UNIVERSIDADE FEDERAL DE SANTA CATARINA

PROGRAMA DE PÓS-GRADUAÇÃO EM LETRAS

MARGE PIERCY'S FEMALE PROTAGONISTS: BEYOND THE STEREOTYPE OF PASSIVITY?

Dissertação apresentada à Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina para a obtenção do grau de

MESTRE EM LETRAS

OPÇÃO INGLÊS E LITERATURA CORRESPONDENTE

ILDNEY CAVALCANTI

FLORIANÓPOLIS

1989

Esta dissertação foi julgada adequada

para a obtenção do

GRAU DE MESTRE EM LETRAS

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many people have helped me in the making of this dissertation, and I want to express my appreciation to them here. Special thanks first to Profa. Dra. Susana B. Funck for her steady encouragement, constructive criticisms and illuminating orientation which guided me.

I have received much support and encouragement from my family, especially from Marcos Vermelho and Ilbert Cavalcanti. Thanks also to Moisés Almeida for his patient help in the manufacturing of this study.

I wish to thank my colleagues, and especially Anelise R. Corseuil who kindly helped me to get some references from which I benefited immeasurably. I am also grateful to the professors and the staff of the English Department.

Finally, my debt to CAPES, whose financial support enabled me to complete this course, is enormous.

RESUMO

A presente dissertação constitui uma análise parcial da obra de Marge Piercy, escritora americana contemporânea. Tendo por foco a suposição estereotípica da passividade feminina, investiga-se até que ponto as protagonistas na ficção de Marge Piercy transcendem as rígidas imagens de mulher (estereótipos femininos) existentes na estrutura patriarcal contemporânea. Foram escolhidos cinco entre os trabalhos de Piercy por estes serem produtos do contexto mais amplo do movimento feminista na sociedade americana dos anos 60 e 70. Tais trabalhos são os romances centrados em protagonistas mulheres: Small Changes (1973), Woman On the Edge of Time (1976), The High Cost of Living (1978), Vida (1979), e Braided Lives (1982). Nesses romances, nove personagens são examinadas quanto a suas interações na esfera privada e na vida pública. Observa-se como essas personagens reagem (ou permanecem passivas) com relação a estrutura familiar tradicional, relacionamento com amigos e parceiros, educação, vida profissional e organização sócio-política. Procura-se documentar a rejeição demonstrada por Marge Piercy quanto a representações estereotípicas da mulher na literatura. Os resultados apontam para uma das maiores realizações do movimento feminista americano e de sua literatura: a trilha neo-humanista que tem sido seguida em oposição ao autoritarismo inerente ao patriarcado ocidental.

ABSTRACT

The present dissertation constitutes an analysis of literary works by a contemporary American woman writer. Focusing on the central stereotypical assumption of female passivity, it investigates the extent to which the female protagonists in Marge Piercy's fiction have transcended patriarchal images of woman (feminine stereotypes). Five among Piercy's works were chosen for their being products of the wider context of the feminist movement in American society in the 60's and 70's. These are the women-centered novels: Small Changes (1973), Woman On the Edge of Time (1976), The High Cost of Living (1978), Vida (1979), and Braided Lives (1982). Nine female characters are looked at under the light of their interactions on both the private and the public levels. The characters' response (or passivity) concerning traditional family structure, relationship with friends and lovers, education, profession, and socio-political frame surrounding them is observed so that readers may have a more comprehensive grasp of Marge Piercy's feminism through her indictment of stereotypical representations of women in literature. The results signal one of the greatest achievements of American feminist movement and literature: the new humanistic path they have been treading in opposition to the authoritarianism inherent to Western patriarchy.

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this is the oppressor's language
yet I need it to talk to you

Adrienne Rich

INTRODUCTORY CHAPTER

WOMEN IN SOCIETY AND LITERATURE

Women's stories have not been told. And without stories there is no articulation of experience. Without stories a woman is lost when she comes to make the important decisions of her life.

Carol P. Christ

Literary critic Wendy Martin has properly pointed out that "fiction not only reflects and expresses social values but transmits them to future generations."[1] Therefore it becomes necessary to consider sex-role stereotyping before undertaking any gender-based analysis of contemporary literature since women characters more often than not reflect the stratification of women in society. For my purpose in this analysis of Marge Piercy's novels, it proves especially important to take a brief backward glance at some of the writers and thinkers who have questioned the status of women in society and have challenged their literary representation as over-simplified figures.

Published in 1792, Mary Wollstonecraft's A Vindication of the Rights of Woman is the first well-known document to plead for social equality between the sexes. A step ahead of her contemporaries, Wollstonecraft claims for women's rights as in the same context with human rights in general. She considers women "in the grand light of human creatures, who, in common with men, are placed on this earth to unfold their faculties." [2] She wants women to be educated under the same model as men are, and not to receive merely a marriage-oriented instruction; she is, thus, against society's expectations from women, and also against men's arguments for superiority. In affirming that "men have increased [women's] inferiority till women are almost sunk below the standard of rational creatures" (pp.39-40), Wollstonecraft denounces the distortion imposed on woman's conduct, manners, and education. According to her, one may not assert that women are intellectually inferior, unless they have room to develop and gain strength, and thus define their place. Meanwhile it is vain to expect them to grow as individuals.[3]

By showing how women have been subjected to propriety and

have been "denied a road open by which they can pursue more extensive plans of usefulness and independence" (p.161). Wollstonecraft's main purpose is to render her sex more respectable members of society, for they have not been treated as rational creatures _ they have been in a state of perpetual childhood. So that women might reach independence and self-esteem, she advocates nothing short of a social revolution abolishing distinctions of wealth, class, and gender. Wollstonecraft's aim with her claim for equality between the sexes is not to extenuate women's "faults," "but to prove them the natural consequence of their education and station in society" (pp.214-215). She believes women will change and correct their "faults" once "they are allowed to be free in a physical, moral, and civil sense" (p.215).

Although outdated in many ways, A Vindication of the Rights of Woman remains an important document because it gives a clear account of the situation of women in Wollstonecraft's time, and because it proves that women's dissatisfaction was already being expressed in the eighteenth century through a remarkable and probably one of the first feminine public voices. As Virginia Woolf has asserted in this century, the originality of Wollstonecraft's daring words "has become our commonplace."[4]

Because of the intellectual climate of her time, Wollstonecraft's ideas remained almost ineffective, overshadowed as they were by the wider reivindications of the French Revolution. But when, in 1869, the English philosopher and economist John Stuart Mill published The Subjection of Women, the reception was much more favorable. Coming out almost a century later, Mill's feminist cry receives the support of other voices in the upsurge of the feminist movement. His, however, is

the strongest pleading of his time. He summarizes the object of his long essay in the much quoted end of his opening paragraph:

> That the principle which regulates the existing social relations between the two sexes _ the legal subordination of one sex to the other _ is wrong in itsef, and now one of the chief hindrances to human improvement; and that it ought to be replaced by a principle of perfect equality admitting no power or priviledge on the one side, nor disability on the other.[5]

Mill reiterates Wollstonecraft's idea of social equality between the sexes in a more formal tone. He also focuses on a point which, although only slightly mentioned by Wollstonecraft (when she notes the distorted character of women's conduct, manners, and education), will be taken up in its totality by Simone de Beauvoir in this century: the nature of women as opposed to the real nature of women. He describes the former as something artificial, for women had their character distorted from its natural proportion. The latter, on the other hand, is not known yet, for the true nature of women will only be revealed when they can freely develop to the point of being able to state it.

Existing moralities, according to Mill, are mainly fitted to a relation of command and obedience, and the time is now come for the morality of justice. He believes this system of oppression will not survive long, for human beings have been walking towards freedom of choice, which, together with competition, is essential for progress, for growth. More optimistic and more academic than Wollstonecraft, The Subjection of Women nevertheless pleads for the same causes. Like Wollstonecraft, Mill emphasizes the benefits a change in the

status of women would bring to humanity in general.

Besides the general issues he raises, Mill also mentions women artists and their lack of originality of creation, which is a result of their not having their own artistic tradition. He illustrates this idea by briefly approaching the problem of lack of tradition in literature, a topic which is taken up by Virginia Woolf in 1929 in "Women and Fiction" and A Room of One's Own _ the first studies which specifically connect women and the writing of fiction.

Woolf's well-known analysis comprehends three basic aspects. The first one, women and what they are like, focuses on the historical subjection of women which has led to a lack of opportunity for free self-expression. Woolf herself as a woman artist felt that her participation in the creative world was not entirely achieved:

> ... and I thought how unpleasant it is to be locked out [of the male world]; and I thought how it is worse perhaps to be locked in; and, thinking of the safety and prosperity of the one sex and of the poverty and insecurity of the other and of the effect of tradition and of the lack of tradition upon the mind of a writer, I thought at last that it was time to roll up the crumpled skin of the day, with its arguments and its impressions and its anger and its laughter, and cast it into the hedge.[6]

Besides the immaterial difficulties of hostility from the male world (which forces women out) and of lack of tradition as stressed in the quotation above, Woolf also mentiions the no less important problem of material difficulties women face. This, in fact, titles her treatise: "a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction" (p.6).

The next aspect covered in A Room of One's Own concerns women and the fiction they write. This part consists of a historical account of women's literary production, ranging from Lady Winchilsea (1661) up until Woolf's contemporaries. Woolf points out as one characteristic of most women's writing the awareness the reader experiments of the presence of a woman "resenting the treatment of her sex and pleading for its rights"[7] behind the text, which she considers a distortion, a weakness in a literary work. Even though not necessarily a weakness, such characteristic can indeed still be perceived in most literature by women nowadays, including Marge Piercy's novels. In fact, Piercy seems to be much aware of the anger in her work when she states that

> not to be in touch with your anger is to be very alienated from yourself. Alienated from your body, alienated from your own history, and alienated from your emotions. And how can you write, then, except with what you learn from other books. Then you get derivative literature. Very very literary literature.[8]

As we can see, the anger that Woolf could not accept as valid has become, for some contemporary novelists, the very main spring of their fiction.

The third important aspect examined by Woolf, women and the fiction that is written about them, presents some images of women in literature _ especially in male texts _ which do not correspond to reality: "imaginatively [woman] is of the highest importance; practically she is completely insignificant" (p.43), asserts Woolf. Because usually depicted in their relationships with men, women acquire a peculiar nature in fiction as

"extremes of beauty and horror" (p.79). Such ideas have been developed nowadays into the concepts of stereotypes of women which pervade feminist literary criticism and which will be the focus of my analysis of women characters in Marge Piercy's novels.

