

**MAIDS IN THEIR-LAND: A STUDY OF THE EFFECTS OF THE CULT OF  
TRUE WOMANHOOD ON CHARLOTTE PERKINS GILMAN'S  
*HERLAND* (1915) AND MARGARET ATWOOD'S  
*THE HANDMAID'S TALE* (1986)**

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By

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The “cult of true womanhood,” as it came to be called by many modern day feminist critics, began in the early 1800’s and thrived until it was trampled by the social and sexual revolution of the 1920’s. According to the philosophy of true womanhood, the four basic feminine virtues necessary to being a prize to husband and community included: piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity. In order to achieve an adequate level of femininity (as well as shun that which was traditionally accepted as masculine”) a woman was encouraged to be self-policing in her efforts to excel within her god-given “place” which was, according to cult teachings, firmly restricted to the domestic sphere. A woman who defined herself according to those human character traits found *only* in the sphere of femininity displayed not merely acceptable by exemplary social behavior. Thus, a strict separation of the masculine and feminine spheres in this way was enforced by cult teachings. Using these guidelines, substantial comparisons can be made between Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s creation of a utopian society in her 1915 novel *Herland* and Margaret Atwood’s conception of a dystopian (utopia-gone-wrong) society in her 1986 novel *The Handmaid’s Tale*. In each of the novels, the four cult virtues are used as a cornerstone to create societies in which the success or failure of that society is proportionally related to the distance between the masculine and feminine spheres. While Gilman subverts the cult of true womanhood traits in order to create her perfect world in which the masculine and feminine spheres intermingle, Atwood magnifies cult traits, strictly separating the masculine and feminine spheres from one another and thus forming her dysfunctional society. Both authors use the cult virtues in order to call for the integration of the masculine and feminine spheres, thus admonishing modern society from repeating social mistakes of the past.

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*I am not a poet, I'm only a preacher, whether on the platform or in print.*

--Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *A Nonfiction Reader*

*Anything that states, Thus shall you be because of your set of genitals—whether it's said by feminist or others—is going to be limiting. No society is above making these distinctions.*

-- Margaret Atwood, "Defying Distinctions"

## INTRODUCTION

The "cult of true womanhood" is a twentieth-century term which has been coined by contemporary critics to identify those ideological traits which were emphasized as essentially feminine to the Victorian woman as well as to the woman of post-war 1950s. According to the cult teachings, a "true" woman must perfectly embody prescribed character traits including sexual innocence, devotion to religion, proper subordination to males, and dedication to maternal duties as well as to the upkeep of the physical home. The term "cult of true womanhood" has proven to be a useful tool for feminist and non-feminist critics alike when the need arises to point specifically to the negative expectations of what has been traditionally been accepted as feminine.

For the most part, scholars agree that virtues promoted by the cult of true womanhood might be categorized under the following headings: purity, piety, submissiveness, and domesticity. Barbara Welter discusses these attributes in her "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860," contending that these were traits "by which a woman judged herself and was judged by her husband, her neighbors, and society. . . Without them, no matter whether there was fame or achievement of wealth, all was ashes.

With them she was promised happiness and power” (152). Though critics have often differed on the exact terminology used to describe the cult’s views of women, there has been unanimous agreement on two specific problems that arise in regards to the cult’s expectation of women: the inhibition of any attempt of a woman to be a wholly functional human being and the delineation of a strict division between feminine and masculine traits.

Although, traditionally, critics have used the cult of true womanhood as an example of unjustified and unfair enslavement of women to an impossibly idealistic way of life, current critics are beginning to discuss the negative repercussions that these teachings have had upon men as functional human beings. Over the past two decades, a shift has occurred in the critical discussion of cult teachings in regards to the societal impact of those teachings. Modern critics have begun to point out, for instance, that just as a woman can be socially ostracized for her lack of submissiveness, a man might also be rejected for his inability to dominate. In this way, piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity affect not only the perception of femininity but also the perception of masculinity: what is essential for the “true” woman is—in many ways—just as detrimental for the “true” man, creating an unjustifiable narrowness of roles for both women and men.

Using these guidelines, substantial comparisons can be made between Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s utopian novel *Herland* (1915) and Margaret Atwood’s dystopian novel *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1986). In order to construct such comparisons, it is important to understand the literary tradition that lies behind the meaning of the word *utopia*, which comes from the Greek term “ou topos” meaning “no place.” The utopian form of

literature has traditionally been used as a vehicle to point to major flaws in the society within which it is written. The utopia serves as a criticism of society as well as a proposal that introduces idealized alternatives to social problems. Dystopia is a form of literature with similar didactic intent. However, a dystopian society usually involves a fanatical utopian theory that has been taken to its literal ends. Both *Herland* and *The Handmaid's Tale*, in keeping with their literary forms, question established social concepts inherent in the time period that the work was written.

The fact that these two novels are written so far apart (1915 and 1986 respectively) and yet are similarly responding to the teachings of the cult of true womanhood suggests the massive influence that the cult had on the literature of the early nineteenth century. More important, however, is the impact and social repercussions cult teachings continue to have on modern twentieth-century literature. That Atwood set her dystopian novel on the eve of the twenty-first century, exactly fifty years from the last “cult” revival in the 1950s, is a simple reminder that history is cyclical. In order to avoid repeating the mistakes of the past, we must continue to reexamine that past while looking towards the future.

Throughout her non-fiction works, despite the strict cult ideologies that surrounded her, Charlotte Perkins Gilman creates an emphasis upon women's reform with an eye on the future; however, in her fiction, she is able to express controversial social theories in a subtle way that might--when introduced in a more straightforward context that non-fiction demanded—have otherwise resulted in public ostracism. When creating *Herland's* utopian society, Gilman contrives a society based upon a subverted rendition of piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity. In *Herland*, a society

composed entirely of women, devout piety is not based upon blind faith to a religion, but rather homage to actual factual knowledge that has come from centuries of research. Likewise the “true” woman’s purity in Herland involves neither ignorance nor passivity. The education that accompanies each Herlander’s childhood experience schools her in physical and mental strength, while encouraging a calm and patient nature that is initially mistaken as submissiveness by the male explorers who stumble upon their land. Gilman creates women who are humble as a result of custom and courtesy while still retaining a physical and mental strength that, according to cult teachings, is traditionally attributed to the masculine sphere of character traits. A deep commitment to family is encouraged in Herland—but since there are no specific homes and childrearing is communal, the concept of domesticity is also drastically altered. Gilman thus creates a perfect society of human beings who represent the pinnacle of a society’s success as a result of the total integration of masculine and feminine spheres.

Within the fictional society of Gilead, Atwood does exactly the opposite and magnifies many of the “true” womanhood values until their distortion creates a dysfunctional society. In the Republic of Gilead, an oppressively androcentric society, piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity are all traits that the women must shoulder in order to survive. The unquestioning devotion to religion that was encouraged in the “cult” of true womanhood is mirrored in Atwood’s women of Gilead. However, the pressure is so intense to objectify oneself with such unerring piety that the only solution is to hide one’s true feelings behind a tightly maintained façade. As Offred herself points out, one never knows who is the hypocrite and who is a true believer. This façade points back to a similar one evident in the cult teachings. Not only were women expected to act

in reverent faith and selfless submission at all times, but they were also expected to find personal satisfaction in this difficult task. In Gilead, purity is pushed to the point where it becomes synonymous with ignorance while submissiveness is exaggerated until it becomes self-objectification. Atwood creates a dysfunctional society of human beings who exemplify the nadir of a society's success as a result of their complete segregation of the masculine and feminine spheres from one another.

This separation of natural human traits into strictly guarded feminine or masculine spheres was a major problem inherent in the teachings of the cult. Human traits were divided into *either* feminine *or* masculine with little allowance for commingling. In an anonymous 1863 article entitled "Education of the Female Sex" strict delineation between the masculine and feminine spheres is set:

The authority and dominion remain with the husband, for the wife, according to God's commandment, must be subject and obedient. The husband must govern the house and exercise, go to war, defend his property, plow, sow, build, plant, &c. The wife, on the other hand, must sit at home and be busy in the house. Thus Venus was represented standing on a snail-shell showing that as the snail carries his house with him, so should the wife always be at home and be busied about the occupations of the house . . . Weak woman has nothing more precious and noble than her honor . . . (86-7)

Each sphere was constructed of the expectations of that particular gender's supposedly natural character traits. As Welter notes, "piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity . . . they spelled mother, daughter, sister, wife—woman" (152). If these traits spelled out women, they were certainly not to be embraced as "manly." The cult virtues were, in this way, prohibited from what was traditionally accepted as masculine. Many of these stereotypes have remained ingrained in society even to this day. An example of this lingering of stereotypical male and female roles might include the supposition that all women are naturally more able to parent or that any male attempt at performing traditionally domestic roles—such as housework and cooking—will naturally be fumbling and inept. These stereotypes created monstrous social problems, especially since each gender was further conditioned to struggle to meet highly idealized renditions of their "natural" yet prescribed traits. In an 1847 lecture to a graduating class of medical students, Dr. Charles Meigs explains this concept of women's naturally religious instincts: "hers is a pious mind. Her confiding nature leads her more readily than men to accept the proffered grace of the Gospel" (qtd in Welter 154). It was not enough for a woman to be merely pure, she must assume that her husband (or other male counterpart) was impure and thus struggle to "right" him from a safe distance. According to Welter, a true woman should view herself as a righteously pious flame designed to "throw its beams into the naughty world of men" (152). All in all, the general rule involving the cult teachings seemed to be that the farther away that that which was designated as feminine stayed from that which was designated as masculine -- the truer the woman or man.

Connected to this separation of masculine and feminine spheres was the strict notion that human characteristics could be *only* either masculine *or* feminine. The reasoning seemed to be that if a characteristic such as purity was a feminine characteristic then conversely the masculine character trait must be impurity. Welter discusses the prevalent admonitions of cult teachings which encouraged women to protect their own purity and forgive men for their weakness in not doing the same: “men, being by nature more sensual than they, would try to assault it . . . would sin and sin again, they could not help it, but women, stronger and purer, must not give in” (155). This concept of the segregation of human traits into that which is acceptable as either masculine or feminine formed much of the basis for the cult of true womanhood’s teachings. An 1853 unsigned editorial discusses this supposed natural segregation of the masculine and feminine spheres: “The whole dual constitution of humanity . . . is not simply the perfection of the species, but the highest perfection of the earthly human state in the harmony of the domestic and outer existences . . . woman was meant to be the main influence of one; man the other. To this all civilization tends” (44). Although cult teachings of the 1800s were primarily directed towards women, the delineation of the masculine sphere was parenthetically formed by implication and inverse reasoning. For example, if child-rearing and nurturing characteristics were to be included in a woman’s sphere of feminine traits then they more than likely were deleted from the man’s sphere of masculine traits. In this way, human character traits were doled out into two very separate spheres of existence

With the separation of the spheres and the creation of a woman’s sphere of essential feminine traits came also the need to separate that which would not be

considered appropriately feminine. All traits that did not fit within the confines of what had been deemed acceptable for a true woman were then designated as inappropriate and off limits, such as the idea that “. . . a young woman should neither curse nor swear, should never speak unless spoken to, and should always answer as briefly as possible” (“Education” 88). A female was then expected to adhere only to those character traits that would reinforce her femininity: passivity, physical frailty, emotional and physical dependence, and intellectual inferiority. For, as the author of “Education of the Female Sex” notes, “A young woman ought not to use many words; for she ought not to be crammed with mere knowledge” (88). The fact that a woman’s physiological make-up necessitated an active role in physical responsibilities towards children including pregnancy, childbirth, and breastfeeding further delineated her sphere. Because women had such an actively physical role in mothering that often took place in the home, domesticity was then placed within their feminine sphere. A woman was told that she should “apply herself earnestly to domestic affairs for a wife who can not keep house is the ruin and destruction of her husband” (Education 88). A man could be completely ruined by a lack of domesticity—as long as it was his wife’s. Because feminine and masculine traits as a rule did not commingle, cult believers assumed that a man was not naturally meant to be domestic. This type of reasoning further distanced the masculine and feminine spheres from one another. If a trait was viewed as masculine then it must not be embodied by women and vice versa. Thus, each sphere supported opposing characteristics. In order to be a true cult believer, a woman was then expected not only to embody the prescribed feminine traits, but to shun traits within her labeled masculine. In this way

The nature of girls, predominantly susceptible, dependent therefore upon . . . immediate feeling, sensitive, introverted, adapted to a narrow sphere, troubled at small things, should not be trained to noisy cheerfulness, to predominant mental activity, to clear and comprehensive generalizing, to universal tendencies in science, to a strictly logical process of thought, to rough openness of manner, to the more vivid, general, and outward phases of activity, such as are proper for boys; unless it is desired to carry them quite out of their sphere and destroy in the germ the charm of lovely womanhood. (Education 90)

Masculine traits in a woman were considered an impediment to her “natural” inclinations as a woman. Any incorporation of dominance, independence, intellect, or physical strength was frowned upon since these traits were commonly viewed as belonging to the masculine sphere.

Men similarly were neither welcome nor willing to take part in the sphere of femininity. Dominance rather than passivity was expected of males as well as physical strength and agility rather than frailty. Those men as well as women who might be tempted to step outside the boundaries of their spheres were subject to social punishment, for it was thought that “however fearful would be the punishment of bringing up a man for woman’s sphere of duty as heavy a curse would rest upon the endeavor to bring up a woman for the occupations of a man” (“Education” 90). Men were expected to be independent thinkers who were interested in intellectual pursuits outside of the home. At

the 1851 Men's Rights Conference, an anonymous speaker, to whom the stenographer gave the pseudonym "Mr. Wumenheyter of New York" commented that "there is a conspiracy afoot. . . which should it succeed in its aspiring aims, will annihilate us as men, and convert us into *mere* household appendages. . . (28 emphasis added). Thus, they were excused from any menial domestic role aside from their "natural" right as authoritarian within the domestic sphere. Men were also excused from the burden of natural purity and innocence because, according to the cult teaching, men were intemperate and more prone to succumbing to temptation as a result of their daily contact with the morally contaminated outside world. In a 1940 letter to Elizabeth Mott, Elizabeth Cady Stanton bewails the "present condition of women" saying "What God has made sinful, both in man and woman, custom has made sinful in woman alone" (qtd. in Oakley 16). Men were—it implied—more prone to succumb to carnal sins than women and thus must be given adequate leeway in their moral improprieties. In this way, the cult's separation of masculine and feminine into two distinct and distanced spheres created very specific ideas concerning the roles of men and women in a society.

In the context of the cult's expectations of women the four central characteristics of true womanhood, piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity, take on fanatical meanings that are much altered from their dictionary definitions. The expectations that the cult places upon its women in regards to these feminine virtues go far beyond the literal definitions of these words.

To the cult of true womanhood, having piety, for example, means much more than a devotion to one's religion. A true woman's spiritual devotion was so idealized and so unrealistically bountiful that she was expected to bear upon her shoulders the "natural"

role of moral policeman for her husband and family, and ultimately her country. As McIntosh contends in her 1850 work *Woman In America: Her Work and Her Reward*: “. . . to American women, we must look to rectify the errors of American society, and that from them we may hope to derive . . . a life nobler, more spiritual, more in conformity with Christian principles than any the world has seen” (71). It is this altered definition of piety rather than a simple “devotion to religion” that serves as the foundation for both Gilman’s utopian and Atwood’s dystopian societies. It involves a total surrender to religious expectations that are not meant to be understood, but only dully followed. This unquestioning faith involves a total submission to a religion that often included ulterior motives such as social control. A “true” woman’s religious devotion was spoken of “as a kind of tranquilizer for the many undefined longings which swept even the most pious young girl, and about which it was better to pray than think” (Welter 153). According to the *Women’s Studies Encyclopedia*, “the cult dictated that True Women were the moral guardians of the family. They are particularly appropriate for the role because they were spiritually pure and therefore closer to God” (106). Gilman and Atwood use a magnified or subverted version of the piety of “true” womanhood to manipulate the separation of the masculine and feminine spheres and thus create their societies. Inherent in each novel is a strong emphasis on piety in order that the utopian or dystopian society remain on its successful or dysfunctional path. The Herlanders’ emphasis on piety as a means for social growth and freedom of true self-expression differs greatly from the piety of Gilead, with its undercurrents of social control and forced hypocrisy. Each author challenges the cult virtues by creating societies based on the total integration or the complete segregation of the masculine and feminine spheres.

Similarly, the cult's version of purity also deviated from the original definition of simply "freedom from evil or sin; innocence." The cult's version of purity demanded an unwavering social and sexual innocence that often spilled over into unquestioning ignorance. By discouraging outspokenness and inquisitiveness as "unfeminine" and thus "unwomanly," the cult encouraged women to follow blindly in order to remain a pure and socially acceptable woman for "purity was as essential as piety to a young woman, its absence as unnatural and unfeminine" (Welter 154). A direct association was also established between a woman's purity and her sexuality. Cult teachings hinted that purity meant some degree of sexual control over men, an extremely contradictory concept when viewed in light of the expectation that she remain sexually passive in order that her husband be the dominant sexual partner. Welter explains this paradigm: "Purity considered as a moral imperative, set up a dilemma which was hard to resolve. Woman must preserve her virtue until marriage and marriage was necessary for her happiness. Yet marriage was, literally, an end to innocence. She was told not to question this dilemma, but simply to accept it" (Welter 158). Sexual passivity meant desirability. Active sexuality, even in the confines of marriage, was considered unpure and thus the mark of a fallen woman. Women were expected to retain an outwardly asexual and passive appearance while still somehow remaining sexually desirable to their husbands. This contradictory lifestyle proved often to be an idealistic impossibility as is depicted by subverted model in Gilman's utopia as well as by overstated example in Atwood's dystopia.

The cult's version of purity is inherent in each of the novels, with Gilman challenging it by modification and Atwood using exaggeration to exemplify its social

danger. Gilman's altered version of the cult's purity includes a genuinely asexual nature, and a lack of passivity. Atwood's exaggerated purity in Gilead, which involves an asexual façade as well as strictly enforced social and sexual passivity, contrasts strongly with the Herlanders' modified version of purity. The total integration of the masculine and feminine spheres creates success in Gilman's society in much the same way that the extreme distance between the separation of the masculine and feminine spheres is directly related to the dysfunction of Atwood's society.

Submissiveness too was taken to a new level of idealism by the cult of true womanhood for submissiveness in their teachings takes on an entirely new meaning. The submissiveness expected of a true woman involved much more than basic humility; rather, it included a submission that bordered on subservience. The cult tradition of submissiveness essentially represents the complete surrender of control to the male. According to cult teachings "men were the movers, the doers, the actors. Women were the passive, submissive responders" (Welter 159). A properly submissive woman had full knowledge and was in humble agreement with her lower position in the hierarchical social ladder of the times. In *Woman in her Social and Domestic Character* (1842), Mrs. John Sanford reinforces this idea with her comment "A really sensible woman feels her dependence. She does what she can, but she is conscious of inferiority, and therefore grateful for support" (15). Not only were cult followers taught to allow themselves to be objectified, but they were also encouraged to practice self-objectification, submitting selflessly to the point that they lost their capacity as a human individual and became *something* to be possessed, for example *her* mother, *his* daughter, and *my* wife.

