“The governing power of the world”: feminism, motherhood, and modern science in Mary Bradley Lane’s Mizora

Kirsten Twelbeck

Angaben zur Veröffentlichung / Publication details:

Twelbeck, Kirsten. 2015. “‘The governing power of the world’: feminism, motherhood, and modern science in Mary Bradley Lane’s Mizora.” LWU: Literatur in Wissenschaft und Unterricht 48 (3): 165–78.

"The Governing Power of the World": Feminism, Motherhood, and Modern Science in Mary Bradley Lane's *Mizora*

Between 1880 and 1881, the *Cincinnati Commercial*, a daily paper with a Republican slant, printed the first radical feminist, technological utopia in the US, *Mizora*. Published in four installments, the story is told from the perspective of Vera, a European refugee on her way to America, who finds herself stranded on the shores of an all-female country of the future called "Mizora." Living happily in the womb-like, pre-oedipal center of the earth, the inhabitants of this "nation of women" (Lane 94) have "eliminated" all men and "darker races" (92 and 105): the Mizorans are extraordinarily white, athletic, and beautiful; their blonde hair, large chests, and "purplish blue" eyes (27) signal their cultural, technological, and moral superiority. According to the editor of the *Cincinnati Commercial*, Murat Halstead (better known in his later function as editor of the Brooklyn *Standard Union*), the author of this uncannily familiar tale of eugenic improvement and national purification, Mary Bradley Lane, preferred to remain anonymous.[1] When the story turned out to be a success, Halstead encouraged Lane to publish the story as a book. Afraid that she would have to disclose her identity, the author declined. When eight years later, in 1889, the publishing firm G.W. Dillingham compiled *Mizora* into a 150-page novel, Lane insisted that her name was not to appear on the book's cover—although she made sure that she held the copyright.

This essay regards her caution as a symptom of the charged climate of cultural conflict and gendered strife in the 1880s. To better understand what can be termed, in a very general sense, a multifaceted moment of transition, the following pages view *Mizora* as a radical feminist effort to capture and weigh the intellectual and emotional dimensions that distinguish the 1880s from other decades in nineteenth-century America. A strange mix of women's rights discourse, eugenics, scientific debates, and late Victorian ideals, the narrative complicates the feminist debate about gender, education, and science that preoccupied the postwar/early progressive women's movement. Skillfully navigating between extremes, it relies on the vital power of (utopian) fiction to raise questions and offer inspiration instead of suggesting clear-cut solutions. Vera Zarovitch, the book's first-person narrator and main protagonist, is the focus of this analysis; she embodies the era's fragile ideological grounding like no other fictional heroine of the day. This paper reads her story's ideological instability and shifting contexts as part of that mental and emotional adaptation process that, according to Leslie Butler, far exceeded political Reconstruction (1865-1877) and included the following decade with its conflicting ideas about human progress, evolution, and state control (cf. 173). *Mizora* builds upon what Louise Stevenson has called "the two prominent disagreements of the 1860s and 1870s"—"the (religiously motivated) 'problem of modern science' and 'the woman question'" (48), and further complicates these issues by referencing the post-Reconstruction battle over racial integration, educational reform, and technological progress. Juggling untried social concepts and ideas, the novel is part of the larger, imaginary nation-building of the post-Civil War era. Revolving around

1 Murat Halstead. "Preface to *Mizora*." Mary Bradley Lane. *Mizora*. New York: G.W. Dillingham, 1890. All biographical information in this essay, including this reference, is from Jean Pfaelzer, "Introduction," xiii.

its dark-haired heroine's sojourn among a tribe of hyperintelligent white women, it responds to and engages in the controversy surrounding coeducation (especially in US institutions of higher learning) and racial segregation in the public school system (especially, but not only, in the states of the former Confederacy). The book ends without arriving at a conclusive judgment: for the narrator of *Mizora,* universal education is merely one of several options. Whether this indecision is strategic or expresses a profound helplessness and perplexity remains open. Foregrounding the novel's complex and contradictory engagement in modern science—including theories of human evolution, racial difference, eugenics, and gendered discrepancies in brainpower—this essay reads *Mizora* as a feminist's effort to make herself heard in an environment that was in many ways hostile to educated and intellectually ambitious women. When the narrative was first published in the *Cincinnati Commercial,* women's education and their participation in intellectual work was a matter of heated scientific and public debate. Male scientists such as Edward H. Clarke famously claimed that "academic competition would be detrimental" to the "delicate physiological development" of girls since their "reproductive organs would shrivel" as a result of blood flowing to their brains rather than their uteruses (cf. Altenbaugh 235).[2] Hence, it is no coincidence that a well-read woman like Lane brought a deep sense of skepticism to a field that she otherwise admired: the field of modern science. For her gender and generation, utopian fiction writing (with its emphasis on science, technology, and progress) came second only to science itself.