Virginia Woolf's works, in short, claim for material conditions and intellectual freedom for women. The question of women and fiction remains unresolved for Woolf, as it still is, in spite of her prediction that in a hundred years things would have changed and women would be taking part in all the activities that were once denied to them. Sixty years have passed since then, and the problem still exists.

Whereas Wollstonecraft and Mill remain basically on the social level, and Woolf, in turn, remains on the literary level, Simone de Beauvoir has made a much more _ if not the most _ comprehensive analysis of the woman's issue. Her world-famous study The Second Sex, published in 1949, presents an overall (biological, historical, mythological, sociological, psychoanalytical, and literary) view of women, and therefore has triggered a new interest in the problem. De Beauvoir's main concern is to investigate the otherness, a fundamental category of human thought, in women, i.e., to investigate and try to explain the reason why women occupy permanently the negative pole in the duality the essential/the other, whereas men stand for both the positive and the neuter poles, without shifting positions. According to de Beauvoir, woman has failed to grow into fully developed human beings because she has been "hesitating between the role of object, Other which is offered her, and the assertion of her own liberty,"[9] without being able to take a stand.

In the first part of The Second Sex, Book One, de Beauvoir makes an analysis of the biological implications of being a woman and concludes that "it is not nature that defines woman; it is she who defines herself by dealing with nature on her own account in her emotional life" (p.69). When proceeding with the investigation of woman from the psychoanalytical point of view, de Beauvoir finds out that theories of woman's sexuality are based upon masculine models, constructing a psychology of woman according to male-biased interests. The next area under analysis is history. In this section she develops the concepts of immanence and transcendence. According to her, women have been historically doomed to the former, that is, to the repetition of life through biological reproduction, whereas men identify with transcendence, for he is the active creator, the individual who pursues goals:

> the religion of woman was bound to the reign of agriculture, the reign of irreducible duration, of contingency, of chance, of waiting, of mystery; the reign of Homo faber is the reign of time manageable as space, of necessary consequences, of the project, of action, of reason.(p.107)

Indeed, some of de Beauvoir's most quoted sentences are those which deal with the immanence/transcendence opposition, such as, "She [woman] can only be, not act" (p.381). De Beauvoir also stresses that even though women have been achieving legal and/or political equality, subjection still exists. Biological, psychoanalytical, and historical accounts concerning women fail to explain why they have been classified as the other. In "Myths" _ the third part of Book One _ Simone de Beauvoir

explains man's need to relate womanhood to otherness in his urge to define himself.

As de Beauvoir states it, woman, thus, "sees herself and makes her choices not in accordance with her true nature in itself, but as man defines her" (p.169). As the contrastive and negative pole of man's definition of himself, relegated to the condition of "other," woman is prevented from freely creating her own destiny. The section on myths proves directly relevant for the study that will be carried out in this dissertation. In the analysis of Marge Piercy's women characters, the issues pointed out by de Beauvoir will come to surface, i.e., basic questions put by the latter will be applied to Piercy's characters: are they still others (and thus imprisoned in stock-role images created by men)? Have they reached freedom from immanence and from the passivity it implies? In what stage of the role-liberation process are they?

De Beauvoir dedicates Book Two in The Second Sex to a detailed description of the several aspects of women's lives (from childhood up until old age), and of their situation in society which is far less preferable than men's. She closes her all-inclusive study by asserting that civil liberties have been theoretical, not enough, unaccompanied by economic freedom. She claims for women's need to achieve complete freedom, and to achieve economical and social equality with men. Even if the vicious cycle _ with each sex being the victim of the other and of itself _ is hard to break, change must come, regardless of the sacrifice it may involve. "The quarrel will go on," she affirms, "as long as men and women fail to recognize each other as equals; that is to say, as long as femininity is perpetuated as such" (pp.727-28). From such a statement one is led to the

understanding that what is needed is a redefinition of the concept of femininity, which has become empty and no longer applies to women's reality _ if ever it did. De Beauvoir's ideal of a new humanism reaches its climax when she stresses that "the fact that we are human beings is infinitely more important than all the peculiarities that distinguish human beings from one another" (p.737), and also when she stresses the necessity of the sexes to "affirm their brotherhood" (p.737), following the same thread as Wollstonecraft, Mill, and Woolf.

In the most specifically literary portion of The Second Sex, that is "The Myth of Woman in Five Authors," Simone de Beauvoir analyses works by Montherlant, Lawrence, Claudel, Breton, and Stendhal. According to her, except for Stendhal who depicts women characters as quite alive, as true human beings, the work of these authors reflects the great collective myths of woman, each from a different point of view. The ideal woman for them is the one who incarnates most exactly the other, capable of revealing man to himself, and also capable of forgetting her self in her love for man. De Beauvoir's analysis constitutes the first kind of feminist literary criticism, and it will become recurrent, as one will see it repeated in Kate Millett's literary analysis in Sexual Politics.

Published in 1970, Millett's work updates de Beauvoir's analysis by placing it in the context of the feminist movement up until 1960.[10] Its main thesis is the recognition of a sexual politics as the ideology behind our history. Millett's aim is to prove that sex is a status category with political implications, i.e., that it is subject to power-structured relationships, arrangements whereby one group of persons is controlled by another:

> However muted its present appearance may be, sexual dominion obtains nevertheless as perhaps the most pervasive ideology of our culture and provides its most fundamental concept of power.(p.33)

Millett applies such a theory of sexual politics to the works of Lawrence, Miller, Mailer, and Genet, to conclude that sex-determined social roles are not simply arbitrary, but the function of an oppressive system which imprisons women in stereotyped images. According to her, counterrevolutionary literature, especially the one written from 1930 to 1960, clearly reflects this fact.

Similarly to Wollstonecraft, Millett claims for a revolution in the entire social system:

> The changes in fundamental values such a coalition of expropriated groups _ blacks, youth, women, the poor _ would seek are specially pertinent to realizing not only sexual revolution but a gathering impetus towards freedom from rank or prescriptive role, sexual or otherwise. For to actually change the quality of life is to transform personality, and this cannot be done without freeing humanity from the tyranny of sexual-social category and conformity to sexual stereotype _ as well as abolishing racial caste and economic class.(p.507)

Echoing all the thinkers mentioned above for the ideal of a new humanism, Millett goes further than they to affirm that we are leaving a period of counterrevolution and entering a new era of the feminist movement: the new feminism. This movement implies the ideals of a liberal humanism in the sense that, unlike the classical humanism with its over-valuation of man, it envisages

all human beings' full realization. She believes this second wave of sexual revolution will at last accomplish its aim to free half the race from its subordination. Her belief is extremely relevant for the purpose of this dissertation, for it illustrates the intellectual climate in which novelist and poet Marge Piercy wrote the works under analysis here. In fact, we might even say that Piercy seeks to actualize Millett's idea of liberating women from stereotypes through her fictional characters.

Like de Beauvoir, Millett makes an investigation of the literary implications of misogyny. Focusing on the depiction of women by male writers (they both investigate the way some "important" male writers portray women characters), they succeed in showing that literature has indeed functioned as a means to perpetuate myths and stereotypes of women. They have, thus, opened the road for feminist literary critics and initiated what critic Elaine Showalter calls "feminist critique" _ the first phase of feminist criticism, which, in its fixation on male literature, becomes limited because it studies not "what women have felt and experienced, but only what men have thought women should be."[11]

Nowadays a number of critics have worried about the portrayals of women in fiction and about the need to discard the old male-invented mythology of women. Concerned with the American tradition in literature and still following the "feminist critique" tendency, literary critic Wendy Martin presents evidence to support the theory that the heroines in American fiction are reenacting Eve's fall _ "they are fallen women, eternally cursed for eating the apple of experience" (p.329). Both Puritan morality and bourgeois economic values

(which are an outgrowth of the former), Martin affirms, provide myths which perpetuate the archetype of the fallen woman in American fiction. She stresses that social and economic changes _ again the urge for revolution _ will bring about an improvement in the female psyche and that fiction can help this process by providing us with a new Eve: a new mythology.

Progressively the interest of feminist critics shifted to the depiction of female characters by women writers. Such is, for example, the case of Joanna Russ and Carolyn Heilbrun. Russ in "What Can a Heroine Do? Or Why Women Can't Write"[12] points out the problems women writers face in living in a male-oriented society, surrounded by myths which do not adequately represent them. Such problems result in their impossibility to write, or to be creative in the depiction of their female characters, since by writing within a male tradition they are ideologically restricted to supportive roles in a limited number of plot-patterns which reflect the man-made myths of woman. Russ challenges current fictional representations as not properly reflecting women's reality, and, like Martin, suggests the creation of a new mythology, of new roles for women. In Reinventing Womanhood[13] Carolyn Heilbrun also shows her dissatisfaction with the depiction of women characters in literature by women writers. She dedicates the third chapter of her study to what she names "The Failure of Imagination." In this section she stresses the inability women writers have displayed in imagining for their women characters the self and the autonomy they _ the authors _ have in fact achieved for themselves. According to her, most novels by women writers still lack autonomous and well-rounded female characters.

In spite of their different historical contexts, all

thinkers and writers mentioned above have pleaded for the same causes, leading us to conclude that even though they have been concerned with the question of women, the situation between the sexes has not become balanced yet. As the literary and the social aspects interweave, the worrying about the depiction of women characters in novels is connected with the preoccupation of how women are seen and of what is expected from them in a non-fictional environment. In analysing either of these aspects, one is in fact trying to solve both problems: of real life women and of fictional women. As it was already stressed by Wendy Martin above, re-creation in fiction can undoubtedly help the process of a social and sexual revolution.

As a result of such historical and literary questioning, contemporary women writers who are much aware of the cause of women have emerged. Born in 1936, in Detroit, Marge Piercy is one of these. She has been politically active since adolescence. First her involvement was basically with Civil Rights, and then with antiwar movements in the 60's. Since the late 60's she has been actively involved in the woman's movement. Her essay "The Grand Coolee Dam"[14] (1969) describes the way she was led to such connection by the misogyny of many early activists. As she articulates in "Laying Down the Tower" (1973), an introduction to a series of eleven poems inspired by the tarot cards, Piercy believes that

> What we use we must remake. Then only we are not playing with dead dreams but seeing ourselves more clearly, and more clearly becoming. The defeated in history lose their names, their language, their culture. The myths we imagine we are living (old westerns, true romances) shape our choices.[15]

And in accordance with her beliefs, she has produced a number of novels clearly intended to revise traditional plots. Through both her realistic and utopian fiction Piercy documents the struggle to eliminate the economic, racial and sexual inequality she identifies with contemporary American life. Piercy advocates a revisionist attitude concerning literature very much like Adrienne Rich's view of revision as "the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction" in the effort to create something new and as "an act of survival."[16] Both Rich and Piercy try, in Rich's words, "not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us" (p.35), and they also try to find language and images for a consciousness that is just beginning to emerge.

