

Hysteria in Utopias: The Condition of Women in Bellamy and Morris

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Throughout history even the supposed egalitarian societies have failed when it comes to women's rights. And while utopian writers attempt to create perfect societies, the conditions women face often have a dystopian bent. Do utopian societies, like their real world counterparts, cause undue stress on women, driving them to rebel against their societies? In order to answer this question, we will look at two utopian novels, and a short story about hysteria, as case studies: *Looking Backward* by Edward Bellamy, *News from Nowhere* by William Morris, and "The Yellow Wallpaper" by Charlotte Perkins Gilman.

Looking Backward was Edward Bellamy's first serious novel, and was written in part with his hope to create a better society for his two young children (Brown 40). Peggy Ann Brown, author of "Edward Bellamy: An Introductory Bibliography," shows that in his early adult life, Bellamy went through a jack-of-all trades period. He left college to travel Europe and was appalled by the social conditions in England. Upon returning to his home in Chicopee, Massachusetts, he became a lawyer, but quit this after his first case. He then started writing for a newspaper, where his first stories were serialized. His early writings show his experimentation with dreams, which feature so significantly in *Looking Backward*. He married in 1882 and his young children were born shortly after, and his new role as a family man likely inspired *Looking Backward*. The novel was started in 1886.

Looking Backward described Bellamy's improved and imaginary twentieth century society through the eyes of a nineteenth century man, Julian West. Through his discussions with his (also male) guide Dr. Leete, we uncover the condition of women. Bellamy makes it apparent that women's lives in his future are different from those of the nineteenth century, having West

observe that Edith Leete's attitude is "more like that of a noble and innocent boy than any girl [he] had ever known" (Bellamy 126). A distinct line is drawn between the behaviors of the women of West's time and this new future through his own observation. Dr. Leete goes on to describe the lives of women in the twentieth century, stating "that the magnificent health which distinguishes our women from those of your day, who seem to have been so generally sickly, is owing largely to the fact that all alike are furnished with helpful and inspiring occupations" (Bellamy 127). This shows how Leete perceives his society to have improved, and offers a glimpse into the distribution of labor; but it also references more obliquely the social and medical issues of the nineteenth century.

At the time Bellamy was writing, the western world was suffering an epidemic of psychological illnesses, chiefly among them hysteria. Hysteria in the nineteenth century was the combination of a number of psychological illnesses that included schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, and depression (Smith-Rosenberg 652). At the time, male doctors were baffled at why their female patients were falling so severely ill – fainting and seizures were the most common symptoms – with no apparent physiological source (Micale, 504). As hysteria was seen to have affected mostly women, generally those of middle and upper classes, and left them so sickly they could not function, it follows that Bellamy is using Leete to reference this issue. Bellamy takes this reference one step further, condemning it and having his character state that in Bellamy's future they have solved hysteria.

During the writing of *Looking Backward*, Jean-Martin Charcot was the leading name in the field of hysteria. Based out of Salpêtrière Hospital, Charcot was one of the first people to take hysteria seriously and approached it as a neuropathological problem and dedicated most of his life to defining and treating it (Micale). Charcot created the first etiology of hysteria, that hysteria "traced to a defect of the nervous system... that resulted either from direct physical injury or defective neuropathic heredity" (Micale 503). It is this definition that Bellamy would have been familiar with.

The social reasons behind hysteria were not explored until the late twentieth century, so Bellamy only had the medical knowledge to reference. In this way, he attempted to fix the problem of hysteria by allowing women more economic freedom. In his future women are allowed to work and are guaranteed payment. They have comparably less strict social lives. Women are not forced to have families and are not required to leave the workforce if they do, but most women start families and stop working anyways. However, women are not equal to men, and are in fact segregated from them, forming their own "allied force" to the integral "industrial army" of men (Bellamy 127). They have role alternatives outside of the home but these are "perfectly adapted, both as to kind and degree of labor, to her sex" (Bellamy 127). Yet there are no clear definitions or examples of what that entails; women could be carrying out the same tasks previously called domestic labor.