Whether it be subverted as in Gilman's utopian society or magnified as in Atwood's dystopia, the cult of true womanhood's idealized version of submissiveness is also apparent in each of the novels. Gilman's incorporation of submissiveness in *Herland* involves a total departure from the cult's traditional view of a truly submissive woman. Inherent in Gilman's novel is the never-ending struggle by the male explorers to force the Herlanders into submission. Gilman incorporates so many "masculine" characteristics (along with their "feminine" characteristics) into the Herlander characters that—at least in the minds of the explorers—these women do not know their proper place. This proper place involves physical, emotional, and intellectual submission to males. Gilman creates a society of women who quite humbly and reasonably defer to the alien ideas of the male explorers without ever handing over control or placing themselves on a lower level than the males. This balance of passivity and dominance creates the perfect utopian society, and is a clear example of Gilman's admonition against the separation of feminine and masculine spheres. On the other hand, Atwood amplifies submissiveness to the point that the women of Gilead completely lose their human identities and become literal objects—the "national resources" or "wombs" of Gilead. Submissiveness in Gilead becomes synonymous with self-objectification and the total forfeiture of control.

Domesticity was another factor that was largely emphasized and idealized by the cult of true womanhood. To a True Woman, domesticity involved the birthing and rearing of children and a close confinement to the domain of the home. According to *Women's Studies Encyclopedia*, "It was absolutely necessary for women to cling to the protection of the home" for, if they "left their haven, they lost their innocence, their moral superiority and ultimately their True Womanhood" (106). To further accentuate a

woman's place the "courts and churches reinforced women's seclusion in the home through legal decisions and sermons that emphasized women's frailty . . ." (*Women's* 107). Thus, the domestic abode came to be represented as a place of "confinement" for the "wombs of the nation . . . away from the stress of the world" (*Women's* 107). The cult emphasized that this seclusion from the world with its impure temptations was necessary in order that a woman perform her duty as nurturer. Women in this way "gained their own sphere, which was entirely separate from men's" (*Women's* 107).

The cult's version of domesticity is also apparent in each of the novels, with Gilman challenging it by subversion and Atwood by exaggeration in order to question the separation of masculine and feminine spheres. The concept of the intellectual, political, and social confinement of women for their own protection is completely undermined in *Herland* until it is hardly recognizable. Gilman's focus is upon a departure from mental confinement through education. Women are not confined to any home sphere simply because the concept of home to the Herlanders has been dramatically altered. Completely rethinking the concept of home, Gilman creates instead a communal society that rears its children as a social unit. When the male explorers "marry" the Herlanders, it is expected that the men will participate in the fathering of the children equally. However, the men's concept of fathering has little to do with childrearing. When the men arrive, it is assumed by the Herlanders that the explorers will join in the communal tasks rather than necessitate the separation of "his" and "her" roles. Because Herlanders embody both feminine and masculine traits, they are constantly puzzled at the men's conditioned inclination to separate tasks and traits by gender. Atwood, on the other hand, focuses upon the physical confinement of a woman as mental immurement, creating a

society in which women are imprisoned until such time as they are called upon to breed. Rather than being treated as individuals, the women of Gilead are separated into tasks including breeder, child-rearer, homemaker, and prostitute. These tasks involve traits that have traditionally been accepted as being confined to the “feminine” sphere of character traits. Any woman who does not fit one or more of the specifications for what Gilead deems acceptable is conveniently dismissed as “Unwoman.” Motherhood—yet with none of its positive qualities—becomes the defining role of women. In Atwood’s novel, the separation of the masculine and feminine spheres becomes an indication of just how dysfunctional her society really is.

In each case, the authors—whether consciously or not—use the four basic “cult” virtues as a springboard to challenge the separation of the masculine and feminine spheres traditionalized by the cult teachings of the early 1800s. Just as Gilman subverts the values of the cult in her novel in order to take arms against their oppressive and segregational nature, so Atwood magnifies these same values in her novel, almost a century later, as a warning against repeating our mistake and once again embracing the concept of human character trait segregationism.

That Gilman and Atwood present their versions of the cult’s ideals in the traditionally didactic utopian and dystopian forms points to the idea that their literary agendas involve much more than an interesting read. Gilman’s *Herland* is, at times, so intent upon stressing the absurdity of the separation of feminine and masculine traits that her novel becomes a sort of manifesto for her political views. As Gary Scharnhorst notes in his biography *Charlotte Perkins Gilman*, “Her literary theory was, fundamentally, an unapologetic defense of didacticism. The author should instruct the reader, she averred

in one of the first essays . . . She scorned dilettantism and the principle of ‘art for art’s sake’” (12). Gilman wrote extensively on the idea that women should be allowed to move into a domain that—up to that point—had been considered for men only is groundbreaking in and of itself. Her idea to allow women out of their socially controlled “spheres” was a groundbreaking proposition even as late as 1918. However, what critics often overlook is Gilman’s assertion that males should also be allowed to take on traits found in the “feminine” sphere. Throughout much of her fiction, Gilman makes suggestions regarding concepts such as communal childrearing and domestic duties that subtly imply the need for integration of males into a hitherto feminine domain. Her subtle assertion that there was something wrong with the masculine sphere of traits was able to be carried out with less chance of political ostracism than if she had directly addressed it in her non-fiction.

Thus, Gilman fights for much more than the release of women from a restricted feminine sphere, and their integration into the masculine sphere. She also calls for the extrication of men from the bonds of their masculinity and their integration into the feminine sphere. In other words, Gilman indicates the need for the intermingling of traditional masculinity and femininity in order to create a more balanced society of people. With her concept of the intermingling of masculinity and femininity and its direct impact on the positive advancement of a society, Gilman was much further ahead of her time than many critics imagine. Within her novel—with its uncannily asexual and decidedly non-lesbian Herlanders—one can clearly see a combination of traits that were traditionally considered *either* feminine *or* masculine. Gilman has not merely created a society of females breaking out of the boundaries of their prescribed “feminine” sphere;

rather she creates a society of human beings that have integrated both masculine and feminine spheres into their social construct. The complete and total intermingling of hitherto traditionally only either feminine or masculine traits creates in Herland the ideal society. This is an obvious didactic exhortation for the integration of feminine and masculine spheres in order to aid in the success of society.

This call for the combination of masculinity and femininity resurfaces in Atwood's novel and is representative of the fact that she seems to be offering a similar moral admonishment. Once a graduate student in Victorian literature, Atwood is also familiar with the concept of the novel as something more than entertainment. As she herself states in "An Interview with Margaret Atwood on her Novel *The Handmaid's Tale*": "I believe as the Victorian novelists did, that a novel isn't simply a vehicle for private expression, but that it also exists for social examination. I firmly believe this" (Atwood 317). Her dystopia, with its complete segregation of masculinity and femininity, creates a horrifyingly dysfunctional society that is a warning against isolating the two spheres from one another. That she admittedly bases her dystopia on real historic examples of social and governmental inadequacies exposes the novel's didactic purpose. Within the context of her novel, the further the separation of the masculine and feminine spheres, the more dysfunctional the society becomes. At one point, a blow is dealt even in regards to feminist segregationism: "Mother," Offred thinks "Wherever you may be. . . You wanted a woman's culture. Well, now there is one. It isn't what you meant, but it exists" (Atwood 127). In the minor character of Offred's mother, we are presented with a feminist who has gone so far in her radicalism that she ends up exactly where she started out: "I don't want a man around, what use are they except for ten

second's worth of half babies. . . just do the job, then you can bugger off, I said . . .”

(Atwood 121). Despite all good intentions, Offred's mother eventually takes her own feminism to its furthest ends and falls into the same dilemma that she has struggled so hard to avoid. By referring to males as unnecessary—as mere sperm donors—and excluding them from the domestic role, she advocates the same exact system that she has set out as a feminist to abolish.

The “doling out” of human characteristic traits into strictly maintained feminine and masculine spheres has direct connection with the fact that Gilead is a dystopian society. Atwood creates her frighteningly dysfunctional society by literally taking the separation of the masculine and feminine spheres to its furthest ends. However, although Atwood leaves Offred's personal fate vaguely unanswered, the point is made that the Gilead regime cannot survive in its present state of social segregation. Eventually, as we find in the “Historical Notes” section of Atwood's novel, the Gilead regime crumbles and the masculine and feminine spheres begin their slow approach towards each other and a more functional society.

Inherent in each of the novels is the idea that social success or failure is to a large degree dependent upon the integration or segregation of masculine and feminine traits. Gilman and Atwood—whether unconsciously or not--use the cult virtues as a foundation for didactic admonitions regarding the strict separation of the masculine and feminine spheres. Inherent in both novels is also the idea that in order for a society to succeed, the masculine and feminine spheres must be integrated. Within each of these fictional societies the sexes are delineated into two rigidly separated feminine and masculine spheres of social existence. As is depicted in *The Handmaid's Tale*, the further apart

these spheres with their closely imprisoned traits are positioned from one another, the more dysfunctional the society becomes. On the other hand, the closer the two spheres come to merging, as feminine and masculine traits are intermingled, the more successful and healthy the society will become, as presented in *Herland*. Within Gilman's utopian society, the cult virtues, piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity are subverted in order to create an intermingling of masculinity and femininity, while Atwood magnifies these same virtues in order to create a rigid separation of masculinity and femininity in her dystopian society. Both novels work to prove that the distance between the masculine and feminine spheres is directly proportional to the success or failure of the society.

*. . . we appeal to woman, in whose heart every enterprise for human good is sure to find a warm and powerful advocate. . . When we describe to her a state of higher mental and moral culture, and of course accompanying it a great refinement of manners and correctness of deportment, she welcomes the prospect as a state of things where her gentle virtues will be best appreciated, and the sphere in which she moves be most replete with honor, happiness, and contentment. We do not flatter her when we remind her how much influence she has in forming the taste and directing the pursuits of the other sex, how far the hope of her favor determines the aspirations and the efforts of those who are forming characters for life. . . there is nothing more congenial than her retired and quiet occupations, no better solace for her solitary hours, no better resource against ennui and depression, nothing which so prepares her to adorn and enjoy society, nothing, except piety. . . .*

*-- On the Sphere and Duties of a Woman, 1852*

*For a young girl's hand these two things are proper, a prayer-book and a spindle.*

*-- "Education of the Female Sex," 1863*

## I.

### PIETY

One of the most widely emphasized character traits found in the teachings of the cult of domesticity was piety. To the cult of true womanhood, having piety meant much more than a devotion to one's religion. In order to be truly feminine, a woman was expected to embody perfectly a prescribed version of piety, bearing upon her shoulders the responsibility of an idealized and unrealistically bountiful example of spiritual devotion to religion, family, and ultimately country. As McIntosh contends in her 1850 work *Woman in America: Her Work and Her Reward*, "to American women, we must look to rectify the errors of American society, and that from them we may hope to derive . . . a life nobler, more spiritual, more in conformity with Christian principles than any the world has seen" (71). Much more than merely a strong devotion to religion, piety, in context of the cult's teachings, meant an unwavering and unquestioning faith involving

total surrender to religious expectations that were expected--hypocritically if need be—to be followed. Women's social obligations as moral policeman were often enforced by manipulated Biblical texts; likewise the restriction to the home was emphasized using “divine law” as fortification for such social alterations.

More than merely a strong devotion to religion, piety, in the context of cult teachings often involved encouragement of a woman's spiritual devotion as a means of social control. A woman's devotion to religion was often used as a device to keep her within her proper sphere of femininity; in turn, this devotion to spiritual matters was encouraged in order to keep the masculine and feminine spheres at a safe distance from one another. A woman who followed the ordinances of cult teachings and confined herself to the moral safety of the home had little opportunity to develop character traits belonging to the “opposing” sphere. A pious woman would be less likely to stray from the teachings of the cult if those teachings were introduced in conjunction with religious doctrine or divine inspiration. In her essay entitled “Charlotte Perkins Gilman—As I Knew Her” Harriet Howe explains the connection between religion and social control during Gilman's lifetime: “Women are taught . . . to feel that their present status is right, natural, and good. Religion has had much to do with this condition. But religions are all made by men. And since religion is paradoxically a fighting word, no religion can be criticized” (74). By keeping religion and cult teachings closely intertwined, women were subtly encouraged to equate cult teachings with church doctrine and thus keep to their “god-given sphere.” Kathryn Kish Sklar further explains the spiritual expectations of the cult of true womanhood in her biography of a famous cult teacher, *Catherine Beecher*: “If women would agree to limit their participation in the society as a whole . . . then they

could ascend to total hegemony over the domestic sphere” (113). Religion became the very means of imprisoning women within a prescribed sphere of femininity. Many women confusedly disagreed; however, the only other choice presented to them involved the forbidden masculine sphere. As Polly Wynn Allen contends in her book *Building Domestic Liberty*, “a substantial number of . . . American women were disinclined to swallow pious platitudes calling for their demure detention in radically transformed domestic spheres” (17). Perhaps they were disinclined to listen to calls for this idealistic piety, but because 1800s society was so steeped in the teachings of the cult, for most women there was no other conceivable way of life. Women learned automatically to distance themselves from anything branded unfeminine. These women were subtly conditioned to believe that to dispute the teachings of the cult meant arguing with “divine revelation.”

According to the teachings of the cult of domesticity, a woman must devote herself to religion in order to prepare herself for her role as wife and mother; inversely, a man must devote himself to the workings of the world in order to develop his role as husband and father. Polly Wynn Allen explains the devices used to keep these women of the first half of the nineteenth century in check: “Articulated in sermons, religious tracts, women’s magazines, housekeeping manuals, and novels, [the cult ideology] addressed the anxiety and guilt aroused by the culture’s increasing preoccupation with material gain. It soothed the collective conscience by designating woman as the homebound representative of such traditional values as spirituality, interpersonal warmth, and home-centeredness” (15). More importantly, a pious lifestyle kept a woman busy and somehow gave her a sense of purpose and control. Welter explains that religion was “a kind of

tranquilizer for the many undefined longings which swept even the most pious young girl, and about which it was better to pray than think” (153). A woman anesthetized with religious teachings directed little attention to other morally dangerous pursuits such as literature, philosophy, and politics. With religion as a prime mediator, the feminine and masculine spheres were kept—at least according to cult teachings—at a safe and healthy distance from one another.

This distancing of the masculine and feminine spheres is challenged in Gilman’s *Herland* as well as in Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Although the cult’s version of piety is incorporated into each novel, Gilman undermines it in order to create a utopian society while Atwood exaggerates piety in order to create her dystopian society. The Herlanders’ emphasis on piety as a means for social growth and freedom of self-expression differs greatly from the piety of Gilead with its undercurrents of social control and forced hypocrisy. Thus, each author focuses on an altered version of piety in order to challenge the separation of masculine and feminine spheres.

In Gilman’s society, although the Herlanders’ equation of religion with patriotism is reminiscent of the “true woman’s” equation of cult teachings with church doctrine, Gilman subverts any manipulative aspect that might accompany this teaching in order to support social growth through the integration of the masculine and feminine spheres rather than to promote social control. The distance between the two spheres has a large effect on the social success of the society. It is no accident that the masculine and feminine spheres are combined to create a utopia of social interaction. The absence of males is not what makes *Herland* so successful, but rather the absence of restrictive gender dichotomies. The piety of the Herlanders is devoid of any hidden agenda; it is a

truly genuine devotion to their way of life. To the Herlanders there is “Nothing else except the literal sisterhood of our origin, and the far higher and deeper union of our social growth” (Gilman 66). Herland lacks the control factor that is so fundamental to Atwood’s dysfunctional Republic of Gilead. It is obvious that a major concern of both Herland and Gilead is the perpetuation of the race; however, Gilman creates a society that is more concerned with the perpetuation of a strong, educated race than a socially controlled environment for that race. Gilman uses the sociologist Van, one of the three explorers to stumble upon Herland, to narrate her novel in the first person. The reader is privy not only to Van’s blatant sexism early in the novel, but more importantly to the slow evolution of this character’s experiences towards his personal understanding of the need to interconnect masculine and feminine spheres. In regards to the initial coordination of masculinity and femininity by the Herlanders, Van notes that when they “suffered the loss of everything masculine, they supposed at first that all human power and safety had gone too. Then they developed this virgin birth capacity. Then, since the prosperity of their children depended on it, the fullest and subtlest coordination began to be practiced” (Gilman 69). In order to survive as a society, the Herlanders had to teach a learned devotion to their country that would eventually become the central focus of their religion—motherhood.

Gilman uses piety as the cornerstone of her utopian society; however, the religious devotion that the Herlanders foster is for the sake of communal social growth rather than autocratic social control. Zava tells Terry that “Every step of our advance is always considered—in its effects on them—on the race” (Gilman 66). Moadine explains the basis for their national piety: “we have . . . nothing else except the literal sisterhood

of our origin, and the far higher and deeper union of our social growth” (Gilman 66). This concept differs greatly from that of the Gileadean regime. The Herlanders encourage a true social camaraderie, which eventually takes its natural course towards religious and social devotion rather than those in power forcing the women to feign devotion as is practiced in the Gilead regime. Van further explains this concept: “they were sisters, and as they grew, they grew together . . . by united action” (Gilman 60). Although their relationship is described as a sisterhood, it is based on the inclusion of the female inhabitants of Herland—which happen to be all women. It is not based upon an exclusion of men for when the men arrive they are welcomed into this “sisterhood” with open arms. Although the Herlanders are curious about the interactions of the men’s bisexual world, they do not separate the men into a different masculine sphere since they themselves share many of those masculine traits with the men.

In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Atwood creates a perverted imitation of “esprit de corps” as a means for social control rather than social growth. Aunt Lydia explains this false forced cooperation to her Handmaids, “What we are aiming for is a spirit of camaraderie among women. We must all pull together” (Atwood 222). Aunt Lydia’s words contradict largely the lives that the Handmaids are expected to live. They are instructed to “pull together” when they have already been alienated from the rest of society and thrown together as a result of their gender and their viable ovaries. Furthermore, they are prohibited from legally conversing with one another as a result of the mistrust that males of Gilead have for female to female relationships. Offred recalls her reuniting with Moira at the Center: “I must have been there three weeks when she came . . . I couldn’t talk to her for several days; we looked only, small glances, like sips.

Friendships were suspicious, we knew it, we avoided each other during the mealtime line-ups in the cafeteria and in the halls during classes” (Atwood 71). Since Aunt Lydia cannot possibly mean for the Handmaids to literally unite as a sisterhood, what she really implies that they should peacefully accept their fate and piously devote themselves to this new way of life. Although Aunt Lydia often includes herself in her own instruction with her use of the word “we,” the gulf of power that separates the Aunts from the Handmaids is more than evident. The irony of Aunt Lydia’s suggestion of “sisterhood” is heightened by the cattle prod that remains ever present in her hand.