The importance of a feminist politics in Piercy's life is stressed in an interview with Karla Hammond, in which the novelist remarks:

> "Feminism" is one particular branch of radical thinking: the other two being anarchism and communism-socialism. All of these I relate to and all of these are important to me. "Feminism" says that the first property was women and children, that the sexual contradictions are fundamental contradictions and antedate capitalism, that unless the sexual contradictions are dealt with and unless women achieve full equality, we cannot have a good society. This cannot be done secondarily, but must be incorporated in any political struggle from the beginning. Feminism also has developed a sound respect for ourselves as part of nature, not its masters.[17]

Because of her concern with the women's cause and of her awareness of her responsibility towards the literary work and

her sex, Marge Piercy provides us with enough material for a literary study of women characters. Feminism in her novels is characterized by the centrality of women characters _ which in itself is not enough to define a feminist artistic work _ , and by fulfilling what literary critic Cheri Register has delineated as the five functions of feminist literature. These are: "(1) serve as a forum for women; (2) help to achieve cultural androgyny; (3) provide role-models; (4) promote sisterhood; and (5) augment consciousness-raising".[18] Register's view represents one trend within feminist literary criticism, best defined in terms of the ways in which literature can serve the cause of liberation. Because it recognizes the political nature of writing and the links of feminist writing and criticism with the woman's movement, this critical approach seems most appropriate for an analysis of Marge Piercy's work.

In fact, Marge Piercy's intense preoccupation with the portrayal of women characters pervades her political and theoretical writings. "Since I began writing," she says, "the world has changed a lot in what women are allowed to say in their work.... Today, women writers can embody the whole range of experience in their work,"[19] and she, in turn, has also been taking advantage and making use of the increasing variety of themes she can write about. Urging to speed the dissolution of rigid sex roles,[20] Piercy has tried to create self-reliant characters in her fiction.

Connected with Register's role-model function in feminist writing, my purpose in this dissertation is to find out to what extent Piercy has accomplished her proposal to create new roles for women in her novels, that is to say, to what extent she has provided new models for women, or modified old ones. This study

will, thus, investigate the relations of Piercy's female protagonists with one major stereotype of woman: passivity. I also intend to try to establish a line of evolution concerning this topic _ the depiction of female characters as active agents _ in the five novels under analysis: Small Changes (1973), Woman On the Edge of Time (1976), The High Cost of Living (1978), Vida (1979), and Braided Lives (1982). These works were most affected by the boom of the feminist movement in the late 60's, and cover almost a decade: from 1973 to 1982. Because of the historical environment of these novels, the women characters portrayed in them seem to emphasize their battle against stereotyping.

I am aware that the theoretical trend I intend to follow within feminist criticism has been severely criticized by some thinkers. Critic Mary Eagleton, for example, disagrees with its principles by asserting that Register "proposes a highly dogmatic form of criticism, couched in authoritarian language" which is "unhelpful" and "futile" because the hidden true, autonomous, and unified identity it searches for in women does not exist.[21] Such opinions are not enough to invalidate Cheri Register's ideas, however. Even though most schools of criticism become, in the last analysis, dogmatic and reductive in their scope, they can still contribute to the evaluation of literature. New Criticism illustrates this point with its over-valuation of certain concepts (irony and ambiguity, for instance). Also, as Eagleton understands it, the idea of throwing off oppression for a real self to appear seems oversimplified. In Marge Piercy's novels, for example, the characters who succeed in reaching or discovering their own identity undergo a long process. They face pain and suffering, they live "false" experiences (as dictated by patriarchy),

before they learn how to cope with their own selves. Finally, the feminist tendency in Marge Piercy's novels seems to result from the author's own experience as an oppressed human being, and not from a desire "to follow the instructions" of a given trend in theory.

In fact, one of the main distinctions between feminist and other forms of criticism seems to be the openness of the former in contrast to the strictness of the latter. As concerning this point, critic Lawrence Lipking has remarked that "the attempt to build a literary theory on principles of 'affiliation' rather than 'authority' seems to [him] one of the most promising avenues of recent feminist criticism."[22] Following this train of thought, in my view the existing connection between Piercy's literary works and Register's theoretical writings on criticism is founded upon a basis of affiliation rather than one of authority. Even though Lipking recognizes that a well-grounded woman's poetics remains to be written, and in spite of its limitations, the so-called Prescriptive Criticism helps to illuminate feminist writing and at the same time furnishes concrete tools for the study of contemporary novels.

My analysis will focus on nine women characters from the novels mentioned above. I will examine these characters in terms of the basic stereotypical assumption of women's passivity. Before undertaking the analysis itself, however, I will describe and define in the following chapter some basic concepts for the understanding of this dissertation.

The importance of this study lies in the opportunity to discover and discuss the production of an important contemporary woman novelist and to introduce her to Brazilian readers. Also, it lies in the need to liberate women from still existing

stereotypes and to break the mechanism of their perpetuation _ a clear concern both for women writers and for the reader/student of literature who believes in women's claim for equality between the sexes and for a mythology of their own.

Notes to the Introductory Chapter

[1]Wendy Martin, "Seduced and Abandoned in the New World: The Image of Woman in American Fiction," in Vivian Gornick and Barbara K. Moran (eds.) Woman in Sexist Society: Studies in Power and Powerlessness (New York: Mentor, 1971), p.331. All future references are from this edition.

[2]Mary Wollstonecraft, A Vindication of the Rights of Woman (London: Everyman's Library, 1985), p.4. All future references are from this edition.

[3]Wollstonecraft uses the word virtue to define a human being's complete growth as an individual. According to her, dependence upon men makes women cunning, mean, and selfish, and therefore, not "virtuous".

[4]Virginia Woolf, "Mary Wollstonecraft," in Michele Barret (ed.) Women and Writing (San Diego: H B J Books, 1979), p.98.

[5]John Stuart Mill, The Subjection of Women (London: Everyman's Library, 1985), p.219.

[6]Virginia Woolf, A Room of One's Own (London: Grafton, 1977), p.24. All future references are from this edition.

[7]Woolf, "Women and Fiction," in Granite and Rainbow (London: The Hogarth Press, 1981), p.80.

[8]Marge Piercy, "The Ordeal of the Woman Writer" [Recorded panel discussion, with Toni Morrison and Erica Jong], introduction by Heywood Hale Brown (New York: Norton, 1974).

[9]Simone de Beauvoir, The Second Sex, trans. H. M. Parshley (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1972), p.83. All future references are from this edition.

[10]Kate Millett, Sexual Politics (New York: Ballantine Books, 1978). Millett divides the feminist movement historically into three parts: the sexual revolution (1st phase) _ 1830 to 1930; the counterrevolution with its reactionary policy and ideology _ 1930 to 1960; and the new wave of feminism from the 60's on. All future references are from this edition.

[11]Elaine Showalter, "Toward a Feminist Poetics," in Elaine Showalter (ed.) The New Feminist Criticism _ Essays on Women, Literature, and Theory (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), p.130. All future references are from this edition.

[12]Joanna Russ, "What Can a Heroine Do? Or Why Women Can't Write," in Susan Koppelman Cornillon (ed.) Images of Women in Fiction: Feminist Perspectives (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1973), pp.3-20.

[13]Carolyn Heilbrun, Reinventing Womanhood (New York: Norton, 1979).

[14]Marge Piercy, "The Grand Coolee Dam" [Pamphlet], in Leviathan (Sommerville, Mass.: New English Free Press, 1969).

[15] Piercy, "Laying Down the Tower," in Circles on the Water: Selected Poems of Marge Piercy (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982), pp.118-19.

[16]Adrienne Rich, "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-vision," On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose 1966-1978 (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1979), p.35. All future references are from this edition.

[17]Piercy, "An Interview with Karla Hammond," in Piercy Parti-Colored Blocks for a Quilt (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1982), p.33. This interview was first published in Pulp 4, no. 1 (1978). All future references are from this edition.

[18]Cheri Register, "American Feminist Literary Criticism: A Bibliographical Introduction," in Mary Eagleton (ed.) Feminist Literary Theory: A Reader (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), pp.169-70.

[19]Piercy, "A Woman Writer Treads on Male Turf," interview to Alvin P. Sanoff, U. S. News & World Report, May 18 (1987).

[20]Indeed, in her interview with Karla Hammond (see note 17) Piercy acknowledges that topics such as sex roles, love, and class are frequent in her writing (p.28).

[21]Mary Eagleton (ed.), Feminist Literary Theory: A Reader (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), p.151.

[22]Lawrence Lipking, "Aristotle's Sister: A Poetics of Abandonment," Critical Enquiry, September (1983), p.73.

CHAPTER ONE

IDEOLOGY, MYTH AND STEREOTYPES OF WOMEN

Stories are ideologies that shape our sense of reality.

Rachel Blau DuPlessis

Dresses flap about me, whore and lady
masks, while my bones still whistle
and my flesh rusts neuter as iron.
The rooms of my life wait
to pack me in boxes.

Marge Piercy _ "Waking One Afternoon
in My Best Dress"

Before proceeding with the analysis of Marge Piercy's women characters, we must examine the concepts of ideology, myth, and stereotype as connected to the women's issue and as central for the comprehension of this study. The sequence of concepts was determined according to two aspects: their gradation from abstractness to concreteness _ from the idea behind to the image as it appears in literature _, and their operative function, for stereotypes serve the myths, which in turn serve the reigning ideology. My purpose in this section is to define such concepts separately, showing the mechanism of their interrelationship. After that, I describe some of the recurrent stereotypes of women in American literature, and I also establish the criteria for the study of Marge Piercy's novels.

Ideology usually implies a theory for the explanation of reality and its transformations. In its Marxist view, it consists of the transposition of established social relations to the realm of ideas. Becoming part of an abstract field, these ideas appear to be independent and pure. Moreover, they are used to explain social reality, when in fact the opposite process is true. In her study about ideology, Brazilian professor Marilena Chaui has described it as follows:

> Besides trying to determine their means of socialization through given institutions, men produce ideas or representations through which they try to explain and understand their own social and individual lives, their relationships to nature and to the supernatural. These ideas or representations, however, will tend to hide the real process through which the social relations were produced and the origin of the social forms of economic exploitation and political control. Such concealment of social reality is called ideology.[1]

In our Western society, patriarchal bourgeois ideology becomes a means used by a dominant group to hold control over the oppressed class. Also, according to Chaui, its aims are to make "true ideas" appear in place of the dominant group, and to make people believe that these ideas are autonomous and really representative of reality.

