland, by either taking the place of the man in his usual profession and especially by nurturing the children. Due to the fact that the roles of men and women are not clearly defined on Winter, it may also be the question, of who might go to war and fight for their home country?

An even larger problem is the concept of patriotism. Especially in a patriarchal society, it is the idea of patriotism and fighting for your country that mobilizes men and women to become soldiers and risk their life for their country. In Gethen, the situation looks slightly different. Following an invitation to Estraven's house, before he is exiled, Genly Ai learns the difference of this concept in Gethen: "No, I don't mean love, when I say patriotism. I mean fear. The fear of the *other*. And its expressions are political, not poetical: hate, rivalry, aggression. It grows in us, that fear" (Le Guin, *Left Hand* 20, emphasis added). In this citation, Estraven introduces a topic, which is an essential theme in *The Left of Darkness*, and which could be the answer to many differences and probably also the cause for problems, namely the idea of dualism. The Gethenians, especially due to their unity in sexual distinction, have created a strong sense of unity, which shapes the mindset and attitudes of its citizens.

It is proposed that, as a result of their ambisexuality, Gethenians are much less prone to the dualistic perception that conceivably is related to the permanent male/female split that characterizes most other forms of humanity. (Ketterer, *New Worlds* 80)

The absence of dualism, which could be traced back to the missing sexual differentiation, could now be the reason for the lack of fear of the other, which Estraven previously described. In his opinion, it is only the king of Karhide who is a patriot, and which represents a threat for war, since it will be his decision if they start a war with the rival nation Orgoreyn. Another fact, which promotes the idea of unity and the absence of duality, is Estraven's comment on the difference between Karhide and Orgoreyn:

'Now, for instance, the Orgota have experience in subordinating local interests to a general interest, while Karhide has almost none. And the Commensals of Orgoreyn are mostly sane men, if unintelligent, while the king of Karhide is not only insane but rather stupid.' (Le Guin, *Left Hand* 21)

Here, it is possible to detect the true reason for the conflict on Winter, namely it is not the citizens who live in fear and wish to go to war, but it is rather the insanity of the king, who

represents the threat of starting a war. The decision if the country is going to war does not lie in the hand of the Gethenians. Since the state is constructed like a feudal monarchy, it is the king's decision if a war is commenced or not. The king, being presented as insane and fearful, is threatened by Genly Ai's presentation of duality, since he possesses a constant genital, and his suggestion of Gethen's inclusion within Ekumen. So, it can be said that the society of Gethen, with its absence of duality, which may derive from the lack of bisexuality, would actually provide a peaceful atmosphere and present the opportunity of creating a sense of unity, which does not need a competitive other. However, it is arguable, whether the presence of Genly Ai, who represents duality, since he has a permanent male sex, and his proposal and introduction of the Ekumen, a confederation of nations and planets, which wishes to include Gethen in their community, is the starting point of the end of Gethen's unity.

The arrival of Genly Ai is also the starting point of the problems that might lead Karhide to war; first, he introduces the concept of duality, which shakes the worldview and attitude of the Gethenians and might be the start of their distrust in unity. Secondly, it is his proposal and introduction of the Ekumen, which also triggers king Argaven to be afraid, since he fears his kingdom to perish in the large confederation of the Ekumen and be reduced to an unimportant small part of this huge unity. Thirdly, the alliance of Estraven and Genly Ai triggers the king's distrust in his prime minister and his final denunciation of Estraven to be a traitor and his rival Tibe to take over his place. Tibe is a representation of hate and distrust and is the opposite of Estraven. The new prime minister fosters the king's fear and promotes the idea of war and dispute: "Tibe evidently was going to press Karhide's claim to that region: precisely the kind of action which, on any other world at this stage of civilization, would lead to war" (Le Guin, *Left Hand* 50). This stands in contrast to Estraven's attempt to help the victims of the dispute and to calm the situation down:

I've been helping some Karhidish farmers who live in the Valley to move back east across the old border, thinking the argument might settle itself if the Valley were simply left to the Orgota, who have lived there for several thousand years. (Le Guin 16)

Hence, the picture that is drawn of Gethen is quite ambivalent, which makes it difficult to detect where this peacefulness and the threat for war at the same time comes from. The absence of war might be lead back to the absence of duality due to the lack of sexual differentiation. However, since the beginning of the tale, the narrator constantly refers to the threat of the dispute between the two nations and the infiltration of the monarchy by



people, such as Tibe, who are not longing for a peaceful conclusion, but rather for the continuation of the superiority of their own nation.

The ambivalent notion of war on Gethen and the seemingly peaceful, but yet threatened nation does also correspond with David Ketterer's notion of destruction and creation. Ketterer argues that Gethen is on the edge of his destruction, but also at the beginning of its re-creation and rebirth. Not only is the temporal structure a cycle, which starts in spring and ends a year later during the same season, but also the shift from the previously independent planet Winter to become a part of the Ekumen denotes its rebirth and beginning of a new age (*New Worlds* 88-89).

