

CHAPTER 1

The Possibility of a Liberating Narrative: *Woman on the Edge of Time* as Radical, Mythic, Moral Argument

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In a recent conversation with a friend, I brought up Marge Piercy's utopian novel *Woman on the Edge of Time*. Her reaction was a surprise. "Oh, God. I hate that book," she said. "It's so didactic, it pounds you over the head. It's not literature." I worried over these statements, wondering where my own pleasure in reading this novel lies. How could I account for its success (in more than four printings)? Ultimately I agreed with my friend. This novel is not really literature—it is politics, and good politics at that. As such, it should be treated as explicit political rhetoric, and assessed according to the political and ethical standards of the critic's interpretive community.

Walter Fisher, Wayne Booth, and others have argued that narrative serves more than an aesthetic function. My argument is that this novel, like narratives of all types, makes public arguments about political, moral, and ethical questions. This process is akin to what philosopher Carl Wellman describes as "thought experimenting," the imaginary testing of hypotheses regarding ethics and values that attempts to convince an audience of the value of a particular way of living.

NARRATIVES AS ARGUMENT: IMAGINING A BETTER WORLD

Because narrative arguments personalize public debate, using emotional and ethical proofs and experientially based data and warrants in support of their claims, they are a unique vehicle for public moral or political

argument. In the course of this paper, I will raise issues about the ways in which narratives argue, the efficacy of presenting radical or oppositional arguments in a literary format, and the role of the critic in evaluating these arguments.

To get at the question of how narratives argue, I want to explore Carl Wellman's notion of the "thought experiment." To put it simply, a thought experiment is the mental process in which a person asks others or herself, "What would the world be like if X happened?" or "What would it be like to live in a different kind of place?" or "What would it feel like to be this other kind of a person?" and finally, "Would it be right or good or valuable?" As Wellman puts it, a thought experiment is the testing out of an ethical hypothesis' implications (32). This process is not always a private one. On the contrary, when ethical matters arise in debate, the thought experiment, a kind of imaginary induction, is one of the only methods of proof.

A thought experiment is an argument. The description of the test case is the premise or set of premises of the argument; the statement that the imagined object is good or the possible act is right is the conclusion. (41)

An important characteristic of this kind of thinking is the use of imagery to concretize an ethical principle. Imaginative descriptions function as premises in the argument, providing reasons for the ethical conclusion (43–44).

In a fictional narrative, then, a proposition is set forth with evidence constituted by the experiences of the characters in the narrative and by the way these experiences are structured. MacCabe (as represented in Fiske) describes how the multiple discourses in any given narrative are structured to privilege one of them in a "hierarchy of discourses" (Fiske 25). Like other kinds of narrative, feminist utopian novels do exhibit hierarchies of discourses that privilege the discourses of specific political perspectives.

These novels do this in a way that could be characterized as oppositional myth. According to Fiske (after Lévi-Strauss, Barthes), mythic narrative puts opposed cultural values or groups into a dialogue in which the voice of the established order comes out on top (Fiske 132–33). The oppositions embodied in a myth are mediated by the mythic hero "with characteristics from both categories" (Fiske 133). Feminist utopian novels usually feature this kind of hero(ine). Here, however, this mythic strategy does not reinforce the dominant culture, but rather functions as a rhetorical/argumentative strategy that helps the reader to understand an *oppositional* set of values. The hero has just enough of the characteristics of the dominant set of values to facilitate reader identification and mediate between the known and the new. This mediation helps ease the reader into a new, radically challenging world.

Marge Piercy's novel is a mythic, argumentative, and potentially radical narrative that employs several rhetorical strategies—dialectical opposition of worldviews and values; the embodiment of public, sociopolitical and ethical issues in personal, experiential data; and an initiation strategy that allows the reader to become gradually integrated with the utopian society along with the story's protagonist—in support for its claims about the ideal world. After explicating the text, I will discuss these strategies and their goals in light of their fidelity to a socialist-feminist political agenda. If there can be such a thing as a radical narrative, is *Woman on the Edge of Time* an example? And what is the critic's role in evaluating such a narrative?