Such patriarchal ideology is responsible for the emergence of abstract universals, undoubted truths. Sexual dominance makes use of these by conditioning human beings to stereotyped views of "masculine" and "feminine," products of an ideology of discrimination between the sexes which undergirds patriarchal ideology, without questioning such concepts. In fact, as we have seen in the Introduction to Sexual Politics, Kate Millett points out that male dominance constitutes "perhaps the most pervasive ideology of our culture and provides its most fundamental concept of power" (p.33). As the ruling caste, men control half the human race.

The most appropriate instrument of ideology is modern myth. The reference here is not to classical myths (although a similar analysis can be carried out concerning their being products of ideology, such is not my concern), but to myth as an ill-formed belief which propagates bourgeois ideology. Such is the view developed by French professor Roland Barthes, who has described modern myth as "a type of speech chosen by history,"[2] and therefore not natural. His theory on mythologies goes so far as classifying the fields comprehended by myth: semiology (a formal science, for it is a sign), and ideology (a historical science, for it displays a social meaning). According to him everything can become a myth once there is pure matter plus a type of social usage. Because of the focus of the present investigation,

the semiological aspect of myth with its double system of signification will not be discussed further. Our emphasis will be on myth as carrier of an ideological message, and therefore as accomplishing the same inversion ideology does: transforming history into nature. Both patriarchal ideology and myth (as its vehicle) have, then, an identical principle. Barthes affirms that "myth has the task of giving an historical intention a natural justification, and making contingency appear eternal" (p.142), and we are aware that the same process occurs with our male-oriented bourgeois ideology.

Our society, Barthes continues, constitutes a priviliged field of mythical significations which arise from use, that is, based on the desire of maintaining the status quo. Translated into sexual terms, such process produces a misogynic mythology of women. In The Second Sex Simone de Beauvoir stresses the myth of "otherness" in women as hiding a suitable arrangement for the interests of the male and as being easily explained by its usefulness to men. She also exposes the asymmetry of categories and the unilateral forms of sexual myths. The ambivalence of the different myths of woman reflects the variety of men's hopes and fears projected on women. Encouraged by de Beauvoir, Kate Millett touches the same issue:

> the image of women as we know it is an image created by men and fashioned to suit their needs. These needs spring from a fear of the "otherness" of woman. Yet this notion itself presupposes that patriarchy has already been established and the male has already set himself as the human norm, the subject and referent to which the female is "other" or alien.(p.65)

Following this train of thought, Millett points out that in primitive societies taboo and mana generated myths. In historical cultures, myths are reflected in ethical and literary rationalizations, and in the modern period, myth also gets connected with scientific rationalizations which try to diminish women before the male norm. Both de Beauvoir and Millett believe that when women reach social equality with men, they will not incarnate the myth of "otherness."

As an instrument of Western dominant ideology, myth implies the creation of types according to the needs of the group in power and under the preconception of these being eternal. In fact, myth distorts nature because of its excess of ideological motivation which is unnatural and supplied by history. The primal, or basic, types implied by myth are the archetypes, original patterns or models of which all things of the same type are representations or copies. While we can trace back archetypes in the origin of certain images, stereotypes are born out of repetition. Archetypes are immutable and generally related to classical myths: the archetype of Eve, the fallen woman, for instance, generated the stereotype of the seductive, fatal woman who will lead man to decay. As concerning modern myth, poor and incomplete images suit it best, for myth fills these according to its need and usage. Thus, stereotypes arise when these recurrent poor images are captured and filled with mythological substance. They become, then, standardized pictures which represent oversimplified opinions and uncritical judgements. It is important for us to keep in mind that stereotypes get crystallized as a result of the excessive recurrence of certain myths.

Barthes has stressed that dominant ideology transforms the

products of history into "essential types" _ which correspond to stereotypes in my analysis _ with the end to immobilize the world. Such constitutes "a prohibition for man against inventing himself" (p.155). According to him, myth (and stereotypes) is a demand

> that all men recognize themselves in this image, eternal, yet bearing a date, which was built of them one day as if for all time. For the Nature, in which they are locked up under the pretext of being eternalized, is nothing but an Usage.(pp.155-56)

Barthes has also affirmed that "statistically, myth is on the right" (p.148). In this side it takes hold of everything (law, morality, aesthetics) it can as a means of expansion of the oppressor's ideology. In this sense, we can assume that literary texts serve as vehicle of ideology. As the Marxist-Feminist Literature Collective has explained, "they cannot give us a knowledge of the social formation; but they do give us something of equal importance in analysing culture, an imaginary representation of real relations."[3]

Focusing on the same topic, literary critic Rachel Blau DuPlessis has reminded us that "narrative in the most general terms is a version of, or a special expression of, ideology."[4] In most cases, literary works display recurrent stereotypes, which help propagate the reigning ideology by imposing categories which condemn the oppressed into different. With the intent to get rid of such categories, poet Muriel Rukeyser has uttered in an explicitly antimythological, self-critical, and defiant tone her much quoted "No more masks! No more mythologies!"[5] in "The Poem as Mask" (1971), following the

revisionist tradition of twentieth-century women poets. In fact, she should have referred to patriarchal mythologies once it seems impossible to produce a literature which is thoroughly antimythological. Critic Alicia Ostriker has properly remarked that the contemporary woman poet "deconstructs a prior 'myth' or 'story' and constructs a new one which includes, instead of excluding, herself."[6] In fact, these contemporary writers generally present the reader with renewed myths.

A great number of literary analyses focusing on the patriarchal myth of woman in male authors have been undertaken in an attempt to disclose such feminine images. The pioneer in this field was Simone de Beauvoir in The Second Sex. Such was in fact the aim of early feminist critics who undertook gender-based literary analyses and who were much concerned with the deciphering of the myth of woman in male-authored works. Nowadays women writers have been given more attention by literary critics. Women authors who are aware of gender difference tend to produce revolutionary literature which is not fundamentally mythical in the Barthian sense. While reactionary discourse is mythical and has the aim to eternalize, revolutionary discourse has the aim to transform and, therefore, openly proposes to abolish patriarchal myth and stereotype.

In an essay published in 1971 with the aim to update the ideas expressed in Mythologies (1957), Barthes goes a step further when he acknowledges that myths have not changed and still abound in our society, and that demystification has itself become a discourse. In an initial moment, the aim had been the destruction (the deciphering) of myth _ which corresponds to the task the Feminist Critique undertook. Barthes proposes that the job we must enter upon now is

> no longer to upend (or right) the mythical message, to stand it back on its feet, with denotation at the bottom and connotation at the top, nature on the surface and class interest deep down, but rather to change the object itself, to produce a new object....[7]

Barthes suggests that myths have turned into a corpus of stereotypes, one of the key concepts in his essay, and that the problem now is not to reveal their meaning but to challenge and change them. The ideas in his essay perfectly fit the present concern of feminism as revealed in the above mentioned revisionist tendency in poetry: to eliminate stereotypes of women, those closed and rigid forms, and to create prototypes to replace these. The new prototypes would turn out to be open forms, disengaged from sexism. Such is the concern of most feminist writers and critics, including critic Rachel Blau DuPlessis, who stresses that the renewed myths reject universals, and therefore

> do not investigate moments of eternal recurrence, but rather break with the idea of an essentially unchanging reality. Prototypes are original, model forms on which to base the self and its action _ forms open to transformation, and forms, unlike archetypes, that offer similar patterns of experience to others, rather than imposing these patterns on others.(pp.133-34)

The new mythical discourse, thus, emerges from the necessity of creation of oppressed groups. Claimed for by many critics _ such as Wendy Martin and Joanna Russ, both mentioned in the Introductory Chapter _, the new mythology is contrary to patriarchal archetype and stereotype. Novelist and poet Marge

Piercy can also be included in this group of persons who are aware of the diminishing quality of archetypal and stereotypical models.

As concerning conventional stereotypes of women in literature, literary critic Mary Ellmann has been the first to attempt their full classification and mapping. She dedicates a long chapter in Thinking About Women to the analysis of such stereotypes. Published in 1968, even before Kate Millett's Sexual Politics, her study inaugurates American feminist literary criticism. Although it lacks the academic accuracy and organization common to other critical pieces written nowadays, Ellmann's remains a very quoted classic, worth reading due to its historical importance and to its avant-garde insights on basic issues of feminist criticism (such as an attack on phallic criticism, speculations on gender-based differences in style, etc). Ellmann dedicates the third and longest section of her investigation to feminine stereotypes, where she explains that there are stereotyped conceptions of everything (animals, peoples, races), and that the mechanism of their origin works as follows:

> the profound trial of having always not only to deal with, but to think about, those who are different from themselves, combining with the elusive nature of this difference, produces a large body of opinions which, if it is no more precise, is certainly more irritable than other bodies of opinion.[8]

Such bodies of opinion, or stereotyped conceptions, however, swarm particularly about the topic of femininity. Gender characterization, therefore, constitutes the most entrenched

form of stereotyping, and fiction one of its most effective means of expansion, according to Ellmann.

Ellmann proceeds to explain that the characterizations of women are many and contradictory. Underlying them, however, certain consistent patterns can be noted, and these are: 1) the association of woman with nature, and of man with culture as the origin of several stereotypes; 2) the effort to move women in two directions away from a premised, though indefinable human center which is occupied by men:

> opinions of women reflect two volatile impulses, to set things apart by distinction but also to return them _ and then to less than even the common stock;(pp.65-66)

3) the complementary qualities of male and female, which reflects a desire for sexual order, where biological complementation is stretched and finds parallels of intellectual and emotional sort; and 4) the tendency in women "to be not only what men are not, but what the individual speaker is not, and even what he is not at any given moment" (p.70). This last pattern stands as an outgrowth of the third one. Even though Ellmann affirms that inherited Western stereotypes have been weakened because of social changes, I believe feminine stereotypes have not been weakened that much. One has just to watch TV commercials, open magazines, read papers or literary works, to find shallow images of women as housewives, mothers, lovers and so on. The problem of stereotyping, thus, still constitutes a serious menace to the development of women as equals of men.