In Ursula K. Le Guin's essay "Is Gender Necessary", she mentions the reason for the contradictory situation and attitude towards war on Gethen. Le Guin recognises a gender division when it comes to violence and war: she assumes that women are anarchic in nature, but accept rules by custom not by force. Men, on the contrary, "make, enforce, and break the laws" and are the reason for war (Le Guin, *Dancing* 12). On Gethen, due to the absence of gender, there is a balance between those two diverse attitudes, which constitutes in a peaceful nation. "But it is not a motionless balance, there being no such thing in life, and at the moment of the novel, it is wobbling perilously" (Le Guin *Dancing*, 12). So, this could be seen as an explanation for the somewhat questionable design of Gethen. The reason for that change from a peaceful nation does not seem so clear, however. The population of Winter has been peaceful for centuries, but yet, during the travel narrative of Genly Ai, this situation changes for no obvious reason. If, as Le Guin also argues, the missing gender division was the reason for the absence of war, then why is it changing now? The Gethenians are still androgynous and have not changed in any way. As already mentioned before, it may be possible that the entrance of Genly Ai could have triggered this change, since he introduced the gender division and therefore, probably also the character traits that come along with the distinction of male and female. Another reason why war seems to be possible is the introduction of progress and technological advance, and their new ability to mobilize, which has been mentioned before. Genly Ai confirms this notion while he is travelling in the rival nation Orgoreyn, who has a different political structure than Karhide and seems to be more advanced than its neighbour.

On this basis of material stability Orgoreyn had gradually built up a unified and increasingly efficient centralized state. Now Karhide was to pull herself together and do the same; and the way to make her do it was not by sparking her pride [...] He was after something surer, the sure, quick, and lasting way to make people into a nation: war. (Le Guin, *Left Hand* 109)

So, now it is possible to detect one of the main reason for the absence and the commence of war. Although the missing gender distinctions might have been a factor why the country managed to remain peaceful for such a long time; one reason, however, seems to be rather their slow technological progress, which shifted their priorities to a different aspect. Due to the hostile atmosphere and weather of ice and snow on Gethen, its inhabitants were more concerned with surviving and producing enough food to live during the winter. Their technological progress allowed them to forget these fears and produce enough food and shelter to concern about something else. Apparently this can be seen as one of the reasons why there has never been the necessity for war. However, a true answer cannot be found to this contradictory notion, since the novel itself only allows speculations.

### **3.2. Normative Heterosexuality on Winter?**

One aspect, which is striking in *The Left Hand of Darkness*, is the concept of normative heterosexuality and the absence of homosexuality. As already mentioned, Gethenians are sexless by nature, but have a few days within a lunar cycle, where they are able to reproduce themselves. During kemmer there is the need of two Gethenians who feel affection for each other. Once they have met, their longing for each other enables them to create a male or female sexual organ, which makes it possible for them to reproduce themselves. However, it is only possible for the two individuals to form one feminine and one masculine genital organ, hence, homosexuality is not a concept that has a place on Winter. “The partner, triggered by the change, takes on the other sexual role (? without exception? If there are exceptions, resulting in kemmer-partners of the same sex, they are so rare as to be ignored)” (Le Guin, *Left Hand* 96).

However, there is one contrasting element, which needs to be taken in consideration here. The narrator Genly Ai, as already mentioned before, constantly uses the pronoun “he” when he refers to other Gethenians, which evokes the mental concept, that planet Winter is only populated by men, since Genly Ai hardly ever mentions the presence of a woman. If we compare this notion with the concept of sexuality and the idea of kemmer, then actually our sense of heterosexuality is reversed, since Winter seems to be populated only by one species, namely males, and the concept of homosexuality seems to be omnipresent. This notion is also confirmed by Robert Plank, who argues that “homosexuality is on the whole covert” (42).

Although it might be possible to sense an underlying idea or maybe even longing for homosexuality, the storyline promotes the idea of heterosexuality and the narrator does not mention any occasion where the opposite, namely sexual intercourse between the same sex, is happening.

This notion could probably derived from the whole attitude of the Gethenians towards sex. Due to their fixed and static mindset that kemmer only serves for reproduction and not solely for pleasure, leads them to the denunciation of anyone who is not behaving according to their idea. They denounce Genly Ai, whose sex is always present as a “pervert”, as well as all the other nations, when they hear from Genly that Winter seems to be the only planet where androgyny is present. In addition, during his visit at the Handdarata Foretellers, Genly Ai meets one Gethenian whose genital is also constantly present and who is therefore condemned as a pervert and avoided by the other Gethenians: “The Pervert laid his hand quickly and softly on the kemmerer’s hand. The Kemmerer avoided the touch hastily, with fear or disgust, and looked across at Faxe as if for help” (Le Guin, *Left Hand* 68).

The disgust and rejection of the “Pervert” promotes the idea of the Gethenian’s intolerance towards sexual otherness, which is represented by Genly Ai and the Pervert who lives with the Foreseers. Further, the concept of homophobia is promoted on Gethen, since it is even only physically possible for two kemmerers to form a male and a female sexual organ. The rejection and the physical possibility to have sexual intercourse underline the idea of the Gethenian’s fixed mindset, which demands heterosexuality and rejects sexual otherness. Here it may be possible to once again convert Le Guin’s creation of Gethen to the present reality, where homophobia was also a striking issue and had not yet met acceptance in society during the 1960s, when the novel was published.