Atwood also uses as the cornerstone of Gilead a distorted and exaggerated version of the cult’s concept of piety, emphasizing the use of religion as a means of social control rather than a means of growth in order to further separate masculine and feminine spheres from one another. Handmaids are often told that “the Republic of Gilead . . . knows no bounds. Gilead is within you” signifying a powerful connection between a heavenly kingdom and Gilead (Atwood 23). In her article “Is There No Balm in Gilead? Biblical Intertext in *The Handmaid’s Tale*” Dorota Filipczak discusses the inherent control factor, contending that it

possesses a remarkable rhetorical power. Its binary structure, with the second sentence enhancing the meaning of the first one, contains the pronouncement of total ideology that is not only present in the state’s mechanisms . . . but inside him or her, embedded in the unconscious.

There is no escape from Gilead no matter whether one is

outward or inward bound, for Gilead is an integral part of  
the self. (173)

The social problems initiated by the considerable distance between the spheres are explained away by the emphasis on the divine mandate regarding the separation of the spheres. It is no accident that the separation of the masculine and feminine spheres is taken to its logical ends in order to create the dysfunctional society of Gilead. In her essay, Filipczak discusses the removal of women's right by using manipulated Biblical text as justification or, as she puts it "the demonic misrepresentation of the Judaic-Christian religion" (171). Filipczak further contends that Atwood "uses the possibilities of distortion to the full, thereby pointing to the dangers lurking in the institutionalization of the sacred text" (171). Even more frightening is the complete restriction of women from reading those texts used as the justification for their imprisonment. As Ann Kaler notes in her article "A Sister Dipped in Blood": "Offred's personal rights are steadily eroded--her bank account, her right to read, her job, her husband, her child, and finally her sense of identity when her name is swept away by the depersonalizing techniques of the dystopia" (46-7). Each time something is taken from her, in order to remain socially acceptable, Offred was told to remain patient, faithful, and silent—to accept her fate piously. Offred is encouraged by her husband to stay home and wait in patient devotion: "I didn't go on any of the marches. Luke said it would be futile and I had to think about them, my family, him and her . . . I started doing more housework, more baking" (Atwood 180). She is slowly conditioned to remove herself from what was traditionally accepted as the "man's world" and withdraw into her "god-given" feminine domain. For

“to be a loving wife, a cheerful life companion, a diligent housewife, the guardian of her children, such is a woman’s vocation” (“Education” 90).

As an example of the dangers of religion as a means of social control, Atwood introduces the appalling Gileadean “salvagings,” in which the Handmaids are stirred into a frenzy of anger and then allowed to rip a man apart with their bare hands. The fact that the men of Gilead encourage—and even instigate—this behavior in “their” women only serves to widen the gap between the spheres. Truly, Atwood’s society is a perfect example of an “us” verses “them” psychological agenda. The horrific “participation” that takes place at the salvaging is used as a type of psychological reward for those women who have reached appropriate level of unquestioning acceptance and self-righteous piety. Aunt Lydia announces the participation as if it is a game for the Handmaidens to play, telling them to “wait until I blow the whistle” (Atwood 278). This act of violence represents a distinct further separation of the masculine and feminine spheres by not only restricting participation of this public demonstration of piety to women, but also by emphasizing the fact that the victim was a man who committed heinous crimes against women. Aunt Lydia tells the angry women: “‘This man . . . has been convicted of rape.’ Her voice trembles with rage and a kind of excitement . . . I might add that this crime involved two of you and took place at gunpoint. It was brutal. I will not offend your ears with any of the details, except to say that one woman was pregnant and the baby died” (Atwood 279). The women are goaded into self-righteous rage. During the carnage that follows they are “permitted anything” (Atwood 278). Offred recalls the Aunt’s demeanor, “She smiles down upon us, generous, munificent. She is about to give us something. *Bestow* . . . ‘You know the rules for a Participation,’ Aunt Lydia says, ‘You

will wait until I blow the whistle. After that, what you do is up to you, until I blow the whistle again” (Atwood 278). Piety once again serves its purpose of social control when the women do not stop to question whether the man is innocent or guilty but—like automatons—they literally tear the man limb from limb.

Only the truly pious--the Handmaids who have surrendered completely to the lies and fabrications that have been presented to them—can take satisfaction in the horrific salvagings that occur as a result of self-righteous anger. Because Offred does not completely rise to the level of blind faith necessary to fully participate in a salvaging, she is left horrified and disgusted at her partial participation in the salvaging. After the initial shock of the particicution she thinks, “I am beginning to feel again: shock, outrage, nausea. Barbarism” (Atwood 280). The character Professor James Darcy Pieixoto in the “Historical Notes” portion of Atwood’s novel explains the social control involved in the salvagings:

the Particicution ceremony. . . was not only a particularly horrifying and effective way of ridding yourself of subversive elements but. . . it also acted as a steam valve for the female elements in Gilead. . . it must have been most gratifying for these Handmaids, so rigidly controlled at other times, to be able to tear a man apart with their bare hands every once in a while. As the architects of Gilead knew, to institute an effective totalitarian system or indeed any system at all, you must offer some benefits and

freedoms, at least to a privileged few, in return for those  
you remove. (Atwood 308)

The salvagings, with their grisly executions, serve as yet another example of the consequences of unquestioning devotion as a means of social control. Just as it is essential that the Wives be given scarves to knit, gardens to oversee, and Handmaids to abuse, it becomes necessary to allow the Handmaids, for just a moment, to feel as if they too control something. As Offred herself mistakenly avows during the Particicution, “this is freedom” (Atwood 278).

While Atwood relies on shocking exaggeration of cult teachings to exemplify the dangers of religious devotion as a means of social control, Gilman undermines the cult teachings by presenting them in conjunction with an obviously contradictory reality. Gilman uses her three male explorers—with their constant spouting of the views on femininity of the period—to exhibit the powerful impact that the teachings of the cult had on modern society. The intermingling of masculine and feminine spheres, which has vehemently been held as a foolish and imprudent way to conduct a society happens quite naturally and successfully before the explorers eyes! The women of Herland take on traditionally masculine traits such as independence and logical reasoning in addition to their “feminine” traits, and as Van compares his social structure with that of the Herlanders:

We have two life cycles: the man's and the woman's. To  
the man there is growth, struggle, conquest, the  
establishment of his family, and as much further success in  
gain or ambition as he can achieve. To the woman, growth,

the securing of a husband, the subordinate activities of family life, and afterwards such “social” or charitable interests as her position allows. Here was but one cycle, and that a large one. (Gilman 101)

Van explains the difference between the piety of the women of Herland and that of the women of his own country: “All the surrounding devotion our women have put into their private families, these women put into their country and race. All the loyalty and service men expect of wives, they gave, not singly to men, but collectively to one another” (Gilman 95). This “loyalty and service” that the Herlanders give to each other is not done out of “feminine duty” but rather out of choice. The piety that the explorers encounter in the Herlanders is bewildering because it comes in the form of genuine devotion to motherhood and country rather than a piety that is used to keep women in her role as spiritual guardian. The Herlanders are not expected to morally “police” anyone but themselves. The male characters’ musings about an all-female land outlines a “true woman’s” characteristics, but those stereotypes are immediately dispelled with the presentation of the contradictory truth about Herland:

“They would fight among themselves,” Terry insisted.

“Women always do. We mustn’t look to find any sort of order and organization.”

“You’re dead wrong,” Jeff told him. “It will be like a nunnery under an abbess . . .”

I snorted with derision at this idea.

“Nuns, indeed! Your peaceful sisterhoods were all celibate,  
 Jeff, and under vows of obedience. These are just women,  
 and mothers, and where there’s motherhood you don’t find  
 sisterhood—not much.” (Gilman 8)

The men imply that vows and strict rules must enforce piety in order to construct a “true” woman. Any woman who deviates from this norm is “just” a woman—to them much less than the ideal woman. The genuine piety they encountered in the women of Herland is a far cry from what they have expected.

A further element of piety in cult teachings involved the pressure to be the moral policeman of family and ultimately society in order to keep a woman confined to her sphere of feminine traits. Cult teachings were given credibility by being used in conjunction with oftentimes vague Biblical references: “Around the nursing mother God and nature have thrown a hallowed seclusion. Society has framed her laws and usages in obedience to the Divine and physical ordinance. Every attempt to break through them, therefore, must be pronounced as unnatural as it is irreligious and profane” (“Editor’s” 44). As Welter notes, “If religion was so vital to a woman, irreligion was almost too awful to contemplate” she continues, remarking “One gentleman, writing on ‘Female Irreligion’ reminded his readers that ‘Man may make himself a brute, and does so very often, but can woman brutify herself to this level—the lowest level of human nature—without exerting special wonder” (qtd. in Welter 154). At a later point in his essay the anonymous 1840 writer righteously contended that “‘*female* irreligion is the most revolting feature in human character’” (qtd. in Welter 154 emphasis added). To be

pronounced irreligious resulted in the stripping away of that badge of “true” womanhood that cult followers so coveted.

Avoiding being considered irreligious oftentimes meant the acceptance of hypocrisy in order to conform and thus survive as a socially acceptable true woman. According to the teachings of the cult, the example woman—a “true” woman--never complained about her inferior role in society; in fact, rather than questioning social expectations that seemed unfair, she was encouraged to act as if she freely chose to follow these “feminine rules” until she became more comfortable with them. In her essay “Charlotte Perkins Gilman: A Feminist’s Struggle with Womanhood,” Mary Hill discusses the hypocrisy forced upon Victorian women during Gilman’s lifetime: “a significant factor leading to ‘artificial’ femininity . . . was that ‘there was no faintest possibility of choice . . .’” (40). The artificial femininity was to be a woman’s key to social acceptance as a “true” woman, and she was encouraged to present constantly an outwardly pious and devout demeanor, carefully hiding any inward disagreement so as not to bring shame upon her head. She slowly accustomed herself to her duty to limit herself to those character traits traditionally accepted as feminine as well as to steer herself away from those traits commonly accepted as masculine. This gradual acceptance perpetuated the further separation of the masculine and feminine spheres.

Gilman subverts the cult’s emphasis on hypocrisy as a means of social conformity and emphasizes the genuine devotion to religion and country achieved by freedom of self-expression through unrestricted education rather than forced submission. The religion of Herland is not used as a vehicle for proving their devotion, but rather it is used as yet another learning tool to develop love for one’s country and thus one’s religion. The

Herlanders do not assume false feminine identities in order that they be deemed socially acceptable. They are genuinely devoted to their way of life, rather than to a particular sphere of human characteristics. Van explains the basis for their genuine devotion:

“They loved each other with a practically universal affection . . . broadening to a devotion to their country and people for which our word *patriotism* is no definition at all” (Gilman 94). Although the women of Herland are encouraged to nurture their devotion to their religion, the piety that they learn to express is quite genuine. Playing the hypocrite in order to survive at a social level is not necessary since all people are considered to be always growing in knowledge. Because they represent the complete integration of masculine and feminine spheres, the Herlanders devote themselves to their religion only after they have grasped a complete understanding of the laws—both spiritual and physical—which govern them. They are not restricted to a particular sphere of character traits and as a result are not prohibited from any aspect of their society. They can freely learn devotion without “faking” it to be deemed socially acceptable. Gilman emphasizes the idea that devotion to one’s country comes from the Herlanders’ belief that it belongs to them rather than their being owned by it. This idea differs greatly from the experience of women of the 1800s. It was considered their duty to raise sons to run the country; however, they themselves had no direct political connection with their country’s workings. Rev. Geo. H. Johnston emphasizes this pressure against direct contact with the political world: “Outside of domestic life in its broadest and best sense, woman has no history, her life no meaning . . . desiring to reach the public ear and to move the public heart, she does it most effectually in the life she leads, and in the principles she instills in those around her. Does she want to vote? She votes through the “boys” and through her

father. After she attains to her majority, she votes through her husband, and is perfectly satisfied with such an organ as that" (196-7).

Gilman modifies the idea of duty to country in such a way that the Herlanders do not speak of their duty, but rather their pride in the active role that they play in the management of their country. This role is yet another example of Gilman's integration of the masculine and feminine spheres. They love their country not as a duty but "because it was their nursery, playground, and workshop . . . they were proud of it . . . but most of all they valued it" (Gilman 94). The Herlanders devote themselves with genuine piety to their country because they are educated in and thus are proud of the part that they play in its perpetuation. Their education does not consist of brainwashing or mental "force-feeding" as is inherent in many of the cult's beliefs; rather, the people of Herland are allowed to educate and be educated without the pressure of social conformity. For the women of Herland, "life to them was growth, and their pleasure was in growing, and their duty also" (Gilman 102). The Herlanders who do not conform are not punished for their opposing views. Instead those who "had real weakness or fault" are "treated with cheerful allowance" and given more educational space in which to find their way back to the communal "truth" (Gilman 102).

Gilman modifies the cult's emphasis on conformity by accentuating the benefits of unregulated physical congruity in order that she may better focus on the Herlanders' freedom from the pressure of forced social conformity. Gilman goes so far as to emphasize physical conformity in an attempt to remove the natural focus that the society of her time made—as the American men prove time and time again—on social conformity. This is yet another example of Gilman's subversion of the cult's teachings by

modification rather than outright challenging them. Mary Hill discusses Gilman's theories: "she . . . emphasized not female powerlessness, but woman's natural passivity; not artificially imposed dependence, but an innate desire to love and serve; not cowardice, but peacefulness and cooperation; not the oppressive restrictions of motherhood roles, but the glories of mother love. . ." (45). Gilman creates a species of women who dress alike, speak alike, are even in their parthenogenesis striving toward physical conformity. At the same time, she creates spiritual and mental individualism in the Herlanders that parallels the type of non-conformity that she so fought for as a feminist in the nineteenth century. Thus, the Herlanders are exempt from the social struggle with which Gilman herself as writer, mother, wife, and feminist was so concerned.

In Atwood's novel, the cult's version of piety appears at a level of not only forced, but *enforced* hypocrisy in a society in which the Handmaids must constantly present an exterior façade not only to maintain social acceptability, but also simply in order to remain alive. At the salvaging, Offred must "touch the rope in front of me, in time with the others, both hands on it. . . then place my hand on my heart" in order to "show my unity with the Salvagers and my consent, and my complicity in the death of this woman" (Atwood 276). Offred obeys despite the fact that she is not even given any reason for the woman's death. She pretends to agree because she simply has no other viable choice. Aunt Lydia urges her "girls" to feign piety until it becomes more natural: "This may not seem ordinary to you now, but after a time it will. It will become ordinary" (Atwood 33). The women are slowly conditioned to believe that they are freely following the laws of Gilead when, in fact, they have no choice. In his article

“Back to the Future: Margaret Atwood’s Anti-Utopian Vision in *The Handmaid’s Tale*,” Reingard M. Nischik notes “Atwood picks out the role of religion and the relationship between the sexes to show the way general, political power structures work as systems and the potential dangers they imply for the individual if the ideology behind them is made absolute” (144). The “absoluteness” of the laws presented to the Handmaids makes it necessary for them to choose between rebelling openly (and becoming an “Unwoman”) or feigning acceptance and faith and remaining an acceptable woman. When asked by the Japanese tourists how she feels about her lifestyle, Offred answers that she is “very happy” despite the fact that she is in internal anguish at her memories. The “smell of nail polish” makes her “hungry” for the liberation that she once enjoyed and she thinks painfully: “I used to dress like that. That was freedom” (Atwood 28). Offred is compelled to lie to them because, she reasons fearfully, “sometimes it is dangerous not to speak . . . I have to say something. What else can I say?” (Atwood 29). Not only must Offred resign herself to a life of piety, but also she must feign strong devotion to the life that she lives. Offred becomes a forced hypocrite.

False devotion to the Gilead regime is not limited solely to Handmaids. In Serena Joy, Atwood creates yet another perfect example of the hypocrisy to which the women of Gilead must adhere in order to be deemed a socially acceptable woman. Serena endorses the separation of masculine and feminine spheres, while she herself is loath to adhere to them. As a free woman, Serena Joy was a television evangelist, gospel singer, and traveling lecturer on “the sanctity of the home, about how women should stay home” (Atwood 45). As a free woman, she was also more than happy to endorse Gileadean standards—as long as she herself did not have to follow them. The fact that Serena

herself does not adhere to her own advice concerning a “woman’s place” is explained away as “a sacrifice for the good of all” (Atwood 45). Eventually, in order to earn the status of a Commander’s Wife, she will be forced to stay home and nurture the feminine traits that she herself has long endorsed. As a Commander’s Wife Serena is forced to practice what she has been preaching for so many years. Offred remarks: “[Serena] doesn’t make speeches anymore. She has become speechless. She stays in her home, but it doesn’t seem to agree with her. How furious she must be, now that she’s been taken at her word” (Atwood 46). As the wife of a Commander, Serena Joy represents the pinnacle of social hypocrisy for she literally can go no higher in the Gileadean hierarchy. Serena tells Offred “‘Til death do us part. It’s final . . . It’s one of the things we fought for” (Atwood 16). She is safe as long as she continues to exhibit outward devotion to the Republic of Gilead—whether it is in earnest or not.

It is not enough that the women of Gilead are kept physically imprisoned in Gilead, unable to deviate from the pious lifestyle imposed upon them, but they must further imprison themselves by pretending that their piety is genuine. Offred’s pretenses at devotion must be convincing enough to save her from being labeled “Unwoman” and thus undesirable and mortally disposable. Her pretense at devotion puts further emphasis on the distance between the masculine and feminine spheres. Her outward devotion paradoxically proves to the men of Gilead that they have done right in segregating the two spheres and thus her prison life is perpetuated by her own actions. As a result, it is impossible to discern the follower from the survivor. The Handmaids become so adept at appearing pious that they are unable to tell who is acting the part of the hypocrite even among themselves and who is a true believer. During her walks with the first Ofglen,

Offred worries that “[Ofglen] may be a real believer, a Handmaid in more than name” (Atwood 19). Offred then compares Ofglen’s actions with her own: “I think her a woman, for whom every act is done for show, is acting rather than the real act. She does such things to look good . . . But that is what I must look to her, as well. How can it be otherwise?” (Atwood 31). Offred not only realizes that she is as guilty of the hypocrisy that she so despises in Ofglen, but that it is a necessary part of her role as a Handmaiden.

Gilman and Atwood both challenge those cult teachings which encouraged hypocrisy in a “true” woman in order that she may conform to society’s expectations of her and thus be deemed a feminine woman. This hypocrisy led to the slow conditioned separation of women from those traits that were not traditionally accepted as feminine. By constantly presenting an outwardly pious appearance, despite any doubts about the necessity of struggling to attain such idealized and rigidly controlled traits, a woman soon came to view herself in terms of those false ideologies. A “true” woman soon came to truly believe that:

her sex, her organization, naturally so sensitive to rude  
touch, her native sense of beautiful, and her sympathy with  
the sunshine and smile of infancy and child, disqualify her  
forever to move contentedly and happily in any other  
sphere than that which she has blessed with her presence  
and crowned with her virtues in the ages gone by.

(Johnston 186)

This artificial femininity—with its constant pressure to flee from those traits considered masculine and which if incorporated into her being would cancel out her femininity and

“strip her of her true glory” (Johnston 190) is either subverted or magnified in order to point to the danger of the separation of the masculine and feminine spheres. Gilman subverts piety so that she may create a species of human that--incorporating both masculinity and femininity into each person--forms the basis for a distinctly successful society focusing on piety as a means for social growth and freedom of self-expression through education. On the other hand, Atwood exaggerates piety, creating a society of functional human beings that--in their complete segregation of the masculine and feminine spheres--form a dysfunctional society that uses piety as a means of social control and forced hypocrisy.