Spurred by Ellmann's study several critics have turned to

the question of stereotypes and their effects on readers. Lee R. Edwards, for example, explores the effects of stereotypes upon the woman reader:

> I said simply, and for the most part silently that, since neither those women nor any women whose acquaintances I had made in fiction had much to do with the life I led or wanted to lead, I was not female. Alien from the women I saw most frequently imagined, I mentally arranged them in rows labelled respectively insipid heroines, sexy survivors, and demonic destroyers. As organizer I stood somewhere else, alone perhaps, but hopefully above them.[9]

Such lack of identification has led to what critic Judith Fetterley has established as constituting the first act of a feminist critic, and that is, "to become a resisting reader rather than an assenting reader."[10]

Not focusing on reader response, but rather on the images themselves, Cynthia Wolff's essay which, together with Edwards', was also published in Woman: An Issue has added some helpful information to the study of stereotypes of women in literature. Going beyond the mere exposition of the prejudiced and stereotyped characterizations of women, Wolff points out that such characterizations "[tend] always to emphasize one aspect of character while leaving out others of equal or greater importance," and constitute "by a sort of perversity, an image of reality that even women seek to perpetuate."[11] The latter aspect has been much discussed and emphasized by feminists because of the paradox behind it. In speculating about the differences between the characterizations of men and of women, she finds out that the former group always relates to masculine

problems and generally becomes the principal subject of literary interest, whereas characterizations of women as they relate to feminine problems rarely appear in literature. Very few writers approach themes such as

> resolving the "Electra" problem; establishing feminine identity (among other things, coming to understand and accept the fluctuations of the menstrual cycle and resolving conflicts of power with the mother); entering into an appropriate marriage; acting as a mother (this entails resolving one's own desire for oral gratification, resolving fears concerning childbirth, accepting the responsibilities of rearing a child _ or redefining the role so that the task of rearing will be shared by others _ or even choosing not to undertake the task of mothering); accepting the private sphere as the appropriate one (or redefining woman's role so that an accomodation can be made between public and private); and dealing with loss of beauty and with menopause.(p.206)

Feminine problems as they generally appear in literary works become limited to the topic of courtship and are defined in relation to men.

Wolff analyses five stereotypes of women in literature. These are: the virtuous versus the sensuous woman, the sentimental stereotype, the liberated woman, and the American girl. She describes the origin and the characteristics of each one, and also points out the male end served by them. Even when depicted by women writers, women in literature more often than not conform to male-authored stereotypes. She concludes that stereotyped characterizations of women are meant to meet masculine needs and thus become useful justification for male behavior. Even though stereotypes of men also exist (the brave

soldier and the Byronic hero, for instance), according to Wolff, these are not fashioned to suit women's needs, nor are they defined in relation to women. Besides that, stereotypes of men do not find analogous correspondents among the characterizations of women. In fact, Wolff ignored some stereotypes of men as presented especially in radical feminist works of fiction serving the author's needs and constituting very shallow representations of masculine types. In general terms, however, I am aware that these stereotypes (such as the doctors in Marge Piercy's Woman On the Edge of Time, for instance) form only a minority group. Therefore, I share her opinion that, on the whole, characterizations of women become a mirror for men, in the sense that they are born out of genuine male experience, whereas stereotypes of men have an existence of their own.

After this theoretical introduction covering the basic traits of stereotypes in general and, more specifically, of stereotypes of women, I will attempt to give a brief overview of the predominant features of women in American literature since the colonial period until our present days. Critic Ann Stanford has developed an analysis about the images of women in early American literature. She focuses on the two hundred years of changing values that go from the arrival of the Pilgrims to the early years of the republic. According to her, women in that period consisted of a group restricted by man-made law and custom, even though the biblical restrictions on the role of women had lost some of its force. In Stanford's words, women "were subject to the psychological and physical domination, and sometimes oppression, of men in the form of seducers, captors, or unsympathetic fathers or husbands."[12] Thus, literature in this period tried to indicate the acceptable roles and attitudes

for women. Even appearing in a brief and fragmented way, in the first reportorial writings (journals, sermons, and pamphlets) seventeenth-century women were shown in literature as real, capable, and courageous. In the eighteenth century American literature grew from the scattered accounts of the early colonial period, through indian captivity narratives and fictional letters _ which already constituted native storytelling _, to the popular tales and novels which marked the beginning of the age of fiction in America. These new literary styles saw the decline in the stature of women, who were now depicted as major characters especially in novels of seduction, often appearing as lacking in education, displaying exaggerated sentimentalism, and depending upon men. Novelist Charles Brockden Brown, the first American professional writer, constituted the exception of the period, for in his work the effort to improve the conditions of women was assured by the depiction of women characters who were complex and rich.

Proceeding further in time, the following period of American literature to be looked at covers almost one century: 1790 to 1870. Literary critic Nina Baym's analysis of this period exposes an ideology of woman as being naturally designed for the home and the private sphere. Again law and custom got blended in a false and theorical "benign protectorate." By the 1850's, the home-loving woman was the national model. After this time, an age of reform movements began to arise, and as a result, middle-class women began to rebel. The "new woman" was taking shape then. It was also in this period that many middle-class women took to the writing of fiction to earn a living. They were mostly writing popular literature, long forgotten works by now.

On investigating major writers of the time, Nina Baym finds

out that, except for Margaret Fuller, who was concerned with woman's rights, and for Hawthorne, whose women characters transcend sexual stereotypes and whose Hester Prynne was elected the heroine of the period, in spite of the different approaches given to women characters by Irving, Cooper, Whitman, Poe, and Melville, their women are not real. They either function for symbolic purposes being unconnected to the social sphere (like Poe's heroines, for instance), or conform to current stereotypes of the time (such is the case of Irving's women who fit domestic ideals and of Whitman's who do not transcend the level of mothers of men). Baym also affirms that the most realistic portrayals of women in the literature of the period were basically found in popular fiction, the precursors of realism. Women characters in these, however, still conformed to a trio of female types: the diabolic woman, the angelic woman, and human women who were disciplined by reality into the mold of gracious womanhood. Baym concludes her article by asserting that "we can only regret that the split between popular and major literature has prevented us from understanding how women thought about themselves in these important years of American development."[13] In mentioning such a split, Baym leads us to question what is taken for granted as being major and popular literatures. If we go beyond the surface of these labels, we are certain to find an ideologically biased literary canon which implies some problems. The most relevant of these problems is the authority of the canon to dictate which literary works are major, and therefore are to be studied and analysed as representative of a given culture.

My choice of Marge Piercy for the present investigation comes as a result of such questioning. Even being aware that

Piercy will probably never come to be considered a major novelist because of the academic criteria used to select the present American literary canon, I am positive concerning her contribution to American literature and also concerning the representativeness of the themes she develops in the wider context of American culture.

Discussing the period in American literature that covers the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, Martha Banta has noted that immediately after the Civil War, the central issues in American society were property, value, force and unity. She analyses works by James, Howells, Adams, Norris, Dreiser, Twain, Crane, and Fitzgerald under the light of those issues. The functional types women were being given to enact by these writers displayed some common characteristics: women were supplied with an anarchical power, a potential force, but something blocked its full release into the world; as a result of the frustrated and unused value, woman's sexuality was repressed in that period; the fragmentation body/mind took place, making it impossible for a woman to display both; women were divided into the classical triad (mothers, sisters, wives; servants, spinters, relatives; whores); and these were not fully human women, for they were presented with single characteristics, in the fashion of caricatures.

In terms of literary stereotypes available to women in late nineteenth-century American writing, Martha Banta pointed out the five most recurrent ones. They were the bitch-virgin, the idol of Wall Street for her degraded lust for money; the mother, a stereotype which is connected with the elevation of the nation, for maternity serves as a basis for social stability; the spinster, who had Emily Dickinson for its live model; the

victim; and the heroine. The last two stereotypes are related in the sense that the innocent victim has developed into the heroine, who is a step beyond that of a merely passive acceptor. Unlike the victim, the heroine is aware of what is happening to her, even though she does not understand why it is so. Two types of heroine were presented in the literature of the period: the heroine of ideas (the woman of mind and of intelligence), and the heroine as idol (a sublime woman, worshiped as saint or goddess). In spite of the variety, all these stereotypes correspond to unilateral views. Banta closes her analysis with the hope that these one-sided women characters will be fully human one day. "They shall have faces _ expressive of minds, feelings, and a soul _ and bodies too,"[14] she concludes, for so far as her investigation goes, the female characters of this period remain incomplete.

Advancing to the period between the two world wars, we find out that some social, intellectual and economic slow improvements in the women's situation brought about a few social changes. Conservatism, however, was still strong, and women's happiness was supposed to be found in the home. Being a "womanly woman" and being an achieving individual did not match, and therefore women were led to choose one from either extremes. Literary critic James Tuttleton sees the emergence of the "flapper," the new social type and literary character, as a result of the conflict in women's behavior. The "flapper" arised as something of a scandal to the respectable bourgeois, and the attitude towards her was ambivalent. The "flapper" had a short life as a literary type, and was replaced by the "new woman," who also displayed a shocking style for the conservative group. After analysing the major literary works of the period,

Tuttleton finds out that on the whole the "new woman" was unattractive for novelists, both for men (Hemingway, Faulkner, Fitzgerald), and for women authors (Wharton, Cather, Glasgow, Gale). The greatest sympathy of the time lay with the stereotype of the "womanly woman," "the woman with an old fashioned sense of her role as life-giving, nourishing, life-sustaining presence ministering to her husband or family."[15] Such conception seemed to be endemic in American culture, and therefore so strongly reflected in literature by men and women.

Finally, when we come to the characterizations of women in contemporary American literature, we discover that the situation of women has not changed much. Male-invented stereotypes of women which had already been present in early American literature still exist. They may undergo changes in shape, but their function remains unchanged. Such opinion is shared by most of the literary critics who study the characterizations of women in literature. Martha and Charles Masinton, for instance, open their article on the status of women in contemporary American fiction by affirming that "the roles assigned to women in contemporary novels derive primarily from myth and stereotype."[16] Even in feminist fiction, the significance of female characters lies in their identity as stereotypical products of social conditioning. The Masintons also point out that women have been depicted as second-class citizens of their own country due to the social myth of woman, the conservator of social value. The treatment of women in American novels is related to the conventions of bourgeois social world, where the conformity to social expectations is the greatest good.

Martha and Charles Masinton analize literary works by Mailer, Bellow, and Updike, to find out that their women

characters still conform to stereotypes of good and evil, and that their roles are subsidiary and supportive. In contemporary American fiction, they proceed, the male hero is experiencing his time, whereas the female character is exempted from the participation in the experience of contemporaneity, and therefore is allowed refuge in myth and stereotype. The Masintons also stress that with the feminist movement of the sixties and seventies came the recognition of the oppression of myth. The movement asks for full humanity for women and tries to find works where such is achieved. Feminist literary production is clearly intended to detail the effects of cultural stereotyping. In my view, in doing so, writers also get imprisoned by stereotypes. I believe they have to go beyond that and envisage open forms of female portrayals, i. e., prototypes.