THE ARGUMENTATIVE STRATEGIES OF THE FEMINIST UTOPIAN NOVEL: *WOMAN ON THE EDGE OF TIME*

The genre of utopian fiction (from the Greek, meaning “no place,” places of the imagination) includes depictions of alternative worlds and lives in both eutopias (“good places”) and dystopias (“bad places”). So it follows that a feminist utopia, like all utopias, is basically a depiction of an alternative society that acts as a perspective on and critique of the structural oppression of our own society, targeting those aspects of our society directly related to the oppression of women.

Such novels sustain an intense dialectic between the personal and the political, the private and the public, undertaking the explicit negotiation of the relationship between an individual woman and the societies in which she lives—and could live. A utopian novel is explicitly didactic and political, designed to teach and to argue. Most critics see utopias as calls to action (Kessler 19). In my view, the primary rhetorical strategy of the feminist utopian novel is the presentation of political, public messages about the structure of society at large through the personal, private perspective of an individual woman.

The form of these novels, then, is simultaneously public and private, reinforcing the feminist political messages that our public and private lives are interrelated and that to live in a society based on the welfare of the collective is better than to live in one that is completely privatized. The dialectic between public and private is, in both content and structure, the underlying principle of Marge Piercy's novel *Woman on the Edge of Time*.

Woman on the Edge of Time is the story of Connie Ramos, a single, Chicana welfare mother. At the beginning of the story, she attacks her niece Dolly's pimp Geraldo in order to defend Dolly, whom he is beating. As a result, Connie is incarcerated in a mental hospital, where we learn she

has been before as a result of a prolonged depression over the death of her imprisoned, black, blind, and utterly powerless lover Claud. During her period of grief, Connie had neglected her daughter Angelina, and she committed herself to the hospital in the hope of being healed. Her daughter has been adopted by a white family, and now Connie is once again imprisoned. While in the hospital, she is treated like an object. No one listens to her side of the story or tries to help her in any way. Instead, she is drugged and ignored—until she is selected for use in a frightening neurosurgical mind-control experiment.

Meanwhile, Connie has been contacted by Luciente, a woman from a eutopian future, and learns to project herself mentally into this future. Eventually she becomes intimate with the members of this society, which provides a critical perspective on her own, teaching her as the novel teaches the reader. The novel alternates among several different times. There is of course Connie's present and the eutopian future. The reader also has access to Connie's memories of her difficult life. In addition, a second future hinges on the thought-control experiments imposed on Connie, this one horribly dystopic. In her encounters with the people of Mattapoissett (Luciente's community), Connie learns that her present is a "crux time" that determines which of the futures will come to be.

An intense dialectic between public and private operates in this novel on several levels. First, Piercy is careful to draw clear connections between the individual private lives she documents and the impact on them by the structure of the society. Second, Luciente's community is just that—an integrated community with a rich public life, whereas Connie's version of the twentieth century is highly privatized, a place where people live in almost complete isolation from one another. The eutopian public world provides a point-by-point critique of the private one, with Connie as the link between the two. Finally, as discussed above, the interaction between the novel and the reader is simultaneously public and private. The text is a public call to action that is very persuasive insofar as the reader can identify with Connie and trust her voice and her interpretation of events.

To identify with Connie is to experience her world, and to engage in the first level of the public/private dialectic I have identified: the recognition that the private is public, that identity itself is socially constructed. Connie's world, symbolized by the isolation of the mental ward, is extremely privatized despite the fact that her activity is regulated by the state. In her private life, Connie faces an onslaught of sexism, racism, dehumanization, poverty, manipulation, and grief—all strands of the rope that binds her. In this world, the only sources of power and self-esteem a woman has are her sexuality, her ability to bear children, and her family. In a society where people compete for scarce and unequally distributed resources, individuals are

forced into the isolation of the nuclear family, waging battles for power and control within its limits. This is what Geraldo, Dolly's pimp, does to Dolly.

Early on, Geraldo comes to represent all men (14–15), yet as Connie points out, he is the positive embodiment of twentieth-century masculine traits:

A man is supposed to be...strong, bold his liquor, attractive to women, able to beat out other men,...macho, we call it, muy hombre....to look out for number one...to make good money, well, to get ahead you step on people...you knuckle under to the big guys and you walk over the people underneath. (120)

Here and throughout the book, Piercy links the personal, private abuses of women, as well as of other marginalized, alienated groups of people, to a key oppressive component of the basic structure of public society, namely, capitalism—the need to “look out for number one,” to “make money,” to “get ahead.” Unfortunately, women are at the bottom of the competitive social hierarchy, the ultimate scapegoats and victims of the limitation of their personal power to the private realm.

