

# Contradiction as Contra-Diction

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*Writer's comment:* Most essays I write are either last minute, too long, or both. This introduction is last minute. The essay in question was too long. I remember taking this paper to my professor's office the day before it was due and, with woeful, anxious eyes, asking him to look to over and tell me what he thought. (I have a bad habit of assuming that grades and life are going completely downhill if I don't receive something higher than a B+ on any given assignment.)

My professor's comment? "The length is out of control, but a superb essay about the novel!" It seems to be my fate to spend endless, anxious hours worrying, only to have things turn out well. The fact is that I do have a strong level of confidence about my writing, and inside I have always felt a stronger commitment to what I would call "academic integrity" than to the confines or constructs of a given assignment. Once you start doing a thing, you'd better do it well or just not do it at all. I'm sure this tendency frequently frustrates my teachers!

But for me the excitement of writing about a subject that I can get really involved in is worth the occasional sense of insecurity. This paper combines the knowledge of history and popular culture I gained in *Science and Technology in America*, the class for which I wrote this paper, with the rhetoric and information of *Feminist Theories*, another class I was taking that quarter. Because I was excited about my subject and approach, the paper may be long, but its thoroughness gave me a deep sense of both academic and personal satisfaction.

Look—true to form, this comment is also quickly becoming out of control. Sorry, readers! But do enjoy the essay!

—Amy White

*Instructor's comment:* There comes a moment in the course, "Technology, Science, and American Culture," for which Amy wrote this essay, when I quote the famous architect, Le Corbusier, who called America's skyscrapers "hot jazz in steel and stone." That metaphor prompts the quintessential American Studies sort of question. If students can imagine ways to say how jazz is like a skyscraper, then they have acquired the habit of interdisciplinary thinking. I look for signs of that way of thinking as students write essays throughout the quarter, and Amy's essay demonstrates the connecting sensibility I seek.

As we marched chronologically through American systems of thought, connecting scientific ideas with expressions in literature and the arts, the students were also doing small group work around feminist science fiction novels, aiming for the day when (after learning about Neoclassicism, Romanticism, Realism, Expressionism, Modernism, and Late Modernism) we would address the question of the relation between science and Postmodernism. The last essay assignment in the course was to write a critical essay about the feminist science fiction novel

the student had read. I was looking for evidence of the connecting mind, of the interdisciplinary habit of asking a strange enough question that leads to seeing something new.

Amy's essay displays the sort of thinking I wanted to cultivate. She shows us the Postmodern elements in Piercy's novel, but she also shows us the continuities between earlier systems (Realism, Expressionism, Modernism) and Piercy's Postmodernism. Amy weaves into her narrative some of the scientific ideas (from Freud, Einstein, Lewontin, and others) connected with these expressive systems. She makes her connections seem organic; they contribute effortlessly to the richness of the essay, rather than appear stuck on in an attempt to impress the instructor. I learned something new in reading Amy's essay.

—Jay Mechling, American Studies Program

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**I**f one's message is that things are complicated, uncertain, and messy, that no simple rule for force will explain the past and predict the future of human existence, there are rather [few] ways to get that message across" (vii), writes R. C. Lewontin in *Biology as Ideology*. Feminist science fiction, however, functions as one of these ways. As a genre, science fiction often makes commonly accepted structures in our society appear problematic, through language, setting, characters, and plot. Feminist science fiction then takes these interpretations one step further by problematizing, in particular, the issue of gender. In doing so, its writers invoke the canons of postmodernism, as Marge Piercy does in her novel *Woman on the Edge of Time*, while also incorporating principles from the fields of realism, expressionism, and modernism.