In this sense, Martha and Charles Masinton select the works by Marge Piercy, Joan Didion, and Joyce Carol Oates as intended to free women from imposed images. These novelists have written about women in a larger context, that is, sharing equally with men in contemporary experience. In the critics' words, these writers "treat women as serious human beings, actively seeking to understand and shape their own lives" (p.312); however, they constitute a minority group. Most contemporary novelists have not succeeded in getting rid of certain deeply rooted cultural attitudes:

> In the face of radical social change only a few writers have begun to see beyond those rigid concepts of sexual identity that have always implied inequality and denied women the freedom of action accorded men, and fewer still have gone so far as to examine the grounds for a commonality of experience. (p.313)

Such has been the reality in contemporary American literature: in general, women have not been treated as men's equals.

In exposing some of the many critical opinions which show the classification of stereotypes of women and their use by (mostly male) novelists, I do not intend to damage their reputation as writers, but to make people aware of the reductive aspect of stereotype and, by contrast, of the rich fictional possibilities of roles for women once these unilateral traits are abolished. I believe Florence Howe to be right in her assertion that "from a feminist's point of view, literature has a significant social function for the future,"[17] and in this concern, dismissing stereotypes becomes a fundamental step for women's liberation.

Such sociofeminist approach to literary works whose aims have been to investigate the roles assigned to women in literature has generated a large body of the so-called "images of women" criticism (a sample of such trend can be perceptible in the brief overview on the depictions of women throughout American literature which was just shown). Being part of the Feminist Critique tradition, it constitutes one of the earliest forms of feminist criticism and a powerful weapon against crystallized androcentric assumptions about women. Literary critic K. K. Ruthven has pointed out the double motivation _ "contradictory purposes" in his words _ implied in the "images of women" type of criticism:

> On the one hand there is the desire to unmask the oppressive nature of stereotypical representations which, converted into role-models, offer an alarmingly limited view of what a woman can expect of life; and on the other hand, there is the hope that by

> providing opportunities for thinking about women, and by comparing how they have been represented with how the ought to be, women's self-awareness will be heightened by a process known as consciousness-raising.[18]

Later in the same work, Ruthven stresses the negative repetitiousness one is inevitably led to fall into by undertaking the task of exposing male-oriented stereotypes in literature. He seems to be right in his assertions in so far as feminist critics keep themselves chained to this activity of exposing misogyny in literary works.

The present study, however, intends to go a step further than merely carrying on a critique of androcentrism. Such task has already been undertaken by several literary critics. I do agree with Ruthven when he affirms that those articles and essays

> enrich our understanding of literary convention by supplementing earlier studies of those reductionist practices which simplify human beings into types (or stereotypes) capable of being manipulated for a great variety of literary effects, ranging from farcical to tragic.(p.72)

My interest, however, means to surpass the pure uncovering of sexism in literature. I intend to follow the trend opened and named by critic Elaine Showalter as Gynocritics, a new visible tradition in feminist criticism whose aims are "to construct a female framework for the analysis of women's literature, to develop new models based on the study of female experience" (p.131), and whose focus is on female culture as such. In the expanding universe of women writers, an approach which looks at

women as creators of new meanings seems most appropriate.

In analysing women characters in the work of a woman novelist, the above mentioned double motivation of the "images of women" criticism is validated. I believe woman exists beyond the appearances dictated by patriarchal mythologies and analyzed by "images of women" literary critics. Some women writers seem to be trying to rescue women from these stereotyped views by depicting women characters who transcend such representations. Marge Piercy, as acknowledged above by critics Martha and Charles Masinton, is undoubtedly one of these writers who worry about the characters's survival out of stereotypical frameworks, or in Lee Edwards's words, out of "the doll's house" (p.228). A study such as the present one becomes useful because it adds something to the wider activity of discovering women as artists and their production _ specifically the solution they offer to the question of stereotyping. In this sense, as critic Marcia Lieberman has stressed, feminist criticism "can expose and overturn the double standard that is manifested in literature and in criticism."[19]

Now let me focus on the criteria which will be used for the analysis of Marge Piercy's women characters. In reading about stereotypes I have observed that they can be classified in broader terms within two categories: concrete and abstract. If on the one hand the devouring mother, the dedicated housewife, the bitch (just to mention a few) are concrete recognizable representations of women, on the other hand materiality, instability, intuitiveness (again just to mention some of them) have turned into abstract stereotypical characteristics related to female behavior, and existing behind the concrete images. Concrete stereotypes can be further subdivided into social and

literary. Of course any social stereotype as it appears in everyday life (the spinster, the femme fatale, and so on) can be found in literary discourse, but the opposite is not true. There are, thus, specifically literary stereotypes, such as the dark lady in poetry, or the romantic heroine in gothic tales and novellas, for instance. I have chosen to deal with an abstract characteristic as revealed in literature instead of recurrent concrete stereotypes because the former group is much more comprehensive due to its very nature. Smaller cultural stereotypes are encompassed by these wider abstract traits. Another reason why I was led to such a choice is that I intend to develop an analysis that will transcend the traditional "images of women" criticism.

I have developed a model which is loosely based on Mary Ellmann's seminal work on the same topic. In her Thinking About Women, Ellmann has classified feminine stereotypes in a roughly systematic way into ten modalities: 1) formlessness; 2) passivity; 3) instability; 4) confinement; 5) piety; 6) materiality; 7) spirituality; 8) irrationality; 9) compliancy; and 10) two incorrigible figures: the shrew and the witch. Even though she is not consistent in her investigation, I have chosen one out of the abstract categories she has dealt with, and developed it into a model of my own. I have relied on one of the most pervasive and still existing stereotypes: the one of passivity as connected to basic assumptions concerning women both in society and in literary works. Within the topic of passivity, I will observe the characters in their relationships with family and friends, and also the way they deal with their lovers (on the level of private life); and also their education and professional life plus the response to the social

organization as a whole (as concerning their public life). In the next chapter, my analysis will focus on the topic of passivity, more specifically, on the characters' interaction with people around them in the personal realm.

Notes to Chapter One

[1]Marilena Chaui, O Que é Ideologia (São Paulo: Brasiliense, 1980), p.21.

Além de procurar fixar seu modo de sociabilidade através de instituições determinadas, os homens produzem idéias ou representações pelas quais procuram explicar e compreender sua própria vida individual, social, suas relações com a natureza e com o sobrenatural. Essas idéias ou representações, no entanto, tenderão a esconder dos homens o modo real como suas relações sociais foram produzidas e a origem das formas sociais de exploração econômica e de dominação política. Esse ocultamento da realidade chama-se ideologia. [Translation mine]

[2]Roland Barthes, Mythologies, trans. Annette Lavers (St. Albans: Paladin, 1973), p.110. All future references are from this edition.

[3]Marxist-Feminist Literature Collective, "Women's Writing: 'Jane Eyre', 'Shirley', 'Villette', 'Aurora Leigh'," in Mary Eagleton (ed.) Feminist Literary Theory: A Reader (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), p.194.

[4]Rachel Blau DuPlessis, Writing Beyond the Ending: Narrative Strategies of Twentieth-Century Women Writers (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1985), p.x. All future references are from this edition.

[5]Muriel Rukeyser, "The Poem as Mask," in Florence Howe and Ellen Bass (eds.) No More Masks! An Anthology of Poems by Women (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1973), p.1.

[6]Alicia Ostriker, "The Thieves of Language: Women Poets and Revisionist Mythmaking," in Showalter (ed.), p.316.

[7]Roland Barthes, "Change the Object Itself - Mythology Today," in Image - Music - Text, selection and translation by Stephen Heath (Glasgow: Fontana/Collins, 1977), p.169.

[8]Mary Ellmann, Thinking About Women (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1968), p.59. All future references are from this edition.

[9]Lee R. Edwards, "Women, Energy, and Middlemarch," in Lee Edwards et al. (eds.) Woman: An Issue (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1972), p.227. All future references are from this edition.

[10]Judith Fetterley, The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), p.xxii.

[11]Cynthia Griffin Wolff, "A Mirror for Men: Stereotypes of Women in Literature," in Edwards et al. (eds.) Woman: An Issue (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1972), p.207. All future references are from this edition.

[12]Ann Stanford, "Images of Women in Early American Literature," in Marlene Springer (ed.) What Manner of Woman: Essays on English and American Life and Literature (New York: New York University Press, 1977), p.187.

[13]Nina Baym, "Portrayal of Women in American Literature, 1790 - 1870," in Springer (ed.), p.232.

[14]Martha Banta, "They Shall Have Faces, Minds, and (One Day) Flesh: Women in Late Nineteenth-Century and Early Twentieth-Century American Literature," in Springer (ed.), p.267.

[15]James W. Tuttleton, "'Combat in the Erogenous Zone': Women in the American Novel between the Two World Wars," in Springer (ed.), p.292.

[16]Martha and Charles G. Masinton, "Second-Class Citizenship: The Status of Women in Contemporary American Fiction," in Springer (ed.), p.297. All future references are from this edition.

[17]Florence Howe, "Feminism and Literature," in Susan K. Cornillon (ed.) Images of Women in Fiction - Feminist Perspectives (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1972), p.267.

[18]K. K. Ruthven, Feminist Literary Studies: An Introduction (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), pp.70-71. All future references are from this edition.

[19]Marcia Lieberman, "Sexism and the Double Standard in Literature," in Cornillon (ed.), p.339.

CHAPTER TWO

PASSIVITY IN THE PRIVATE LIFE

"Why do you choose to be noisy, to fight, to make trouble?"
You ask me not understanding I have been born raw and new.
I can be killed with ease, I can be cut right down,
but I cannot crawl back in the cavern
where I lay with my neck bowed.
I have grown. I am not by myself.
I am too many.

Marge Piercy _ "The Judgment"

In one of her most quoted sentences, Simone de Beauvoir has properly remarked that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (p.295). It is, indeed, through a long process of socialization which begins in childhood that the "feminine" or "womanly" woman is produced based on a male oriented and ideal model. In spite of its various facets and again reiterating de Beauvoir's idea, the pictures of ideal women are created so that they become imprisoned in immanence _ as mentioned in the Introductory Chapter _ whereas men are creators, have projects, and thus identify with transcendence. A woman's natural inclination would also be to create, but through a sexist socialization she learns to restrict herself to immanence. As critic Nancy Chodorow points out, such form of socialization is not restricted to women but hinders full development in both sexes. According to her,

> until male "identity" does not depend on men's proving themselves, their "doing" will be a reaction to insecurity, not a creative exercise of their humanity, and woman's "being," far from being an easy and positive acceptance of self, will be a resignation to inferiority.[1]

Chodorow's view of the problem, therefore, seems to be much more encompassing than de Beauvoir's. Because we are interested in female protagonists, our stress lies, however, on the bad effects of the immanence/transcendence opposition upon the lives of women.