Ruth Levitas, author of "'Who Holds the Hose?' Domestic Labor in the Work of Bellamy, Gilman, and Morris," argues that Bellamy's view on domestic labor is dark. Levitas shows that in Bellamy's Boston, domestic labor is "unpleasant, unskilled, drudgery that should be abolished" and that it is not acknowledged as worthwhile, or even as a form of production. This viewpoint completely negates women's contributions to family life. "The statement that women have no housekeeping responsibilities is predicated on the assumption that there is nothing to do, not on the suggestion that men share these responsibilities" which shows that, especially with women continuing to care for children, Bellamy focuses on economic change over social (Levitas 66). Had he known about the social aspect of hysteria, Bellamy might have been able to make a more convincing case for his society. Unfortunately, no one in the nineteenth century thought to look at social factors as a reason for women's illnesses, despite the fact that these factors were driving forces behind the psychological issues.

Laura Briggs, author of "The Race of Hysteria," states that "[h]ysteria, we learned from feminist historical scholarship in the 1970s, was never just a disease. It was also the way nineteenth-century U.S. and European cultures made sense of wom-

en's changing roles" (246). The social significance of hysteria shows how women felt about their lives in the context of Victorian culture. Hysteria explains the relationship between Victorian cultural norms and individual behavior, and could even be seen as a social role within the nineteenth century family. The stress in Victorian society and Victorian families presented hysteria as an alternate role for women incapable of accepting their life situations (Smith-Rosenberg).

The stress women faced stemmed from a discontinuity in the social ideals attributed to them and to their actual lives. Women were well aware that society's ideal was a woman safely ensconced in the home caring for their children's and husband's every want. Yet as society moved closer to the twentieth century, more and more women had to take jobs outside the home, breaking this ideal. Victorian girls were taught from a young age to be overly emotional, and to react to pain with tears, even though they would have to face the pain of bearing children (Smith-Rosenberg 657). The ideal woman of this time was a follower, gentle and dependent. Yet a mother had to lead the household, enforce rules, discipline her children, and efficiently handle everything from day-to-day finances to serving as the family nurse (Smith-Rosenberg 656). Many women were confused by these dichotomies and were therefore unable to place themselves in the social sphere of their society. Hysteria was therefore a way out of a confusing social setting, even for a few weeks, and could have been a break for women, as they forced the men of the household to take on their roles.

While Bellamy's society is quite different from nineteenth century America's, it is similar enough in its core principles that social stress would still be laid on women. This fact is proven through how women are viewed in government in Bellamy's future. In this American utopia, women cannot vote for the president and only have one representative in his cabinet while men have ten. There is no gender neutrality in courts; instead male judges sit cases strictly for men and female judges strictly for women. If there is a case that involves both, one judge from each sex must be included (Bellamy 127). In Bellamy's future, there is no empathy between genders.

Dr. Leete, Bellamy's ambassador for his utopian society, goes on to state that "The passional attraction between men and women has too often prevented a perception of the profound differences which make the members of each sex in many things strange to the other, and capable of sympathy with only their own" (Bellamy 127-128). Bellamy very clearly draws a line here between men and women in the social sphere, separating them so firmly that he believes they cannot relate to each other. While men and women may be said to be equal in the economic sphere, in the social sphere they are restricted. Women are unable to compete with men in any sense and are therefore kept at a distance from them, the sexes address each other formally as "Mr." and "Mrs." or "Miss." With these constraints in place, not much has socially changed from the Victorian Era, and women in Bellamy's Utopia would feel and be seen as less than men. Bellamy is clearly trying to improve the conditions of women from his own time, but as was proven throughout the world in the civil rights movements of the twentieth century, segregation is not equality.

The role of women in male-female relationships is complicated by the fact that their labor is not essential and that they depend on the government rather than any man for their economic security. Since women have no real economic roles, we must look at the social sphere to see where they stand in relation to men. There is not much for women to truly do. The only role offered to women is that of a companion, but this is also the role for men. Men also depend on the government for economic security: therefore men cannot be a provider, and do not need to be a protector. Socially, the ideal for women seems to be for inquisitive, physically active and attractive, social individuals who fill out their term for their country before retiring back to the home to raise children and provide companionship.