As a postmodern novel, *Woman on the Edge of Time* includes the principles of post-rationality, linguistic turn, and love of pastiche. Its "irrationality" contrasts with Enlightenment ideals of logic, linear thinking, natural rights, and absolute truth in both its structure and its subject matter. Structurally, the novel is a controlled view of chaos, not unlike the music of composer John Cage, who believed that, in order to understand, the listener must relinquish his or her sense of time. As the title suggests, the main character, Connie, is very much a woman on the edge of time. She is caught between the time of her existence (presumably the modern era) and a potential future, as the structure of the storytelling leaps between the two, often unpredictably. Thus Connie, encouraged to time-travel by a woman from the future, is caught on the edge of two times, on the beginning of one and the tail end of the other, with no real identity aligned with either—for one isn't yet real, and the other has no need of her.

Piercy's manipulation of time, however, represents more than artistic license. In the novel, she communicates that time, a linear and measured progression, as well as a definition of the society in which one lives, is malleable, an idea which goes against Enlightenment ideals of logic and absolute truth. Thus time-traveling serves as a metaphor for structure-traveling, communicating the postmodern idea that structures can be changed, which is inherent in the function of a feminist novel.

In the novel Piercy also questions the concept of natural rights—which says that all people are equal and have their place—when she writes, "Then the gates . . . swallowed

her as she left the world and entered the underland where all who were not desired, who caught like rough teeth in the cogwheels, who had no place or fit crosswise the one they were hammered into, were carted . . ." (31). This "hammering" into place is reminiscent of the Enlightenment desire to force new scientific discoveries into the links of the "Great Chain of Being" in order to preserve the paradigm of natural theology. That anyone must be forced into a particular circumstance in the interests of preserving a cultural worldview is a concept which Piercy finds problematic and particularly oppressive to women. She writes of the women who are institutionalized for stepping out of their feminine roles: "Sometimes a woman was finally more scared of being burned in the head again, and she went home to her family and did the dishes and cleaned the house. Then maybe in a while she would remember and rebel and then she'd be back for more barbecue of the brain" (81). What Piercy shows in the novel, however, is that this oppression may have two meanings. On the one hand, it is sexist, cruel, and degrading. But on the other, the insistence of the power structure on maintaining the current system may mean that it feels threatened by the impending strength of a new paradigm.

This new (postmodern) paradigm, one focusing not on an individualistic view of the world but on the creation of common meaning, is shored by the influence of linguistic turn. In postmodernism, language is created through symbols of representation, and this language in turn affects how individuals see the world. In the futuristic world which Piercy creates, this deconstruction and reconstruction of language has erased the linguistic gender distinctions which may be perceived as discriminatory. For example, all people are referred to as "per," as a pronoun, rather than "he" or "she." Lovers and mates are not "boyfriends," "girlfriends," "husbands," or "wives," but "sweetfriends," and parents are not "mothers" or "fathers," but are referred to as "co-mothers." Connie finds herself surprised at how even the meanings of words which have stayed linguistically the same in the future world have achieved far different implications than she is used to. When Luciente, the woman from the future, tells Connie that she is "receptive," Connie thinks to herself: "Receptive. Like passive. The Mexican woman Consuelo the meek, dressed in black with her eyes downcast, never speaking unless spoken to" (45). Luciente must explain to Connie that in her culture, being "receptive," means not only that she has the special capacity to "receive" people from the future, but that receptivity is a sign of open-mindedness and interest. Luciente tells Connie, "To explain anything exotic you have to convey at once the thing and the vocabulary with which to talk about the thing" (42). In communicating the principles of feminism, many writers find that the topic is perceived as "exotic" because there is no vocabulary within the current structure with which to relate the feelings and conflicts of their struggle. As Luciente tells Connie of the modern language, "Your vocabulary is remarkably weak in words for mental states, mental abilities, and mental acts" (42). It is such weaknesses as these that both the feminist and postmodern movements wish to change in their acknowledgment of reality as a social construction of language.

