

2014-10

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Recommended Citation

Norton, S. : Family Frontiers: The Spage Age Fiction of Marge Piercy and Ursula K. LeGuin, *Vector, The Critical Journal of the British Science Fiction Association*, Issue No. 277. 2014.

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Family Frontiers: The Space Age Fiction of Marge Piercy and Ursula K. Le Guin

Sue Norton

There is a short but striking passage in Ursula K. Le Guin's 1969 novel *The Left Hand of Darkness* that relates to the artificiality of culture. It is written in the voice of Ai as he contemplates the political caginess of a Karhide demagogue. The demagogue had 'talked a great deal about Truth...', for he was, he said, "cutting down beneath the veneer of civilization" (91). His rhetoric prompts Ai to ruminate that:

it is a durable, ubiquitous, spacious metaphor, that one about veneer (or paint, or pliofilm, or whatever) hiding the nobler reality beneath. It can conceal a dozen fallacies at once. One of the most dangerous is the implication that civilization, being artificial, is unnatural: that it is the opposite of primitiveness.... Of course there is no veneer, the process is one of growth, and primitiveness and civilization are degrees of the same thing. (91)

His thesis is an interesting one. If, for instance, we allege that a particular family form, such as the so-called nuclear one, is merely a product of "civilization" or "culture", does that mean we are also calling it unnatural? Yes we are, but only in a limited sense. The artificiality of culture needs to be qualified: instead of categorically regarding culture as unnatural, it is considerably more useful to see it as the continual reinvention of itself as "natural" in accommodating the next evolution in material human circumstance. Such an understanding of culture and society is outlined by Levi-Strauss's argument that it is impossible to refer without contradiction to any phase in human evolution as lacking in culture, since humankind would always have practiced activities that exceeded the requirements of nature (3). Thus a primitive "then" and a civilized "now" are degrees of the same thing.

Since civilization is so thoroughly, and so conspicuously, constructed, it is spurious and politically or ideologically motivated to claim with certainty that any social formation is more or less "natural" than any other, given that the category of "the primitive" is equally a product of civilization and therefore utterly constructed as well. What is of interest to literary and cultural critics is the identification in fiction of the points where one culturally generated form competes for privilege with another. These competitions take place across time (linearly), of course, and also across human cultures and sub-cultures (laterally).

And literary and cultural criticism are socially instrumental, for it is by carefully and methodically delineating difference, and the forces that shape it, that spaces are cleared in which change can be allowed, charted, narrated, and new forms "naturalised". By examining the devices and practices through which such forms take shape, the constructed, artificial, or narrated complexion of the world we live in is emphasised, thus highlighting the enabling potential of critical fictions (to use bell hooks' well known term) to effect "real" change.

Perhaps attempts to expose the constructedness of unsavoury social formations, institutions, racial (and gender) pecking orders -- which are symbolized and practiced as "natural," that is, as logical expressions of "human nature" -- as a way of challenging their ideological dominance will always fall short of their project. Even as feminist fiction writers, writers of feminist sf, and feminist critics manage to "denaturalise" the patriarchal nuclear form, manage to reveal it inarguably as a product of "civilization", we are still left with the

problem of the natural, or, rather, inevitable, momentum of culture, and all that that implies. If Ai is right, if primitiveness and civilization are degrees of the same thing, and the ‘process is one of growth’, then there is little to be gained in arguing that a seemingly omnipresent but oppressive form of social organisation is unnatural. For in a certain sense (Ai’s sense) all forms of social organisation are indeed, and despite their obvious social construction, natural. Thus, one form of family necessarily replaces another as the “natural” dominant practice, and, given the nature of representation, the practice of backgrounding and foregrounding persists.

Nevertheless, fiction has the power to be both enabling, insofar as it can expose the constructedness of seemingly natural social formations, and disabling, to the extent that it often reconstructs the ideologies it critiques. Serious writers acknowledge, in their very enterprises, the importance of fiction in the formation and de-formation of social patterns. It is not surprising that many writers write stories according to principles that have a broadly-based appeal. In other words, the deliberate alienation of the reader, post-modern obfuscation, and abandonment of navigational aids are not practices employed by writers who seek wide readerships in order to prompt broad social reflection or change. Instead, these writers endeavour to work within the coordinates of their genre, and to make their stories attractive and accessible. Speculative texts are especially apt to participate in the process of the symbolic naturalisation of burgeoning family forms. They are able to identify myths in the unmaking, and myths in the making.

The baby-boom era novels of Marge Piercy and Ursula LeGuin are especially engaged with myths of the family. Their speculative representations of family come not only out of the social revolts of the sixties, but also of the explosion of science fiction which, during this era, mirrored the landing on the moon, the space race, and such popular television series as *Star Trek*. Their work, like the work of African American female writers during the same period - writers such as Toni Morrison and Alice Walker - makes immediately apparent the artificiality of the nuclear configuration of family because it overtly assails the heavy, and now crumbling ideological structure that has held it in place. Certainly other writers assail that structure as well. For instance, Armistead Maupin’s *Tales of the City* series, which began in *The San Francisco Chronicle* in 1976, takes account of gay and lesbian efforts to replace nuclear families with surrogate ones. Native American writing, especially the work of Leslie Silko and Louise Erdrich, also offers strikingly different models of family. But such accounts do not pose direct contrasts to what has been accepted in mainstream American culture as “normal”, whereas blackness has often been constructed as the binary opposite of whiteness. Likewise, science fiction and speculative fiction (sf) generally pose direct contrasts to what we know, or think we know, about dominant reality.