*Although it is true that chastity is a law of universal obligation, it is not true that a man's guilt in violating it is as great as that of women, because the degree of guilt depends on the degree of temptation, which, in the case of men is very strong, both from temperament and circumstances, and in the case of women very weak. Men's passions are fierce and active; women's feeble and dormant. Moreover, the way in which the work of life has been divided makes men's exposure to temptation constant; women's, very rare. The race has, therefore, in forming its moral judgement on the quality of offences against sexual purity, always treated the man's guilt as less heinous than the women's. . . it does in the vast majority of cases work what, we believe, is in the course of heaven, as well as those of earth, recognized as substantial justice.*

--"Another Delicate Subject" 1870

*Many a boy is wrecked in his course, many a one stumbles and recovers himself; but a girl cannot retrace a false step as her brother can. For her, once to fall is ruin.*

--"The Sexes in College" 1870

## II.

### PURITY

Another important character trait central to the teachings of the cult of true womanhood was purity. The cult's ideas of purity meant much more than merely freedom from moral sin; rather, they encouraged a specific type of purity that demanded an unwavering sexual and social passivity, including an emphasis on presenting an outwardly asexual demeanor in order to be acceptably pure. Thus, a direct association was established by cult teachings between a woman's purity and her sexuality. Only women were expected to remain appropriately innocent and naive to sexual intercourse as well as to the workings of what was deemed the man's world. E.L. Godkin scornfully addresses, in his 1870 essay "Another Delicate Subject," the ridiculousness of assuming that male and female purity should be judged using the same guidelines. It is, according to Godkin, a large mistake "to treat female violation of the law as no worse than male

violations of it, and to disregard . . . the old and universal adage which lodges woman's honor in her purity" (148). "True" women were expected to retain their outwardly asexual image even after marriage when they were counted upon to begin their womanly duty to their husbands. Welter explains this contradiction involving the cult's teachings: "Purity considered as a moral imperative, set up a dilemma which was hard to resolve. Woman must preserve her virtue until marriage and marriage was necessary for her happiness. Yet marriage was literally an end to innocence. She was told not to question this dilemma, but simply to accept it" (158). As Welter explains, to be pure meant essentially to be sexless unless called upon by her husband to do her duty in the bedroom. Thus, a true woman was faced with the struggle between maintaining an outwardly passively asexual appearance while still ready to be sexually responsive (albeit passively so) when greeted with her husband's sexual whims.

In order to keep the masculine and feminine spheres strictly segregated, according to the teachings of the cult of domesticity, a woman must retain the appearance of passive asexual purity in order to make proper use of her gender. Women were taught to pattern themselves after a contradictory ideal involving an asexual façade that, in turn, presented a challenge as well as an implied promise of inhibited sex. The female body with its implicit promise of sexuality must contradictorily be hidden to remain pure as well as be displayed to remain desirable. As Eliza Farrar asserts in her 1836 instruction manual on etiquette called *The Young Lady's Friend*, it is the woman's duty to go about "laying down rules": "If a [presumably male] finger is put out to touch a chain that is round your neck, or a breast-pin that you are wearing, draw back, and take it off for inspection. Accept not unnecessary assistance in putting on cloaks. . . let not your eagerness to see

anything induce you to place your head too close to another person's" (293). This aloof manner, Farrar further contends will "operate as an almost invisible, though very impenetrable fence" (294). A woman was allowed a certain amount of sexual power, but was told contradictorily that this power would only be obtained by sexual passivity and only within the confines of the marriage sacrament. She was told that her "pure" feminine traits meant power over men, only to be told that upon marriage her duty would be to relinquish that power completely and engage in proper sexual passivity in order to retain her power. Active sexuality was viewed as a traditionally masculine trait and thus frowned upon in women as unfeminine and detrimental to her femininity. Godkin informs us of the reason why men were held to considerably looser guidelines regarding purity:

Men's passions are fierce and active; women's feeble and dormant. Moreover, the way in which the work of life has been divided makes men's exposure to temptation constant; women's, very rare. The race has, therefore, in forming its moral judgement on the quality of offences against sexual purity, always treated the man's guilt as less heinous than the woman's. . . it does in the vast majority of cases what, we believe, is in the courts of heaven, as well as those of earth, recognized as substantial justice. (148)

Thus, woman's purity kept her safely restricted to her proper sphere of femininity; this resulted in the further separation of the masculine and feminine spheres.

The cult's paradoxical view of purity is subverted by Gilman in order to create her utopian society in which the masculine and feminine spheres intermingle, while Atwood exaggerates the cult's version of purity in order to demonstrate the dysfunction that occurs when the separation of the masculine and feminine spheres is taken to its logical ends. The Herlanders' modified purity, which is based on genuinely asexual passions and strong principles contrasts strongly with the exaggerated purity of Gilead, which involves a passive and asexual facade. Thus, the integration of the masculine and feminine spheres in Herland is directly related to the success of Gilman's society in much the same way that the extremity of the distance between these two spheres creates dysfunction in Atwood's society.

In Gilman's genuinely asexual society of Herland, Gilman subverts the cult's emphasis on a passive and asexual exterior in order to challenge the cult's rigidly controlled separation of masculine and feminine spheres. Gilman introduces a new perspective on purity with Ellador's explanation of her disinclination to have sex. She tells Van, "If I thought it was really right and necessary, I could perhaps bring myself to do it, for your sake, dear, but I do not want to—not at all. You would not have a mere submission, would you? That is not the kind of high romantic love you spoke of, surely?" (Gilman 129). Van does not answer her seemingly rhetorical question since he knows that deep down, that is exactly what he wants—what the men of his country have been conditioned to expect from women—an asexual façade that gives way at the man's whim. Ellador makes a conscious choice as to when she wants to have sex; this freewill choice in regards to sexuality is a trait that has hitherto been restricted to the masculine sphere. A pure woman does not think active sexual thoughts, rather—at least according

to cult teachings—she simply exists in an asexual state until she is called upon by her husband to do her duty. Ellador retains her purity not by denying the sex act or presenting an asexual front, but in refusing to compromise her own beliefs and actively informing him of her decision regarding sexual intercourse. Her refusal to have sex with her new husband falls outside of the cult's guidelines for femininity since, now that she is his wife, she should have sex with him when he wishes out of duty to him. The explorers are not accustomed to asexuality with no double standards or implicit meanings. In Herland, a vehement “no” to sexual intercourse means just that--since spontaneous regeneration presents no need for a woman to “do her duty” in order to procreate.

Gilman challenges the separation of masculine and feminine spheres by combining in the Herlanders an altered version of feminine asexual purity with the reasoning powers and active decisiveness of the traditionally opposing masculine sphere. In her work “Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* as Feminist Response to Male Quest Romance,” Aleta Cane contends that “Gilman sets no (male/female) binary oppositions in the minds of the enlightened Herlanders” (31). The explorers have been conditioned to view human beings in terms of these binary oppositions and thus think that women are only sexually desirable when they are pure which really means passive as opposed to incorporating a traditionally masculine dominance. The Herlanders see no need for non-procreational sex and, furthermore, do not enjoy it. As a result, they refuse to submit to their duty despite the fact that the husbands tell them that it is the unquestionable tradition of marriage. To the explorers it is a man's *right* to force his wife to have sex because she does not have the right as a woman to actively play a role in human sexuality. Active sexuality has been traditionally confined to the masculine sphere of

character traits. Van explains Terry's belief that his rape of Alima was justified because she was his wife: "There was a trial before the local Over Mother, and this woman, who did not enjoy being mastered, stated her case. In a court in our country he would have been held quite 'within his rights,' of course. But this was not our country; it was theirs" (Gilman 132). In Herland Terry is not "within his rights" in assuming that Alima's decision against having sex was irrelevant simply because she was his wife.

Using the character Terry and his stereotypical ideal of women, Gilman subverts the idea that only women who lack masculine characteristics such as dominance and who incorporate only traditional feminine characteristics such as passivity can be pure and thus a true woman. Terry is upset by this idea of a race of women who "were not pets . . . [or] servants" (Gilman 141) and is especially confused when the Herlanders' asexual exteriors do not give way to coy sexual double standards. Terry's masterful approach, which has always been "irresistible at home" now "irritated" the Herlanders (Gilman 86). His attempts to force them into his concept of ideal woman only results in their combating him even more: "His too intimate glances were vaguely resented, his compliments puzzled and annoyed. Sometimes a girl would flush, not with drooped eyelids and inviting timidity, but with anger and a quick lift of her head" (Gilman 86). Their conversations with him lead him further away from his goal of placing them in their appropriate passive role. The women of Herland are a threat to Terry since they have acquired the experience necessary to see through the hypocrisy and ulterior motives that lie under Terry's charming façade. He is unused to women who are not passively "timid, inexperienced, weak" and his repeated failures to make them so are what ultimately causes him to try as a last resort to force Alima into what he believes should be

her “duty” as his wife (Gilman 93). However, in an unbecoming display of her lack of passivity—at least in Terry’s eyes—Alima unpredictably resists: “‘She kicked me,’ confided the embittered prisoner. . . ‘I was doubled up with pain, of course, and she jumped on me and yelled for this old harpy [Moadine] and they had me trussed up in no time. . . of course a man’s helpless when you hit him like that. No woman with a shade of decency--’” (143). Her use of the traditional masculine qualities of physical strength, aggression, and independent reasoning mark her in Terry’s mind as far from a true woman.

Gilman further challenges the traditional teaching of the cult in depicting sex as a struggle for control between men and women. The Herlanders, with their genuine asexuality and lack of “feminine” passivity, bring this struggle to an abrupt halt. The women of Herland remain pure by actively refusing to corrupt or compromise their system of beliefs, instead utilizing a balancing of control with the male explorers. The men attempt to control them, but because their social ideologies are so completely different, the Herlanders are unable to relate to the sexual power struggle that the men attempt to undertake. However, by the end of the novel, Van and Jeff begin to incorporate many feminine traits “without losing their masculinity,” finally abolishing many of the “androcentric dichotomies” that they had hitherto held (Cane 35). Alima, Ellador, and Celis are convinced to “marry” the explorers, but with such a differing social background than that of the men, the Herlanders do not understand the passive role that they are expected to play as wives. The men explain the unquestioned tradition of a woman’s taking her husband’s name upon marriage as well as the control factors implicit in the tradition. “Terry, always irritating [Alima], said it was a sign of possession. ‘You

are going to be Mrs. Nicholson,' he said, 'Mrs. T.O. Nickolson. That shows everybody that you are my wife'" (Gilman 118). When given the reasons behind the tradition, the woman balk at yet another type of passivity expected of women:

"Do your women have no names before they are married?" Celis suddenly demanded.

"Why, yes," Jeff explained. "They have their father's names, that is."

"And what becomes of them?" asked Alima.

"They change them for their husbands', my dear," Terry answered her.

"Change them? Do the husbands then take the wives's 'maiden names'?"

"Oh, no," he laughed. "The man keeps his own and gives it to her too."

"Then she just loses hers and takes a new one—how unpleasant! We won't do that!" Alima said decisively.

(Gilman 118)

Gilman's didactic situation points to the wrestle for control as well as the assumption from the men that once married, the Herlanders will offer no resistance—slipping meekly into their dutiful role as pure and passive wife. This subversion of the ideological teaching of passivity and a woman's purity force the men to look at women as complete human beings rather than something to dominate. Furthermore, the explorers are forced to look beyond the cult's ideology regarding purity and accept traits not traditionally

considered feminine in women. This integration of masculine and feminine traits into one person is ultimately what makes Herland such a well-balanced society.

Rather than eradicating the sexual division as Gilman does, Atwood furthers the rigid separation of masculine and feminine spheres by magnifying the cult's idea of sexual passivity and emphasizing actively sexual or unpure women as socially unacceptable. In order to be deemed pure, the Handmaids are expected to remain outwardly asexual at all times. Their voluminous clothing with its bulky "yoke that extends over the breasts" and heavy headpieces that come complete with "red veil" (Atwood 65) is designed to conceal all indications that they are women. Kaler discusses the significance of Offred's clothing as a means of de-sexing the Handmaids: "The most visible sign of depersonalization in any community is a uniform style of clothing; the visible sign of nun's vocations is the set of blessed clothing . . . intended to preserve modesty and to conceal femininity . . ." (Kaler 50). In addition, their hair must be "long but covered" (Atwood 62), representing their hidden female bodies. Aunt Lydia discusses the unpure summertime habits of actively sexual women in Pre-Gilead period: "The spectacle women used to make of themselves. Oiling themselves like roast meat on a spit, and bare backs and shoulders, on the street, in public, and legs, not even stockings on them, no wonder those *things* used to happen . . . Such *things* do not happen to nice women" (Atwood 55). Aunt Lydia is referring to free and consensual sex, which was a concept that was "too distasteful or filthy or horrible to pass her lips" (Atwood 55). Within the confines of the Gilead regime, this type of consensual sexual relationship is considered an abomination to the purity of women. Aunt Lydia's reaction to her memories of women having consensual sex demonstrates this negative reaction to a

woman's sexual free will: "In the park, lying on blankets, men and women together sometimes, and at that she began to cry, standing up there in front of us, in full view . . ." (Atwood 55). Aunt Lydia's tears are for the Pre-Gileadean women's failure to "positively" exhibit purity and thus properly represent women.

In Atwood's dystopian society, the "pure" asexual exterior that is so emphasized in the teachings of the cult of domesticity is exaggerated in the women of Gilead in order to rigidly separate the masculine and feminine spheres. Atwood creates a society in which purity is equated with a false asexualness. The "Ceremony" of sex in Atwood's novel is done in such a way as to establish the "masculine" and feminine" sex roles. For the women, the sex act is a completely humbling and humiliating experience. A woman is not supposed to think or act in a sexual way—even *within* the confines of the marriage bed. Offred describes a Handmaid's experience with Gileadean sex: "It has nothing to do with passion or love or romance or any of those other notions we used to titillate ourselves with, at least for me, and certainly not for Serena" (Atwood 94). Each month Offred must lie on her back between the legs of Serena Joy as the Commander has sex with the Handmaiden "fully clothed except for the healthy white cotton underdrawers" (Atwood 93). Her upper torso is positioned with "arms raised; [Serena] holds my hands. . . This is supposed to signify that we are one flesh" (Atwood 94). This symbolic unifying of Wife with Handmaiden ironically serves to alienate them further from the active role sexual role in which the males participate as well as from one another. In her essay entitled "Constructing the Narrative of Women's Friendship: Margaret Atwood's Reflexive Fictions," Jane W. Brown notes: "The Wife herself is degraded, required to condone another, younger woman as a sexual partner for her husband, even to the point

of participating while her husband attempts to impregnate the Handmaid” (206). Women are conditioned to believe that they should take no active part in sex; rather they should maintain an outwardly asexual façade at all times in order to be deemed socially acceptable and “pure” women. The Commander, as a male, is also doing his duty, but is not under the same restrictions that the women of Gilead face. The Commander does not have it too terribly bad, for as Offred sarcastically notes, “But isn’t this everyone’s wet dream, two women at once?” (Atwood 94).

Atwood challenges the cult’s version of purity by taking the separation of the masculine and feminine spheres to its logical ends, placing emphasis on the idea that active sexuality should be restricted to only the masculine sphere of traits. Gileadean males are allowed to feel things like arousal, power, control, and lust; however, these traits are strictly separated from the feminine sphere because of their impure implications. Although Offred says that “arousal and orgasm” (Atwood 94) have been outlawed, what she really means is that they have been outlawed for women; she forgets that the Commander must accomplish both in order to “do his duty” (Atwood 95). Furthermore, although The Commander finds the Ceremony “impersonal” (Atwood 162), he still prefers this to the consensual sex of Pre Gilead. Offred recalls a conversation with her Commander:

The main problem was with the men. [he says] There was nothing for them anymore.

Nothing? I say. But they had--

There was nothing for them to do, he says.

They could make money, I say a little nastily. Right now I'm not afraid of him . . . This lack of fear is dangerous.

It's not enough, he says. It's too abstract. I mean there was nothing for them to do with women.

What do you mean? I say. What about all the Pornycorners, it was all over the place, they even had it motorized.

I'm not talking about sex, he says. That was part of it, the sex was too easy . . . You know what [men] were complaining about the most? Inability to feel . . .

Do they feel now? I say.

Yes, he says, looking at me. They do. (Atwood 210)

With the implementation of this “new and improved” sex act, the men of Gilead regain their ability to feel as if they are in control, which is, in essence, what the Commander admits was lacking in the time before Gilead. In “Subject Position as Victim-Position in *The Handmaid's Tale*,” Jamie Dopp contends that “the Gileadean revolution was motivated almost entirely by a desire to (re)oppress women” (50). According to the Commander, men were not searching merely for something to do, rather they were searching for something to do to women in particular. Once they discover that regulating women's sexual habits will fulfill their yearnings for power, then they are once again able to “feel” (Atwood 210) in control during sex. Double standards are incorporated into the concepts of rape, adultery, and polygamy in the Gileadean regime in order than men's

desires be adequately assuaged. Although the “official creed denies” women “truants” (for these are not paid prostitutes since the state has deemed it their “duty” to fulfil their roles) “their very existence” (Atwood 235), the Commander rationalizes “you can’t cheat Nature. . . Nature demands variety, for men. It stands to reason, it’s part of the procreational strategy. It’s Nature’s plan” (Atwood 237). Polygamy becomes acceptable in the hypocritical Gilead regime. In her essay “A Sister Dipped in Blood: Satiric Inversion of the Formation Techniques of Women Religious in *The Handmaid’s Tale*” Anne K. Kaler discusses this contradicting value system: “polygamy becomes righteous act and civil virtue . . . even when the patriarchy of Gilead dissolves all second marriages as adulterous” (45). Offred describes her sexual experience in terms of her passivity and his active role: “What he is fucking is lower part of my body. I do not say making love, because this is not what he is doing. Copulating too would be inaccurate, because it would imply two people and only one is involved” (Atwood 94). In this way, the bizarre sex act becomes a symbol of the total forfeiture of control for the women of Gilead, for, as Offred asks, “Which of us is it worse for, her or me?” (Atwood 95).

Sex in Gilead is also taken a step further by being equated with violence and perversity; this serves to reinforce the asexual facade that is forced upon the Handmaids as well as further separate the masculine and feminine spheres from one another. Within the teachings of the cult of domesticity, sex is proper only when done passively in context of the marriage bed. However, Atwood creates a society in which sex is never a good, pure thing. At best it is a “duty that must be done for our country” (Atwood 95). Although the Handmaids are told that what they do is condoned by God, it is interesting that the “color” assigned to them is traditionally—at least in Pre-Gileadean times—one

of harlots, prostitutes, and other sexually impure groups mentioned in the Bible. The Handmaids are often shown pornographic films so that they might be re-educated to believe that sex outside the Ceremony is frighteningly violent:

Women kneeling, sucking penises or guns, women tied up or chained or with dog collars around their necks, women hanging from trees or upside-down, naked, with their legs held apart, women being raped, beaten up, killed. Once we had to watch a women being slowly cut to pieces with garden shears, her stomach slit open and her intestines pulled out. (Atwood 118)

The Handmaids are deliberately never shown any consensual sexual images or any that depict what is considered to be the sexual norm during the Pre-Gilead era. They are encouraged to believe that deviation from the Gileadean norm concerning sex will always end in suffering. By telling the Handmaids that this type of behavior is only done by “Unwomen,” Aunt Lydia emphasizes the idea that anything involving sexual desire is unpure and unfeminine. The pornographic films selected for viewing present a violent parallel to Offred’s description of the Ceremony in which “only one person is involved” (Atwood 94). That “one person,” at least according to what the Handmaids are taught, is always the male, further separating the masculine and feminine spheres.