Unfettered by the constraints of academic rules and regulations, utopian fiction allows for radical mental experiments. *Mizora,* however, differs from the bulk of utopian literature as it negotiates the evolutionist theories and social issues of the day in an unusually concrete manner. It is also extraordinary in its refusal to fully embrace the utopian dreamscapes that it projects with loving detail. The novel is a sounding board for various scientific and social theories that it pits against one another. While the book is noticeably driven by a deep feminist anger, what it puts under scrutiny is not limited to a male scientific repertoire: *Mizora* also challenges the postbellum feminist discourse of female genius. The book thoroughly curtails readers' expectations and leaves him or her in a state of perplexity, despairing of the novel's moral dubiousness, and its irresolvable mix of preliminary stances and self-contradictory advice. At the same time, however, the contradictions that are thus made visible allow the narrative to also explore the moral, social and institutional impacts of what is essentially a Pandora's box of mutually exclusive ideas. This, then, results in the narrative's moral instability: *Mizora* anticipates both a quasi-fascist obsession with purity and racial cleansing and progressive long-term programs for educational reform and social "uplift."

This essay does not seek to resolve the book's logical and moral dilemmas. Rather, it takes as its objective the exploration of the gendered dimension of the conflicted American mind in the post-Reconstruction era. Taking a scarcely illuminated moment in the history of United States education as its starting point, it reads *Mizora* as an effort to publicize and popularize a feminist view of modern science. By recognizing the rebelliousness of the novel as one of its main functions, the narrative's moving back and forth between universal, educational reform and social Darwinist pessimism emerges as a massive and critical intervention in the central scientific and popular debates of the early 1880s.

2 Altenbaugh refers to Clarke's *Sex in Education* (1873).

In line with this interventionist logic, the main protagonist and narrator of the story is a courageous woman with a deeply skeptical and thoughtful mind. Vera admires Mizora's celibate sisterhood, but she also goes through states of alienation and crisis that eventually lead to her departure from the "enchanted country" (Lane 94). While she shares the Mizorans' ideals of moral purity, technological progress, and higher education, she revolts against the uniformity and collectivity that prevail in their community. Vera yearns for individual and intellectual independence, but there is also an unresolved conflict between her older belief in a Christian God and the lure of science. On a general plane, her quest for truth (note the telling name "Vera") is marked by a tension between what Jane Burbick calls the early nineteenth-century's "ideology of the heart" (91) and the late nineteenth-century takeover by the "head." Neither sentimentalism nor hyperrationality wins the upper hand in this novel that first takes the reader into an Edenic, all-female future, and then back again, right into the urban disaster of a nineteenth-century, heterosexual US metropolis. Like many of her potential readers, Vera feels helpless and overwhelmed by the problems that emerged in the wake of emancipation, urbanization, immigration, and secularization. Contrary to what one may expect, however, she fails to transfer the promise that lies in the teachings of the Mizoran blondes to the moral and educational limbo of post-Reconstruction America. In the end Vera takes refuge in writing a "true and faithful account" of her journey, as the novel's subtitle announces. Her escape into fiction leads her, ironically, to a utopian country that is both of the past and of the future: after all, *Mizora* records Vera's memories of a tribe that owes its existence to the politically tumultuous years of the postwar Reconstruction, and that has developed over three thousand years into that proud nation of the pure. This paradoxical temporal overlap enables the critical negotiation between ideal and reality that defines the utopia as a genre, but it also enables an additional feminist twist: by rewriting the history of Reconstruction from a feminist viewpoint, and by merging it with a feminist (and, potentially, lesbian) dream of the future, Vera weighs the opportunities and risks of a post-gender, post-racial, post-religious, technologically advanced society against the backdrop of male-driven, late nineteenth-century cultural decline. By taking seriously her often-felt misery, which also resonates in the country-name "Mizora," among both the Edenic blondes and among America's urban poor, the narrator embodies (rather than indicates) the mental and emotional concerns of white middle-class feminists in a nation that was still struggling to define itself, approximately two decades after what was known as its "second founding" in 1865.

Vera's conflicted thoughts are told from a first person narrative perspective that allows a maximum of identification on the side of the reader. The novel's heroine and narrator is a Russian noblewoman by birth, but her moral convictions and adventurous spirit show her "American" qualities long before she settles in the United States. The cultural capital and moral code of her class, together with her revolutionary attitude and cosmopolitan upbringing make her a natural critic of the Czarist regime. After supporting the "oppressed people" of Poland and committing treason in the name of American revolutionary ideals (Lane 9), she suffers persecution by her native government and is exiled to Siberia. In the first chapter of *Mizora*, Vera describes her flight from that hostile environment and her prolonged stay among the Mizorans. The head of state is also the director of the national college; she is titled "Preceptress," and is a matriarchal figure who soon becomes Vera's trusted and beloved guardian as well as native source of information.

For fifteen years, Vera shares this motherly figure with her fairer sisters, who work tirelessly to perfect their already perfect nation. In line with the concentric logic of their country's womb-like location, Mizora evolves around the Mizoran "College of Experimental Science" that is located in a park-like national geography anticipating the late nineteenth-century City Beautiful. Driven by personal talent and collective will, the blonde geniuses research and experiment in perfectly equipped national laboratories.