Thus, delivering characters that are untrue to type is one of the primary aims of feminist writers of sf. Like “raced” writers who create characters that resist behavioural resemblance to racial stereotypes, feminist writers of sf construct female characters whose traits are often, in the phrase of Marlene Barr, ‘alien to femininity’. Barr, a prominent scholar in the field, has observed how contemporary female sf writers ‘address themselves to three broad, sometimes overlapping themes: community, heroism, and sexuality/reproduction’, and, in doing so, create protagonists who change their worlds by defying behavioural models of femininity. She says:

Women who form communities, become heroes, and take charge of their sexuality behave in a manner which is alien – opposed, estranged, repugnant, outside – to the concept of femininity [...] When women

conform to the requirements of “femininity”, they bolster patriarchal ideologies upholding exclusive male power at the expense of their own effectiveness and power [...]. Female speculative fiction writers use two forms of exaggeration or hyperbole to speak against the imposition of femininity upon women: their characters either become overwhelmingly negative and feminine, [...] or overwhelmingly positive and unfeminine. [...] Both methods decry femininity’s imposed limitations, restrictions, and indirect routes as they show women displaying mastery and competence. (Barr, 1987: xvii-xviii)

Feminist writers of mainstream or “realistic” (as opposed to speculative) fiction have, of course, always created female characters who behave in ways that are ‘alien, opposed, and estranged’ to femininity. One need only consider *Jane Eyre*, for instance. But the speculative genre frees the writer of the historical, psychological, spatial, and temporal requirements of realist fiction, thus allowing greater narrative latitude for the revision of gender roles. Because writers of sf are released, as Barr says, from the ‘constraints of patriarchal social reality, they can imagine presently impossible possibilities for women’ (Barr: 1987: xi).

As for women, so too of course, for family. The future visions of female sf writers tend to involve renditions of family that are fundamentally alien to conventional notions of “the family unit”. They are, to use Barr’s descriptors, estranged, outside, and repugnant to the concept of the patriarchal nuclear family, which depends so heavily upon a maintenance of “the feminine” and “the masculine.”

By blurring the usual distinctions between male and female subjectivity, works of a speculative nature sometimes create future-perfect families that are, among other things, gender neutralised. The didacticism of such texts is often unequivocal. They aim, as Robin Roberts has observed, to ‘teach us to rethink traditional patriarchal notions about science, reproduction, and gender [for] only in science fiction can feminists imaginatively step outside the father’s house and begin to look around’ (2).

One might argue, in fact, that only in science fiction, or in sf more generally, can *any* writer step outside the father’s house. When non-speculative writers attempt deviant renditions of family (or of other societal institutions), they must do so within a context of the world as we know it, not as we might imagine it. The store of images available to them is quite limited. A realistic writer must create family scenarios that conform to reader expectations of a plausible world or else risk exposing themselves to charges of implausibility.

Challenging, then, must be the task of the realistic writer who seeks to deliver plausible plotline *and* independent character, when fidelity to social reality insists upon the marginalisation of character. When, in his 1989 novel *S*, John Updike sought to liberate Sara, his latter-day Hester Prynne, from her upper-middle-class marriage to an inattentive New England doctor, he needed to create a kind of alternative reality for her by sending her to a utopian commune in the Arizona desert. Rather than posit either a distant future or a distant world, he devised this remote but parallel space in which his heroine could “find” herself (before fleeing, nevertheless, to a life of solitude in the Bahamas - also a remote but parallel space). For Updike, as indeed for any writer of realistic fiction, female liberation can be imagined only *to a certain extent*, before it collapses into the implausible. If an author is to remain mimetic to a world we recognize as our own, then certain wished-for plot gestures are apt to be compromised. Sf, by contrast, offers the possibility for radically re-visioned social landscapes without upsetting readerly expectations. Its conventions simply allow for the extraordinary. As feminist writers of futuristic sf, Marge Piercy and Ursula K. Le Guin rebut patriarchally sanctioned

representations of family. With reference to the so-called “family unit,” they, quite simply, attempt to split the atom and explode the nucleus entirely.

Discussions of late twentieth-century fictive representations of family invite such atomic metaphor, given the political context in which the American nuclear family entered its heyday. As historian Elaine Tyler May has argued, the politics of the American nuclear family in the 1950s were intimately linked to the politics of American nuclear weaponry during the same period. The family’s ideology of closure replicated and helped to sustain the nation’s cold war policies of “containment” and its general warding off of “foreign influences” (11). She reminds us, furthermore, that ‘the legendary family of the 1950s, complete with appliances, station wagons, backyard barbecues, and tricycles scattered on the sidewalks, represented something new. It was not, as common wisdom tells us, the last gasp of “traditional” family life with roots deep in the past. Rather, it was the first wholehearted effort to create a home that would fulfil virtually all of its members’ personal needs through an energised and expressive personal life’ (11).