### **3.3. Androgyny and Hierarchy**

One crucial and possibly utopian aspect, which can be found within *The Left Hand of Darkness* seems to be the absence of hierarchy and the supposedly equality of the citizens in Karhide. Pamela J. Annas argues that “[t]here is no division of humanity into strong and weak, protective and protected, dominant and submissive, owner and owned, active and passive” (151), since there are no gender divisions.

Unfortunately, this may not be true in every respect. If we take a closer look at how the state is structured, we soon come to realize that there is a certain kind of hierarchy, since

there is a sovereign which is the head of the state, there is the “hand of the king”, who serves as a prime minister, and there are many other lords, chancellors or other members of the royal party. Now, the concept of monarchy does also include the superiority of its members and creates a power hierarchy between the rulers and the ruled. So, therefore, it cannot be said that simply by the elimination of gender, the power relations within a state are also extinguished. On the contrary, the king seems to be the most powerful and redoubtable person in Karhide, since not even his closest ally, Estraven, dares to speak up to him or talk to him in an honest way.

In addition, the concept of servants, although they may have lost the negative aspect of incarceration and bondage of usual servants, are still present in Karhide: “There had been a servant to attend our meal, but Karhiders, having no institutions of slavery or personal bondage, hire services not people, and the servants had all gone off to their own homes by now” (Le Guin, *Left Hand* 19). Although the citizens choose for themselves which profession they would like to fulfil, there are still differences in hierarchy of its inhabitants, which seems, however, to be more connected to money, since Estraven, being of a higher rank, can afford to have servants.

#### **4. The Importance of Gender in *The Left Hand of Darkness***

The elimination of gender and the introduction of an androgynous society are two very innovative thoughts in the 1960s and are one of the reasons why this novel has been so successful and why feminists around the world praise it. However, there are a few striking and quite contradictory thoughts that come up, while one is reading the novel. As Ketterer observes, the aspect of gender is not a major element of the novel, but seems rather like an unimportant supplement (*New Worlds* 80). The reason why someone would degrade this major and important element in the novel is simply that it is not interwoven in the main plot of the book. The first fact, why it can be argued that the gender issue is actually not an important part of the main plot is simply that the structure, events and everything that happens is not influenced by gender in any way. The issue of gender and its elimination is always only peripherally discussed and it does not influence the plot in any way.

A second reason why the androgynous fact disappears more and more throughout the novel is the fact that the narrator refers to the Gethenians always with the male generic pronoun “he”. The question now arises, why did Le Guin constitute an androgynous planet, which is in its vision unique and quite revolutionary and then simply omit the

important details, such as also inventing an androgynous pronoun, in order to realize it to the end? Le Guin notices this flaw in her novel and mentions her regret in her essay “Is Gender Necessary?” (Le Guin, *Dancing* 15).

A third reason, where the potential of a sexless society was overlooked or simply omitted, was already mentioned earlier during the discussion about the absence of war. Now, as already mentioned, the androgynous society made it possible for the Gethenians to remain peaceful and without a war for thousands of years, until the narration of Genly Ai commences. Suddenly the notion of gender becomes unimportant and does not seem to be the reason for the peaceful attitude of the Gethenians. Now this is a contradictory element in the novel, which according to Le Guin herself, is simply a misunderstanding from the reader’s part than a flaw in the plot (Le Guin, *Dancing* 12-13). In her opinion, it is not the gender theme that provides the solution and answer to the world’s problems and her own remarks about the influence of gender on the plot is still quite contradictory. She herself states that

[i]f we were socially ambisexual, if men and women were completely and genuinely equal in their social roles, equal legally and economically, equal in freedom, in responsibility, and in self-esteem, then society would be a very different thing. (Le Guin, *Dancing* 16)

But, considering the society of Gethen, the political structure, the assumed missing hierarchy, the change in the attitude of the Gethenians, we cannot really spot a different aspect of society than compared to a patriarchal society. Surely, at the beginning the reader is informed that there has not been a war ever on Winter and that there is no hierarchy and slavery, so one could argue that everyone is free and equal. However, as already mentioned above, there is still a kind of hierarchy, see the relationship and power of the king, the prime minister and the rest of the Karhidians; as well as the emergence of one of the first wars in the history of Winter.

During the time span of the novel, however, all this is changing. One of the two large nations of the planet is becoming a genuine nation-state, complete with patriotism and bureaucracy. It has achieved state capitalism and the centralization of power, authoritarian government, and a secret police; and it is on the verge of achieving the world’s first war. (Le Guin, *Dancing* 11)

This is the contradictory part of *The Left Hand of Darkness*, in my opinion. The novel promotes the advantages and positive side effects of a sexless society, but on the other hand, the plot develops in a direction where the whole society seems to change for no obvious reason. This underlines the fact that gender is actually not such an important issue on Gethen and does not have much influence on the proceedings and actions on Winter.