Bellamy does provide a strong model for women in his character Edith Leete. She is smart, engaging, and confident, joining in on her father and West's conversations easily. However, Bellamy only includes her in a few of these conversations and also shows her in much more traditional roles, going shopping, fretting over West's affections, and acting rather roman-

tically. We see her comfort a confused West by “extend[ing] her hands towards [him] in a gesture of helpfulness, and, as then, [he] caught and held them in [his] own; her bosom heaved with strong emotion, and little tremors in the fingers which [he] clasped emphasized the depth of her feeling” (Bellamy 146). Edith is described as “little,” “tremulous,” overtaken by her own emotions so that she cannot speak. She is in this way, no different from the women of the Victorian Era.

Yet when she is first introduced, it is almost as a counterpoint to West. West is slowly waking from his century of sleep and the first thing he is aware of is voices, one belonging to Leete and one to Edith. Bellamy does something interesting here, placing his male protagonist in a position of extreme vulnerability, passed out like the popular image of a hysteric, and it is a woman standing above him, talking rationally and insisting her father do something her way. This conflicting view of Edith, as an individual who is in control but still falls to ‘womanly’ ways, is itself an allegory for Bellamy’s views of women. He sees women as intrinsically different from men, and therefore they cannot be equal – at least not in the modern view of the word. But he gives women economic freedom and their own realm in social life a “world of their own, with its emulations, ambitions, and careers, ... that they are very happy in” (Bellamy 128). Bellamy assumes that segregating the sexes would solve the contemporary problems that he must have seen daily.

Hysteria was a rejection of social norms by women of the Victorian era. For women, when they were afflicted, they were no longer the care givers, and they no longer had to deal with all of their responsibilities. They unconsciously expressed dissatisfaction with their lives and attempted to redefine gender roles. Since social stress was a main cause of hysteria, and this stress is present in *Looking Backward*, caused by women’s social position beneath men, Bellamy’s society would cause a continuation of hysteria. The “lack of empathy” between the genders would hurt the ability of the doctors to seriously consider the complaints of women in order to diagnose and treat them, whether or not women were a part of the medical profession. With this in mind, there is little social indication in Bellamy’s

society to prove that men would have been able to transcend their views about women to properly classify hysteria.

However, Bellamy certainly thought he had fixed the condition of women by allowing them to work and while this shows a weak understanding of the issue, Bellamy's intent is important. He wrote the book to make a better world for his son and daughter. In the context of his society he created a remarkably freeing world for women. Yet, while the characters of *Looking Backward* would be perfectly happy at their author's discretion, there is no doubt that the social constraints, gender separation, and condescension placed on women would have permitted a continuation of the mental illness deemed hysteria, therefore proving that this utopia has a dystopian stain.

William Morris wrote *News from Nowhere* as a response to Bellamy's *Looking Backward*. Fiona MacCarthy discusses Morris's early life in "William Morris: The Poet, Prophet, and Upholster." Born into a middle class family, Morris was spoiled and had an unusual amount of domesticity that would later color his life. A man of many talents, he was a prolific poet, friends with the pre-Raphaelite painters, and started the furnishing company Morris, Marshall, Falkner & Co. Morris was also highly invested in the Socialist movement in Britain. In "An (Almost) Egalitarian Sage William Morris and Nineteenth-Century Socialist-Feminism" Florence Boos frames Morris's political life. Morris founded the Socialist League and helped lead the organization until he eventually broke with it. He was extremely fond of his daughters, especially after his troubled marriage. One of his daughters was politically active and he worked with her and other feminists later in his life.

Boos also focuses on the political implication of Morris's writings. She shows that throughout his work, Morris portrays women in strikingly different ways from Victorian standards. He stresses male sexual responsibility to women, which was unheard of, and creates female political characters that address the issues raised by nineteenth century feminists. While he was not a shining beacon for women's rights (he condones the rampant sexism of his colleague Bax) Morris did contribute and advocate for feminism and women in important ways. He

was a consistent supporter of women's right to sexual choice, a position that was conspicuous even within the Socialist League and caused clashes with his colleagues. "Morris remained notable among the better-known nineteenth-century male 'sages' (again, save only Mill) for the complete absence of casual sexism from his speeches, essays, and private writings" which cannot be said for Bellamy (Boos 193).