What Marge Piercy in particular seeks to show in her futuristic reworkings of family is that *all* of the members of the nuclear family have hardly had their needs fulfilled or, for that matter, considered. Her manicured lawns surrounded by white picket fences in the dystopic *Body of Glass* (1992) implicate the ideological framework Tyler May refers to, holding its legacy responsible for the misogynistic, socially dysfunctional society she projects onto the year 2061.

Tyler’s May’s analysis of the connection between cold war politics and the dominance of the American nuclear family after World War II is a convincing one. She argues that ‘postwar Americans fortified the boundaries within which they lived’ (13). She continues at length:

They wanted secure jobs, secure homes, and secure marriages in a secure country. Security would enable them to take advantage of the fruits of prosperity and peace that were, at long last, available. And so they adhered to an overarching principle that would guide them in their personal and political lives: containment. Containment was the key to security. The word was used only in its foreign policy version, first articulated by George F. Kennan, the American charge d’affaires in Moscow, in 1946. The power of the Soviet Union would not endanger national security if it could be contained within a clearly-defined sphere of influence. But the term also describes the response to other postwar developments. The terrifying destructive potential of the atomic bomb would not be a threat if it could be contained, first in the hands of the United States and later through peaceful applications.

[...] In the domestic version of containment, the “sphere of influence” was the home. Within its walls, potentially dangerous social forces of the new age might be tamed, where they could contribute to the secure and fulfilling life to which postwar women and men aspired. [...] More than merely a metaphor for the cold war on the homefront, containment aptly describes the way in which public policy, personal behaviour, and even political values were focused on the home. (13-14)

In such ways, the Cold War encouraged the seemingly “natural” nuclear family - that next evolution in material human circumstance - as rootless Americans scrambled from the cities of enclosed spaces and extended kin to the sprawling suburbs of private property and professional security, both deftly supported by fixed understandings of

masculinity and femininity. While Soviet women were headed to the factory, American women continued to keep the home fires burning.

In *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) Le Guin makes more literal the Nuclear Age's metaphor of "Cold War politics" by casting her futuristic vision of family and society on the ice-covered planet of Winter, where two rival nations maintain an epoch of, for the most part, bloodless political hostility. We learn that Winter's people are a mutant, androgynous strain of humanity produced as an experiment of Earthlings who, long ago, may have been trying to eliminate human aggression. On Winter, any adult can become pregnant, and children are raised by the clan. Neither of Winter's rival nations privilege the "copulating couple" to use Germaine Greer's phrase, but instead configure family as an extended network of kin spanning 'hearth and domain', the two primary sub-sections of Nation. The sibling relationship, rather than the conjugal one, enjoys the greatest degree of status.

Piercy and LeGuin's visions of family reflect a number of the concerns present in much late twentieth century female-authored sf. Not least of these is a deep cynicism of heterosexual monogamy leading to exclusivity in parenting. *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1978), *Body of Glass* (1992), *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), and its sequel of novellas *Four Ways to Forgiveness* (1995) seek, for the most part, to herald in an age of open partnership and a village-approach to child-rearing. They operate very much in the late '60s and early '70s consciousness-raising tradition reflected in Joanna Russ's influential speculative short story "When It Changed" (1972), in which the tranquillity of an all-female, parthenogenically reproducing society is threatened by the sudden arrival of four men from earth. Details are revealed sparingly, but the reader can surmise that, heretofore, life on Whileaway has been a largely agrarian and thoroughly harmonious matter of lesbian partnering, cottage industry, highly participatory local government, and community-based parenting. When the earth-men arrive, this Adam-less Eden must shrink from impending masculine imperialism. Characteristic of much feminist utopian fiction, the text is preoccupied with the significations of clothing and its relationship to the construction of gender. At one point in the story, 'the man passed around pictures of his wife, who looked like the priestess of some arcane cult' (414). At another, he says to his inquisitors, 'where I come from, the women don't dress so plainly' (413), leaving the narrator to reflect upon the one question 'those four men hedged about all evening and never quite dared to ask, looking at the lot of us, hicks in overalls, farmers in canvas pants and plain shirts: *Which of you plays the role of the man?* As if we had to produce a carbon copy of their mistakes!' (416).

By these and other exchanges, "When It Changed" implies that sexual difference is largely cosmetic, put on from without, and therefore possible to eradicate, the result of which would be a more just social order. Heterosexual monogamy is taken to task in this and more extended feminist utopias, owing not to any of its inherent features, but because of its pride of place in the history of the patriarchal nuclear family. In "When It Changed," the earth-men are seen to regard themselves as humane, rational, scientific, and eminently *reasonable*, yet they think nothing of the all-male composition of their mission, nor of their unabashed pride in having well-ornamented (read ornamental) wives. The biases latent in their unexamined assumptions become subtly apparent to the reader each time one of them innocently professes that 'sexual equality has been reestablished on Earth' (414), as though it had ever been a *fait accompli* to begin with. The reader is left wondering just how *unequal* things must have become on Earth before some of its women resorted to the founding of Whileaway.