However, an answer to this question is hard to find, since the presentation of Winter and the life of the Gethenians are of a quite contradictory nature, as already mentioned above. It may be possible that the novel should rather propose the notion that even if we eliminate certain traces that might cause trouble, such as the male sex, which is, according to Le Guin herself, the sex who is eager to go to war, that there are still certain characteristics, which we may call *human* then, which cannot be fully eliminated. This, however, is just a suggestion and is difficult to answer, given the contradictory presentation of Gethen.

All in all, it can be said that *The Left Hand of Darkness* would have had the potential of presenting a society which could have presented a solution and utopian space by promoting the idea of androgyny of being the solution to many problems. Although at first this society seems to be as utopian as one might hope, it soon introduces many negative traits, such as the threat of a war or of certain gender specific traits, which should have been eliminated due to the sexless society. The question also arises about how the novel would have looked like if the androgyny was omitted and the plot simply be pursued without the different sexuality. I assume that the plot would not be very different, since the reason for the betrayal and punishment of main characters cannot be traced back to the missing gender distinctions. The character trait of ambition, which can be found in Tibe, would in a bisexual, patriarchal society be rather seen as a male characteristic, than a female one and therefore not be considered to be merely *human*.

## **5. Can *The Left Hand of Darkness* be seen as a Utopia or Dystopia?**

Having now seen how the society of Gethen is structured, how the androgynous population is experiencing their life on Winter and how the absence of gender influences the way of living and society, it should now be the time to ask the question- is *The Left Hand of Darkness* a utopia or even a dystopia?

There are certain elements in the novel, which can be considered utopian. The novel is designed as a travel narrative, told through the eyes of Genly Ai, which is a classical utopian characteristic and can already be found in early utopias, such as in Thomas More's *Utopia*.

A second utopian aspect is, of course, Le Guin's novel imagination of the androgynous population, which is a great potential for a utopia. The creation and presentation of a sexless society is an innovative invention, which serves as a possibility for the solution of

many problems a bisexual country is faced with. By eliminating the gender differences, it is possible to also delete the negative connotations and restrictions gender might include for certain parts of the population. The elimination of these negative prejudices would have presented the opportunity to create a whole new world, including a different structure of society and the status of its citizens. Unfortunately, this aspect was not fully realized in Le Guin's novel. She did present the sexless society as a solution for war, but apart from that, the androgynous state of the population of Gethen, does not seem to matter. Neither their reproduction nor their construction of society is in any way different than in a bisexual society, since Karhide is a feudal monarchy. The only difference is of course the lacking restriction and oppression of females, since there are none, but this notion does not have any effect on Gethen's society, especially during the time of Genly Ai's narration, which was already mentioned before.

A third utopian aspect are houses in which Gethenians live. Contrary to our concept of a house and a home, where every family lives in a separate building or flat, but not sharing more than the concrete walls, the population of Winter has a different system. They all live in what they call "islands", where everyone has their own room, but they share meals together, which is an attitude that leads away from the isolation and separation and promotes the feeling of community and affiliation to the group. This aspect is missing in a bisexual patriarchal society, where the concept of individuality is promoted and people tend to become more and more isolated. In Gethen, however, their way of living is the exact opposite, which goes back to their ancient form of a "hearth" which was a stable community in rural areas and serves as positive example of coexistence. The islands however are "lacking, of course, the topical and genealogical stability of the Hearth" (Le Guin, *Left Hand* 10). Although they may not also represent the steadiness of a hearth, they come close to the promotion of community, which is an essential human characteristic.

Although it is easy to spot a few utopian features in this novel, it does not make it a utopian novel. A reason why this might be the case is the author's own attitude towards the nature of her book. Le Guin herself states that "[i]t seems to me that it is quite clearly not; it poses no practicable alternative to contemporary society, since it is based on an imaginary, radical change in human anatomy. All it tries to do is open up an alternative viewpoint" (Le Guin, *Dancing* 16). Therefore, Ursula Le Guin never had the intention of writing *The Left Hand of Darkness* as a utopian novel, but rather as a criticism on actual society and never intended it to be a feminist role model. "The fact is that the real subject of the book is not feminism or sex or gender or anything of that sort; as far as I can see it, it

is a book about betrayal and fidelity” (Le Guin, *Dancing* 8). Robert Seyferth argues that Gethen is actually a mirror image of our Earth, which makes it impossible to be a utopia, since the Earth itself is not a utopian space either (104). This notion also underlines the fact that the novel can rather be seen as a criticism on present society, than presenting a better alternative future.

Now the question arises, if this novel is not a utopia, could it be possible that it is a dystopia? A few negative traits can indeed be found in the novel, for example, although the elimination of gender might also imply the deletion of the negative gender-based character traits, such as ambition or betrayal. However, those aspects can be found in the novel, especially in the character of Tibe and turn Gethen into a rather negative and dangerous place. The threat of the upcoming war, as well as the fact that negative characteristics, such as murder, assassinations and feuds, are quite common on Winter, creates a rather negative picture of this society. In addition, the change from a previously peaceful nation without any potential of war to a society where the dispute between Karhide and Orgoreyn is on the edge of collapsing does evoke a rather uneasy feeling in the reader. The banishment of the good character Estreven and his eventual death also promote the picture that there is no place in Gethen for honest and peaceful people.