As Geraldo represents all men, the mental institution itself and the manipulative techniques it employs are symbols of the larger society. Connie calls electroshock therapy “a little brain damage to jolt you into behaving right” (81). The “barbecue of the brain” (81) she experiences is the silencing of those on the fringe of society by those in its center, the “doctors and judges, caseworkers and social workers, probation officers, policy psychiatrists” (91) and other middle-class institutional representatives. Connie faces all these people in the center as she is screened for participation in a test of a brain implant (called a dialytrode). This implant would allow for complete social surveillance and control. Thus Connie's private experience and observations become metaphors for the cruelty of American society at large.

By contrast, Luciente, Connie's counterpart, lives in a socialist society where no one is victimized. There is no private property; the wealth of the community is earned by and distributed among all of its members. Everyone has access to good food, housing—all the basic necessities of life—and no one has more than anyone else. In fact, Luciente's definitions of ultimate evil “center around power and greed—taking from other people their food, their liberty, their health, their land, their customs, their pride” (139). Through a number of rich, culturally meaningful rituals, members of this community of Mattapoisett, Massachusetts, maintain a feeling of connection, kinship, and integration with each other. Whereas Connie conceives of power and wealth in terms of “I,” Luciente and the rest of her community think almost always in terms of the collective “we.” Luciente says, “The gift is in growing

to care, to connect, to cooperate. Everything we learn aims to make us feel strong in ourselves, connected to all living at home" (248). The phrase "at home" is a telling one, reflecting the complete conjoining of public and private in Luciente's world. Here people are at home with the other members of their community, not in isolation from them. Action here is collective, with all participating in all major decisions (277). Here individuals are valued instead of alienated for their special gifts and characteristics, and Luciente, an educated, happy, successful, free woman, is the person Connie could be—given this context.

With Connie, the reader comes to know this world, but only gradually to accept it. Because the twentieth-century American reader is more or less a member of Connie's culture, it is easy to identify with Connie's difficulty in shifting from self-directed consciousness to other-directedness, from technological control of the environment to harmony with the natural order, from isolation and competition to cooperation and love. The novel's third-person limited point of view enhances the process of reader identification with Connie. At the beginning of the story, Connie (mis)interprets everything Luciente reveals to her from behind a twentieth-century screen. She cannot conceive of a viable collective, because, as she puts it, "Her life was thin in meaningful we's" (35). She first mistakes Luciente for a man because in her experience, women are not direct, assertive, or strong (40), and upon discovering that she was wrong, automatically labels Luciente a "dyke" (67). Because she cannot interpret outside her frame of reference, she struggles with the societal vision Luciente provides her. And because her frame of reference is also the reader's, so is her struggle.

Similarly, her first glimpse of pastoral Mattapoisett is one fraught with confusion:

What did I expect from the future...Pink skies? Robots on the march? Transistorized people? I guess we blew ourselves up and now we're back to the dark ages....She stood a moment weakened by a sadness she could not name. A better world for the children—that had always been the fantasy....But if Angelina had a child and that child a child, this was the world they would finally be born into....how different was it really from rural Mexico with its dusty villages rubbing their behinds into the dust? (73)

Ironically, her expectations for a "better world" closely match the dystopic future that she encounters later in the novel, whereas the real eutopia is much like traditional societies of the past. She (and the reader) is not yet ready to see the possible dystopic future until she can realize the merits of Luciente's society. Until then, she would evaluate the dystopic future according to her own culture's criteria—and her evaluation would be positive. Throughout the novel, Connie must come to realize that Mattapoisett is "a better world for the children."