This binary opposition brings about many other polarities in which the positive aspect or side refers to men while the negative pole is always connected to women. The activity/

passivity opposition is central among these. On the one hand there is man, the active subject capable of creating; and on the other hand, woman, who is made a passive object: the poet's muse, the businessman's wife (or secretary), prince charming's awaiting princess. The repetition of this pattern generates the stereotype of passivity for the female sex. Furthermore, as Mary Ellmann has stressed in Thinking About Women, the intricacies of human beings are often understood exclusively in terms of sexual physiology. Even though this seems to be too strong an assertion, no doubt a sexual analogy exists behind the stereotype of passivity which connects the female body _ usually seen as merely receptive, with the womb as empty space _ with the female mind. In this way, the idea of biological complementation is applied to the intellectual and emotional realms, as Ellmann so well acknowledges:

> the stereotype of passivity is strengthened by a physiological impression _ now of the comparative horizontality, atonality and torpidity of women.(p.79)

Ellmann also points out that passivity generally leads to senseless activity. Not being able to enter the world of wider activity and in the urge to do something, women find an escape in excessive housework, for instance, which is repetitive and ephemeral, and therefore not undertaken by men.

Passivity constitutes, thus, one of the most deeply rooted assumptions about women, and this is why such a topic was picked out for this analysis. Because passivity can be perceived on different levels, I have chosen to observe Marge Piercy's female characters in their private life through their interaction with

family, friends, and lovers; and also in their public life _ in the next chapter _ through their education, professional life, and response to the social organization as a whole. I believe these areas of interaction to cover the main aspects of a person's life, being thus sufficient to validate the analysis of the extent to which women in Piercy's fiction fit or not the stereotype of passivity. The characters to be observed are the protagonists of the women-centered novels: Beth and Miriam in Small Changes; Consuelo (Connie) Ramos and Luciente in Woman On the Edge of Time; Leslie and Honorée (Honor) Rogers in The High Cost of Living; Davida (Vida) Asch in Vida; and Jill and Donna Stuart in Braided Lives.[2] For reasons of clarity, most of the times the characters will be treated in this sequence, which corresponds to the chronological order of publication of the novels, unless another arrangement becomes necessary for thematic reasons.

I. FAMILY

Family structure as it occurs in Western civilization represents a microcosm of patriarchal society. In most cases, women tend to direct their attention to their husbands and sons, the latter being responsible for the continuation of the family name. With the intent to see their sons' growth and development, parents are willing to sacrifice or neglect their daughters' "personhood" once women are supposed to get married and to be

financially and emotionally supported by their husbands.

Marge Piercy perceptibly criticizes such behavior by being ironic when she mentions her main characters' brothers. Beth's brother, Dick, in Small Changes "was to be the success" (SC, p.19) of the family; in the same novel, Miriam's brother _ Mark _ "was the name-bearer, the carrier of light" (SC, p.94). The only time Miriam's family talk about the future is when they are discussing Mark's schooling, and that makes her sick: "Mark had a future before him; Allegra [her sister] and she had only prospects, which meant husbands" (SC, p.94). In Woman On the Edge of Time, the same reason justifies Consuelo (Connie) Ramos's outburst before her mother when she was fifteen: "You don't love us girls the way you love the boys! It's everything for Luis and nothing for me, it's always been that way" (WET, p.46). Indeed, probably because of the different treatment he receives from his parents, Luis succeeds in becoming a well-to-do businessman, whereas his three sisters who did not have the same opportunities lead very poor lives. Connie, the protagonist of the novel, had to rely on welfare for her own support. She is so deprived of material possessions that finding a pen which was left on a bus seat constitutes a priceless find to her. And it is worth noting that besides its phallic significance, the pen, symbolic of the literary activity, may represent another level of deprivation.

All the main characters who have been looked at in Piercy's novels come from low-class or lower middle-class families, which represent a chain to conventionality and to the double-standard[3] in society. In Small Changes, Beth keeps being pulled to her role as a traditional housewife and mother _ the only aims a "normal" woman is to pursue _ by her mother, her sister, and her

husband:

> Once [Beth] started to cry and her mother touched her on the shoulder and said, "there, there." But they were the arm of authority. The next moment her mother was calling her a crybaby. They had to press her back in line. She was not behaving as a wife was supposed to. She sensed that she scared them.(SC, p.40)

Beth, however, has the courage to run away from that situation which is so dissatisfying for her. When, after her development, Beth is able to stand on her own two feet, she tries a reconciliation with her family, but that is no longer possible.

Miriam, the other important woman character in Small Changes, also comes from a low middle-class family. Like Beth, Miriam rejects the sort of life led by her mother, who had changed her attitude towards Miriam since the latter reached puberty. Miriam had lived in constant war against her mother since then. Indeed, there was no real contact between Miriam and Sonia, who dies of cancer without being able to have a loving relationship with the daughter. In fact, mothers and daughters do not relate in Miriam's family, for she resents Sonia (her mother), who, in turn, resents Rachel (Miriam's grandmother). Even before Sonia's death, Miriam was able to make her own choices in life, despite the strong influence the figure of the mother exerted upon her.

Born from poor Mexican parents _ including a father who beats her _, Connie Ramos cannot stand the burden of women's family roles. Still in her adolescence, Connie feels impelled to reject her mother's resignation:

> "I can! I'm going to get a scholarship. I'm not going to lie down and be buried in the rut of family, family, family! I'm so sick of that word, Mamá! Nothing in life but having babies and cooking and keeping the house. Mamacita, believe me _ oígame, Mamá _ I love you! But I'm going to travel. I'm going to be someone!" (WET, p.46)

Connie really flees from that type of organization. However, she can never count on her parents' understanding and support, and for the rest of her life she resents her mother's not being able to empathize with her, for

> "she had wanted her mother's approval. She had wanted her mother's comfort. She had wanted Mariana [her mother] to come with her in her pursuit of knowledge and some better way to live."(WET, p.47)

Like Miriam, Connie decided to pursue her desire to have an education before her mother's death.

The same resentment for the family and for the mother expressed by Connie in Woman On the Edge of Time is felt by Leslie, the protagonist of The High Cost of Living. Being a lesbian makes Leslie's burden much heavier. Indeed, her struggle is not only against middle-class bourgeois family values in themselves, but also against the heterosexuality they imply. At first Leslie thinks she can be accepted just like she is by her family. When she takes her lover to visit them, however, they reject her.

> "... Yeah, I had a fantasy. I wanted something from my mother, some sign, some approval."... "I can't go home now. For real. They won't have me. You wouldn't think it would bother

> me, but it kind of does. People murder and their family sticks by them. It makes me mad, really."(HCL, p.151)

The power of her family, however, is not enough to prevent Leslie from carrying on her own life. Though the remembrance of her mother shouting at her will accompany Leslie throughout life (HCL, p.205), her mother's words do not interfere in her opinion.

The influence of the family upon Honorée, the other relevant female character in The High Cost of Living, however, is overwhelming. Cam and Mignon (Honor's two sisters), for instance, act out what society expects from them, and therefore embody conventional values. Besides that, the strongest person in the family is their mother, Mrs. Rogers, who directs Honor's behavior. Mrs. Rogers's physical presence is enough to constrain people, for she is a big woman who takes up both the physical and the social spaces around her. Having a very strong personality, she always manages to manipulate people, especially Honor, whom she keeps bribing with presents.

> Of course Honor Rogers must be a girl with an ambitious mother. Honor was Mama Rogers' creation. Every cent that could be leached from the house, from the food bills, from taxes and mortgage went into or onto her. The third daughter, the last chance, the beautiful youngest princess.(HCL, p.101)

Honor is easily attracted by her mother's values, even though she is Leslie's friend, and thus has the opportunity to discover different ways of life. By the end of the novel, she is not able to mature and to get rid of the values imposed by her family.

Unlike Leslie, Honor is probably bound to reenact her mother's and her sisters' roles in society.

Jill and Donna Stuart, the protagonists of Braided Lives, also come from lower middle-class families whose values are the same traditional ones mentioned above concerning the other protagonists' families. Brought up in a working-class suburb in Detroit, Jill Stuart has parents who have traditional expectations concerning her. These are so deeply rooted in Jill, that sometimes she feels weak. "Almost I could give up," she thinks in one of her moments of weakness before their expectations, "Do what they want. Drop my fantasies in the trash. Give up, give in and be loved" (BL, p.32). Constantly carrying the burden of being born female, for her father wanted a son, Jill is never able to have an open relationship with him.

As concerning her mother, again the strongest person within her family, an impressive figure seen by Jill as "the Great Devouring mother, ogress big as a horizon sitting on [Jill's] head" (BL, p.11), Jill and she have quarrelled since Jill reached puberty, thus repeating the same pattern of the mother/daughter relationship of Sonia and Miriam in Small Changes. Since that time they have lived at war, "[their] reconciliations brief and aching with sore love and rancid mistrust, one of [them] always shouting betrayal" (BL, p.13). Always full of tricks to trap Jill, Pearl constitutes the most manipulative mother figure in Piercy's fiction. For Pearl, love is synonymous with power, which is astonishingly depicted and pulled to an extreme in Chapter 18 _ "The Agon" _ in which Jill is led to provoke an abortion in herself, risking her life, under her mother's surveillance and manipulation, for the latter would not permit Jill to go and see a doctor. After the incident of the

abortion in which Jill herself undergoes a kind of rebirth, she is able to discard the family's influence upon her: "I will escape you all. I will choose what I do" (BL, p.225), she thinks by the end of that dramatic chapter as marking her new awareness concerning her life. Real friendship with her mother will only be possible when Jill becomes a mature woman.

Donna Stuart, Jill's cousin and foil in Braided Lives has a similar familiar background. Even though her family is not much stressed in the novel, we do find out that her family's principles are similar to those of Jill's family. No comparison can be traced, however, concerning the influence of those values upon Jill and upon Donna. The latter is much freer to act on her own way, and her mother is not so manipulative as Jill's. Thus, concerning this aspect, Donna's path to establish her own set of values, her own "morality," as Jill puts it (BL, p.51), should be far easier to be crossed. Later in the novel, however, we discover that Donna fails to build her own morality, and that middle-class values were much rooted in her personality. Her failure, however, cannot simply be a result of her family's influence. Donna was able to act according to her will and she had already succeeded in reaching a certain distance from her family's authority before she gives in.

All the characters analysed so far have been inserted in the conventional frame of family structure as observed in American society. As a consequence, they face two possibilities: either they reject the old scheme or they connive with it. Two of the characters in the novels, however, have to be considered separately. These are Vida in the novel of the same name and Luciente in Woman On the Edge of Time. They shall receive such a special treatment because they constitute exceptions in their

relationships with family, and thus do not follow a similar model as the other characters mentioned above.