Similar to Bellamy, Morris describes his society in *News from Nowhere* through a twentieth century man known as Guest, who has found himself in the future. Morris does not devote a chapter to the position of women in his new society, but their presence throughout the novel gives clues on their standing. Women work as well as men; however, their roles still perpetrate sexual divisions of labor. Women can take jobs outside of domestic labor, but their range of options is narrower than men's. Morris's different take on domestic labor, that it is a valuable form of production intrinsic to society, implies that the social relations under which it is carried out are what skews the perception of it (Levitas 80). Women are first introduced in the Hammersmith Guest House, where they fetch breakfast for the men, "[o]ne of the others, who had run off also, then came back with a big cabbage leaf full of strawberries. . ." (Morris 177). And in this society, housekeeping is seen as an important occupation and it is "a great pleasure of a clever woman to manage a house skillfully. . ." (Morris 208).

But women are not bound to the Victorian standards for addressing men and are much more forward than Morris's contemporaries would be; they introduce themselves as equals: "[t]hey came up to us at once merrily and without the least affection of shyness, and all three shook hands with me as if I were a friend newly come back from a long journey. . ." (Morris 177). This is an interesting note, that the women shake hands, which in Morris's day was an action reserved for men, and approach a stranger frankly, as they would a friend. Clearly these women are confident in their social standing. They also take part in conversations among men, as can be seen with Annie the waitress (179-181), Clara (235-238), Ellen and Clara (269-273), and the female house builder (286-289). In Morris's native Victorian

age this would have been highly improper if the conversation had been anything of substance and yet he promotes these actions. In Morris's utopian society, women were not required to be reserved.

However, Victorian women were supposed to be quiet and helpful, deferring to men. And when they stepped outside these bounds, they faced intense social backlash. For hysterics, this phenomenon is shown poignantly through Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper." A prolific writer, Gilman wrote several short stories and essays. Having suffered from mental illness herself, Gilman's short story portrays the experience of hysterical women during the Victorian era. The themes of the story show the main character disagreeing with the diagnosis and treatment her brother and husband (both doctors) prescribe, but noting that she is powerless to go against it. The main character repeats the phrase "what is one to do?" showing that she knows how futile it would be to object (Gilman 29). Yet even though she is subjected to this domineering relationship, she continues to express her love and her worry for her husband.

The dysfunctional marriage of the story is revealed through the main character's thoughts about her husband. We are given a glimpse into the couple's everyday life: "John laughs at me, of course, but one expects that in marriage;" where the husband does not respect his wife or her feelings, and instead laughs them off (Gilman 41). And the wife takes such treatment as a given: "of course" my husband laughs at me. That is what life for Victorian women entails, it is what "one expects in marriage" (Gilman 41). We are given the husband's name, a personal identifier for him, but never the main character's. While the story is completely first person, and therefore the narrator refers to herself as "I," she is also not addressed by name by any of the other characters. This choice makes her representative of all hysterics. Hysterics were no longer individuals, but simply another whining woman to be dealt quickly with. The loss of an identifier shows how hysterics must have felt in a society that did not have a place for them.

The narrator goes on to say that she "get[s] unreasonably an-

gry with John sometimes" showing that even she has been conditioned to think her emotions are invalid (Gilman 43). There is no place in Victorian society for an angry woman, especially not an angry wife. Wives cater to their husbands' every want and need. Gilman's use of language embodies how twisted the narrator's marriage is. The narrator talks of how her husband "... takes all care from me, and so I feel basely ungrateful not to value it more." (Gilman 43). Here the narrator is denied control of her own recovery. All choices are made for her, and the narrator can do nothing for herself, and of course feels resentful. But then she feels guilty for this resentment because of the social expectations lauded on her. Her husband is lowering himself to care for her, and therefore she must be eternally grateful.

The story gets inside the hysteric's mind, as the narrator does not blame herself for her illness, and she disagrees on her treatment, while seeming to understand that her husband is ultimately trying to help her. Gilman's story perfectly underscores how those diagnosed with hysteria suffered. They knew they were ill and knew they were receiving help, but they also knew that the treatment was not working, and in many cases, was only making them feel worse. And yet because of their social standing as women they knew that arguing their case would get them nowhere with their male doctors, who generally had much higher social standing than they did. The patients then suffered more from this social stress, as can be seen with the main character in "The Yellow Wallpaper," who is eventually driven mad by her seclusion.