Although it is not perfect, Connie gradually comes to realize that Mattapoisett is a good place to live. She notices that the entire community is a sort of family (118). Working from her own experience, Connie begins to understand. In the same chapter, Connie sees a child, Dawn, who resembles her own Angelina, running, playing, and laughing. In an epiphanic moment, Connie sees how much better off the child is in this world than Angelina was—and is—in the twentieth century:

Suddenly she assented with all her soul to Angelina in Mattapoisett, to Angelina bidden forever one hundred fifty years into the future....For the first time, her heart assented to Luciente, to Bee, to Magdalena. Yes, you can have my child....I give her to Luciente to mother, with gladness I give her. She will never be broken as I was. She will be strange, but she will be glad and strong, and she will not be afraid. She will have enough. She will have pride. She will love her own brown skin and be loved for her strength and her good work. (141)

This moment, reinforced by the pathos of the knowledge that Angelina will never really experience the life Connie imagines for her, is the culmination of Piercy's first argument. Given her association as a familiar guide, the reader can come to this realization, too. The reader is with Connie alternately in her own world, where Connie watches more and more of her friends become resigned and beaten, and in Luciente's world, where she sees a healthy community living, loving, and working out its problems together.

In this way, Connie—and through identification, the reader—share in the argument's gradual unfolding. By revealing the virtues of one societal structure over another through the personal experiences of individuals, Piercy is able to present her argument in the representation of dramatic thought, feeling, and action. This ability is the most significant manifestation of the public/private dialectic for this novel: The reader who has identified with Connie at this point can adhere with her to Piercy's claim that, despite its flaws, contradictions, and strangeness, Mattapoisett is a preferable society to her own.

From this alternative perspective, Luciente targets sexism, destruction of the environment, violence, hierarchical power structures, and especially the tragic isolation of individuals, that, in her view, result from unmitigated consumption and competition—that is, capitalism (see especially 42–55). This explicit identification of the widespread oppression and rape of the environment of twentieth-century America forms an obvious link between the abuses and excesses of Connie's time with its likely successor: a dystopia where all the worst tendencies of our world are projected much larger than life.

This dystopia is a surrealistic, nightmarish exaggeration and compression of all of the evils Luciente points out. Yet it is powerful, again

because we know it not only in propositional terms but also through Connie's experience and the personal account of Gildina, whom Connie meets in this horrifying place. If Luciente is Connie's futuristic counterpart, Gildina is Dolly's. Like Dolly, she is a woman who accepts her place and uses her feminine "powers" to maintain dependent relationships with men. Like Dolly, she is a prostitute, in a world where contract sex has replaced marriage. She lives in New York, 127 floors up, isolated from an atmosphere clogged with filth and from the rest of humanity. Her only contact is the "Sense-all," the future of television, on which she views programs very much like today's most sadomasochistic pornography. In this society, people are owned by multi-national corporations that monitor their property via mind-control technology—the technology about to be tested on Connie in her own time.

This coincidence is an invitation to infer direct parallels between the two worlds, as is Connie's cheerless statement, "Men and women haven't changed so much" (294). The presentation of this dystopic future is the capstone of the novel's argument. Recall Connie's vision of the logical successor to her time: "Pink skies? Robots on the march? Transistorized people?" (73). Connie returns to the mental ward knowing this vision of the next "dark ages" is indeed a possibility. She decides to fight the power of the mental institution, enlisting herself—and the reader—in Luciente's war (338–76).

The hierarchy of values in this novel is explicit. By engaging socialism and feminism in a dialectical exchange with patriarchal capitalism and its consequences, by revealing the relations of domination within capitalism from the perspective of a marginalized, powerless, victimized woman, and by initiating the viewer into the socialist eutopia along with her, *Woman on the Edge of Time* argues that Mattapoissett or somewhere like it is where we want to be. In this way, the novel is a thought experiment in mythic form, an imaginative argument that is "designed to decide between competing theories" (Wellman 34). It remains, then, to evaluate its success.

ISSUES FOR CRITICS

For Wellman, a good argument invites challenge and critique with each new encounter. Different audiences bring different criteria to the text. For this reason, the critic's job is to decide who would find the text in question acceptable. This can be achieved by locating the narrative's implied audience (in this case marginalized women and socialist feminists) and its political values. But the critic must do two more things. First, s/he must assess the narrative's fidelity to those particular values, and second, s/he must look to her

own community's criteria for acceptability in order to decide whether or not the narrative constitutes an ethical argument.

