PART TWO

Women of the Third Century

In projecting the situation of woman in the third century we are not claiming clairvoyant powers for peering deeply into that future nor are we assuming the posture of the futurist who envisions living in tetrahedrons in interstellar space. We are instead taking the more moderate position of projecting into the future on the basis of trends already with us. Many of those trends which are now emerging into reality are the fruition of dreams and visions held by women of this nation writing one hundred and two hundred years ago. From the perspective of history we learn that society has been slow to incorporate these visions of change imagined by women writers from the beginnings of this country to the present time. However, we are beginning to see some of these societal changes around us and on the basis of these trends for change we can make some predictions for the future.

Impact of Contemporary Women's Movement

There are those who affirm that the trend, the major socio-cultural factor presently taking place in our society is the contemporary women's movement. It is seen to be that catalyst which absorbs the economic-politico-ideological realities of the present and spells out the future. The women's movement has taken root in the lives of women everywhere in this country and worldwide. Women of all ages, of all situations of race and class, find that they have new options and opportunities. Those of us with a historical perspective see that the hopes and visions of one hundred years ago, of two hundred years ago, are more and more descriptive of the lives we live in contemporary society. We do not see an apocalypse in which the old has passed away and the new has come, rather we see a society that has changed and changed in large measure because women have begun to perceive themselves differently; they see themselves as if reflected from a new set of mirrors. And, more importantly, women have begun to act on these new perceptions of themselves. As they have acted societal changes have begun to occur. Legislation and public pressure have begun to weaken old stereotypes, new forms of life and work are developing.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's Visionary Hopes as Instructive for Present and Future

As we have previously noted, Charlotte Perkins Gilman's significant work, Women and the Economy, is an example of an