The Mizorans' highly developed educational and legal infrastructure secures not only the progressive state of their society but also the moral purity of their race—a factor that is of fundamental importance to the Mizorans' civilization. Even the "little machine[s], with brushes and sponges attached" (44) that keep their houses clean, help preserve the unstained Mizoran mind and spirit. Freed from the drudgery of domestic work, the efficient blondes dedicate their lives to personal and collective self-cultivation. Although they live at a temporal remove of three thousand years into the future, these ladies appear strangely familiar. As Jean Pfaelzer has pointed out, they have driven the ideal of "true womanhood" to its logical extreme: the utopian woman is "*still* contently submissive, but strong in her inner purity," she is "queen of her own contained realm, which is really the extension of her home" (*Utopian* 148). Most obviously, their unblemished perfection shows in their effortless celibacy: they have successfully overcome desire, sex, pregnancy, and childbirth. Three thousand years earlier, these virgin-chemists discovered "the Secret of Life" (Lane 103) which allowed them to eliminate the male line in the first place: they simply let it die out. This Darwinian vision of female intellectual victory carries a late nineteenth-century, conservative American nightmare to extremes: between 1870 and 1900, "young women commonly outperformed their male classmates in academic subjects, particularly in the sciences, always dominated the graduation class, and typically were the class valedictorians" (Altenbaugh 234). As the historian John Rury found out in his study of Lane's hometown Cincinnati, girls "outnumbered boys in the top ten ranked graduates from both the city's high schools" (cf. Altenbaugh 234). In the early 1880s, the most common effort to keep these young women from pursuing a higher education was the aforementioned theory of the female intellectual's infertility: according to Edward Clarke, motherhood and female intellectual endeavors were mutually exclusive concepts. *Mizora,* however, puts an end to Clarke's misogynist binary: after separating motherhood from the sexed body, the Mizorans use the term "mother" to describe the nurturing qualities that they attach to the female gender as such, regardless of the notion of biological motherhood. Utopian motherhood, then, includes, first and foremost, intellectual and creative activities, all of which are geared toward the reproduction of the race.

All of this makes *Mizora* an almost prototypical, early example of "eugenic feminism"—a category introduced by Asha Nadkarni in 2006. As a predominantly rhetorical formula, eugenic feminism celebrates self-purification and self-perfection "to create a feminist subject who, free of race, guarantees the reproduction of the sovereign nation" (221).[3] In accordance with their inherited genius, the utopian blondes have turned this post-racial rhetoric into a routine practice to speed up the building of their nation: they have outsourced natural reproduction to

3 Nadkarni uses "the phrase 'eugenic feminism' to refer not only to US and Indian feminism's historical engagement with the eugenics movement but also to the rhetoric of feminism itself." By doing so she exposes an uncanny connection between feminism and racism (Nadkarni 221). She further develops her thoughts in ***Eugenic Feminism*** (2014).

collectively-run national laboratories where the ovum is developed into an embryo without fertilization. By addressing parthenogenesis and making it a planned rather than an accidental occurrence (as is the case in Gilman's 1915 novel *Herland*), the novel touches upon deep cultural fears of the late nineteenth-century. As the religiously infused terminology of the "virgin birth" indicates, the concept challenged male hegemony and the notion of parenthood as part of the heterosexual contract. According to Smilla Ebeling, parthenogenesis (a term coined by Richard Owen in 1849) was a theoretical battleground throughout the nineteenth century, as biologists and evolutionists fought over its place in relation to heterosexual reproduction. By the 1880s, parthenogenesis had become central to the debate over sexuality, love, and reproduction that was staged and restaged in order to strengthen various scientific arguments in the field of evolutionary biology (110-116).[4] As a feminist contribution to this field, *Mizora* de-sexualizes reproduction and separates it from the concept of romantic love. The novel projects a notion of motherhood that goes beyond the act of conception and childbirth and even transcends traditional childrearing duties: the Mizorans' exclusively female offspring grow up in the care of professional educators while their chemist-mothers serve as guardians and knowledgeable mentors. Allowing the mothers time for learning, teaching, and research, this constellation, then, guarantees the quality, survival, and happiness of the race and the advancement of the nation.

From a retrospective, post-Holocaust perspective, the book's content is deeply disturbing. In the early 1880s, however, its broad thematic focus and speculative approach made it appear inspirational rather than dogmatic. The Mizorans' anti-male ideology, for example, is powerfully counterbalanced through recourse to the established norms of nineteenth-century true womanhood. It seems that by refusing to privilege one school of evolutionary thought over the other, the book contributes, in an open-ended and unorthodox manner, to the 1880s marketplace of competing theories. Because it asks—not answers—ethical questions about social engineering, the limits of humanness, and the right to "own" human nature, *Mizora* may have been more in accord with public sentiment than its contradictory messages suggest.

For all its seeming marginality, *Mizora* appeared in the midst of a cultural constellation that was marked by intense theoretical bargaining (in evolutionary science, in matters relating to education, gender, and race) on the one hand, and by a very particular generational influence on the other. Lane belonged to that hinge generation of American women who had been raised in the spirit of the 1850s, in the absence of their soldiering fathers. Her age group had experienced antebellum ideals as frayed, distorted, and, most of all, non-imperative. When the war was over, these women refused to embrace antebellum ideals of domesticity and self-limitation. Together with the young men of their generation they took it upon themselves to reconcile Victorian gender norms and orthodox Christianity with the Darwinian concepts and theories of the postwar age. The young women were doubly encouraged (and forced, as due to the war they outnumbered the men) to strive for independence, higher education, and a stable income to support themselves, and, sometimes, their war-ridden families. Not at all untypical for her generation, Lane remained single until she was thirty-four—and when she eventually married a Civil

4 It was only in the early twentieth century—when Gregor Mendel's findings were eventually acknowledged by the scientific community—that the sexual origin (of the two genders) was commonly recognized as the superior form of reproduction. Cf. Ebeling 116.