However, although there are certain negative aspects in Genly Ai’s narration, it can also not be classified as a dystopia, since it does not really present a nightmare vision of the future and does not present an alternative future at all. The novel represents rather all the characteristics that can be found in a present society already, which rather classifies it as a criticism on Le Guin’s contemporary society. The intention of the author of avoiding to create a utopia can be recognized by taking a closer look at the plot. It may contain utopian and dystopian elements, but it is not leading in one clear direction of being a classical utopia or dystopia. Fredric Jameson also argues that *The Left Hand of Darkness* is a mixture of different narrative strategies, including the utopian travel narrative, but also “straight SF [...], Orwellian dystopia [...] and finally even, perhaps, something like a multi-racial lovestory” (221). The novel fits more into the genre of science fiction, which may also include utopian and dystopian elements, but is not a classical representation of either of these two literary genres. Jameson describes the potential of science fiction as “the capacity to provide something like an experimental variation on our own empirical universe” (223). This notion also fits with Le Guin’s definition of her own novel, when she says that it is her intention “not to predict the future [...] but to describe reality, the present world” (Le Guin, *Left Hand* XIV).



So, therefore, we can conclude that Ursula K. Le Guin's novel *The Left Hand of Darkness* can be considered a science fiction novel, which includes utopian as well as dystopian elements. The novel presents a society, which includes utopian aspects, such as the androgynous state of its population, as well as dystopian characteristics, i.e. the shift from a previous peaceful nation to the emergence of their first war. Although it may not be considered a classical and "pure" utopia, the novel still has the potential of serving as criticism on present society. This fact is also underlined by Seyferth's statement that Gethen is a mirror image of Earth and it is exactly this planet and society that Le Guin is aiming to analyse and criticise.

## 6. Conclusion

Ursula K. Le Guin's novel *The Left Hand of Darkness* has introduced a gender aspect which could have had the potential of becoming an innovative vision and the creation of a unique utopia. She created the planet Gethen with its exceptional gender specifications and asked the question how a society could look like if the negative connotations of females and males were eliminated and only the pure human characteristics are left.

On the surface, her presentation of this sexless society seems to be remarkable, since the concept of war seems to be completely banned from their way of thinking and also the hierarchy of inferior and superior seems not to be present on Winter. The reason that every Gethenian has the potential of becoming a male or female during their sexual reproduction phase, which makes it possible for anyone to become pregnant, seems to eliminate one negative female prejudice and reason for oppression.

However, by taking a closer look at Gethen's society, it is easy to spot many problems and reasons for concern that still persist although gender has been eliminated. Even though the hierarchy seems to be less restrictive for certain groups among the population, the oppression just shifts to a different origin. Due to the fact that in Karhide there is a feudal monarchy with the king and his prime minister being the most powerful persons in the country, the division of royalty or superiors and the inferior population still persists. Gethen's society is not a utopian space where every citizen is exactly equal; it merely represents a simple monarchy, where the dualism between the ruler and the ruled still persists.

In addition, although Le Guin attempted to eliminate gender, she still uses the male pronoun in order to refer to the Gethenians. By this constant male reference, every citizen

and person Genly Ai meets is presented as male and the whole planet seems to be populated only by men; women are completely absent on Winter. In my opinion, this would have been a detail that should not have been overlooked, since especially pronouns or names are one distinctive feature of how a mental picture is created. By constantly referring to others as “he/him/his” the picture of a male is created, which completely omits the fact that Le Guin attempted to design Gethen’s population as manwomen. Le Guin regretted this error in her essay “Is Gender Necessary?” herself and suggested the alternative of using a new pronoun such as “a”, which would have presented the novel and its inhabitants in a whole different way.

A further aspect, which was quite contradictory, is the concept of war and its relation to gender. The reason why there has never been a war on Gethen was traced back to the eliminated male character traits, since Le Guin herself characterized females as anarchic but still rather peaceful and the males as the main force for the commence of wars. However, since the beginning of Genly Ai’s narration, the threat of war is omnipresent and is a constant issue throughout the novel. The reason for this change is however not recognizable, since the sexless society still has no gender division and therefore should not possess this distinct male characteristic that would lead to war.

A further aspect that was quite striking in the novel is the fact that the performed sexuality on Gethen called for a normative heterosexuality. This derives from the fact that the sexual act can only be performed between a man and woman, intercourse between two males or two females is physically not possible and therefore absent and even physically prohibited. This notion is rather striking when one is aware of the fact that Le Guin wrote this novel as a criticism and reflection of present society. The novel rather promotes the fact that homosexuality should be eliminated and not be performed.

In addition, the concept of kemmer, the phase where sexual reproduction is possible, is also not a novel invention, since it is merely a normal heterosexual reproduction between a man and a woman. The creation of this androgynous society could have actually also present the opportunity of also inventing a whole new way of reproducing. Instead the Gethenians are acting out their desires without any restrictions, which is a mere reflection of society on Earth, without the usual taboos and restrictions. Also, the concept of “vowing kemmer” is nothing else than a conventional Christian marriage, and not a novel invention. The only aspect that is striking when it comes to sexuality, is the fact that incest among siblings is not forbidden. It is not quite clear why exactly this aspect differs to our

understanding of sexuality, since especially the biological reason and the dangers that come with it actually could justify its illegal status in our society.