Representations of ambisexuality and androgyny in female-authored utopian and sf are prevalent. In *Woman on the Edge of Time* the desire for gender neutrality can be found in the 'reformed pronoun 'per'' to mean both him and her, and also in the proclivity of both men and women for fanciful attire. Mattapoissett is a society that embraces all forms of aesthetic creativity, and welcomes the expression of personal identity through elaborate costuming. Bisexuality is the norm, and parenting involves three 'co-mothers' of both sexes who have not given birth to their offspring, but who have adopted them in embryonic form from a community 'brooder' which serves as a massive artificial womb. The mores of Piercy's future world expect that parenting be a shared responsibility of both sexes, and its ethos anticipates and accommodates the desire of men and women to nurture.

Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*, though it also presents an ambisexual, gender neutralised world, one which certainly has its advantages, is nevertheless concerned to reject the naivety inherent in utopian projections, especially feminist ones. It was written before *Woman on the Edge of Time*, but emerges from, and helped to comprise, the same literary movement -- the feminist utopianism of the late '60s and early '70s.

As Barr and others have critically documented, these decades produced a wealth of specifically feminist sf that challenge received wisdoms pertaining to family life. Authors and titles of note include Suzy McKee Charnas's *Walk to the End of the World* (1974) and *Motherlines* (1979), Joanna Russ's *The Female Man* (1975), Dorothy Bryant's *The Kin of Ata Are Waiting for You* (1971), Mary Staton's *From the Legend of Biel* (1975), Sally Miller Gearhart's *The Wanderground* (1978), as well as Ursula LeGuin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), and Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1978).

These writers and their fictions allow readers to view alternative societies that hold "corrected" and seemingly alien, but adoptable, counter-notions, or else they rehearse the familiar in the extreme. In instances of the latter, the tactic of the writer is, as Barr suggests, simply to exaggerate our most common assumptions into nightmarish proportions. This is Margaret Atwood's approach in *The Handmaid's Tale* (1986) in which she depicts the dehumanising results of a rigidly enforced patriarchy. Like a good number of other female-authored sf, including *The Left Hand of Darkness*, *The Handmaid's Tale* links the politics of cold war containment to the politics of the nuclear family. The post-apocalyptic Republic of Gilead insists upon the nuclear configuration of family in a world that has so long been negligent of female health and well being, that its women can no longer bear children. A small minority of reproductively healthy women must, in servitude, conceive, carry, and deliver the offspring of the elite as it wages war to preserve its insular values.

But Le Guin's novel stands in contrast to these and numerous others of its kind in that it is neither facile of argument nor simplistic of plot. *The Left Hand of Darkness* is not wholly utopian, and it isn't wholly dystopian either. It represents, as Ellen Peel has observed, a kind of 'sceptical feminism' (35-49). It does not, for instance, behave as though the elimination of gender roles alone will lead to a Golden Age of Feminism and the erosion of all things patriarchal. Problems of family organisation and gender equality may have been satisfactorily resolved on Le Guin's planet Winter, but social imbalances of power remain. If such imbalances can no longer be attributed to a 'patriarchal social reality', then to what can they be attributed? LeGuin's novel would appear to suggest that the human race is fundamentally desirous of conflict and would generate it even in a sexually equal world.

Piercy's two novels are also driven by conflict as are, of course, all fictional narratives (or, at least, all that are worth reading). Utopian projections become stultified if they are left unchallenged by either external

marauders or internal insurrections. Without some sort of lurking threat, any fictional utopia (for, is there any other kind?) risks becoming a scene as lovely and as flat as a picture postcard, or, in Peel's words, a site of 'chilly perfection' (34).

And for every threat to every utopian vision, we find ideological "fallout". At the risk of over-punning, the context of Cold War nuclear weaponry is a notable one in mid- to late-twentieth century sf by women, relating, as it does, to isolationist family values. As the nation hunkered down beneath its anti-ballistic missile shield, so, too, did the family. The Regan administration made much hay of "family values", a rally cry that took hold and promoted the sanctity of heterosexual marriage as the only safe space for reproduction, until the Clinton Administration proclaimed that "it takes a village to raise a child". The stories, novellas, and novels of feminist sf writers of the latter decades of the twentieth century, such as Piercy and Le Guin, seek, quite simply, to unmake the myth of the nuclear family. They endeavour to radicalise American family values through the socio-political constituencies of their characters, those who resist stereotype, embrace the androgynous, and run far away from the house of the father.

Marge Piercy's Future-Perfect

Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* foregrounds, in no uncertain terms, its resistance to the nuclear family. In her future society of Mattapoisett, children are randomly selected from an amniotic tank by three co-mothers of either sex who have no romantic involvement with each other. As Luciente, Mattapoisett's ambassador to the past, tells Connie, Bellevue Hospital's (allegedly psychotic) traveller to the future, 'co-mothers are seldom sweet friends if we can manage. So the child will not get caught in love misunderstandings' (74). Thus, most adults in Mattapoisett have several 'sweet friends' with whom they share sexual love, and two 'coms' (co-mothers) with whom they form a parenting triad. There is a further network of kin called 'the core'. Each adult has "per" own hut, and therefore does not live *in* a family but, as Luciente explains, '*among* our family' (72). Children live not with any of their three co-mothers, but in 'the children's house' with professional childminders. Such an open configuration is meant to prevent the emotional stranglehold of the old-style families of Connie's past, described by a minor character as 'unstable dyads, fierce and greedy, trying to body [i.e. *embody*, in Piercy's future-speak] the original mother-child bonding' (125).