War veteran ten years her senior, she had a professional career as a schoolteacher that proved helpful for the couple's economic survival. Archival materials reveal that the Lanes struggled financially (cf. Pfaelzer, "Introduction" xiii). It is very well possible that economic difficulties motivated Mary Lane to submit work to the local paper. Significantly, however, she concealed her writing career from her husband, although—or maybe because—she had known him since childhood.

Feminists of Lane's generation are known to have felt particularly betrayed by the patriarchal underpinnings of the "second founding": the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments granted full citizenship rights and an end to discrimination to formerly enslaved men but excluded female voters. Importantly, Reconstruction lawmaking was accompanied by a more general reluctance of the male elite to share their power and influence with the daughters of the Civil War. Henry Ward Beecher, who was an important public spokesman in the years following the war, was among those who took a decided stance against women in the workplace: he strategically adapted the notion of "true womanhood" to the postwar era. Beecher promoted a new, joyful, and voluntary concept of female intellectual self-limitation. In his influential 1867 novel *Norwood*, women are explicitly welcome in the system of postwar higher education and invited to contribute their ideas to current scientific debates, but only as long as such activities remain within the confines of her empire, the home (cf. Twelbeck 201-202). With its blurring of the lines between the domestic realm, educational sphere, and national institutions, *Mizora* fiercely attacks this toned-down Victorianism and its misogynist premises. At the same time, however, Lane's novel goes beyond a narrowly feminist agenda and suggests alternative, albeit "female" ways of minimizing the threats of modernization and mass immigration. As will be shown at a later point, these alternatives are not clearly spelled out but refer, somewhat vaguely, to female participation in general. While acknowledging the role of science and technology as legitimate instruments of population control and social engineering, *Mizora* demands that more attention must be paid to female voices, including those of "darker," immigrant women. With its broad thematic setup, its competing ideological reference points, and its subtle sense of irony, the book demands that "real" women like Vera (who in her doubtful attitude was more "real" than her fairer sisters) must be fully recognized as citizens in the post-Reconstruction United States.

In view of Beecher's pseudo-enlightened "cosmic success story" (Smith 58) and the more general neo-Victorian trend of the postwar era, it is no coincidence that a feminist author would stage a central protagonist who despairs of the status quo. When Vera eventually returns to the real world and settles in a US city, her efforts to contribute to the reshaping of a "fallen America" prove to be limited: while it had been surprisingly easy for her to adapt to the different cultures that she passed through on her way to Mizora, she now feels powerless at the sight of the poor, ignorant, and insane who "multiply with reckless improvidence" and criminals with "a horrible capacity for murder that lies in [their] blood" (Lane 147). In line with Thomas Malthus's then newly popular eighteenth-century views, Vera feels that charity would be an inadequate and insufficient response to moral decline. It is at this low point that she remembers that the Mizorans, too, had suffered early setbacks before winning the Darwinian race. This legacy, then, allows her to redefine her personal goals, and, in the end, Vera concludes that "(t)hough we cannot hope to attain their perfection in our generation, yet many, very many, evils could be obliterated were we to follow their laws" (147).

Ironically, however, it is not exactly clear what this means. Only a few pages earlier, the narrator had left Mizora due to a heterosexual longing and her intuitive reserve against the hyperrationalism of its inhabitants. Vera also disagrees with the profound atheism of these calm and happy blondes who have no use for a suffering Jesus and men in general. By freeing themselves from the burden of original sin, these celibate creatures have brought the Christian obsession with sin to its logical, atheistic end. In their world, science has replaced God—just as beautiful granite roses have uncannily taken the place of a divine nature. A double message, then, pervades Vera's description of an artificial Eden where "no sound greeted me from the ripening orchards, save the carol of birds; from the fields came no note of harvest labor. No animals were visible, no sound of any. No hum of life." (14)

For all its superior beauty and perfection, Mizora breathes a spiritual emptiness and artificiality that bothers the visitor from the real world, and while Vera enjoys the wonders and educational opportunities of the "enchanted country," she is repeatedly gripped by a sense of shock and alienation. After fifteen years among its blonde inhabitants, she remains unable to sever the deep, emotional ties to the husband and son whom she left behind. Although she recognizes, somewhat critically, that this sentimental longing is a part of those "contracted forces of thought" in which she was "born and reared" (139), she eventually accepts the underlying craving for authentic, sensual experience as a defining part of her existence as a human being, a woman, and a feminist with roots in the real world.