Probably the most important aspect that was detected during my analysis was the fact that the gender aspect is actually not interwoven in the main plot. As I have already stated earlier, the plot would not look a lot different, if the Gethenians had two sexes and the unique gender aspect was omitted. This fact is probably the most regrettable in the whole novel. In my opinion, it is actually sad to let such a brilliant idea, which the creation of an androgynous society and the elimination of gender-related problem is, to be so unimportant in the end. By simply looking at the main plot, the missing gender seems not to matter anymore and the way society is presented does not look any different than a bisexual society. In my opinion, the sexless aspect should have been more interwoven in the actual plot and play a more distinctive role than simply mentioning its existence.

To conclude, Ursula K. Le Guin's novel is a splendid work of betrayal and fidelity; unfortunately, if one is looking for a work that deals with gender, one soon comes to realize that this book is approaching gender only on the surface. I think that the notion of an androgynous society is very interesting, but it should have played a more important role in the main plot and not be simply a characteristic of the population, which actually does not matter in the end. I have argued that the idea of androgyny actually provides the opportunity of creating a world without problem that are related to gender, such as the fixed role models for men and women and women's oppression by the superiority of men. I have shown that some utopian aspects can be found that can be traced back to the sexless society, but I have also argued that Le Guin omitted the inclusion of androgyny in the main plot of the novel. She missed the opportunity of constructing a utopian space where androgyny is altering people's lives and creates an ideal space for communal living. I have shown that the novel had the potential of becoming a utopian space and vision for a better society without gender-related problems.

## V. Conclusion

Three different novels- three different approaches to gender. After having had a closer look at the texts of Perkins Gilman, Atwood and Le Guin, it was possible to recognise that every book offers a completely different aspect of gender. One of the reasons for this disparity could be the different genre each represents, either being a utopia, dystopia or a mixture of both. In a utopia, we have a rather positive portrayal of society, since it tries to promote a better version of the future or in a different part of the world, which was the case in *Herland*. The dystopian aspect of Atwood's novel was of course the presentation of a nightmare vision of the future, which she achieved not only by the altered gender roles of the citizens of her totalitarian state. The probably most peculiar setting was to be found in Le Guin's novel *The Left Hand of Darkness*, which took the reader to a foreign planet with androgynous inhabitants. The difference between those three novels is the fact that every book was written at a different time. The earliest novel was *Herland*, which was written in 1915 and reflects the hopes and yearnings of the first-wave feminist movement. The novel's utopian outlook into the future for women's rights gives an insight on women's situation and fights for their rights and independence at the beginning of the twentieth century. *The Left Hand of Darkness*, however, can be situated within the second-wave of feminism in the 1960s, where women were already granted a lot of rights but still struggled with full acknowledgment and equality in everyday life. Especially Judith Butler, whose ideas were the main inspiration for this thesis, was active during this time. Finally, *The Handmaid's Tale*, published in the 1980s, at the end of second-wave feminism includes Butler's ideas and feminist concerns of the last decades, but can rather be seen as a speculative fiction inspired by real events in the 1980s. Those three books are just a selection of the variety of feminist literature of the last century. Feminist utopian writing can also be found in Virginia Woolf's works, such as *A Room of One's Own* and argues for women's presence within a patriarchal society. Another work, which deals with women's liberation, is Kate Chopin's novel *The Awakening*, published in 1899. The probably most famous non-fiction feminist author was Simone de Beauvoir who published *The Second Sex* in 1949, which can be seen as a pioneer work for the second-wave feminist movement. The aspect of androgyny and the advantages of a sexless society can also be found in Marge Piercy's *Woman On the Edge of Time* and the dystopian suppression of women and

superiority of men is best displayed in Angela Carter's *The Passion of New Eve*, where the main protagonists experiences both sides when he undergoes a sex transformation.

Before I started writing my thesis, I was thinking of research questions that I wanted to answer with my analysis of selected works of feminist literature. I was especially interested in the different role models each author would create in accordance with their literary genre. Would they be different from the ones we are used to in our society? Would they represent the patriarchal division of human kind into superior men and inferior women or would they take the chance of envisioning a whole different future with a solution for the gender related problems of our time?

Another aspect, which aroused my curiosity, was the notion of power dynamics between the two sexes. I was interested to see if the authors were able to create a world where both men and women were totally equal and power dynamics were dissolved. Did any of the three authors consider the oppressive power aspect when it comes to gender and include it in the story? Here, especially the difference between the genre of utopia and dystopia and its relation to power dynamics was interesting to consider.

The main aim of my thesis was to especially have a look at the various fictional societies each author has created and how they relate to the real-life societies from which the books stemmed. Since every book represents a different approach to gender, it was interesting for me to look at how society is portrayed and if it varies from our Western society.