Atwood creates in the monthly “Ceremony” a forced passivity that is represented in the legal form of rape of the Handmaids as well as in the metaphorical rape of all of the women of Gilead. Offred is mistaken in her assumption that her monthly “fucking” (Atwood 94) is not rape. Her alternative to passive, asexual Handmaid is active

rebellion, which would mean “shipment to the infamous Colonies, a place composed of “portable populations used mainly as expendable toxic-cleanup squads,” (Atwood 308) and suicide. This choice between activity and passivity equates activity with death and passivity with survival. As helpless as a woman with a gun to her head, Offred instinctively “chooses” passivity over activity and, in turn, rape over death. Although technically, Offred is correct when she says that “there is nothing going on here that I haven’t signed up for” (Atwood 94), realistically she is never given the chance to say no, thus making her “Ceremony” experience a whitewashed form of rape. At the same time, Atwood points to the dangers of free passivity by showing the difference between passivity that has been forced and passivity by choice, such as her words “We lived, as usual, by ignoring” in relation to the “stories in the newspapers, corpses in ditches . . . but they were about other women, and the men who did such things. . .” (Atwood 56). When Offred could have made a difference, she chose to “ignore” the problems around her. Stephanie Hammer addresses this issue in her essay entitled “The World as It Will Be: Female Satire and the Technology of Power in *The Handmaid’s Tale*”:

On one hand, the very fact that Offred is not a revolutionary but an average, college-educated working mother makes her both recognizable and sympathetic to us. But at the same time Atwood turns our empathy for Offred against us, suggesting that her protagonist acts or fails to act based on a dangerous amalgamation of gender assumptions which have governed women’s behavior for

centuries and which have guaranteed their oppression by  
men. (44)

This experience is mirrored metaphorically in the experiences of all women of Gilead. They are never presented with a choice to live freely; rather they know that any rebellion is a choice for death. Their instinctual passivity—in order to live—results in the “choice” to be stripped of their freedom and raped with the brutally dehumanizing rules and regulations of the Gileadean regime.

In Atwood’s fantastic society, a struggle ensues between actively sexual and passively sexual women and their social acceptance as pure women; this serves to further delineate the strict separation of masculinity and femininity. Handmaids and illegal prostitutes alike are expected to have sex performed upon them, whether or not for procreation. In her essay “Maternity and the Ideology of Sexual Difference in *The Handmaid’s Tale*” Janet Montelaro contends that “According to the Aunts’ teachings which endorse the repression of a feminine erotics, men’s sexual advances toward women are considered ‘natural,’ but Handmaids are always expected to control the sexual overtures initiated by men” (234). Active sexuality of women is labeled unpure and unacceptable while the active sexuality of males is condoned. Moira *is* socially accepted in her position as prostitute in the underground brothel, since she is doing her sexual duty in much the same way that Offred does hers. It is a known fact among the Aunts and the underground “workers” that the brothels are organized and run by the Republic of Gilead. Moira subtly points to the fact that hers and Offred’s sexual duties are not so different when she explains that the revealing costume that she is wearing is “government issue” (Atwood 242) just like Offred’s clothes. Each woman is forced into what the

government deems is appropriate whether it be Moira's "black high heels" which she has "always hated" (Atwood 243) or Offred's "red shoes, flat-heeled to save the spine and not for dancing" (Atwood 8). However, Moira's active sexuality is not socially acceptable and she is labeled unpure as a result of it. The underground brothels are labeled "Jezebel's" because they are filled with women who are actively rebellious in all ways including sex. Moira describes their open sexual activity:

they said I was too dangerous to be allowed the privilege of returning to the Red Center. They said I would be a corrupting influence . . . So here I am. . . there's drink and drugs, if you want it. . . anyway, look at it this way: it's not so bad, there's lots of women around. Butch paradise, you might call it . . . Know what they call this place among themselves? Jezebel's" (Atwood 249).

Moira is Gilead's epitome of the unpure woman. Her being consensually sexual and actively rebellious—that is making decisions and having independent thoughts about sex—is looked upon as the mark of an "Unwoman." This is a concept with which the followers of the cult of domesticity would be more than familiar.

Thus, in *Herland* and in *The Handmaid's Tale*, the cult's impossibly idealistic version of purity which demanded both a sexual and social passivity that emphasized an outwardly asexual demeanor is either subverted or magnified in order to challenge the problematic segregation of the masculine and feminine spheres. In her alteration of purity, Gilman creates a culture in which the inhabitants integrate masculine and feminine spheres into each individual and develop a society based upon genuinely

asexual passions and strong principles. This view of character traits as human as opposed to either belonging to the sphere of masculinity or of femininity is directly related to the success of the society. Atwood also challenges the separation of masculine and feminine spheres by magnifying the cult's version of purity in her own fictional society in order to create an appallingly disastrous of human beings whose social foundation is based upon a passive and asexual facade. Thus, both authors create societies in which the success or failure of those societies is directly proportional to the distance between the masculine and feminine spheres.

*The real question is, whether it is right and expedient that one-half of the human race should pass through life in a state of forced subordination to the other half. If the best state of human society is that of being divided into two parts, one consisting of persons with a will and a substantive existence, the other of humble companions to these persons, attached, each of them to one, for the purpose of bringing up his children, and making his home pleasant to him. . . . When, however, we ask why the existence of one half the species should be merely ancillary to that of the other—why each woman should be a mere appendage to a man, allowed to have no interests of her own, that there may be nothing to compete in her mind with his interests and his pleasure; the only reason which can be given is, that men like it. It is agreeable to them that men should live for their own sake, women for the sake of men: and the qualities and conduct in subjects which are agreeable to their rulers, they succeed for a long time in making the subjects themselves consider as their appropriate virtues.*

--"The Subjugation of Women" 1869

*The purer the gold of a vessel, the more easily it is bent.*

--"Education of the Female Sex" 1863

### III.

#### SUBMISSIVENESS

Submissiveness was yet another widely emphasized virtue essential to the construct of the cult of true womanhood's teachings. Within the context of cult teachings, submissiveness meant much more than basic humility; rather it included an obedience that bordered on subservience. A properly submissive "true" woman had full knowledge of and was in meek agreement with her lower position in the hierarchical social ladder of the times. Furthermore, submissiveness was often emphasized to a point where a woman allowed herself to be viewed as an object or a piece of property to be used to fulfill her feminine duty of "self-sacrificing service to their families" (Hill 189). Thus women were often discussed in peripheral terms, being viewed as belonging to someone as in *his* mother or *my* wife and thus losing their capacity as human individuals.

A woman was dependent upon her husband in all things and, according to cult teachings--as an appropriate trade-off--she was expected to submit herself to his wishes. What often caused the perpetuation of this subservience was women's "lack of economic independence" as well as "their psychological dependence on men" (Hill 20). This made women, in many ways, literal slaves to the demands of the males in her life. As Hill contends "the wife is the actual bond-servant of her husband: no less so, as far as legal obligation goes, than slaves commonly so called. She vows lifelong obedience to him at the altar and is held to it through her life by law" (55). Not only were cult followers taught to allow themselves to be objectified, but they were also encouraged to practice self-objectification, submitting selflessly until they themselves become self-policing, holding that they were not really human beings, but rather a "vessel" for divine work, a civil angel, or a completely unrealistic and idealized version of themselves that they could never quite attain.

According to the teachings of the cult of true womanhood, a "true" woman understood that her body—her very gender—was an object with which she must barter. As the Rev. Jonathan F. Stearns contended in 1837, a woman's chastity—the eventual "gift" of her body to her husband was essentially all she had to offer: "Let her lay aside delicacy, and her influence over our sex is gone" (qtd. in Welter 157). Much more than a mere "respectful consideration" (McIntosh 80) of the opposite sex, a true woman was under the complete understanding that she was physically, emotionally, and intellectually inferior to men and thus must show this in her meek demeanor: "take this good advice: Be modest and speak little, adorn yourself not much, and do not look straight at him with bold eyes" ("Education" 87). Weaknesses were encouraged because they added to her

attractiveness and femininity. A woman was socially ostracized when she failed to effectively submit herself to males, while being lavishly praised as “feminine” and “truly” woman when she deferentially submitted. In his 1859 essay “Intellectual Culture of a Woman” Alexander Sands notes: “You will find it even a pleasant thing to yield to authority, sometimes when its exercise is in your opinion inexpedient” (328). In order to be a “true” woman, a cult follower was expected not only to allow herself to be objectified—possessed by males—but to practice self-objectification, viewing herself as “God’s gift and bestowal” (“Education” 87) to men. Thus, her duty of obedience resulted in the further segregation of the masculine and feminine spheres.

This much altered and highly idealized definition of submissiveness is incorporated by both Gilman and Atwood’s fictional societies. In *Herland*, Gilman modifies submissiveness, emphasizing human identity--women as human beings rather than serviceable objects—in order to create a utopian society in which the spheres of masculinity and femininity commingle. Atwood also incorporates the cult’s rendition of submissiveness in her own society; however, in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, submissiveness is exaggerated until it becomes synonymous with objectification. Thus, each author uses a reconstructed version of cult submissiveness in order to manipulate the distance between the masculine and feminine spheres and thus create socially successful or dysfunctional societies.

Gilman’s incorporation of an altered form of cult submissiveness in *Herland* involves a total departure from the cult’s view of a submissive woman; the explorers—with their traditional stereotypical view of the traits a true woman should possess—are Gilman’s vehicle for the delineation of the type of strictly “feminine” women that is

contrary to the Herlanders' social construct. The attempted objectification of the Herlanders by the male "outsiders," especially Terry, begins the moment that they meet. Terry describes the women in terms of luscious fruit to be devoured "Peaches . . . Peacherinos—apricot—nectarines! Whew!" (Gilman 15). His comments immediately make them into edible objects and also alludes to their evident gender, visible in the well fitting clothing which Van notices and describes as "the closest of tunics and kneebreeches" (Gilman 15). Terry immediately attempts to capture Alima as if she were an animal to be tamed or a prize to be won. He introduces himself to the women "laying his hand upon his chest—a fine chest he had too" (Gilman 15), expecting the women to shyly blush under his intimidating manliness. Instead, they laugh. He also assumes that Alima will respond with dull fascination to his "bait" (Gilman 16)—a faux piece of jewelry. Van narrates:

Terry's smile was irreproachable, but I did not like the look in his eyes—it was like a creature about to spring. I could already see it happen—the dropped necklace, the sudden clutching hand, the girl's sharp cry as he seized her and drew her in. But it didn't happen. She made a timid reach with her right hand for the gay swinging thing—he held it a little nearer—then, swift as light, she seized it from him with her left hand, and dropped on the instant to the bough below. (Gilman 17)

In her "Introduction to *Criticism on Charlotte Perkins Gilman*" Joanne Karpinski notes: "A central tenet of Gilman's theory of social organization was that since prehistoric times

women had been obligated to overstress their sexual allure in order to win sustenance and protection from males, who would not allow females to earn their living by more independent and productive means” (2). The men expect that, being women, the Herlanders will act submissively and meekly towards them in order to acknowledge their dominance. However, Alima does exactly the opposite, outsmarting Terry and immediately establishing the fact that these females are very different from the men’s ideal woman. Terry spends the remainder of the novel attempting to force the Herlanders to surrender to his own ideologies concerning a woman’s feminine traits of submissiveness and obedience.

In order to emphasize the idea that the success or failure of a society is directly related to the distance between the masculine and feminine spheres, Gilman places special emphasis simultaneously on the role that women are expected by the explorers to play and the role that the Herlanders play in actuality. As Van constantly points out, Jeff “idealizes women” (Gilman 9), creating them exactly in terms of the cult of domesticity. Jeff’s idea of a real woman includes a beautiful, frail, trusting, and completely helpless “clinging vine” (Gilman 21) —both intellectually and physically speaking. He has, according to Van, “rose-colored halos on his womenfolk” (Gilman 9). The men assume that these women will humbly enforce those feminine stereotypes that the explorers are so familiar with by meekly admitting to their subordination and their dependence upon the males. In her book *Women: The Longest Revolution*, Juliet Mitchell discusses this assumption that all women are dependent possessions: “the classical literature on the problem of woman’s condition is predominantly economist in emphasis, stressing her simple subordination to the institutions of private property. Her biological status

underpins both her weakness as a producer, in work relations, and her importance as a possession, in reproductive relations” (26). Jeff has been taught to believe that women are subordinate by nature as well as economic necessity—and that men must simply accept it and take care of them. Terry’s ideals are also based upon the same foundation as Jeff’s with an emphasis on women’s inability to remain submissive unless forced by a man to do so. He agrees with Jeff that a woman’s natural “feminine” traits should include meekness and obedience, but Terry finds these traits charming while Jeff seems more inclined to benevolently accept women’s differences as endearing feminine faults.

Gilman’s incorporation of masculine characteristics, along with their feminine characteristics, into the Herlanders’ characters shows—at least in the minds of the explorers—that these women do not know their proper “place.” This balance of character traits creates the perfect utopian society and is a clear example of Gilman’s admonition against the separation of feminine and masculine spheres. George Burnap addresses this need for submissiveness in his 1854 instruction manual for young ladies, *Sphere and Duties of Woman*, noting that a cult follower should understand that in return for the “wisdom, constancy, firmness, perseverance” that her husband supplied her, she was expected to “repay” her husband with her complete obedience in all things (47). Jeff’s transition to respecting and appreciating the women of Herland for their masculine traits as well as incorporating some of their feminine traits into his own character is much easier than Terry’s—who never actually accepts the idea that women can incorporate traditionally masculine and feminine traits and still be women. Van explains the thinking behind Terry’s sexual and social expectation of women:

Women have killed themselves rather than to submit to outrage; they have killed the outrager; they have escaped; or they have submitted—sometimes seeming to get on very well with the victor afterward. There was that adventure of “false Sextus,” for instance, who “found Lucrease combing the fleece under the midnight lamp.” He threatened, as I remember, that if she did not submit he would “slay her”. . . but the point is Lucrease submitted and Alima didn’t.

(Gilman 143)

The Herlanders do not react in any of these extremely passive and stereotypical ways when Terry rapes Alima, instead they rise up quite actively--as well as quite reasonably--and expel Terry from Herland, using intellectual reasoning, decisiveness, and dominance that—the cult would argue— should only be exhibited by men since they come from the masculine sphere of traits. Terry believes that if Alima were initially forced to submit, she would come to understand her role as a woman and eventually accept being mastered.

Gilman was all too familiar with this concept of the dichotomy of dominance and submissiveness that applied to masculine and feminine spheres of character traits. In her first husband’s diaries lie “a dramatic illustration of the destructiveness of nineteenth-century gender norms”:

“My love for her has conquered,” Walter proudly noted in the early years of courtship. She no longer has “the daring and independent manner of the Charlotte that I first knew.” She is “more like what is best in other women—thoughtful,

bland, gracious, humble, dependent.” “[S]he is as dough to the kneader or clay to the potter, to be fashioned as her lover wills.” “O, how that spirit is broken. The false pride is melting before love rapidly.” “She wants to be treated more as a child now than a woman.” (qtd. in Hill 18)

Walter Stetson’s words are echoed in the actions of the character Terry. In Terry’s eyes, he is simply fulfilling his masculine role as master; his wrong is not the attempted rape, but rather his failure to consummate his domination and her failure to submit. The Herlanders become to him “Sexless, epicene, un-developed neuters!” (Gilman 142). Terry proves to himself that once and for all these Herlanders, lacking submissiveness and obedience can never be true women.

According to the male explorers’ estimation, women left to rule themselves will end up naturally at either extreme—either ideally submissive true women or completely rebellious unwomen in need of mastering. According to cult teachings, it was ludicrous to allow women social or intellectual freedom since this would develop in them many masculine traits that would, in turn, mask their femininity. And as Rev. George Johnston contends “Take away what is feminine in women, and you strip her of her true glory” (Johnston 190). According to A.F. Allen, writing in 1870:

Nobody expects girls to have the same freedom as boys. . .  
 They are of necessity subjected to rules and hours from  
 which boys may safely be free; and this circumstance,  
 while it shows the futility of expecting a real and genuine  
 equality of the two sexes. . . has also this evil effect, that

the girls who are promised quality of treatment, and expect  
 it. . . chafe against restraints which they would not mind if  
 they were by themselves. . . (146)

The explorers' expectations of the Herlanders are extremely disproportionate in terms of submissiveness, for either Herland is supposed to be "like a nunnery" with the women under "vows of obedience" or "it will be awfully primitive" with the women constantly "fighting among themselves" (Gilman 8). Jeff's comparison of the women of Herland to nuns conjures up images of cloistered submission and utter selflessness, while Terry's speculations focus on rebellious freedom and primitivism that comes from a total lack of male domination. In either case, they are making the assumption that women's actions somehow revolve around men's expectations of them. Van tells his companions that: "women of that stage of culture are quite able to defend themselves . . ." (Gilman 8). This is said as if to imply that the higher the cultural "stage" for women, the more fragile and vulnerable they become. This assumption is actually true in his own experience since the women of the explorers' completely "civilized" country have no ability to protect themselves because they have been stripped of their independence and forced to rely on men completely. The explorers initially assume that the men keep the women for sexual purposes. The men, of course, own the beautiful women in order that they remain safe and protected. Terry describes Herland as "some kind of matriarchate where [the men] may live up in the mountains yonder and *keep* the women in this part of the country—a sort of national harem" (Gilman 13; emphasis added). Terry's use of the word *keep* signifies that the women would be the property of the men.

The women of Herland are truly free from preconceptions about men and have not been conditioned to allow themselves to be viewed as objects for the good of their country, nor have they been taught to objectify themselves in order to prove that they are properly submissive women. In Herland, Gilman emphasizes that there is no concept of masculine or feminine traits as a result of the absence of a “bisexual” society; however, when the men arrive and it becomes bisexual, the women do not revert to what the cult describes as “natural” virtues. Instead, the explorers’ attempts to force them into submission are met with confusion. In “‘Making a Change’: Strategies of Subversion in Gilman’s Journalism and Short Fiction,” Shelley Fisher Fishkin discusses Gilman’s emphasis on the changing of roles for both males and females of her time: “Whether reassuring women that they are up to all that men can achieve, or castigating women for not allowing the achievement of each to reflect well on all, Gilman keeps her eye on the ball: the game is reclaiming human endeavor for males *and* females alike” (239; emphasis added). Van explains their complete lack of social conditioning and thus the reason for the Herlanders’ failure to succumb to Terry’s advances: “when Terry said Sex, sex with a very large S, he meant the male sex, naturally; its special values, its profound conviction of being ‘the life force,’ its cheerful ignoring of the true life process, and its interpretation of the other sex solely from its own point of view” (Gilman 134). Terry’s inability to see the Herlanders as anything other than objects to desire and control creates an unfailing obstruction to any relationship with the Herlanders. In Alima he finds friendship, but his socially conditioned need to master—both emotionally and sexually—makes it impossible for the relationship to progress properly. The fact that

Alima “never gave an inch” (Gilman 87) creates in Terry an even stronger desire to force her into the role of submissive wife.