Since it is image (often created by language) rather than the "real" that most strongly affects how individuals and societies see themselves and others, image is important to

include when identifying paradigms. Piercy's use of pastiche in the novel works on both a structural and textual level to communicate particular images. Structurally, she invokes the postmodern paradigm through her "patch-work" storytelling, a contrapuntal approach with several completely different settings and worldviews bound together within the book's design. This chaos is not only bound by the two covers of the book, however, but also by the technique of Piercy's writing, not unlike the emphasis on technique found in Cage's music or even the late modernist splatter paintings of Jackson Pollock. Piercy also uses pastiche within the text when describing the futuristic culture. "Grasp, that's the essence of it. History gets telescoped a little" (173), says Luciente to Connie when describing a speech she has just given. In communicating the events of past history, Luciente's culture is more concerned with historical events as they convey concepts—images—than in describing absolute truth, because her culture believes that experiencing the emotional essence of history is more "real" than the linear progression of events. The pastiche has become the image, rather than the images becoming the pastiche.

This postmodern emphasis on pastiche—the de-historification of its parts—is actually a key element in the feminist science fiction novel. While largely considered to be postmodern texts, novels such as *Woman on the Edge of Time* also incorporate several elements of previous paradigms in their problematizing of the construction of gender. For example, Piercy uses realism in the novel to convey the experiences of women in a patriarchal society. This vividness, in its use of truthfulness, common subjects, and vernacular style, works to convey the oppression which feminism confronts. The novel's realism functions much like that found in Stephen Crane's novel *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* in its study of environment and culture and the idea that "environment shapes life regardless," for even as Piercy would like to communicate a message of hope, whatever changes Connie makes in her life choices—such as poisoning the doctors at the institution—will not divert her life from the path on which it has been set as a lower-class, Mexican-American woman.

"Maybe those bastards who had spayed her for practice, for fun, had been right," Connie thinks of herself at one point in the novel. "That she had borne herself all over again, and it was a crime to be born poor as it was a crime to be born brown. She had caused a new woman to grow where she had grown, and that was a crime" (62). Piercy's use of this crude thought communication is part of her employment of truthfulness in the novel, which takes two forms. One form, as in Crane's *Maggie*, is to communicate the realistic brutality of the characters' experiences. At the beginning of the novel, after beating his fiancée, who is Connie's niece, the pimp Geraldo comes looking for her at Connie's house. The following argument ensues:

"Tia Consuelo," he crooned. "Caca de puta. Old bitch. Get your fat and worthless ass out of my way. Move!" "Get out of my house! You hurt her enough. Get out!" "Not anything like I'm going to hurt that bitch if she doesn't shape up." The back of his arm striking like a rattlesnake, he shoved her into the sink. Then he strolled over to lounge blocking the bedroom door. . . . "Hey cunt, stop blubbering." (13)

As in Crane's novel, Piercy's descriptions of lower-class life do not concern genteel subjects. Her detailed depictions of child abuse, prostitution, suicide, drug abuse and alcoholism, domestic violence, death, abortion, and life in mental institutions convey the crudity of realism and the experiences of many women in this culture, as do her focus on the trials of the common person and her vivid use of vernacular language, noted in the argument above.

The other function of truthfulness utilized in *Woman on the Edge of Time* is in Piercy's exploration of how different accounts are given of how things happen. For example, when Connie breaks Geraldo's nose with a bottle, in defense of her niece, the nurses at the institution do not believe or listen to her side of the story. She is institutionalized for being a woman who is out of control of her faculties and who has struck out against members of her own family. This difference in accounts is made particularly clear at the end of the book, when, after becoming familiar with all of the trials and experiences of Connie's life, the reader is left facing the doctors' printed reports of the "Excerpts from the Official History of Consuelo Camacho Ramos," a documentation of her condition which represents only the doctors' interpretations, not the "true" story of her life that the reader has come to believe.