Significantly, it is only after Vera has acknowledged original sin as a defining dimension of her own identity that she questions whether the Mizorans are humans: "Were the lovely blonde women fairies – or some weird beings of different specie, human only in form?" (94). In other words, the novel's religious theme—reverberating in biblical allusions to original sin, the garden of Eden, the creation of life — is tied to a surprisingly modern debate about the replacement of humankind through posthuman species. Like all the other philosophical issues that *Mizora* brings to the surface, the status of the blondes as (post-)humans remains uncertain. Additionally, Vera's own post-Mizoran life denies the reader a sense of moral or philosophical closure with regard to the limits of humanness. Vera, too, ends up living a celibate life that she dedicates to writing about a imaginary, female world—for upon her return to the nineteenth-century metropolis, she finds that her husband and son have died. The reader, of course, is left wondering what she bemoans most: her widowed status or her decision to leave her beloved sisters in the sheltering womb of the earth.

Jean Pfaelzer is right when she attests to the strong dystopian element that pervades this novel ("Introduction" xxxv). But then "[e]very utopia always comes with its implied dystopia—whether the dystopia of the status quo, which the utopia is engineered to address, or the dystopia found in the way this specific utopia corrupts itself in practice" (Gordin 2). In *Mizora*, however, the two seem strangely intertwined, and while Vera is not the first time traveler to become homesick in a fairyland, her narrative is exceptionally fierce in its refusal to resolve the tension between the "enchanted country" and the "misery" that echoes through the name of the nation. Interspersed with dystopian elements from the very beginning, the novel develops along the lines of mutually exclusive theoretical principles. While for Vera this leads into a dilemma that is more emotional than moral, it causes readers to experience a logical and ideological crisis. Should we applaud Vera for preferring an imperfect world to a state of absolute control? Or should we lament

her surrender to "inferior" drives, her active refusal to be fully enlightened? These questions do not emerge from a current, twenty-first-century viewpoint alone: the conflict between liberty and control, and between sentiment and intellect, were at the heart of America's cultural and political discourse throughout the nineteenth century.

Mizora seeks to solve these conflicts through recourse to late nineteenth-century evolutionary discourse. As this essay argued earlier, the novel does not offer smooth ideological closure but engages in the marketplace of evolutionary approaches. *Mizora* openly contradicts the Darwinian discourse of the early 1880s through feminist intervention. The novel's troubling stance vis-à-vis Lewis Henry Morgan's evolutionary model is a case in point. Only three years before the initial publication of *Mizora* in the *Cincinnati Commercial*, the US anthropologist had claimed the impossibility of skipping steps on the evolutionary ladder. At first sight, *Mizora* seems to confirm this model: although she admires the posthuman ideal of the blondes, Vera eventually succumbs to earlier beliefs and traditions and returns to the real world. At the same time, however, her life among the Mizorans challenges Morgan's gradualist concept: when she first arrives in the "enchanted country," she skips evolutionary periods with considerable ease by learning the utopians' language in a very short time and lives comfortably among the sisterhood. She also adapts quickly to presumably lower states of civilization, as she befriends a tribe of "Esquimaux" during her voyage.[5] What does it mean that they help her survive in the Arctic while she shows them how to use a compass? Is *Mizora* not so much indebted to Morgan but to John Wesley Powell, the neo-Lamarckian who was one of the few to believe in the ability of *all* humans to progress, and in social evolution through active, cross-ethnic cooperation?[6] (This groundbreaking concept was just beginning to become known to a larger audience when the *Cincinnati Examiner* printed the four installments of *Mizora*.) But then why does Vera's Mizoran friend who travels with her to the United States die of exhaustion caused by the country's morally hostile climate? Does this mean there is a limit to cross-racial cooperation? Are Lane's blondes the sorry result of overbreeding and isolation? How is all of this connected to the social ills of the early 1880s? How does it relate to one of America's most fiercely debated issues, namely education? Can the narrative be read as a critical intervention into the segregated public school system that at Reconstruction's end had absorbed the freedmen's schools? Does it disapprove, indirectly, of regulations at northern high schools where African Americans were seated separately from their white peers (cf. Altenbaugh 155 and 98)?

As a whole, *Mizora* refuses to provide answers on the grounds of an ideological agenda. At the same time, however, its heroine is not without moral and political convictions. Significantly, Vera admires the Mizoran educational ideal but objects to racial homogeneity as a defining prerequisite for higher learning: the college of her superior sisters provides access to white blonde women only. Vera's struggle

5 For an introduction to early American ethnography and how it prefigured the debates of the post-1880s, see Robert E. Bieder, *Science Encounters the Indian, 1820-1880* (Norman: U of Oklahoma P, 1986).

6 Powell was an important bridge between Morgan's classical cultural evolutionary ideas and the school of Franz Boas, who opposed the idea of a progression from savagery to civilization (cf. Haller 110). Powell's ideas had much in store for late nineteenth-century feminists: in various publications during the 1880s, he distinguished *cultural* evolution from *animal* evolution by grouping science, art, and cooking as indicative of a "conscious effort for improvement in condition." Powell, "Barbarian to Civilization," *American Anthropologist* (1888): 103-104, quoted in Haller 109.

with her "sisters'" all-encompassing segregationist dogma cannot be separated from the so-called Jim Crow laws that institutionalized racial segregation in US schools right around the time of the novel's serial publication in the *Cincinnati Commercial*.[7] Awestruck by the Mizorans' all-white national college, Vera dreams of an American "Temple of Learning"—"grand in proportion, complete in detail, with a broad gateway over whose wide-open majestic portal was the significant inscription: 'ENTER WHO WILL: NO WARDER STANDS WATCH AT THE GATE'" (68). The fact that this means something entirely different in America's post-slavery era than it does in the egalitarian system of the Mizorans makes this an ironic passage. In line with the novel's more general strategy, however, its message remains unclear and disquieting.