Piercy's simple (if not simplistic) rearrangements have effectively freed the implied psychological hostages of the nuclear family. In Mattapoisett, one's children need not experience maternal separation as emotional abandonment because the mother, though loving, has become a fairly peripheral figure (one of three, in fact). Adults, though they may have several 'sweet friends', need not form 'unstable dyads, fierce and greedy' because parenting has become a communal act of giving, rather than a home-enclosed struggle for power enacted, as Greer says, by the 'copulating couple'. Piercy's Native American-sounding Mattapoisett does not idealise "the unit" but privileges the tribe.

Indeed it would appear that in *Woman on the Edge of Time* the nuclear configuration is the strict, and blessedly archaic, form and function of patriarchy - an outmoded way of life that had both sustained and been sustained by the house of father.

Nevertheless, Piercy shows us that a second, far less blissful future is possible when Connie accidentally time travels to the New York of 2137 where she finds a ‘cartoon of femininity’ with ‘enormous sharp breasts’ and oversized hips and buttocks (288) called Gildina, a sex-slave of the future, who services ‘the richies’, and is held in captivity by an armed cyborg. If Gildina’s, rather than Luciente’s, future comes into existence (depending on certain actions Connie may or may not take in New York in 1976), the egalitarian principles of Mattapoissett will never take hold and flourish. The future’s military-industrial complex will, in Piercy’s dystopian projection, depend upon the sexual containment of woman, and the unharnessed momentum of a free market economy that yields nothing more sustaining than shrink-wrapped food and gleaming white teeth. Her ugly depiction strategically places blame for gender encoding and social dysfunction at the feet of a global capitalism, thus shifting culpability away from anatomy and toward alterable institutions. Patriarchy is thereby freer to appear as a social phenomenon that can indeed be undermined, overthrown, or at the very least, ironically subverted.

We see an instance of its subversion later on, when we learn that a group of scientists in Mattapoissett has ironically called itself ‘The Manhattan Project’, enabling Piercy to render the founding fathers of nuclear warfare, the symbolic - but significantly obsolete - protectors of all things patriarchal. Mattapoissett’s appropriation of the name metaphorically wrests power away from a male scientific establishment and grants power to male and female bi-sexual eco-scientists who inhabit a world of amorphous social structures and open families. The new Manhattan Project is directly antithetical to the original Manhattan Project, which enabled Cold War isolationism through its development of nuclear weaponry.³ In her creation of a utopian, flower-child world devoid of marriage, private property, and any and all sexual taboos, Piercy is, in distinctly 1970s fashion, seeking to allay lingering American Cold War fears of sexual chaos. Far from chaotic, though, Piercy’s Mattapoissett is, through its sexual liberation, serene, harmonious, and anti-nuclear in every sense. Patriarchy, by implication a purely ideological structure, has effectively been toppled.

Clearly, consciousness-raising is a special aim of *Woman on the Edge of Time*. Piercy’s later novel *Body of Glass* (1991), however, probes gendered family arrangements even more decisively through its use of cybernetics. First published in the United States under the title *He, She and It*; *Body of Glass* is an inferior work to *Woman on the Edge of Time* owing to its several convoluted plots, and its frequent slips into sentimentality and melodrama. But it is more intriguing for its exploration of the nature of identity, and of the implications of science and technology on family and society. It centres on the story of a cyborg who is made in the metaphorical image of a Jewish golem, which, in Hebrew, means literally a “shapeless man”. Piercy’s reliance on centuries-old Jewish myth and legend emphasises her text’s thematic pre-occupation with social and biological evolution - with time’s ability to “program” us - for it tells the stories of two such shapeless men, a golem named Joseph of early 17th century Prague, and a cyborg named Yod of mid- 21st century Massachusetts.

It is this second figure, Yod, who is especially relevant to a discussion of the fictional representation of social organisation and family configuration since, using the body of the cyborg, feminist sf has become increasingly able to ponder the construction of identity and gender. Because a cyborg, usually depicted as a creature comprised of both human and animal tissue as well as of inorganic materials, is programmed by humans, its subjectivity is to a large extent pre-determined by the will of its creators. However, because a cyborg has a human genetic makeup, it is also meant to be read as susceptible to the inheritance of any “innate” characteristics possessed by its human ancestors. By positing an androgynous cyborg, the product of both genetic and cultural

programming, as a self-proclaimed person (for Yod insists he is a person, if not a wholly “human person”), Piercy prompts consideration of the extent to which identity, and therefore gender, is comprised of cultural influences. Theoretically, Yod ought to be duplicable. His maker, Dr. Avram Stein (a name that prompts association with Dr. Frankenstein), ought to be able to make several Yods, each just like the other, provided he uses the same materials and programs the chips identically. In the event, though, Yod becomes highly subjective and non-reproducibly unique through his interactions with others and exposure to his surroundings. Thus the novel suggests that, genetic mapping notwithstanding, we are what we consume of our environment.