The first novel that was taken into consideration was *Herland* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman. This book is a representative for a utopia where the author introduces the reader to Herland, a country that is only populated by women who are able to reproduce themselves without the help of men. Three men discover this unknown country and are soon faced with problems related to the missing gender stereotypes and altered power dynamics. Not only are gender roles revised in this country, since the women need to perform all duties without male help, but this absence of masculinity seems to even improve the country in comparison to a bisexual society. They were able to build fine architecture, create a remarkable social system where each individual is equal and present the opportunity for women to be seen as a true equal and not being kept in a fixed social role.

The novel especially compared the two societies, the utopian space of Herland, and the American society of the early twentieth century, the time during author Gilman was living. The restriction and oppression of women in the United States was highlighted and the

better alternative of a society without any gender divisions was promoted. Presenting the Herlanders as stronger and physically superior to the three men who represented the misogynist, male attitude, dismissed the assumed physical weakness of women, which led to their restriction to the private space in America.

Further, Gilman did not only present the oppressive restrictions for women in their ability to work or perform duties, but also commented on other forms of oppressions, as for example the choice of clothes. Due to the different style of clothing of the Herlanders, it became clear that gender is not only constructed by the biological sex we are born with, but rather by how we behave and dress within a society. This was especially visible through the attitudes of the three men, who did not consider the Herlanders to be women at first, since they did not dress or act as the females of their society. They slowly start to realize that gender is a cultural construct, which represents the needs and demands of a particular society and is not a characteristic anyone is born with.

Finally, due to the absence of men, the power relations between the two sexes have shifted as well. When the three men visit this foreign country, they find themselves in a different position than they are used to. Advantages for their being male are not granted anymore and they find themselves often in a weaker position than all the other women in Herland. This derives not only from the physical superiority of the Herlanders, but also by the recognition that most advantages that males enjoy can be traced back simply to their biological sex and the accompanied cultural agreement that males are superior and stronger than women.

Gilman's novel *Herland* provided a clear insight in how society would look like if there is only one race, which is in her case women. Due to the missing duality, all gender stereotyping and role models are dissolved and human kind is not judged and discriminated against due to the biological sex.

In Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale*, which was a representative novel for a dystopia, we could encounter a society, which presents a vision of how worse the division and oppression of women could become. The distinction between men and women are taken to the extreme, where women are denied almost any right for independence or individuality and are a victim of male oppression. Males are the powerful and superior inhabitants of the totalitarian state of Gilead and dictate the roles women have to perform within this society. Women are divided into various categories according to their reproductive abilities, where a handmaid has the lowest position and a wife the highest position a female can achieve. What all women have in common is that they are deprived

of all their rights; every female depends on a man and is not allowed to live an independent life.

Therefore, also the power relations between the two sexes are modified where women are even more powerless than in a conventional bisexual society and even men of the lowest rank still possess more power over any female. This division of the two sexes into two extremes, where men are unspeakably superior and women are completely deprived of power, presents a horror vision of the future, which was Atwood's aim in her dystopian novel. She was inspired by a real event that she witnessed in the United States in the 1980s and used it as an incentive to create a society, which reflected the visions of this real Christian fundamentalist group.

Atwood's portrayal of a totalitarian society is therefore a real nightmare vision of the future and should also serve as a warning for current trends in society. What is striking with regard to the power dynamics is that the division into superior and inferior does not only occur between men and women, but also amongst the females themselves. Although it could be assumed that the oppressed female population would form bonds to escape their miserable situation, but instead even among women there is a certain power hierarchy where the powerful wife exploits her status in order to suppress other inferior women.

The dystopian vision of Atwood has put the gender divisions to the extreme and the biologically determined sex has become an important factor, which decides your social position within a society. It was my aim to detect which social roles men and women possess in this dystopia and have found out that the two sexes enjoy different privileges where the men possess power in society, especially over women. Females are merely reduced to their reproduction capabilities and suffer from an oppressed status within society without having any rights at all.

The last novel introduced another aspect of gender, namely the androgynous human. Le Guin takes the reader in *The Left Hand of Darkness* to planet Gethen, where its citizens are sexless most of the time, except for a short period every month when they are able to turn into males or females in order to reproduce themselves. Here, it was especially my concern to detect if there are any role models or stereotypes that can be related to gender, although there is no biological distinction between male and female. It was rather difficult to analyse this due to the presentation of this society by the narrator who was a representative of a patriarchal society and influenced the plot with his male attitude. The first problem the reader is faced with is that every androgynous citizen was addressed with a male pronoun, which immediately turned the whole planet into a society of merely males. However, the

stereotyping and predetermination of roles and jobs were not restricted to a certain group of the population, which was an advantage compared to the bisexual society; but the whole society did in fact not differ that much to a conventional society with the division of male and female. At first, one advantage seemed to be the absence of war, which could be traced back to the missing male characteristics, but finally also this aspect of a peaceful cohabitation seemed to be threatened or seemed to be finished.

In addition, the apparently absent hierarchy among the citizens due to the missing gender distinctions may be an advantage, however, the society of Karhide is structured like a feudal monarchy, which again allows certain social groups to become more powerful than others. The power relations between men and women may be absent, but power dynamics still exist, they have merely shifted to another sphere of society, which is in this case the opposition of poor and rich.