Because the Herlanders have a society of human beings whose traits have not been divided into *either* masculine *or* feminine, they do not view a character trait such as submissiveness in terms of belonging only to women. Terry’s attempt to force Alima to do her “sexual duty” by means of rape is his last effort to put her in “her place.” As Cane notes, “Terry . . . is the man who never evolves. Thus, the rape of Alima must be seen, simply as the most egregious example of his inability to assimilate into what Gilman views as a more highly evolved culture” (29). His rape is not done out of sexual frustration, as Van sympathetically assumes, but rather as a deliberate means of control. He tells his comrades shortly before the rape “There never was a woman yet that did not enjoy being *mastered*... I *know*” (Gilman 131). Van himself remarks that “To hear him rage you’d not have believed that he loved Alima at all—you’d have thought that she was some quarry he was pursuing, something to catch and conquer” (Gilman 131). What Terry wants more than anything is for Alima to accede to the idea that she is inferior to him—that he is, in fact, her master. Terry finds in Alima, as well as in all of the women of Herland, an uncomfortably intimidating masculinity that the women of the explorer’s land have been taught to destroy within themselves. In her essay “The Ideal Woman in Two Feminist Science-Fiction Utopias” Margaret Miller, describes Terry’s dubbing of the older Herlanders as “The Colonels” viewing their authority as “male, military, and despotic . . . women are, in his view, desexed by the exercise of authority as he is desexed by submitting to it” (192).

Gilman emphasizes the integration of the masculine and feminine spheres by constantly pointing to the fact that the Herlanders have not been conditioned to believe that submissiveness in regards to men is a trait necessary to become a whole woman. They are whole women already, having incorporated *all* human traits in order to survive. Noticing the Herlanders' unconscious lack of deference for men, Terry remarks "These women aren't womanly" (Gilman 58). What he *really* means is that the Herlanders have not learned to automatically place themselves on a lower level than males. In an argument with the now highly evolved Jeff, Terry complains that the women of Herland are missing the virtues of true women:

Jeff was . . . incensed. "I don't know what 'virtues of women' you miss. Seems to me they have all of them.

"They've no modesty," snapped Terry. "No patience, no submissiveness, none of the natural yielding which is a woman's greatest charm." (Gilman 98).

Jeff is correct in his contention that the women have all of the virtues of true womanhood. These women are "wise, sweet, and strong but never afraid or embarrassed by their sex 'not like shy girls'" (Gilman 30). In the women of Herland, Gilman emphasizes the importance of purity of belief, religious homage, patience without subservience, and devotion to family. However, the Herlanders lack the idea that women are lesser people than men. Van explains: "What Terry meant by saying they had no 'modesty' was that this great life-view had no shady places; they had a high sense of personal decorum, but no shame—no knowledge of anything to be ashamed of" (Gilman 101). Feelings of inadequacy and defectiveness are completely lacking in the Herlander

social construct, thus making subordination superfluous. Although Terry claims to miss modesty, what he really misses is a consciousness of the inferiority of their gender. To him, the women of Herland lack the ““feminine charms”” that are, as Van points out “not so feminine at all, but mere reflected masculinity—developed to please [men]” (Gilman 59). In “Our Brains and What Ails Them,” Gilman herself contends that those who maintain a “feminine mind” would eventually be “more submissive, less critical, less argumentative, less experimental” and lacking the proper “initiative” in a decision making situation (124). The incorporation of masculine traits into a woman’s prescribed femininity would then act as a balancing factor to create a less submissive and more critical and argumentative human being. Inversely, the incorporation of traditional feminine traits into men’s character sphere would help to balance out domination over critical tendencies.

Unlike Gilman’s strategy to modify submissiveness, Atwood amplifies submissiveness to the point that the women of Gilead completely lose their human identities and become little more than objects— the “national resources” or “wombs” of Gilead. Submissiveness becomes synonymous with objectification and total forfeiture of control. Offred is conditioned to believe that she is only a shell for her female reproductive organs; thus, she must struggle against her very “humanness” in order to submit to her role as dutiful vessel. In “Names and Naming Tell an Archetypal Story in Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*,” Charlotte Templin notes that “Men occupy positions of authority; women serve and obey, and have names appropriate to their subordinate status. . . ‘Unwoman’ is a striking name and suggests that women unwilling or unfit to serve men are not women—or persons—at all” (147). Fertile women are

designated state property and are forced to produce babies for the elite couples of Gilead. Even the Marthas speak of her as if she is an object to be included in their daily perfunctory tasks:

“Who’s doing the bath?” says Rita, to Cora, not to me.

“I got to tenderize this bird.”

“I’ll do it later,” says Cora, “after the dusting.”

“Just so it gets done,” says Rita.

They’re talking about me as though I can’t hear. To them

I’m a household chore, one among many. (Atwood 48)

Aunt Lydia rationalizes Gilead’s fascination with control when she tells the Handmaids: “A thing is valued only if it is . . . hard to get. We want you to be valued, girls” (Atwood 114). Aunt Lydia specifically uses the word “get” as if the Handmaids are animals to be “gotten”—captured and put to use.

In the Gilead regime, Atwood creates an environment in which “femininity” is equated with submitting to the idea that women are specifically vessels for procreation. According to Polly Wynn Allen, the dominant gender ideology during the period of the cult “held that a woman was uniquely determined by her sexuality, that outside of reproduction she had not a significant social role” (136). One who would rebel from her role as vessel of life is considered resistant to the knowledge of her proper place. Offred is encouraged to view her body as an object—a vessel which she must use to do her duty to society and perpetuate the race. Deborah Raschke contends in “Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*: False Borders and Subtle Subversions” that giving something a name that is subtly different than its reality, the negativity of the act is lessened and the

namer's powers are furthered. Thus, according to Raschke, rape is renamed "ceremony" and becomes "a sacred opportunity" (258). To give up all control of her body for the good of the nation is to be a truly submissive woman, while to resist, as Moira and the other underground brothel "workers" have done, is to be labeled a "Jezebel" and thus "Unwoman." Aunt Lydia speaks with scorn of the women in Pre-Gilead who refuse to submit to their duty to procreate: "Some did it themselves, had themselves tied shut with catgut or scarred with chemicals. How could they, said Aunt Lydia, oh how could they have done such a thing? Jezebels! Scorning God's gifts!" (Atwood 112). These women who refused to breed are labeled wicked, incomplete, and impure women: "They were lazy women, she says, they were sluts" (Atwood 113). Aunt Lydia calls the rebellious women "sluts" or "Jezebels," using the terms for their negative connotations rather than their literal meanings of "sexually active" or "prostitute." Ironically, those women who do not submit to the prostitution of their bodies are contradictorily labeled "sluts" and "Jezebel's" while the women who opt to buy their freedom with their bodies are praised as being properly submissive.

Atwood further emphasizes the self-objectification of women of Gilead in that they are made to believe that the only important part of them is that part which will allow them to submit as well as objectify themselves most completely—their reproductive organs. The Handmaids, being near the bottom of the Gileadean "hierarchy of serviceability" live the most sedentary lives. Because the Handmaids are only valued for their reproductive organs, only their bodies are carefully cared for, while no thought is given to provide for their mental wellbeing. Offred's bland food is designed only to provide her with "vitamins and minerals" in order that she may "be a worthy vessel"

(Atwood 65). As Offred herself says, “We are two-legged wombs, that’s all: sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices” (Atwood 136). When the Handmaids are punished, they are beaten in such a way as to emphasize the fact that their sole value is based upon their reproductive organs. Offred tells us “It was the feet they’d do, for the first offense. They used steel cables, frayed at the ends. After that the hands. They didn’t care what they did to your feet or hands even if it was permanent” (Atwood 91). Aunt Lydia reminds the Handmaids of their limited usefulness with her words: “Remember . . . for our purposes your feet and your hands are not essential” (Atwood 91). Offred is preserved, protected, and tattooed for no other reason than her fertile ovaries; in this way she becomes an object, a product to be used up and then discarded. Offred notes: “We are containers, it’s only the insides of our bodies that are important” (Atwood 96)

Under the Gilead regime, not only are women taught to allow themselves to be objectified, but they were also encouraged to practice self-objectification, submitting selflessly to the point that they themselves become self-policing in the view that they are not really human beings, but rather “vessels” for divine work. Offred’s own self-objectification becomes evident in the ritual like cleansing of the body before she will go into the breeding “Ceremony” that constitutes her purpose in life. She cleans her body as if she is completely detached from it, metaphorically purifying herself with “soap brush and the piece of pumice” so that she might be “totally clean, germless, without bacteria, like the surface of the moon” (Atwood 64-65). While in the bath she is reminded of the tattoo on her ankle “Four digits and an eye, passport in reverse” (Atwood 65) which demonstrates Gilead’s claim upon her: “It’s supposed to guarantee that I will never be able to fade finally, into another landscape. I am too important, too scarce, for that. I am

a national resource” (Atwood 65). Offred recounts the Commander’s gesture of proprietorship just before he has sex with her in the hotel room of “Jezebel’s.” He strokes her “from stem to stern” in an attempt to arouse her and pointedly stops at her tattooed ankle: “his fingers encircling the ankle, briefly, like a bracelet, where the tattoo is, a Braille he can read, a cattle brand. It means ownership” (Atwood 254). This tattoo comes to symbolize her complete and total objectification. Although she is encouraged to act as if her decisions are made freely out of devotion to the Gilead regime, her tattoo is a constant reminder of her complete and total objectification.

The masculine and feminine spheres are distanced from one another by forcing males to think of women as objects to attain and to possess, while women must use those very bodies in exchange for their lives or the chance at freedom. Offred explains that in order for a man to earn a woman he must first think of “doing his duty and possibly being allowed to marry. . . and if they are able to gain enough power and live to be old enough, of being allotted a Handmaid of their own” (Atwood 22). Offred has an inkling of power, but only if she plays by the rules of submissiveness. Even in dreaming of freedom she uses her body with its implicit representation of sexuality as a sort of item with which she might barter: “What if I were to come at night, when he’s on duty alone . . . and permit him beyond my white wings? What if I were to peel off my red shroud and show myself to them . . . I move my hips a little, feeling the full red skirt sway around me. . . It’s like teasing a dog with a bone held out of reach . . .” (Atwood 22). Although she speaks of using her sex as a means of control, she must do so within the confines of her “feminine” limitations. She continues: “I enjoy the power; power of a dog bone, passive but there. I hope they get hard at the sight of us and have to rub themselves against the painted

barriers, surreptitiously” (Atwood 22). Her use of sex as a means of power is ironic in that in order to be deemed desirable she must first present an outward facade both submissive and untouchable at once. Aunt Lydia tells them that “Modesty is invisibility . . . never forget it. To be seen—to be seen is to be penetrated. . . .What you must be girls, is impenetrable” (Atwood 28). This is, of course, a huge contradiction since the single role of a Handmaid is to be penetrated—but only at her master’s will.

Atwood perpetuates the separation of the masculine and feminine spheres by creating a society in which women must submit to being divided into functions rather than treated as individual human beings. In Gilead all women are spoken of in terms of male ownership as if they are pieces of property to be manipulated by men. All women of Gilead are put to their proper “use”: Marthas serve domestically, Handmaids breed, Aunts teach, and Wives act as the iconic high “mother” of all women. The women have been separated into different “tasks” because that is thought to be the only purpose for women—to do rather than to be. The Aunts particularly, with their dark gray attire, are quite possibly the most useful women to the Gilead regime aside from Handmaids. Jeanne Campbell Reeseman explains their use in her essay “Dark Knowledge in *The Handmaid’s Tale*”: “Their training, an indoctrination of new Handmaids into a definition of femininity imposed upon them, involves an odd mixture of emotional and physical manipulation, including the use of cattle prods to make their dogma stick” (11). The Econowives who are described as “the women of the poorer men . . .” are not “divided into functions” and are at the bottom of the Gilead hierarchy specifically because they “have to do everything, if they can”(Atwood 24). It is interesting that these women wear “striped dresses, red and blue and green . . .” made up of all of the colors of the functions

of women. Red is assigned to all Handmaids' clothing, while blue is a color worn only by Wives. Green is a color restricted to the Marthas or servants of Gilead. The Econowives wear dresses that are made of stripes of these three colors signifying that they are possibly the closest thing in Gilead to a "whole" woman. Ironically, despite the fact that they seem to be allotted more freedom of movement and task, they still are looked upon "lowly" and as having undesirable lives because of their lack of status. Nevertheless, notwithstanding their economic or social status, all women of Gilead are objectified by their roles in society.

In Atwood's society, the masculine and feminine spheres are further separated by the constant eradication of a woman's human identity with the exception of those traits that are appropriately feminine as well as conveniently able to illicit submission from the women of Gilead. This concept is reminiscent of early cult teachings. Kaler compares this doling out of human traits as a seemingly positive and religious way to depersonalize and thus control the women of Gilead: "The obliteration of self into selflessness; the depersonalization of name, clothes, lifestyle; the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. . . all are transmuted from necessary formation devices from women religious into the 'perversions' by which the 'conversions' of the handmaids are affected" (44) . Although a large emphasis is placed on the idea that women must hold specific character traits such as submissiveness, it becomes evident that the dysfunction of the Gileadean society has become such that these laws do not always apply to males. Although Handmaids have been stripped of their rights and are drilled to learn dependence, and submissiveness, secretly the Commander wants a "controlled" taste of the opposite—which will still result in forced (albeit now concealed) submissiveness. Desiring to

subjugate Offred in every aspect, he pretends to make requests of her: a game of scrabble, a kiss, a conversation but “There is no doubt about who holds the real power” (Atwood 136).

Everything about Offred’s relationship with the Commander illustrates the dangerous double standard that arises when the cult virtue of submissiveness is taken to its logical end. The expectation that Offred must totally submit herself to the wishes of a man applies even when he is not staying within his own sphere of character traits. Her remaining submissive to anything he wishes only perpetuates her prison. Women are expected to be submissive unless men wish it otherwise—then they must make a pretense at genuinely fulfilling whatever the man wishes:

Sometimes, after the games, he sits on the floor beside my chair, holding my hand. His head is a little below mine, so that when he looks up at me it’s at a juvenile angle. It must amuse him, this fake subservience. (Atwood 210)

He asks for Offred to kiss him as if he does not hold her life in his hands and when she passionlessly submits as she has been so thoroughly conditioned he says “Not like that. . . As if you mean it” (Atwood 140). Openly, for propriety’s sake, there is the Ceremony in which Offred must remain passionless and asexual. However, when the Commander takes her to a private room in “Jezebel’s” she is expected to again submit—only this time, she must make it seem as if it is her choice. Offred notes that the Commander is “dismayed and disappointed” when she acts in the same submissive and passionless way that she has been conditioned to respond to sex: “Usually I’m inert” (Atwood 255). Offred coaches herself into obeying, “Fake it, I scream at myself inside my head. You

must remember how . . . Bestir yourself. Move your flesh around, breathe audibly. It's the least you can do" (Atwood 255). During the Ceremony she must objectify herself and at Jezebel's she must do so again, submitting to his wish that she actively participate in the sex rather than lying there 'like a dead bird" (Atwood 255) as she is expected to do during the Ceremony. Once again, she must force herself to submit to his demands—even when they go against what she has been conditioned to see as correct "feminine" behavior. Thus, Atwood points to the vicious circle of hypocrisy which has begun and can only be broken if Offred steps outside her sphere of expected feminine traits. She must take the initiative, rebel, dominate, be "impure," impious—anything but submissive-- for her obedience is what allows his behavior to continue.

Gilman and Atwood both use a reconstructed version of cult submissiveness in order to manipulate the distance between the masculine and feminine spheres and thus create socially successful or dysfunctional societies. Gilman subverts submissiveness, creating a utopian social construct largely influenced by an emphasis upon the Herlanders' human identity—as opposed to their serviceability--in order to create a society in which the masculine and feminine spheres intersect. Atwood also incorporates the cult's rendition of submissiveness in order to create her dysfunctional society with its largely distanced masculine and feminine spheres; however, in *The Handmaid's Tale*, submissiveness is magnified until it becomes synonymous with self-objectification. Thus, Gilman and Atwood both challenge the cult's ideological version of submissiveness, which emphasized an unwavering obedience often bordering on subservience, by incorporating an altered form of this virtue as a catalyst for the social function or dysfunction of each society.

*The very idea of a public institution for female education is at variance with the best education for women. The sphere of action of the future man is out in the world; and there should be his school. But the scene for the exercise of womanly virtues is a domestic one; the family; and this should be the girl's school . . . girls have an opportunity of learning what are right and wrong ways of housekeeping, and in fulfilling the duties of social life; they learn to obey the old, to take charge of the young, to be companions of those of their own age, and to direct those under their authority. Therefore the home life amongst brothers and sisters and parents, small and great together, is the proper school for girls. In public institutions . . . The hundred instructive little daily occurrences of domestic life are wanting . . . Instead of these there is a cold uniformity in listening and doing, and with the best teachers and companions, none are seen but strangers. And thus, during the most critical years of the young woman's life, her character takes an impress which is in future life to be seldom necessary, but often injurious. She returns to domestic life, with a scientific half-education, skillful in concealing her thoughts from others, accomplished in external decorum, with an increased desire and capacity for shining before the world in little things . . . Her parents' home and those of her relatives must anew become her school. But often it is too late, and she is ruined forever for the labors, the sameness, and the little enjoyments of domestic life.*

-- "Education of the Female Sex" 1863

*May God preserve us from an over-wised learned woman!*

-- "Education of the Female Sex" 1863

#### IV.

### DOMESTICITY

Domesticity was quite possibly the most emphasized and idealized virtue prescribed by the cult of true womanhood. As with piety, purity, and submissiveness, the cult's emphasis did not match up to the literal definition. The cult's idea of domesticity meant much more than a mere devotion to home and family; rather it focused largely upon her role as caregiver to family through her devotion to housekeeping duties which, in turn, demanded a closely restricted confinement to the home that bordered on imprisonment. It was this seclusion of all else except that pertaining to the home that prescribed duties for "feminine" women. According to the *Women's Studies Encyclopedia*,

Medical science's definition of women reinforced the idea of their confinement. Doctors believed that women were more fragile than men and that their frailty had to be protected because they were, in effect the wombs of the nation. Women, therefore, should remain in the home away from the stress of the world. (107)

In order to further accentuate a woman's place, the "courts and churches reinforced women's seclusion in the home through legal decisions and sermons that emphasized women's frailty . . ." (*Women's* 107). A woman's imprisonment was not limited to only the physical home, but any educational or practical knowledge of the world outside her home was deemed improper and damaging to her femininity and thus her role as mother and wife. Not only was she imprisoned physically to her domestic life, but she was restricted from intellectual, political, and most social enlightenment—basically any type of education or understanding which fell outside the home was verboten to a true woman. It was absolutely necessary for women to cling to the protection of the home for, if they "left their haven, they lost their innocence, their moral superiority and ultimately their True Womanhood" (*Women's* 106).