Yod, unlike his human counterparts, inarguably has no gender-specific essence. So he is fundamentally un-gendered except to the extent that he is *en-gendered*, so to speak, by the humans who spawned and programmed him. He becomes aware of the gendered expectations of humans only as he interacts with them. Even then, his exposure to gender categories is limited because the setting in which Piercy places him, Tikva, is so nearly devoid of them. Piercy’s deployment of an Edenic trope in *Body of Glass* serves to impress her reader with an equation between innocence and androgyny. Tikva operates as Piercy’s version of the garden, where, as Shands points out, ‘the role of housewife or homemaker has simply been dismantled [...] Women’s work outside the house is seen as highly meaningful [...] With everyone in Tikva over fifteen being in the work force, work is in fact central for everyone, and with housework mostly automated, women’s old conflicts are reduced or resolved. Children are in day care even if mothers work at home because of the value seen in the socialisation that day care offers’ (145). Yod, in the end, gives his life to preserve this futuristic Eden, and, in doing so, enacts the part of a revised pre-lapsarian (because androgynous) Adam who sacrifices himself to free the world from the sins of the father, especially from the implied “original sin” of gender encoding. When Yod self-destructs to save Tikva, he intentionally triggers an explosion that simultaneously destroys Avram, who, like Connie’s “patriarchal construct” called God, had been observing events from the detached perspective of his laboratory.

Thus, as in *Woman on the Edge of Time*, *Body of Glass*’s utopian possibilities are ultimately consecrated by an obliteration of the patriarchal stance. But where *Woman on the Edge of Time*’s technological innovation, the brooder, verges on reinvesting the notion of fixed gender identities, *Body of Glass*’s technological innovation, the cyborg, thoroughly problematises the notion of fixed or “natural” identities by allowing a “shapeless” man to acquire attributes solely through acculturation. Because this “shaped” man is, at various times, the lover of two of the novel’s heroines, Shira and Malkah, the reader comes away from the text with a sense of endless possibilities for social and familial reform.

Le Guin’s Complications

Where Piercy’s narratives gesture toward genderless worlds, Le Guin’s depict them though, interestingly, Le Guin’s are less utopian. She is a prolific writer, so her novels, poems, and stories do many things. But her penchant for delivering moral grey areas has often been noted by critics.

The Left Hand of Darkness is a meditation on social morality that sets up several hypotheticals to which it offers scant solutions. Le Guin’s two essays, “Is Gender Necessary?” (1976) and “Is Gender Necessary? Redux” (1988) clarify some of her positions and, of course, shed light on intent. The first she wrote in defensive response to critics who had objected to what they felt was her fairly masculine style of androgyny. The second

she wrote as a qualified retraction of the first, for she later came to agree, in some measure, with her critics. In “Is Gender Necessary?”, Le Guin said the novel was meant to pose a ‘thought experiment’. She writes:

Because of our lifelong social conditioning, it is hard for us to see clearly what, besides purely physiological form and function, truly differentiates men and women. Are there real differences in temperament, capacity, talent, psychic process, etc.? If so, what are they? Only comparative ethnology offers, so far, any solid evidence on the matter, and the evidence is incomplete and often contradictory. The only going social experiments that are truly relevant are the kibbutzim and the Chinese communes, and they too are inconclusive – and hard to get unbiased information about. How to find out? Well, one can always put a cat in a box. One can send an imaginary, but conventional, indeed rather stuffy, young man from Earth into an imaginary culture which is totally free of sex roles because there is no, absolutely no, physiological sex distinction. I eliminated gender, to find out what was left. Whatever was left would be, presumably, simply human. It would define the area that is shared by men and women alike. (“Is Gender Necessary?”: 138)

What would be left, we are encouraged to conclude, is a human race that still tends toward domination and exploitation, but which carries with it the prospect of hope for a more socially just future.

In *The Left Hand of Darkness*, the character of Ai, though flawed and naïve, represents such hope. He is a representative of the Ekumen, the federation of worlds that coordinates contact and communication among the various Hainish planets for the exchange of goods and knowledge, and what he finds on the planet Gethen is an international power struggle between two rival nations. The mere fact that all of Gethen’s people truly have been created equal, in that anyone can become pregnant and give birth, does not eliminate the potential for strife, conflict, and conquest. Karhide and Orgoreyn are, at Gethen’s present point in history, engaged in a contest for world domination even though there is no battle of the sexes upon which to model, or from which to derive, their behaviour. On Gethen, there has been no original division of labour based on sex since, as Le Guin says, ‘the mother of several children may be the father of several more’ before returning to a perfect state of androgyny (“Is Gender Necessary?” 137). Nevertheless, there exists great ideological division between nations, with Karhide gradually assuming an imperialising position.

Given its premise of ambisexuality, then, the text is heedless of the hypotheses of Socialist and Radical Feminism, such prevalent discourses in the ‘60s and ‘70s, which tend to attribute most forms of hegemony and exploitation to an original sexism. As Le Guin herself explains:

on Gethen, the two polarities we perceive through our cultural conditioning as male and female are neither, and are in balance: consensus with authority, decentralizing with centralizing, flexible with rigid, circular with linear, hierarchy with network. But it is not a motionless balance, there being no such thing in life, and at the moment of the novel, it is wobbling perilously (“Is Gender Necessary? Redux”: 141)

Why that balance has begun to wobble is not made explicit by the text, or by either of Le Guin's essays, but clearly the cause has nothing to do with biological sex, nothing to do with gender. For Le Guin, unlike for Piercy, utopia is not an automatic outgrowth of gender neutrality.