For all its ideological blurriness and lack of a social vision, *Mizora* deserves credit for responding to anti-immigrant xenophobia, lynchings, and exclusion laws at an early point in time. Its call for government intervention, education, and scientific research in the name of social progress anticipates a combination that the sociologist Lester Frank Ward demanded with more authority two years after *Mizora* was published.[8] There are also striking similarities between the world that Vera encounters during her journey and William J. McGee's anthropological model of 1899: both propose four distinct evolutionary stages—savagery, barbarism, civilization, enlightenment—and emphasize the role of technological progress. Even post-1890 US nativism is clearly laid out in *Mizora*. Foreshadowing the social activism and large-scale progressive reform programs of the 1880s, most of the novel's concerns touch upon the relationship between education and evolutionary progress. Yet can human intervention give "a dynamic impulse to the chain of being" (Livingstone 54), as Vera hopes, somewhat vaguely, on the last page of the book? Or should we reject such neo-Lamarckian ideas[9] because it is only the fittest few who—according to the "social Darwinist" positions of Herbert Spencer and William Graham Sumner[10]—will bring progress and prosperity to the nation in the making? Once again, the discourse of fiction overrules the need of science to settle upon *one* plausible solution: possible answers are relegated to the reader.

The book's one unambiguous topic is the belief in female superiority: both the Mizorans *and* Vera are endowed with unequaled intelligence. Female brainpower was a common theme in late nineteenth-century feminist circles. In an 1868 speech,

7 The first law to regulate racial segregation after the American Civil War was passed in Tennessee in 1881 and segregated public transportation. Soon similar regulations "spread on both the municipal and government level, climaxing with the 1883 Supreme Court decision to declare important paragraphs in the 1875 Civil Rights Act unconstitutional" (Schuyler). (The 1875 Civil Rights Act was the first to support forced integration by desegregation). After the American Civil War, many schools and universities remained limited to white men; sometimes religious denomination was an additional obstacle. Black schools were notoriously underfinanced, making it extremely difficult for African Americans to attend one of the few universities that were open to them (cf. Stevenson 101-136).

8 Ward's influential *Dynamic Sociology, or Applied Social Science* promoted government intervention to relieve poverty as well as the centrality of science for social progress.

9 Like their Lamarckian predecessors, the neo-Lamarckians felt that "a laissez-faire approach to social issues was tantamount to a denial of human creativity and the very principle of evolutionary development. Convinced that they could change the future course of social evolution, they supported policies for improving social conditions" (Livingstone 55).

10 Sumner believed that the "survival of the fittest" was a natural law that could be interrupted by human intervention without ultimately being stopped in its course. A society that implements programs to support the "unfitted," he suggested, may produce equality but contradicts the notion of liberty. Cf. Henning 87 and Ross 85-87.

Elizabeth Cady Stanton had objected to the then commonly held Comptean conviction that "woman" could only "inspire science but was not herself a scientist" (Satter 46). According to the famous feminist leader, women had a natural affinity with science. The speech and its publication in the early 1880s inspired a whole generation of white American feminists who responded to this theoretical battle-cry: they "heralded themselves as the epitome of Anglo Saxon racial development, claimed science as a womanly spiritual discourse, promoted cooperation over capitalism, and strategized toward the final eradication of devolutionary male desire" (Satter 27).

Mizora substantiates such ideas by appropriating Francis Galton's concept of "hereditary genius" to a feminist agenda.[11] In his 1869 book *Hereditary Genius*, Galton claimed that individual intelligence was almost entirely hereditary, and that "a natural biological sifting had already occurred with the cream settling naturally, effortlessly, at the top" (cf. Sweeney 11). With their "dependably good intelligence" that is automatically passed on across generations, the Mizorans are Galton's "superiority doctrine" incarnated, complemented through a feminist ideology of women's natural moral superiority.

Mizora is as much inspired by Galton's theory as it is by the critical discourse that evolved around his book in the early 1880s, when researchers came to recognize the defining role of the environment on human behavior.[12] The skepticism that *Hereditary Genius* was met with, offered a crucial chance for feminist intervention, and Lane jumped at it eagerly as it enabled her to examine the female potential for genius. In *Mizora*, female talent and moral superiority are indisputable facts but they come at a high price. While Galton's exclusively male geniuses thrive in a patriarchal, heteronormative society, female excellence can only develop in an all-female sphere. By aligning maleness with impurity, contamination, and decay, the novel adds a feminist and albeit racist twist to Galton's concept of the survival of the best. At the same time, however, *Mizora* pushes Stanton's statement that women's "natural" affinity to the natural sciences would make them "the governing power of the world" (Stanton, qtd. in Satter 46) to its logical extreme: after winning the scientific race, the blondes dwell in what Jessica Burwell in her critical analysis of the utopian genre calls "a self-contained 'elsewhere' of existent conditions" (1). Unable to exchange ideas and cooperate with others,[13] the Mizorans may have reminded nineteenth-century readers of those "celibate monasteries or sisterhoods" that Galton mentions in *Hereditary Genius*. "The best form of civilization," he argues, should provide isolated, secluded places as possible refuge for the "civilized but weak" (362).[14] Anticipating Marxist critiques of the utopian genre, Lane addresses the escapist dimensions of the utopian ideal and calls for a full, disillusioned, and honest recognition of the very real problems of a patriarchal, socially, ethnically, and racially diverse society (cf. Burwell 1).