According to a cult of true womanhood teachings, a woman's confinement was sacrificially done for the good of her family in order to stave off the moral evils of the world from infecting the home sphere. Antithetically, she was also told that her confinement was necessary in order to keep those same moral evils from infecting her femininity, although sadly, her husband's contamination must be indulged since his duty demanded that he leave the safety of the home in order to develop his masculine traits.

Those women who were not so eagerly willing to commit themselves to such a socially reclusive life were not only labeled “unfeminine ” for choosing to develop masculine traits found in the morally impure outside world, but were often forced to remain within the domestic domain anyway as a result of laws and social pressures. Although many women were told that an education would distract them from their god-given place in the home, many more were simply told that an intellectual education was a physiological impossibility. In an 1847 lecture on the distinctive differences between men and women, Dr. Charles Meigs, in noting the difference in male and female brain sizes, states: “‘Women,’ said the physician, with a kind of clinical gallantry, ‘has a head almost too small for intellect but just big enough for love’” (qtd. in Welter). In his 1870 essay entitled “The Sexes in Colleges,” A.F. Allen contends that women are simply physically unable to endure the rigors of a formal education: “Very few girls can do, without breaking down physically, the intellectual work which their robust brothers can safely undertake” (145). These were things said to be better left to men as they were not only morally dangerous to “femininity” but physically taxing to would-be mothers and wives. Any education deemed acceptable was largely edited and concocted in such a way as to steer a woman right back to her domestic duties:

History, as studied by girls, should be directed to the cultivation of their sensibilities, their feelings, their sense of the great and noble; not the mere cramming of the memory. The extent of what is to be committed to memory should be as limited as possible. A chronological error is much less injurious to a young girl, than the least appearance to a

pretension to historical learning. It is self-evident that it  
 will be of great service to a young girl, to be made  
 acquainted with the lives and characters of the best  
 feminine models. (“Education” 94)

The education presented to a woman was usually done so in an attempt to realign her with the proper feminine traits expected of her—at least according to cult teachings--by God and country: “Our women should be acquainted with history, that she may learn how in times of barbarism and degeneration, arts and sciences, virtue and faith, have found a place of safety with them and them only; and also how bad women have caused the destruction of whole nations” (“Education” 95). The ulterior motive to this “editing” (under the guise of concerned protection) was that it kept women from becoming interested in issues outside the homefront, thus preventing the two spheres from becoming catastrophically entangled.

This disproportionate view of domesticity is subverted by Gilman in order to create her utopian society in which the masculine and feminine spheres commingle while Atwood magnifies the cult’s idealized version of domesticity in order to demonstrate the dysfunction that occurs when the separation of the masculine and feminine spheres is taken to its logical ends. The domesticity of Gilman’s utopian society is completely subverted until the emphasis is no longer upon a woman’s protected confinement and restriction from worldly matters, but rather upon the participation in a country-wide unfettered intellectual, political, and social education with the specific purpose of making them whole people and, as a result, better mothers. In her dystopian society, Atwood’s grotesquely magnified version of domesticity involves the physical imprisonment of

women as well as the intellectual “protection” from any education other than that which furthers their reproductive usefulness. Thus, the integration of the masculine and feminine spheres in Herland is directly related to the success of Gilman’s society in much the same way that the extremity of the distance between these two spheres creates dysfunction in Atwood’s society.

In her perfect society, Gilman challenges the separation of human character traits into masculine and feminine spheres by undermining the cult ideology that a woman’s confinement is executed for her own protection. According to the teachings of the cult, those women who became caught up in intellectual aspirations triggered a chain-reaction of broken virtues that usually ended in the loss of her virginity and finally death or at least hysteria. Welter explains “The frequency with which derangement follows the loss of virtue suggests the exquisite sensibility of woman, and the possibility that, in the women’s magazines at least, her intellect was geared to her hymen, not her brain” (Welter 156). Gilman was familiar with this designation of education as a masculine trait dangerous to women, for when treated for her own depression, she was told by her doctor to “Live as domestic a life as possible. Have your child with you all the time . . . And never touch pen, brush or pencil as long as you live” (*Living* 96). After attempting to follow (for her own protection) this rigid prescription, Gilman says she “came perilously near to losing my mind” (*Living* 96). By emphasizing Herlander character traits as human rather than either feminine or masculine, Gilman makes the point about the role that social conditioning plays in a “true” woman’s life. In Herland, according to Van, “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 57). Gilman

makes the point that the country of Herland is begun by women who refused to allow themselves to be held captive by males. Gilman discusses the absurdity of the idea that women need the “protection” of men in her autobiography *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman*, recounting a conversation on the subject of female dependence : “A stalwart man once sharply contested my claim to freedom to go [out] alone. ‘Any true man,’ he said with fervor, ‘is always ready to go with a woman at night. He is her natural protector.’ ‘Against what?’ I inquired. As a matter of fact, the thing a woman is most afraid to meet on a dark street is her natural protector. Singular” (72). Gilman demonstrates the idea that the Herlanders do not need to be “kept” and protected by men, thus undermining the idea that women must be confined to a physical domain simply because they are women.

Gilman further subverts the cult’s idea of domesticity by altering the cult ideology that women are naturally weak and thus need men’s administration in order to exist as functional human beings. Terry’s implication is that without men women are unable to function—that, in fact, women need men to compel them to go against their nature in order to become functional human beings. In discussing Herland, the explorers insist that if men are not the leaders then “[we] mustn’t look for innovations and progress, it’ll be awfully primitive” (Gilman 8). They reason that if a society is to be “civilized” then “there must be men” as administrators of proper social order (Gilman 11). Men must be present to insure that women are put properly in their place as wives and mothers. This concept of “control for your own good” is addressed persistently in both Gilman’s and Atwood’s novels. The reasoning behind the confinement of women is that such control is for their own protection. In *The Home, Its Work and Influence*, Gilman addresses the

cyclical weakening of women followed by efforts to protect them which only makes them weaker: “women are [not] really smaller-minded, more timid and vacillating, but whosoever . . . is always guarded, protected, directed, and restrained, will be come inevitably narrowed and weakened by it” (92). The attitude of the three explorers is mirrored in the assumption that the leaders of the Republic of Gilead make—that women need to be rigidly controlled for their own welfare. Whether it be subtly present in the minds of the male characters of Herland or blatantly evident in the actions of the Commanders of Gilead, the confinement of women for their own protection is at the forefront of each authors’ thematic agenda.

The women of Herland operate under a system of social freedom that is free from the weighty bonds and rigid regulations; not being restricted to a specifically feminine sphere of traits, they are thus free to take on many traits which are considered traditionally masculine in order to create better mothers in themselves. The explorers bring with them the idea of the physical and intellectual segregation of specific character traits from each gender. From this ideology springs the assumption that women must confine themselves to the home in order to properly parent. Terry is correct in his statement ““*Home!*”” he sneered. “There isn’t a home in the whole pitiful place”” since, when viewed in context of the explorers’ idea of a woman confined to one domain and a particular set of expectations to be carried out *only* within that domain, no “home” of this sort exists in Herland (Gilman 98). Van describes the preconceptions about women that accompany the male explorers: “To these women we came, filled with ideas, convictions, traditions of our cultures, and undertook to rouse in them the emotions which to us—seemed proper” (Gilman 96). The whole concept of a “mother” is altered

in Gilman's utopian society—these women are freely devoted parents, not gender held captives of guilt-ridden social conditioning: “You see, they were Mothers, not in our sense of helpless involuntary fecundity. . . but in the sense of Conscious-Makers of People” (Gilman 68). What is most interesting is the fact that the Herlanders have no segregation of masculine and feminine spheres, and thus do not view the men as engendering any character traits that are different from their own. They are devoted mothers and assume, for instance, that the men will entertain the same level of devotion to children—but as fathers. As Terry exclaims heatedly “‘The only thing they can think of a man is Fatherhood!’ said Terry with high scorn. ‘Fatherhood! As if a man was always wanting to be a father!’” (Gilman 124). Fatherhood to Terry means essentially a domesticated male—yet the concept of traditional domesticity has very little to do with the motherhood of Herland.

In her utopian novel, Gilman combines the masculine and feminine spheres, creating a society that strives to empower its race by the education on all aspects of itself rather than only a prescribed sphere of traits. By the end of the novel, Van has accomplished a complete evolution of thought about women and is now ready to view them not as “only women” but as people. Only when Van can overcome his urge to think of the Herlanders in his own social context with all of its restrictive implications can he begin to develop a relationship with Ellador. Their friendship grows as he travels farther and farther away from his fundamental beliefs that a “true woman” must be a vehicle for men's expectations. Van explains the main difference that lies in the education of the Herlanders and Terry's “true” woman:

You see, if a man loves a girl who is in the first place young and inexperienced; who in the second place is educated with a background of caveman tradition, a middle-ground of poetry and romance, and a foreground of unspoken hope and interest all centering on the one Event; and who has . . . no other hope or interest worthy of a name—why it is a comparatively easy matter to sweep her off her feet. Terry was a past master in this process.

(Gilman 93)

Initially, the explorers are unable to relate to the Herlanders because these women are grounded in a tradition of education and experience. This is a huge change from the women with whom the explorers are familiar. The Herlanders have many intellectual “hopes and interests worthy of name” to pursue as opposed to just a husband and home—neither of which, prior to the arrival of the explorers, have existed (Gilman 93). As Van notes, the Herlanders have not been confined to “the limitations of wholly personal life devoid of education and restricted to the movement in the home” (Gilman 97). Polly Wynn Allen discusses this problem of forcing dependence upon women during the nineteenth century: “The occupational structures of society presupposed that most women would get their living by getting a husband. The “sexual-economic” dependence of women caused them to overdevelop themselves as sexual beings and to neglect themselves as autonomous, rational individuals, which was to do themselves harm” (68). The Herlanders have not been taught to believe that men are more intellectual nor have they been taught that women’s intellectual education is a trait that they must avoid.

According to Polly Wynn Allen, “[Gilman] was concerned throughout her life to prove that women were the intellectual equals of men, despite the fact that the material conditions of the home had retarded their mental proficiency to date” (69). In her essay “Our Brains and What Ails Them” Gilman herself writes: “The daughter may inherit the brain of a line of scholars, as a Chinese woman may inherit the legs of a line of runners; but the ‘female leg’ in China has been sadly modified by its environment—and so has ‘the female mind’” (247). Herland is a society that assumes women can be intellectual and still be “true” women. The focus then lies upon education and interdependence rather than innocence and subordination. They have no need for the protective mental confinement of cult teachings. This wide education grounds them in such a way as to make them discuss motherhood in terms of logic and reason rather than the traditional “emotional” and implied “instinctual” mothering that the explorers are accustomed to encountering in the traditional women of their own land.

Gilman challenges the separation of the masculine and feminine spheres by subverting the idea of a woman’s confinement by continually emphasizing the importance of obtaining a “true” understanding of one’s role in society through education before following a prescribed ideology. The explorers view intellectual education as traditionally masculine and thus the incorporation of intellect and reasoning into the Herlanders is automatically assumed to clash with or cover her feminine traits. As Van notes: “I see now clearly enough why a certain kind of man, like Sir Almroth Wright, resent the professional development of women. It gets in the way of the sex ideal; it temporarily covers and excludes femininity” (Gilman 130). Gilman integrates masculine and feminine traits into the Herlanders, creating a more complete society of human

beings as a result. Decades after Gilman, in *Women: The Longest Revolution*, Juliet Mitchell articulates an updated version of Gilman's integration of the masculine and feminine spheres:

As far as femininity is concerned, we have moved from the hysteric whose femininity, being nothing, had nothing she wanted, to the feminine boy and girl who, in imaginatively taking in their mother, have everything. But I believe there is confusion in the conceptualization here. This mother who has everything is not 'feminine'; she is complete.

(Mitchell 312)

From her standpoint, Mitchell is able to contend that no separate spheres exist at all—that they are and were social constructs. Femininity represents only a part of human traits. Gilman, on the other hand, existing in the culture that was deeply entrenched in the concept of two different spheres, knows no other way to conceptualize her challenge against the spheres other than first to address them—making them a reality—than to integrate them. In this roundabout way, Gilman foretells many later critical scholars.

In her personal life, Gilman stressed that in order for a social ideology to have positive benefits, it must be a “reliable” as well as “founded on fact” (*Living* 328). The intellect exhibited in the Herlanders is exactly what is lacking in cult of true womanhood followers. In Herland, the explorers encounter “all over the country . . . everywhere there was the same high level of intelligence” (Gilman 64). In Gilman's society, education is used as a means to freely inspire motherhood rather than manipulatively restrict women to adhering to it. Van explains: “They had faced the problems of

education and so solved them that their children grew up naturally . . . taught continually but unconsciously – never knowing they were being educated . . . the babies and children never felt the pressure of that ‘forcible feeding’ of the mind that we call ‘education’ (Gilman 95). For the cult followers, it was necessary to downplay education in order to convince them that their domesticity was their duty as women and thus keep them confined to prescribed character spheres. The role of the traditional domestic wife was perpetuated by her political, intellectual, and social ignorance. Likewise, her ignorance was also perpetuated by her restrictive role as wife. However, the total lack of husbands, homes, and traditional feminine roles in Herland completely undermines the cult’s ideology of domesticity and forces the explorers to see women without any pre-conditioned domestic conceptions. This new view of women—for Terry at least—is often quite disconcerting.

Gilman’s utopian society emphasizes a devotion to parenting that comes from centuries of education rather than from an unquestioning acceptance of an unproven ideology. In her autobiography, Gilman addresses the problem of blind acceptance of a religion or ideology: “All religions of the past have rested on someone’s say so, have been at one in demanding faith as the foremost virtue. Understanding was never required, nor expected, in fact it was forbidden. . .” (*Living* 38). In her utopian vision, blind acceptance is abolished, in order that purity of motivation can take place through understanding and education. Van describes the Herlanders as “far from being ignorant, they were deeply wise . . . and for clear reasoning, for real brain scope and power they were A No 1” (Gilman 46). The sense of social authenticity in Herland is made possible because the Herlanders freely educate themselves on the social, religious and political

workings of their country rather than succumb to ignorant naivete regarding concepts about themselves and their roles as human beings. Howe describes Gilman's life motto: "Her object was to persuade women to think for themselves instead of accepting what they were told to think" (74). This motto corresponds with her constant challenging of the concept of motherhood in *Herland*. The male characters are confused at the all female society's integration of feminine and masculine traits: "We had expected a dull submissive monotony and found a daring social inventiveness far beyond our own . . . ." (Gilman 81). The sense of understanding that accompanies the *Herlanders'* purity is something that is alien to the women of Gilman's time. They are confined to their role as mother, but have made their decisions out of a freewill that is steeped in education. According to Alexander Black, in his essay entitled "The Woman Who Saw It First," Gilman "saw and described with an unmitigated clearness the obligation imposed by admitted truth as to the position of woman. . . [that] a woman's ignorance was invested with a mawkish glory" (64). Cult teachings often praised women for their intellectual delicacy and feminine innocence; however, those women were actually being praised for their ability to remain ignorant of their own character traits that—because they had been labeled masculine—they were not allowed to incorporate into their own lives. Thus Gilman places emphasis upon the freedom from mental confinement for women, in order to protect their femininity and thus discourage them from neglecting their role as mother figure. Gilman emphasizes participation in an unobstructed intellectual, political, and social education with the specific purpose of making the *Herlanders* whole people and thus, better mothers.

While Gilman focuses on freedom from mental confinement, Atwood focuses more on the physical imprisonment of women as being a type of mental confinement. Atwood separates the masculine and feminine spheres in order to emphasize the imprisonment to the “home” as an exaggerated version of the cult’s expectations regarding feminine domesticity. Historically, cult followers were taught to devote themselves to the home not only for moral reasons but in order that they may become better mothers and more obedient wives. For the Handmaids of Gilead, however, there is no need to better themselves for future families, as they never can hope to be a part of one—yet they are still imprisoned. Offred notes the Commander’s referral to her forced confinement as her home: “he tells me it’s time for me to go home. Those are the words he uses: *go home*. He means to my room” (Atwood 139). The sole reason for their confinement is so that they will not escape their maternal duty as breeder. This empty version of domesticity then is demanded of them in order that they fulfill their reproductive duty. Just as a cult believer was confined to the home in order that she not escape her duty as wife and mother, a woman of Gilead is confined to her domain in order that she not escape her own distorted maternal duty. In his essay “Boundaries, Centers, and Circles: The Postmodern Geometry of *The Handmaid’s Tale*” Bob Myhal notes “Throughout the text, doing one’s duty implies staying with the various boundaries—physical, emotional, and psychological—as established and defined by the regime” (216). According to Aunt Lydia, Offred’s confinement is designed to protect her from the bad world outside, yet this “protection” is limited solely to her reproductive organs. The rest of her is of little importance. She sits for hours on end “washed, brushed, and fed, like a prize pig” (Atwood 69). The Handmaids are allowed no physical

activity, no conversation or touch with others. Of her inactivity Offred remarks: “This is one of the things I wasn’t prepared for. . . the amount of unfilled time. . . If only I could embroider. Weave, knit, something to do with my hands” (Atwood 69). Besides her “walk that is prescribed to keep her abdominal muscles in working order” (Atwood 26), Offred is left to herself in her empty room all day to wait for her time to breed again. To stave off boredom, Offred envisions illegal and “sinful” acts of rebellion: “I would stay in the kitchen . . . [to] talk . . . Or I would help Rita make bread, sinking my hands into that soft resistant warmth that is so much like flesh. I hunger to touch something, other than cloth or wood. I hunger to commit the act of touch . . .” (Atwood 10-11). Because friendship is considered to be selfish and sinful for Handmaids, when she resists smiling at Rita, she is protecting the Martha as well as herself from the selfish and disobedient possibility of friendship: “Why tempt her to friendship?” Offred says (Atwood 11). Anything that distracts from their duty of procreation is considered unnecessary and thus unwomanly.

Atwood further emphasizes the separation of the masculine and feminine spheres by pointing to the expectation that the women of Gilead adhere to those domestic “duties” which define their “femininity.” Raschke discusses the idea that all women in Gilead are allotted a domestic duty: “each class marked by symbolic dress, serves only one function: body vessels, mothers, domestic servants, and bearers of morality” (259). Although maternal duties such as birthing, feeding, and educating children of Gilead are doled out among women, there is never any parenting—any mothering or fathering—expected from either sex. The Wives yearn for babies to increase their social status as well as get the Handmaid situation “over and done with and out of the way, no more

humiliating sweaty tangles. . . “ (Atwood 204). Offred often remarks on the busywork that is given to the Wives in order to give them some purpose: “The garden is the domain of the Commander’s Wife . . . it’s something for them to order and maintain and care for” (Atwood 13). Serena Joy’s knitting is another example of a outlet for purpose: “Sometimes I think these scarves aren’t sent to the Angels at all, but unraveled and turned back into balls of yarn, to be knitted again in their turn. . . it’s just something to keep the Wives busy, to give them a sense of purpose . . . I envy the Commander’s Wife her knitting” (Atwood 13).