What happens to family as a result of Le Guin's thought experiment in *The Left Hand of Darkness* is intricately bound up in her treatment of gender. Yet any specific treatment of family in the novel is conspicuous by its near-absence. Le Guin would eventually come to see this absence as a failing of the text, but it is not a failing that prevents *The Left Hand of Darkness* from *implying* certain things about family, family as it might exist in an androgynous world. Indeed, what it implies may be more interesting for its lack of authorial intent on the matter: Le Guin is not found trying to re-write the family in this novel; she is found trying to re-write gender. What happens to family as a result of that re-writing is therefore somewhat haphazard and, therefore, happily unburdened by politicising intent. It is also happily compatible with most feminist aims and objectives in relation to child-rearing practices and the non-division of labour, suggesting that a hierarchical, a nuclear, or an otherwise closed family structure in a genderless society is an imaginative improbability. Le Guin, however, found fault with the novel. She wrote:

for the reader, I left out too much. One does not see Estraven as a mother, with his children, in any role that we automatically perceive as 'female': and therefore, we tend to see him as a man. This is a real flaw in the book, and I can only be very grateful to those readers, men and women, whose willingness to participate in the experiment led them to fill in that omission with the work of their own imagination, and to see Estraven as I saw him, as man and woman, familiar and different, alien and utterly human." (Is Gender Necessary? 146)

But despite what Le Guin described as this 'real flaw', we do learn several things about family organisation on Gethen. We learn, for instance, that the basic unit all over the planet is a group of two hundred to eight hundred people, called a hearth. We also learn that anyone can and will have sex with anyone else who is in a state of fecundity called kemmer. We learn that there is no marriage requirement, either for purposes of fidelity or child-rearing, but that some people elect to 'vow kemmer' for life. Otherwise, there exists group sex, group "marriage," or pair-bonding without vows (*Left Hand* 91-92). 'Such commitments have intense moral and psychic significance, but they are not controlled by Church or State' (Is Gender Necessary? 143). The closest bonds tend to be between siblings, who can, and do, form sexual couples at times, but who are forbidden to 'vow kemmering'. Lifelong incest, then, is the only taboo (*Left Hand* 83).

Such family values are, it is safe to say, generally at home in feminism, especially feminism of the 1960's and 1970s. But it would seem that one threat to the possibility of a gender neutralised utopia is symbolised by Gethen's frozen landscape which suggests not just stillness, but stalemate. Le Guin's use of a literally frozen setting on which to cast the drama of two nations perpetually on the brink of conflict, is suggestive of Soviet/American relations during the Cold War. The plot's frequent references to military paranoia, espionage, and Siberian-type prison camps, prompt such an association and work well in a moral tale that bears a political resemblance to the extra-textual world. That Karhide is a feudalistic/capitalistic type of country, and Orgoreyn a repressive communistic type of country, makes the similarities to the U.S. and the former U.S.S.R

fairly compelling. In terms of family, we also learn that in Orgoreyn, 'no child over a year old lives with its parent or parents; all are brought up in the Commensal Hearths. There is no rank by descent. Private wills are not legal: a man dying leaves his fortune to the state. All start equal' (103). Karhide, however, family - the clan, the hearth - remains detached from government.

This familiar dichotomy assists Le Guin in depicting family as socially and politically determined, and, therefore, as remediable. She reproduces Cold War conditions of political polarity, suggesting, however inexactly, ideological parallels with the extra-textual world. By rendering the textual world genderless, she clears a space in which it is possible to imagine the emergence of new forms, of new family configurations. She clears a space but builds nothing more than a foundation: sexual equality, communal child-rearing, hearth schools. In a clear echo of the feminist discourse of the decade, she offers a symbolic manifestation sexual equality, but she rejects the naïve conclusion that the elimination of class, dominance, and aggression will follow from the elimination of sexism, or vice versa. Where Piercy would choose in both *Woman on the Edge of Time* and *Body of Glass* to consistently and favourably illustrate aspects of feminist theory, Le Guin reveals a scepticism.

Thus *The Left Hand of Darkness* remains in a kind of default collusion with patriarchal modes of thinking, even as it operates as a force against them. Yet as a sf work, of specifically science fiction, it uses what was once a typically male mode of writing to allow women, both its author and its man-woman characters, to enter a man's world. Le Guin's much later Hainish fiction, *Four Ways to Forgiveness* (1995), goes further, in one of its stories in particular, toward positing a more sexually integrated society, even though it makes no revisions to human anatomy. Similar to *The Left Hand of Darkness*, it finds itself, even in its ideological subversion, reconstructing patriarchal narrative practice.