Piercy further addresses the subject of women's roles in society through her use of expressionism in the creation of a futuristic world. This world evokes the discussion of what many feminists believe to be an ideal society, a society hinged on androgyny. Freud believed that modern society suffers from a surplus of repression and that expressionism is about the liberation of the id, the basic libidinal drives. He felt that these unexpressed drives would manifest themselves in other, possibly harmful, ways if not released. The best solution for releasing individuals from this repression, he felt, is for men and women to assume the androgynous condition, meaning that they begin to express the best features of both sexes. Piercy's futuristic world attempts to fulfill this assignment. In fact, when Connie first meets Luciente, she assumes that Luciente is male because, as Piercy writes, "She spoke, she moved with that air of brisk unselfconscious authority Connie associated with men" (67). In Luciente's society, adults are also not socialized out of their "infantile," libidinal drives. As Connie notes, "Indeed, they were like children, all in unisex rompers. . . . Touching and caressing, hugging and fingering, they handled each other constantly. In a way it reminded her again of her childhood. . ." (75, 76).

The release of expression found in *Woman on the Edge of Time* fits the feminist ideal in its absence of different social role constructions and expectations for men and women, as well as in the fact that it contains no gendered change in expectations as individuals pass into adulthood. As Luciente points out, all children experience the same rite of passage in her world, regardless of biological sex, and even as they reach adolescence, they are not pressured to choose hetero- or homosexuality but are allowed to choose either or both. As a woman in the futuristic world tells Connie, "All coupling, all befriending goes on between biological males, biological females, or both. That's not a useful set of categories." Even jobs are not divided by sex. The same woman tells Connie, "We tend to divvy up people by what they're good at and bad at, strengths and weaknesses, gifts and failings" (214).

In addition, the expressionism in the futuristic world eliminates classifications such as those which are placed upon Connie in her own society. In Luciente's world, people are not called "crazy" if they have emotional difficulties; it is considered a personal struggle that they will overcome with some help. In Connie's world, however, one can be called "crazy" for not following the rules, in her case, the structures of gender. In admitting why she is placed in the institution, Connie feels "the floating feeling was a cutting loose because she had been raised and had lived under a code where a woman never did anything like that, let alone speak of such actions" (90), while within the institution, "patients were [still] punished for unladylike behavior" (147). Since there are no such restrictions in the futuristic world, however, people cannot break them and thus cannot become socially estranged for doing so. This means that in Luciente's world, expression is embraced as a predominately positive characteristic, contrasting to Connie's, where, due to the emphasis on rationality, expression may be seen as a sign of madness. Piercy believes that this madness is really the helplessness of modernity, for in Luciente's world, all people are equal and do not feel helpless; they have no need to strike out or to be "disciplined" by a "rational" authority.

This emphasis on rationality in the modern world is responsible for the novel's inclusion of modernist elements in conveying the particular experiences and concerns of women in a modern and postmodern age. In *Woman on the Edge of Time*, Piercy displays modernism—and its emphasis on science—as problematic, for it is at once oppressive to women in its ideology and responsible for much of the relative and total freedom that modern women and postmodern women, respectively, may enjoy. Lewontin writes in *Biology as Ideology* of the view that "science consists of simple objective truths and that if only we will listen to biologists we will know everything worth knowing about human existence" (viii). In modernism, these formal systems, such as the fields of science and mathematics, are questioned. It is shown in mathematics, for example, that geometry is not necessarily a measure of absolute space, that there is no absolute reflection of reality. In physics, the nature of light is debated, with some experiments showing that it is a particle, and others showing that it is a wave.

The uncertainty of scientific truth in a society which has lost its religious affirmation of truth, and relies on science, affects women in two ways. In one, science is shown as problematic, for even with the "holes" in its paradigm, it is used to explain things: nature, society, women. Facts may not be able to explain everything, but everything can be made to be explained by facts. "Cold, calculating, ambitious, believing themselves rational and superior, they chased the crouching female animal through the brain with a scalpel," writes Piercy (282). Unable to explain that which does not fit into the paradigm, the power structure creates ways to make these difference "solvable" through science. "They trapped you into saying something and then they'd bring out their interpretations that made your life over," Piercy writes. "To make your life into a pattern of disease" (26).