The novel's critical elaboration of Stanton's feminist claim of female superiority is further complicated by the Victorian doctrine of the heart. Living in a transitional

11 The English polymath introduced the term "eugenics" in 1883.

12 Galton in fact watered down his claim that "heredity is nearly all, and environment almost nothing in the making of individual intelligence" (Sweeney 2).

13 This is one of the notable differences between *Mizora* and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland*: the Herlanders welcome contact and personal, even romantic, exchanges with male strangers.

14 There is irony in this vision of a "doomed race" of hyper-whites who are unfit to meet the challenges of urban America: only a few years earlier, American anthropologists had legitimized black exclusion by arguing that because of their tropical origins, African Americans were unfit to meet the challenges of modernity. Cf. Galton 362.

period between "true" and "new" womanhood, Vera combines conservative moral values with a progressive feminist agenda and an independent mind. She is torn between sentiment and intellect: should she listen to the language of her heart? Or should she follow the calling of her brain? In the end she trusts in true sentimental fashion, her heartfelt experience and intuition. While this turns out to be a fatal mistake (the last scene of the book projects an unhappy woman who finds solace only in writing), the book insists that in the absence of emotion it is impossible to make any decisions at all. In line with contemporary psychological research on judgment and decision-making, incidental emotions and physiological changes influence what Vera decides to do. The novel's two most crucial events are described as moments of great emotional intensity. Appearing in close sequence, they lead to Vera's decision to leave Mizora. Relating how she saw the hidden portraits of "good and evil looking men" in the Mizorans' national gallery, she remembers being gripped with "an odd kind of companionship," and that she wept "the bitter tears of actual experience" (Lane 90-91). Imperfect and morally stained, these dead men embody the notion of truth and authenticity that Vera finds lacking in Mizora. In a remarkably Christian fit of recognition she sobs that these men "had loved as I had loved, and sinned as I had sinned, and suffered as I had suffered" (90-91). When she recognizes the chemical origins of Mizora she reacts, once more, with authentic, unmediated shock: "I trembled at the suggestion of my own thoughts" (94). As an unfiltered expression of inner turmoil, the trembling body signals a discrepancy between physical experience and intellect that reminds Vera of the promises held by a fully lived, nineteenth-century, heterosexual woman's life: love, passion, sex, and the pain of childbirth.[15]

Essentially, the narrator does not criticize the elimination of men as morally wrong. She also does not object to the usage of reproductive technology per se. The novel goes beyond a naïve return to the sentimentalist credo where nothing is more trustworthy than the individual's gut feeling. Rather, what is at stake here is the preconscious struggle between intellect and emotion, and the meaning of this struggle in a society that demands both. By transforming the avid learner into a trembling female, the novel highlights an unstructured, physical moment as narrative turning point. It is the language of the body that allows Vera to experience, for the first time in *Mizora*, a moment of true independence, individual difference, and agency. Thus, when she is told one page later that "the highest excellence of moral and mental character is only attainable by a fair race," Vera finds herself "secretly disagreeing" with the Mizoran practice of racial cleansing. As she confides to the reader, she is

> of the opinion that their admirable system of government, social and political, and their encouragement and provision for universal culture of so high an order, had more to do with the formation of superlative character than the elimination of the dark complexion. (92-93)

Importantly, the novel presents Vera's anti-racist stance as not a matter of political considerations but of intuition. Deviating from the earlier nineteenth-century ideal of a "true woman's" God-sent sense of "what's right and what's wrong," her emotional reaction is entirely self-serving. As the narrator does not tire to tell readers,

15 Pfaelzer argues that in Mizora "chastity is seen as a refuge from both male-dominated sexuality and from the pain of childbirth" (Pfaelzer, *Utopian* 92).

she is "a brunette" (17) with "dark hair and eyes" that "were such a contrast to all the other hair and eyes to be met with in Mizora" (79). In other words, Vera's rejection of racial elimination reduces racial differences to the natural diversity within white societies. Sidestepping Jim Crow legislation, reservation policies, and anti-Chinese pogroms, the novel prompts a more general suspicion toward the ideal of racial purity and homogeneity: to resist such ideas becomes a matter of individual survival that applies to *all* humans, including brunettes.

Thus, there is a surprisingly clear-sighted plea to accept "pollution" as a defining marker of the real: in a multiracial country like the United States, "dark hair and dark eyes" figure as biological bulwark against racial absolutes since they are common among all racial groups. *Mizora* also acknowledges affect and intuition as a motor for enlightened human action and partisanship. At the same time, however, the novel challenges an all-too-easy alignment of sentiment and truth. According to Vera "the contracted forces of thought in which [she] had been born and reared" are as limiting as they are enabling. By constantly destabilizing its own ideals, *Mizora* is, therefore, a "critical utopia" where "the alternative society and indeed the original society fall back as settings for the foregrounded political quest of the protagonist" (Moylan 45).