The Handmaid’s devotion to her domain essentially becomes the same sort of purpose as the Wives’ knitting, the Aunts’ instructing, and the Marthas’ housekeeping duties. She has been banned from everything that does not conform to her function as Handmaid—that is, breeder. The militaristic regime of Gilead has removed from the Handmaids the need to be good mothers since their children are immediately snatched from them at birth and turned over to the Wives. Furthermore, the Handmaids are never given the option to become Wives and thus do not need to worry that “worldliness” will ruin their relationships with men. They do not cook, or clean, for those particular duties have been doled out to the Marthas. For the women of Gilead, their confinement to the home is their all consuming purpose—they must devote themselves completely to their proper domain not only to be socially acceptable, to keep from “being nothing in the eyes of the Gileadean system, a hole in their political and sexual discourse, a Nonwoman” (Raschke 259). Confinement to the “home” then ceases to be the means to an end; instead it becomes the end in itself. The cult teachings insisted that a woman must be confined to be protected from the moral dangers of the world outside her domain, in order

that she might be a better mother and wife. The Aunts also insist that Handmaids are confined to the “home” for protection, however, since there is never any foreseeable consequence to this protection, their domesticity is pointless. Atwood takes domesticity to its logical end.

In order to challenge the separation of the masculine and feminine spheres, Atwood magnifies the concept of “protective” restriction from political and social education to the point that the Handmaids must shun any type of education including reading, writing, and even internal reasoning or thought in order to escape the label of “unwoman” and thus remain acceptably “feminine.” To keep not only their lives but also their sanity, the women of Gilead must resist questioning and thinking in order to protect themselves from dissentious conclusions about the outrageously exaggerated distance between masculinity and femininity. The women must strive to remain ignorant of the offenses that their lives have become. Offred explains this struggle against thinking, “Ignoring isn’t the same as ignorance, you have to work at it” (Atwood 56). An outwardly faithful automaton is what a woman of Gilead must become in order to endure. Offred maintains that “Thinking can hurt your chances, and I intend to last” (Atwood 8). Books are used—with an emphasis on scripture—as the supposed instruction manuals for the people of Gilead with only the men being allowed to read while the women are expected to remain intellectually, politically, and socially ignorant in any kind of educated sense. Their education consists of being drugged and forced through a series of brainwashing exercises such as “Testifying” in which the women are reconditioned in their beliefs regarding their “place” in society. Their “graduation” from the Red Center—at which all of this brainwashing takes place—is consummated with their being

awarded a pair of “white wings” which wrap around their face and completely block their peripheral view of the world (Atwood 71). The Bible, supposedly from which much of their prescribed character traits come is, of course, forbidden to them. Filipczak notes, “Locked in a special wooden box, [the Bible] becomes a totem of the totalitarian system in every house. At the same time, it is an incendiary device, available only to the initiated . . .” (171). Like cult teachings, the laws delineating a woman’s purity and “femininity” in Gilead are introduced in conjunction with Biblical interpretation; however, Atwood takes the level and severity of social manipulation a step further. Rather than subtly encouraging the equation of divine law and individual interpretation as the cult does, the Gileadeans brazenly pronounce their system of law and divine law as one and the same. As pointed out in the discussion of piety, rulers in Gilead freely edit scripture from the Bible in order to enforce their laws. Offred discusses this intentional distortion of the Bible:

. . . the Beatitudes. Blessed be this, blessed by that. They played it from a tape, so even an Aunt would not be guilty of the sin of reading. [The voice] was a man’s. *Blessed be the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are the merciful. Blessed be the meek. Blessed are the silent.* I knew they made that up, I knew it was wrong, and they left things out too, but there was no way of checking. (Atwood 89)

These are laws directed toward only women and are designed to keep them confined to their sphere of femininity. That the women of Gilead are forbidden to read at all excuses

no possibility of determining whether the restrictions placed upon them are divine ordinance or merely false manipulation. Because the book that supposedly outlines the rules regarding their imprisonment is placed so far out of reach, the women of Gilead are forced live in ignorance, placing their freedom and happiness in the hands of the interpreters—the men.

The pointless domestic confinement of women of Gilead reinforces the lies upon which their lives are built as well as furthers the distance between the masculine and feminine spheres. The Handmaids are expected to be devoted to their way of life and to appear to take pride in being a Handmaid despite the fact that their prescribed imprisonment puts them in a position of unbearable ignorance. As she sits in her room with its shatterproof windows and picture frames devoid of glass, Offred repeats to herself the ironic words of Aunt Lydia “Where I am is not a prison but a privilege” (Atwood 8). Although the reality that surrounds her proves Aunt Lydia to be completely wrong, Offred must struggle to remain ignorant. According to Reesman: “The Aunts. . . are trainers of Handmaids. Their training, an indoctrination of new Handmaids into a definition of femininity imposed on them, involved an odd mixture of emotional and physical manipulation. . .” (11). The Handmaids are constantly barred from any form of education other than the one that is force-fed to them. This serves to counteract any internal questioning regarding the fairness of their position. To attempt to search for the truth is to risk rejection as an impure woman and even physical punishment with “electric cattle prods” and “steel cables unraveled at the ends”(Atwood 4). Aunt Lydia tells the Handmaids:

You are a transitional generation . . . It is the hardest for you. We know the sacrifices you are being expected to make. It is hard when men revile you. For the ones who come after you, it will be easier. They will accept their duties with willing hearts.

She did not say: Because they will have no memories, of any other way.

She said: Because they won't want things they can't have. (Atwood 117)

Offred's life is based upon a vast network of lies designed to keep her safely ignorant of the any other way of life apart from her duty to be a "feminine" woman. To educate the women of Gilead would be to open doors involving reasoning powers that would override the thinly masked lies about the needless separation of human character traits into either masculine or feminine.

Atwood constantly emphasizes the idea that Offred's "protective" imprisonment is directly related to her sex, thus further distancing the masculine and feminine spheres from one another. The fact that Offred is a female confines her to a prescribed set of feminine straits as well as restricts her from all traits with masculine implications. Because it represents the temptation of freedom from the strict regulation imposed upon Offred as well as the reason why she must remain a prisoner, her own naked body with its blatant sexuality has become something upon which Offred avoids looking. The Handmaids are told: "In a bathtub, you are vulnerable, said Aunt Lydia. She didn't say to what" (Atwood 62). What Aunt Lydia does not say is that Offred's nakedness will bring

her dangerously close to independent thought. Free from the government issued “white wings” that “are to keep us from seeing . . .” (Atwood 8), Offred is released for just a short period from her physical prison. During the duration of her bath, she is free from the blinders that usually force her to “see the world in gasps” (Atwood 30). Furthermore, it is impossible for Offred to remain ignorant when confronted so blatantly with the senselessness of her imprisonment. Her naked body reminds her of the many freedoms she enjoyed in the time before Gilead. Without her voluminous habit and “heavy white wings and veil” to remind Offred of her purpose as a citizen of Gilead, she is vulnerable to blasphemous thoughts of rebellion, suicide, sex and most importantly the significance (and insignificance) of her gender. Offred remarks:

My nakedness is strange to me already. My body seems outdated. Did I really wear bathing suits at the beach? I did, without thought, among men . . . *Shameful, immodest.* I avoid looking down at my body, not so much because it’s shameful or immodest but because I don’t want to see it. I don’t want to look at something that determines me so completely. (Atwood 63)

She is most vulnerable in the bathtub because that is when she is most obviously reminded that she is a woman and thus according to the laws of Gilead, only is as serviceable as her reproductive system.

In Gilead, Atwood creates an environment of such strict confinement in the name of femininity that all freedom from domesticity is unreachable—reading, writing, and thinking are all blockaded by law and strict monitoring—even escape by suicide is not an

option. Offred tells us that “Above, on the white ceiling, a relief ornament in the shape of a wreath, and in the center of it a blank space, plastered over... there must have been a chandelier, once. They’ve removed anything you could tie a rope to” (Atwood 7). She continues to describe a room in which pictures are “framed but with no glass” and with a window that “only opens partly” (Atwood 7). She explains these necessary precautions: “I know why there is not glass, in front of the watercolor picture of blue irises, and why the window opens only partly and why the glass in it is shatterproof. It isn’t running away they’re afraid of. We wouldn’t get far. It’s those other escapes, the ones you can open in yourself, given a cutting edge” (Atwood 8). She deterred from escaping from her “home,” which is synonymous with her duty as “reproducer.” Her very existence has become a literal prison from which she cannot escape. Even images of things that might cause a mind to linger on freedom are forbidden. Offred remarks “the bleeding hearts, so female in shape it was a surprise they’d not long since been rooted out. There is something subversive about this garden. . . a sense of buried things bursting upwards wordlessly. . . into the light, as if to point, to say: Whatever is silenced will clamor to be heard silently” (Atwood 153). Offred draws a subtle comparison between herself “a Sister dipped in blood” (Atwood 9) and the vulva-shaped flower in Serena Joy’s garden. The flower symbolizes, like the Handmaid, a silent prisoner in the darkness of the ground until its time to burst from its prison when its Mayday of freedom arrives.

Thus, the cult’s impossibly idealistic version of domesticity, that demanded a close confinement both physically and intellectually in order to protect a woman from the evils of the masculine character sphere, is either subverted or magnified in order to challenge the rigid separation of the masculine and feminine spheres. In her undermining

of domesticity Gilman creates a culture in which the absence of traditional homes, husbands, and families completely undermines the cult's argument concerning a woman's strict confinement to a particular place. The inhabitants of Herland integrate masculine and feminine spheres into each individual by freely developing intellectual, political, and social education—the very things which the cult claimed were unnecessary and even dangerous to the aspiring mother—in order to become better mothers and thus create a more successful society. Atwood challenges the separation of masculine and feminine spheres by magnifying the cult's version of domesticity in order to create her dystopian society. The exaggeration and distortion of the traditional concepts of homes, husbands, and families in Atwood's society works to question the cult's argument concerning a woman's strict confinement to a particular domain. The inhabitants of Gilead strictly segregate masculine and feminine spheres by the literal physical imprisonment of women as well as the intellectual, political, and social “protection” from any education other than that which furthers their reproductive usefulness. Again, both Gilman and Atwood's fictional frameworks convey the concept that a society's social function or dysfunction is directly proportionate to the distance between the spheres of masculinity and femininity.

## CONCLUSION

In each novel, Gilman and Atwood use piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity as a springboard for their didactic admonitions regarding the cult of true womanhood's strict separation of the masculine and feminine spheres. Just as Gilman subverts and reconstructs the values of the cult in her novel in order to take arms against their oppressive and exclusionary nature, so Atwood magnifies and distorts these same values in her novel, almost a century later, as a caution against repeating our mistake and once again embracing the concept of segregating human character traits. Despite their opposing societal constructs as well as contrasting literary vehicles (utopian and dystopian), both novels work to make the same point--that the distance between the masculine and feminine spheres is directly proportional to the success or failure of the society.

In order to be truly feminine, a true woman was expected to embody perfectly prescribed versions of piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity, bearing upon her shoulders the responsibility of an idealized and unrealistically bountiful version of each of these traits. Much more than a mere devotion to religion, piety was used as a means to control women socially. Purity meant an asexual demeanor that was to be carried into marriage despite the contradictory fact that a woman was expected to do her duty in the bedroom (albeit passively) when her husband so desired. This sexual passivity was to be maintained in social situations as well. The submissiveness of cult teachings included an

unquestioning obedience that bordered upon subservience. Finally, cult teachings which emphasized domesticity called for the total mental and physical confinement of a woman to her home in order to protect her from being infected with the moral evils of the man's world. Gilman and Atwood incorporate the cult's version of these traits into each of their societies.

In order to create a successful or dysfunctional society, Gilman and Atwood modify the cult's version of each of the four traits of true womanhood. Gilman's altered form of devotion to religion as a means for social growth and freedom of self-expression contrasts with Atwood's piety as a means for social control and forced hypocrisy. Likewise, purity in Herland is altered in such a way that the Herlanders are genuinely asexual, while in Atwood's society purity involves an asexual façade as well as sexual and social passivity. Submissiveness is modified by Gilman, emphasizing human identity, while Atwood exaggerates submissiveness to the point that it becomes objectification. Finally, the domesticity of Herland is subverted until the emphasis is no longer upon a woman's protected mental and physical confinement, but rather upon the participation in unobstructed education, while Gilead's domesticity involves the physical imprisonment of women under the guise of concerned protection. Thus, just as Gilman subverts these virtues in order that the masculine and feminine spheres may commingle, Atwood exaggerates them in order to further distance the spheres from one another.

Most scholars, in discussing the cult of domesticity, avoid separating the cult virtues from one another because of the inherent nature of their interdependence. For instance, in order to be pure, cult followers were taught to shun those traits in a man's world which would corrupt that purity. Likewise, in order to be domestic, women were

told that it was inappropriate to dabble in the world outside their home sphere, lest they be morally infected by the man's world and become less interested in their domestic duties. Any thing that promoted masculinity was a danger to a woman's piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity and was to be avoided at all costs in order for her to remain a true woman. To be truly pious, a woman was taught to emphasize her purity and shun "masculine" traits such as intellectual and political education in favor of religious literature—the latter of which further emphasized a woman's domestic role in the home. Cult teachings accentuated the idea that a true devotion to family necessitated an obedient nature in the same way that submissiveness involved patiently resigning oneself to one's god-given role as wife and mother. Each trait was only logically acceptable when viewed in context of the others. Conversely, the departure from any one trait usually resulted in the collapse of the three remaining traits. As a result of the cult virtues' self-perpetuating interdependence, most modern scholars address them as a unit.

However, to create a structural basis upon which to discuss Gilman and Atwood's challenge of the masculine and feminine spheres, it becomes necessary to separate the virtues in order to allow for a narrowing down of each trait into specific elements. This separation of the traits allows for an adequate emphasis upon those aspects of each virtue that are particularly emphasized by Gilman and Atwood in each of their novels. For instance, in her utopian society, Gilman focuses less upon freedom from domestic methodology and more upon the *mental* confinement of women to the sphere of feminine traits as well as the expectation that traditional masculinity involves the administration of that confinement. In separating and specifically focusing upon the aspect of confinement within the cult trait of domesticity, I was able to more closely examine the ways in which

Gilman calls for the integration of masculine and feminine spheres within *Herland*. Atwood also focuses less upon domestic methodology and more upon *physical* confinement of women to their appropriate acceptable domain. Based upon this, I chose to center mainly upon the cult's emphasis on confinement within the virtue of domesticity, and thus was able to present a more succinct examination. However, because of the inherent interdependence of the cult virtues, a complete division of the traits from one another is virtually impossible, and as a result, some repetition occurs among the discussion of virtues. For instance, because piety and domesticity are both reinforced by an emphasis on education as being a masculine trait, the manipulation of a woman's education is discussed in both piety and domesticity sections. Thus, the discussion of the separation of the spheres is able to be much more distinctly delineated within each novel.

In keeping with their literary forms, both *Herland* and *The Handmaid's Tale* challenge established social concepts inherent of the time period in which the work was written. In *Herland* (1915), Gilman directly attacks the teachings of the cult of domesticity so deeply ensconced in the society around her. Although she did often call for the emancipation of women in countless non-fiction works, this challenge *combined with* her subtle call for the reevaluation of men's sphere of character traits in her fiction is what made her a heroine. The fact that she chose to do so in her fictional works was perhaps a wise choice. To go directly against the teachings of the cult in regards to women was perilous enough, but to assert that there was indeed something amiss in the masculine sphere was to tempt complete social ostracism.

This implication that something was amiss in the "world of men" was without a doubt quite a statement to make even as late as 1915. The world was only just becoming

accustomed to the idea that women should be released from their domestic domain; it seems dubious that the idea of men being allowed into this realm with all of its “feminine” implications would be largely accepted. Thus her choice to keep this assertion subtly within her fictional novels, short stories, and poems aided in the gradual conception of a new way of viewing both feminine and masculine spheres without the peril of a more direct (non-fiction) approach. However, the drawback to this subtle of challenging of the “unchangeable” lies in the question: “Did her audience get it?” To attempt to answer this question, it is necessary to point to the puzzling diminishment of demand for Gilman’s work in her later years. At the time that the integration of masculine and feminine spheres—a concept that she had been articulating for years—was at its height, Gilman was in virtual literary obscurity although, years earlier, she had been one of the first to address the issue in her novel *Herland*. It is important to emphasize that in *Herland*, one sphere is not abrogated, rather these two spheres coexist and mingle in Gilman’s utopian society of near perfect human beings. When the boundaries separating feminine and masculine traits are abolished, a social utopia is created. In both earlier and later criticism of her work, it is apparent that readers understood Gilman’s call for the freedom from cult femininity, but much less was written about her call for the movement of men from masculinity into that which has been traditionally deemed feminine.

Thus, although her call for women’s freedom from the idealistic bonds of true womanhood was readily accepted, the masculine half of Gilman’s argument was often completely overlooked. Her height of literary fame was before 1920, when great emphasis was upon freeing women from restrictive ideologies and the problem of freeing men had not yet opened. After suffrage was won in 1920, other feminist issues

arose such as the integration of men into hitherto women's domain; Gilman's fictional works were still perceived by critics to be *only* a call for women's emancipation and thus her popularity waned. Modern feminist scholars are only now beginning to reunite these two concepts when discussing the social repercussions of the cult of domesticity teachings. These social repercussions still exist, as Atwood proves by re-addressing those issues with which Gilman was so concerned—the separation of the masculine and feminine spheres.

The fact that—nearly eighty years later—Atwood brings up many remnant teachings of the cult of true womanhood that are still deeply (and often subtly) a part of modern day society is an indication of the impact that those teachings have had on our view of men and women's roles as well as the impact that continues to reverberate through history. Her dystopia, with its complete segregation of masculinity and femininity, creates a horrifyingly dysfunctional society that is a warning against isolating the two spheres from one another. Although her work calls for the careful scrutiny of future social ideologies, that Atwood admittedly based her dystopia on real historic examples of social and governmental inadequacies exposes the novel's didactic call for a reexamination of the distance between the masculine and feminine spheres in our present society.

Thus Atwood notes in 1986 what Gilman saw in 1915, that the massive and socially destructive influence of the cult of true womanhood still lives on in innumerable forms. Modern woman has, in many ways, freed herself from the traditional views of what is deemed acceptably feminine and has physically entered into many parts of society that have hitherto been labeled a part of the "man's world." However, the

struggle to reevaluate and correct that which is deemed traditionally masculine is only just beginning. The work that Gilman began in her lifetime to integrate the masculine and feminine spheres to the point that character traits are viewed as human rather than either masculine or feminine is only partially in effect. Women are moving toward those traits that were once considered masculine; however, less progress has been made by men towards incorporating traditionally feminine traits. With her horrifyingly realistic society, Atwood argues that the social boundaries between the two spheres are still something with which we must contend in order to move towards a more successful society. The reexamination of those social problems that continue to surface and resurface is a simple reminder that history is cyclical. Thus, in order to avoid perpetually repeating the same mistakes, we must continue to reexamine our past with an eye on the future.

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