The society Le Guin presents is therefore quite contradictory. On the one hand there is the great potential of an androgynous society to extinguish all gender division and create a country where every citizen is equal. On the other hand, this effect was not quite achieved due to the unimportant aspect of gender in the end. In fact, the reason that there is no gender division did not actually have an influence on the way society was constructed or how the plot evolved. In my opinion, this is one of the reasons why it is actually difficult to trace the differences in that society back to gender, since the androgynous aspect of the Gethenians did not seem to matter at all.

To conclude, it was my aim to show in this diploma thesis whether the literary genres of utopia and dystopia were able to present a solution (or warning) for the cultural construction of gender and its effect on society. In the case of Gilman's utopia, it was possible to read an imagined society, which solved the problem of oppressed females and gave them a space where they can live without any gender restrictions. However, this utopian space is only possible due to the total absence of the opponent male sex. Once the men have entered Herland, hierarchy between the two sexes is again present, with the difference that in this case women are the more superior ones.

The dystopian example presented a society where gender division was taken to the extreme. Even if in our society women are oppressed and restricted, Atwood has shown that the situation could even become worse. Her novel should especially serve as a warning, since she was inspired by real events and imagined what would happen if they were carried out to the extreme. In my opinion, her dystopia should not be a request to stop the complaints about present gender inequalities, since it could always become worse, but



rather a vivid warning of what might happen if we do not pay attention to the division between the two sexes.

Finally, the potential of an androgynous society was the answer to a question that one might ask: if gender is creating so many problems and inequalities, why not simply eliminate it? If we had the technological possibilities of creating an androgynous human, would this actually be an improvement of society or would it not look different in any way. Le Guin's novel only answered this question on the surface, since the only difference her sexless society presents is the absence of hierarchy and war, which, however, does not turn the world into a peaceful cohabitation. Problems still exist although they may not always be related to gender division.

The genres of utopia and dystopia present the opportunity of creating alternative societies and an alteration of presumably fixed gender roles, which was my aim to demonstrate. They are able to rewrite the static power dynamics between the two sexes and enable us to imagine a society where hierarchies among males and females are either relieved or even worse than before. I have shown in my thesis that the genres of utopia and dystopia, depending on their given historical context, are able to speculate of how the situation for men and women could be different. They transformed hopes and ideas of people and especially women at the specific period of time and turned it into either a solution of how things could be better or also even worse. With my thesis I have argued that due to a dissatisfied condition within a society, utopias and dystopias provide the opportunity for arguing how this situation could be changed or should not be turned into. Utopias or dystopias can be seen as suggestions or speculations of how future could look like, including power relations between men and women and the status of the two sexes within a society. On the whole, my thesis presented reasons for the emergence of utopian or dystopian fiction, their concern with gender, as well as their presentation of various roles men and women possess within a society and have either presented suggestions of how an oppression of one sex could be solved or even impaired.

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# Appendix

## I. Abstract

The genres of utopia and dystopia present societies that have their settings in the future and take the reader into a world where the usual conventions of gender might not be applicable anymore. The roles and stereotypes of men and women are alternated in those two literary genres, including power dynamics between the two sexes. *Herland* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman is an example for a literary utopia and presents a society where gender roles are reversed and women find themselves in a more powerful position than men. Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* is an example for a dystopia, where women are deprived of all their rights and have to abide by the rules of the powerful men. Ursula K. Le Guin's science fiction novel *The Left Hand of Darkness* presents an androgynous society, which is supposed to be the solution for gender-related problems. What these three novels have in common is that each presents an imagined space, which serves as an example for an ideal society and a solution for problems especially women are faced with in patriarchal societies, or as a warning of a possible nightmare vision of the future.

## II. Kurzzusammenfassung

In den literarischen Genres Utopie und Dystopie werden Gesellschaften geschaffen, welche in der Zukunft angesiedelt sind und den/die LeserIn in eine Welt versetzen, in welcher die üblichen Geschlechterkonventionen nicht mehr zutreffen. Die Rollenverteilung und Stereotypen von Männern und Frauen sind meist verändert, was auch die Machtverteilung zwischen den beiden Geschlechtern umfasst. *Herland* von Charlotte Perkins Gilman wurde als Beispiel für eine literarische Utopie herangezogen und beschreibt eine Gesellschaft in welcher die Rollenverteilung aufgehoben wurde und die Frauen sich in einer machtvolleren Position als die Männer befinden. Margaret Atwoods *The Handmaid's Tale* ist ein Vertreter der literarischen Dystopie in welcher sich Frauen völlig entmachteten den stärkeren Männern unterordnen müssen. Die Science-Fiction Novelle *The Left Hand of Darkness* von Ursula K. Le Guin präsentiert eine androgyne Gesellschaft, welche als Lösung für jene Probleme dienen soll, die durch die Geschlechterverteilung verursacht werden. Was all diese drei Bücher gemeinsam haben ist, dass sie einen imaginären Raum darstellen, welcher entweder eine Idealgesellschaft präsentiert und als Lösung für aktuelle Probleme dienen soll, oder als Warnung vor einer Albtraumgesellschaft fungiert.

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