Unresolved and ambiguous, *Mizora* is an example for the vital power of literature to interrupt scientific debates without being expected to offer watertight, alternative solutions. On its dark side it shows that the disasters of the empirical world tend to have their roots in the human imagination. *Mizora* is—at its best—a quest for a middle ground between utopia and a community of the heart rooted in the material conditions of history. At its worst, however, it is a severe, proto-fascist fantasy of collective renewal based on racial cleansing and the elimination of men. Ultimately, the book leaves it to the reader to either subscribe to a reformist call for universal education or to the Mizoran practice of social progress through artificial breeding, effective community organization, and technological perfection.

Hannover *Kirsten Twelbeck*

Works Cited

Altenbaugh, Richard J. *The American People and their Education: A Social History.* Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, 2003. Print.

Bieder, Robert E. *Science Encounters the Indian, 1820-1880.* Norman and London: U of Oklahoma P, 1986. Print.

Burbick, Joan. *Healing the Republic: The Language of Health and the Culture of Nationalism in Nineteenth-Century America.* New York: Cambridge UP, 1994. Print.

Burwell, Jessica. *Notes on Nowhere: Feminism, Utopian Logic, and Social Transformation.* Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1997. Print.

Butler, Leslie. "Reconstructions in Intellectual and Cultural Life." *Reconstructions: New Perspectives on the Postbellum United States.* Ed. Thomas J. Brown. New York: Oxford UP, 2006. 172-205. Print.

Ebeling, Smilla. *Die Fortpflanzung der Geschlechterverhältnisse. Das metaphorische Feld der Parthenogenese in der Evolutionsbiologie*: Mössingen: Talheim, 2002. Print.

Galton, Francis. *Hereditary Genius: An Inquiry into its Laws and Consequences.* London: McMillan Co., 1869. Print.

Gilman, Charlotte Perkins. *Herland.* 1915. *Project Gutenberg.* Web. 15 Sept. 2015.

Gordin, Michael D. "Introduction: Utopia and Dystopia Beyond Space and Time." *Utopia/Dystopia: Conditions of Historical Possibility.* Eds. Michael D. Gordin et al. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2010. 1-20. Print.

Haller, John S. *Outcasts from Evolution: Scientific Attitudes of Racial Inferiority, 1859-1900.* Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1971. Print.

Henning, Christoph. "Naturalistic Values and Progressive Politics: A Missing Link Between Pragmatism and Social Theory." *European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy* IV (2012): 84-106. Print.

Lane, Mary E. Bradley. *Mizora: A Prophecy: An 1880s Radical Feminist Utopia.* Ed. Jean Pfaelzer. New York: Syracuse UP, 2000. Print.

Livingstone, David N. *Darwin's Forgotten Defenders: The Encounter Between Evangelical Theology and Evolutionary Thought.* Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 1984. Print.

Malthus, Thomas R. *An Essay on the Principle of Population.* 1798. Reprint. New York: Oxford UP, 2008. 39-45. Print.

McGee, William John. "The Foundation of Science." *The Forum* (April 1899). Web. 22 Sept. 2015.

Moylan, Tom. *Demand the Impossible: Science Fiction and the Utopian Imagination.* New York: Methuen, 1986. Print. McGee, William John. "The Foundation of Science." *The Forum* (April 1899). Web. 22 Sept. 2015.

Nadkarni, Asha. "Eugenic Feminism: Asian Reproduction in the U.S. National Imaginary." *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 39.2 (Spring 2006): 221-244. Print.

Pfaelzer, Jean. "Introduction." *Mizora: A Prophecy.* Ed. Jean Pfaelzer. New York: Syracuse UP, 2000. Xi-xl. Print.

---. *The Utopian Novel 1886-1896.* Pittsburg: U of Pittsburg, 2009. Print.

Ross, Dorothy. *The Origins of American Social Science.* Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991. Print.

Satter, Beryl. *Each Mind a Kingdom: American Women, Sexual Purity, and the New Thought Movement, 1875-1920.* Berkeley: U of California P, 1999. Print.

Schuyler, Lori. "Post-Reconstruction through 1920." *Virginia Center for Digital History.* Web. 5 Sept. 2015.

Smith, Henry Nash. "The Scribbling Women and the Cosmic Success Story." *Critical Inquiry* 1.1 (Sept. 1974): 47-70. Print.

Stevenson, Louise L. *The Victorian Homefront: American Thought and Culture, 1860-1880.* New York: Twayne, MacMillan, 1991. Print.

Sweeney, Gerald. *"Fighting for the Good Cause" Reflections on Galton's Legacy to American Hereditarian Psychology.* Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society. Web. 12 Sept. 2013.

Twelbeck, Kirsten. "The New Rules of the Democratic Game: Emancipation, Self-Regulation, and the 'Second Founding' of the United States." *Civilizing and Decivilizing Processes. Figurational Approaches to American Culture.* Eds. Christa Buschendorf et al. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2011. 175-208. Print.