The collection's third story, "A Man of the People," features families in which the mother/father dyad is replaced by a mother/brother dyad, with the brother of the mother being called "father". The biological father is a peripheral figure, who may know his offspring, but who has no real involvement with them. He may, however, be a part of a parenting dyad with his sister. Thus the story's central character, Havzhiva, is the son of a woman named Tovo, and her brother, Granite. Tovo leads a richly public life of lecturing and performing rituals at other 'pueblos'. She is so respected by her people that she is called The Heir of the Sun. Granite, whose very name pointedly suggests strength and masculinity, takes domestic responsibility for the children. In most families, the women perform paid work and the men perform domestic work, but both roles are highly valued, and neither is invisible. Homes are inter-generational, incorporating grandparents. The 'pueblo' system of tight, small-ish communities ensures plenty of intercourse between households and eliminates the potential for suburban-esque isolation.

Le Guin's utopian depiction of family in "A Man of the People" prompts both association and agreement with the post-Cold War political slogan of the '90s mentioned earlier, 'It takes a whole village to raise a child'. Furthermore, its male/female role reversal is strategically delivered in such a way as to appear nearly wistful in its ease of accomplishment. Certainly the story seeks to garner wide appeal and invite reader assent to its social/familial vision, not, specifically in terms of mother/brother dyads, but in terms of imaginatively reconfiguring family in any number of ways. By first estranging, and then favourably impressing us with the brother/sister dyad, it suggests the arbitrariness of our systems. However, again unwilling to deliver too facile an

argument, here as in *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Le Guin problematises her utopian scenario, her mid-‘90s thought experiment, and sprinkles her narrative with suggestions of unrest.

Havzhiva, born in harmony, raised in harmony, and the product of a perfectly serene childhood, concludes in his late adolescence that ‘existence is fundamentally arbitrary’ (127) and goes off into the wider universe beyond the pueblo, to worlds where people have ‘no lineage, no relatives, and no religion’ (127). He becomes a student of history, a seeker of truth, and in that wider universe he finds societies far less tranquil than had been the pueblo of his childhood. It is in that wider universe of unrest that he cultivates his ability for diplomacy and leadership, and there finds his life’s work in heroic action. Galaxies away from the village that raised him, he tells a fellow freedom-fighter about his pueblo, ‘about his father who was his uncle, his mother the Heir of the Sun, the rites, the festivals,’ and he says to her, ‘when you have to sit still, you want to fly’ (164).

It is in this simple moral that we find both the distillation and the reconstitution of an ideology. For here the child of feminist fiction, the child it took a whole village to raise, the un-triangulated child of amorphous social structures and personally and professionally contented parents, is neither mother-hungry nor father-bound. He is not bound by iron curtains, stone walls, or nationalistic ideologies. Nevertheless, he becomes restless with his freedom and goes in search of other worlds to reform. As in *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Le Guin has cleared another space, only to leave it blank. Anyone reading the story with attention to its potential as a fiction to invite social or familial formation, will be left standing with “a man of the people” on the precipice of unpredictable change. Light-years away from where we would expect to find him, stands the American quest hero, alone in a feminist landscape, perfectly free to quest. He intuits the absence of any ‘supposed nobler reality beneath’ to return to Ai’s phrase, but still he goes forward to reveal another frontier in which change can be allowed, charted, narrated, and new forms “naturalised.”

Notes

1. See the Preface to Barr’s *Alien to Femininity* (Westport: Greenwood Press Inc., 1987).
2. See “Science Fiction Critiques of the American Space Program, 1945-1958” by Albert I. Berger, *Science Fiction Studies*, 15, Vol. 5, Part 2, July 1978.
3. Elaine Tyler May’s assertions regarding the Cold War American ideology of the enclosed family are apropos of Piercy’s implications here -- i.e. that patriarchy is *not* an inevitable, permanent consequence of biology; that the nuclear family is a by-product of patriarchy, and therefore also not inevitable; and that the insular nature of both the nuclear family and of Cold War nationhood is linked to patriarchal priorities, including a desire for containment and closed borders.

Tyler May’s research indicates, for instance, that the mid-twentieth-century ideology of the nuclear family required that “it was not just nuclear energy that had to be contained, but the social and sexual fallout of the atomic age itself” (93). Among other compelling documents, she cites a major article published in the *Journal of Social Hygiene* in 1951 on the dangers of atomic attack, written by Charles Walter Clarke, a Harvard physician and executive director of the American Social Hygiene Association. She summarises the article and its implications as follows:

‘Following an atomic bomb explosion’ [Clarke] wrote, ‘families would become separated and lost from each other in confusion. Supports of normal family and community life would be broken down. . . . [T]here would develop among many people, especially youths . . . the reckless psychological state often seen following great disasters.’ The preparedness plan that Clarke devised to cope with this possibility centred not on death and destruction or psychological damage, but on the potential for sexual chaos. ‘Under such conditions,’ he continued, ‘moral standards would relax and promiscuity would increase. . . .’

Clarke’s preoccupation with sexual chaos may seem absurd in the face of the incomprehensible nuclear holocaust. [...] Nevertheless, his ideas struck a responsive chord among many fellow professionals who shared his concern for sexual order in the atomic age. [...] By linking fears of out-of-control sexuality with the insecurities of the cold war era, Clarke articulated a symbolic connection that found widespread expression in professional writings, anti-communist campaigns, and the popular culture. (93)

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