My task with Piercy's book is clear in this regard. Connie represents a community of extremely marginalized people who suffer from their subjection to the dominant capitalist, patriarchal ideology. Luciente's discourse is also privileged here, representing the ideals of socialist feminism. Because Connie's discourse becomes aligned with Luciente's by the end of the novel, I feel that the novel strongly endorses a socialist feminist perspective.

WOMAN ON THE EDGE OF TIME AND SOCIALIST FEMINISM

In her book *Feminist Politics and Human Nature*, Alison Jaggar outlines the major principles and strategies of socialist feminism, all of which are part of the foundation of *Woman on the Edge of Time*. Basically, socialist feminism relies on many of the analytical tools provided by Marxism, but adds and foregrounds the element of gender as a specific (i.e., not necessarily rooted in class stratification) source of oppression. Socialist feminism is careful, however, to articulate issues of gender in a larger context that includes issues of class, race, and ecology. People are constituted by their social relations along these axes in order to perpetuate unequal power relations (Jaggar 147).

A second major organizing principle of socialist feminism is that because gender distinctions are created to perpetuate male dominance, such distinctions must be erased. A corollary to this principle is that there should be no distinction in material or theoretical terms between public and private spheres. In addition, one's experiences of family, community, and self are variable depending on the larger "public" social structure. For socialist feminists, the larger public should be a version of the family and community.

As should be evident from the foregoing textual analysis, Piercy's utopia incorporates these two ideals. The utopian world inhabited by Luciente is a socialist community, a fully participatory democracy in which the fruits of production are shared equally by all. *Woman on the Edge of Time* provides an explicit comparison of a world in which the public/private distinction is enforced in order to maintain power relations and in which that distinction is erased to the benefit of all. And structurally, as I have already argued, the novel represents the interdependence and integration of private, personal experience with public ethical debate. What makes feminist utopian literature, and possibly all literature, ideal for political argument is

the ability to embody the data, warrants, and claims of an argument in the experiences of characters.

To its credit, Piercy's novel hinges on exactly the issues targeted by socialist feminism. Capitalism and its results—competition, strict gender roles, and individual isolation—are the objects of critique, juxtaposed in stark contrast with the integrated community of Mattapoisett. Compulsory heterosexuality, ecology, the rights of children, community responsibility for education, transportation, food and shelter, health care, and every other basic human need are still other items on the socialist feminist agenda addressed carefully by Piercy. In short, Marge Piercy in 1976 helped to form a clear articulation of all the major issues in socialist feminism. Furthermore, Piercy achieves this goal in such a way as to overcome reader resistance.

But in addition to exhibiting all the assets of socialist feminism, *Woman on the Edge of Time* also suffers from its foremost problem: limited persuasive appeal. From a socialist feminist perspective, the novel receives a positive evaluation. The problem is that from other perspectives, the story is very likely going to seem tedious, heavy-handed, or just plain wrong. Connie's perspective is not one with which just anyone can identify.

In a sense, this paper has come full circle. *Woman on the Edge of Time* does engage in a kind of public moral argument, but it is not mainstream. Instead, it appeals to a limited audience. It tells a story about the world from a particular perspective, endorsing socialist-feminist values that challenge the status quo. For this reason, its acceptance depends heavily on its reaching a specific audience who can and will accept and learn from it.

Paradoxically, a less accessible narrative such as Piercy's meets John Fiske's definition of a successful radical text:

a critical interrogation of the dominant ideology and of the social system which it has produced and underpins; this entails an awareness of the inequalities and of the arbitrariness of late capitalism, which in turn produces the desire to hasten social change and the willingness to work for it. (33)

A truly challenging text is necessarily limited in its mainstream appeal. However, it is important to mobilize the marginalized for whom this story would ring true to work for social change. For this reason, the limited rhetorical appeal of *Woman on the Edge of Time* is not the novel's failure—indeed, it is a significant strength. I do not advocate skepticism about the possibility of persuading a wide audience to accept marginal or radical ideas. My goal here is to endorse a critical perspective that can assess a text's worth on political grounds, so that narratives such as *Woman on the Edge of Time* might be celebrated as successful politics rather than dismissed as failed literature.

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