The symptoms Gilman so poignantly displays would have been as present in Morris's life as in Bellamy's. Hysteria as an epidemic was, by its nature, easily visible. Morris's response to hysteria is reflected in his treatment of women within his future society. Women are freer in the social sphere as the strictures on marriage are weaker (Morris). If, at any point in a relationship either party wishes to end the relationship, then the relationship ends, even if children are involved (Morris). The utopian society's view on divorce is that it is a necessary event when a man and woman have "confus[ed] . . . natural passion and sentiment" but they ". . . are not so mad as to pile up degra-

dition on that unhappiness by engaging in sordid squabbles over livelihood and position, and the power of tyrannizing over the children who have been the results of love or lust" (Morris 206). In other words, if a marriage no longer works, the couple should separate with no anger and no arguing over possessions or children. While most women still congregate to provide hospitality and care for children, there is an implicit freedom to the breakdown of the traditional family. However, there is no mention of men caring for children, or in case of a failed marriage, a father who had to care for the infant.

Despite these shortcomings, there is little social stress direct to women, and the blatant use of communism creates a society where, in theory, everyone is on equal economic grounds. Because everyone chooses which job they want to have, no job is economically better than any other, and so women are on equal economic standing with men. There is also an instance of a woman, Philippa, as the chief carver in a group of homemakers, who is a single, working parent and also has a highly honorific position as the leader of the carvers (Morris 288). This social and economic equality provides conditions that are much more equal between the sexes.

News from Nowhere's river journey plot hinges on women's freedom in at least two instances: when Clara returns to Dick and when Ellen joins the party to follow Guest. Morris also includes strong roles for women. Ellen is a wisdom figure who expresses insights about history and her society that are not previously seen in the novel (Boos 199). She alone from the characters of *News from Nowhere* practices Morris's ideal of popular, living history. As the journey's end becomes a church up the Thames, Ellen becomes a Christ figure, a sort of shepherd leading Guest down the river, through towns, and eventually to the book's final meal. The last consolation in the book is offered by Ellen, when natural beauty, universal and 'feminine' is declared. Ellen's statement is often read as a socialist ideal, but it is also Morris's imagination of how women could have been altered in an egalitarian society (Boos 206).

The relative freedom afforded to women removes many of the stresses Victorian society placed on them, and their ability

to end their relationships makes them socially equal to men, with theoretical economic equality. The roles for women appear to be for their beauty and activity, and also their minds and clever conversations, and all of the women presented in the novel follow these ideals. The continuity between ideals and reality continues to alleviate social stress and there are few social causes of hysteria present in this society. While men and women are still separated in Morris's novel, they are much closer than in Bellamy's society. Morris's society has a better chance of having decreased the numbers of hysteria cases. As societies move away from the gender separation so intrinsic to Victorian society, the conditions of women's lives are improved.

Therefore, the conclusion is that separating genders causes hysteria because it increases social stress. By bringing genders together, we can decrease gender stereotypes and move toward a world where the genders can be equal. This will decrease mental illnesses caused by social stress and create better conditions for women, so that a true utopia can be realized. If we can stop seeing the genders as inherently different, we can go a long way to equality and making a better world.

Even today the genders are not completely equal, and the artificial separation of them causes not only individual strife, but societal unrest. The Pride movements of recent decades have tried to step outside the arbitrary classifications of gender and bring genders closer together, yet they have faced intense and often violent backlash. LGBTQ people choose and reject gender roles in a way reminiscent of hysterics and they are treated with the same discrimination, scorn, and misunderstanding by society that the women of the nineteenth century faced. The new roles for women, and even new roles for men, have been issues we have been dealing with for centuries, and we are still struggling with them. Yet over a century ago it was shown through Bellamy's economic equality and Morris's social and economic equality, that the closer the genders are, the closer they are to equality. If we can break down gender barriers and accept that we are all human and all equal, we can easily resolve the strife that affects us all.

Note: This essay was composed in Dr. Richard Mathews's AWR 201 class.

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