This pattern of disease, as addressed in feminist science fiction such as *Woman on the Edge of Time* and other feminist writings, identifies the way that the technological paradigm—a patriarchal worldview—defines women either as the "other," in refer-

ence to men, such that men are the normal ("well"), while women are the abnormal ("unwell"), or defines the woman who steps out of her prescribed role as "ill," "mad," "sick." "They acted as if they couldn't hear you," Piercy writes. "If you complained, they took it as a sign of sickness" (19). Lewontin quotes *Science* editor Daniel Koshland as saying of the homeless, "What these people don't realize is that the homeless are impaired. . . . Indeed, no group will benefit more from the application of human genetics" (75). This paternal ideological attitude sounds suspiciously like Dr. Acker in Piercy's novel, who tells Connie, "You ran away because you want to return to society. But what you don't understand is that's exactly what we want to help you do" (261)—before he tries to implant an electrode in her brain.

While this movement toward an uncertain reality certainly creates a backlash against women in attempting to assure the security of the scientific ideology, its lack of absoluteness also allows for the creation of one's own reality. Just as light may act as either a wave or a particle, so one may, if one frees oneself from the paradigm, act as, for example, either a man or a woman, as described in Piercy's novel. Albert Einstein's theories of relativity show that there is no absolute time or space and that one cannot determine reality as opposed to the system in which one is placed. If such is the case, and objects create the space and time around themselves, then individuals in a society can, following the Jamesian notion, construct their own worlds, their own realities. This freedom to create one's own reality means the questioning of some of the basic "rules" of the paradigm, of women's roles in society as "women" rather than individuals. In Luciente's world, women are not even biologically bound to motherhood, and there are no societal norms which say that they should be. Men and women have equal opportunities in life. What makes these advancements problematic is that this freedom, as with the pill and other modern contraceptive techniques, relies on the same technology that has the power to oppress. As Luciente says, "It's that race between technology, in the service of those who control, and insurgency—those who want to change the society in our direction" (223). One fights on the one hand against technology and then, on the other, fights for it.

It is the freedom to fight, however, which feminist literature owes to modernism. This freedom from the absolute paradigm creates a new language and style, one represented in works such as Jean Toomer's *Cane*, which expresses the modernist possibility of creating an entirely new form of literature, away from the structures of the old. Like the musical compositions of Charles Ives, it expects readers (listeners) to be active participants in the text's interpretation, while violating the expectation of what a story should do. Feminist science fiction, such as Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time*, takes advantage of these modernist developments to create a unique, evocative, and demanding voice for womanhood. The form is eclectic and multifaceted, yet logical in its technique. It defies traditional storytelling devices by avoiding chronology and by leaving many facets of its characters ambiguous. Most particularly, it involves its readers by not giving away the "ending."

This ambiguous ending, assisted by elements of realism, expressionism, and modernism, is what makes *Woman on the Edge of Time* both a postmodern and feminist

statement. Postmodern texts, such as Cage's compositions or Jack Kerouac's "continuous prose" novels, have no beginning, no middle, and no ending. Characteristics which Piercy tries to communicate are not unlike those of the feminist movement, which may always be a struggle in which the individual may never know the results of her efforts, may never "win," and yet continues on. Feminist writer bell hooks addresses such contradictions in "A Conversation about Race and Class," writing that

contradictions are perceived as chaos and not orderly, not rational, everything doesn't follow. Coming out of academe, many of us want to present ourselves as just that: orderly, rational. We then must struggle for a language that allows us to say: we have contradictions and those contradictions do not necessarily make us quote, "bad people" or "politically unsound people." (70)

The feminist science fiction novel has created this language; and it is not afraid of these contradictions. It embraces them for all of their messiness and disorder, for the "end," while it may never come, will most certainly never come if the conflicts within society are not addressed—and indeed, when they are, one may find that there is more truth in the order of the "complicated, uncertain, and messy" than in the order of the absolute

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