Even though, like other Piercy's characters, Vida Asch also comes from a working-class childhood and a middle-class adolescence, and like Connie had a violent father, she constitutes an exception to the general norm because, unlike the other characters, she and her mother _ Ruby _ have a relationship of love and respect. In fact, there is a strong connection among the women in Vida's family: Grandma/ Ruby/ Vida and Natalie (Vida's half-sister and best friend).

> They were a line of women who loved their mothers .... Physical identification, yes, and solidarity in the face of pain, loss, poverty, hard times, persecution, just plain trouble in the form of man or state or economy or law and the slow or violent destruction of the body. (V, p.183)

Because of the underground life Vida has to submit to, her contact with Ruby becomes difficult: she is not allowed to visit Ruby regularly because she is a political fugitive. The bond between them, however, is so strong that they are always mentally together, even being apart. In fact, throughout the whole novel they remain apart because of Vida's political militance. When Ruby gets sick and goes to hospital, Vida visits her only once, wearing a desguise not to be recognized. Ruby dies in hospital and Vida cannot even go to the funeral. She experiments an intense feeling of loss after her mother's death. The atmosphere of friendship in Vida's family accounts for the respect they show towards one another. There is no room for passivity or for accepting other people's values once there is

respect concerning human beings' differences, as it happens in Vida's family. Ironically, when understanding is perceptible within the family, society as a larger unit thwarts such a relationship.

In Woman On the Edge of Time we are presented with an idealized futuristic utopia which Luciente is part of, but which is actually a product of Connie's imagination. In Piercy's imaginary future, the social structure in the year of 2137 will not have the traditional patriarchal family as its nucleus. Family has been abolished as such. Instead of that frame and organization, the reader is presented with a core, a decentralized group of close friends. Within this group sweet friends, hand friends, and pillow friends are found, but each person lives alone in his or her own place. Motherhood constitutes another concept which is radically changed. Babies are no longer generated in women's bodies but in buildings called brooders, where genetic material is stored and where embryos grow. Instead of one mother and one father, each person has three comothers (who can be either male or female) who are seldom sweet friends "so the child will not get caught in love misunderstandings" (WET, p.74), and so that responsibilities concerning childcare can be better shared. According to Luciente, in the process of their historical revolution women gave up the only power they had _ the power to give birth _ in order to reach equality. Everybody can become mothers, every child has three: in this way the "nuclear bonding" of the family is broken (WET, p.105). Growing up in such a social organization, everyone _ including, of course, Luciente, Piercy's futuristic protagonist _ has the chance to become independent, self-reliant, and self-critical.

When we consider all nine women characters together, we find out that most of them really have a direct and strong influence of their family over their lives. This force is mainly represented in Piercy's fiction by the presence of strong and manipulative mothers who exert power over the family, especially over their daughters. Paradoxical as it may seem at first once we have acknowledged women's passivity, such assumption loses its seemingly contradictory quality when the "powerful" mothers are seen as mere instruments for male ideology, imposing a passive behavior upon their daughters. The only exceptions to this rule are Vida and Luciente for the reasons I have already stressed above.

In one way or another, most of the other characters manage to evade such control, and therefore, do not condone passively the patriarchal values imposed by the powerful family structure. In Small Changes, Beth literally runs away from her marriage and family, and Miriam rejects the life led by her family and decides to go to college. She is able to lead her own life. In Woman On the Edge of Time, Connie Ramos has been critical concerning her mother's resignation since adolescence. Leslie, the protagonist of The High Cost of Living, makes her own choices about her life even knowing her family will not accept her. Finally, Jill and Donna in Braided Lives courageously seek to reject authoritative family values and launch themselves in the pursuit of a new morality _ a task which involves much pain and suffering, especially for Jill.

Only one character out of nine is connivent with the values imposed by the family: Honor in The High Cost of Living. As her name suggests, she "honors" such values, and is, thus, bound to repeat her mother's experience throughout life, for she has not

been able to liberate herself from her mother's strong influence and to grow mature. Honor constitutes the only major character in the five novels who does not even try to reach freedom from her family.

Looking at all the characters together, and specifically at their response to family structure, we note that apparently Piercy believes patriarchal family organization is a decadent one. As a consequence of her view, most of the women characters she portrays reject traditional family values and strive both to evade them and to search for alternative forms of relationship with their kin.

II. FRIENDS

As mentioned in the Introductory Chapter, Virginia Woolf was the first thinker to write about the connection between women and the writing of fiction. One of the issues Woolf approaches in A Room of One's Own concerns the relationships among women portrayed in literature. As she points out, they had been confidantes and sometimes mothers and daughters, "but almost without exception they [were] shown in their relation to men," thus being depicted in fiction not only by the other sex, but also in relation to the other sex (p.79). In speculating about literature by women in this century and in taking hold of an imaginary novel (written by an imaginary woman writer, of course), Woolf is delighted to realize that finally women have

been exposing their relationships with one another in literature.

> "Chloe liked Olivia," I read. And then it struck me how immense a change was there. Chloe liked Olivia perhaps for the first time in literature.(p.78)

Since then and throughout this century the issue of friendship between women has been retaken by feminist writers and critics. Indeed, when describing the ways in which feminist literature can serve the cause of women's liberation, literary critic Cheri Register echoes Woolf's seminal hint about the need to expose relationships among women in literary works. As we have seen, three of the five functions literature shall perform if it is to gain feminist approval are directly related to the issue of bringing about more interaction among women: literature must serve as a forum for women, must promote sisterhood, and must always augment consciousness-raising (pp.169-70).

Such critical points can be observed in Marge Piercy's fiction. Her novels do indeed function as a vehicle for open discussion of women's questions. In her novels, most women are shown to be worrying about one another in their urge to share and shape their experiences of self and world and also to augment interaction among themselves. It proves appropriate, however, to stress once again that relationships among women and the focus on women's problems in Percy's fiction do not arise from the writer's desire to follow prescribed formulae. Much to the contrary, they seem to arise spontaneously from the growing need experienced by most women writers in this century to break their silence and to give shape to women's stories. Friendship

among women is part of their stories, and becomes a very meaningful part of the women characters' experience as a whole. My emphasis in this section lies on the characters as connected to other people (especially to other women) in bonds of active and helpful friendship.

In Small Changes we are presented with two main characters who grow in opposite directions as concerning friendship and popularity. In the beginning of the novel, Beth _ the character who undergoes much development and who grows in this Bildungsroman _ is presented to us as being a shy person who does not have friends: her friends are her husband's. In her development towards liberation, however, Beth begins to open up her mind and to have ideas concerning practical and political alternative forms of organization among women that would replace traditional familiar institution. The women's commune founded in the novel, for instance, is her idea. Gradually she starts attending a women's liberation group, even though she does not completely identify with them in the beginning because their problems are different from hers (SC, p.261). She also joins a women's theater group where she learns to express her feelings also with bodily movements. Moreover, Beth really gets involved with her women friends and therefore is always ready to listen to them and to give suggestions when they are in trouble. When she realizes Miriam is feeling restricted to the roles of housewife and mother, for example, Beth worries about her and tries to help.

> She [Beth] had brought Miriam a list made up by a women's project of child-care facilities available with annotations on what was known about them. She brought her the Women's Yellow

> Pages. Basically she was hoping that lists of alternative possibilities would set Miriam in motion, turn her outward from circling and helplessness.(SC, p.524)

She also brings Miriam information and addresses of people who would plug her (according to her skills) into useful projects, addresses of some communes she could join and of women's liberation groups and centers. Besides all that, she also gave Miriam women's newspapers, journals, pamphlets, and articles, so that Miriam could have a new view of women's lives and activities.

By the end of the novel, Beth has grown from the timid person who lived in a room all by herself in the beginning of the process of her self-discovery into this mature and dynamic woman who tries to help her friends. Even her relationship with men has changed: in the beginning she is afraid of them, for she does not know their code and therefore is unable to participate in their conversations. In the last chapters, however, when she reaches self-reliance, she considers herself their equal, and is thus no longer afraid to talk to them. She is still involved with consciousness-raising groups of women by the end of the narrative.

Miriam, the other main character in Small Changes, follows a path which is a reversal of Beth's. She "grows down" from an exotic, sensual, and popular woman into a relatively passive person. She, who had always been worried about her women friends (always worrying about Beth and Dorine, her closest women friends, for instance), somehow loses part of her interest in them to dedicate all her attention to her home, husband, and children. Indeed, we get to know that by the end of the novel

she occasionally gives Beth some financial help and also refuge in her house when Beth needs it, but the range of her activity as a woman friend of other women and men is too limited and therefore cannot be compared to Beth's. Nevertheless, she cannot be assumed to be a thoroughly passive character concerning her friends.

Passivity concerning involvement with women friends is far from being a characteristic of Connie Ramos in Woman On the Edge of Time. In the very opening of the novel the reader meets this fat woman of 37 courageously confronting and literally fighting a pimp to defend Dolly, her niece and friend. Having only a few friends, being ignorant about women's groups and being confined in an asylum do not prevent her from supporting and trying to help whoever is in trouble.

Her solidarity with her friends of the ward proves to be sufficient to let us perceive Connie's interest in other human beings. The following passage illustrates the solidarity and friendship among women in the ward. Even not having notions concerning the women's movement or consciousness-raising groups, these women are willing to take risks to help one another. Here Connie tries to convince Sybil _ her closest friend in the ward _ to try to escape the mental hospital with her:

> "Sybil, you're getting to be an ... old patient." Before her she could see the chronic wards, row on row of metal beds full of drugged hopeless women. A terrible silence. "Don't let them wear you down!"
>
> Sybil smiled, cold as a moonbeam. "I can't do it. I haven't healed. My pride is hollow .... But I'll help you."
>
> "They'll punish you if you help me and I get loose."
>
> Sybil shrugged. "Not like they'll punish

> you when they bring you back."
> "I'll ask someone else."
> "Don't you dare! Haven't we been friends? Don't you think my loyalty has some value?" Sybil drew herself up. "Perhaps if you do escape, I'll consider it in a new light. It's by far the most intelligent plan for you to escape first with my assistance. Then when you're safe, you can assist me."(WET, p.222)

Indeed, Sybil is not able to try it because she is too weak due to the shock treatment she has received. However, she does help Connie, who, in turn, leaves all the money she managed to save to Sybil so that the latter may try to escape and go on with her struggle after Connie uses her last weapon against the institution.

Being a product of Connie's imagination, Luciente belongs to an idealized world where people live together helping one another and sharing a spirit of community. In Mattapoisett, the village from the future, everybody lives together (even though each person has his or her own private space for being alone) in harmony and balance. People there experiment living in a kind of fellowship where they are all hand friends _ when not sweet friends or pillow friends. Acting like everyone there, Luciente has a very active relationship with her mates.

Like Luciente, Leslie in The High Cost of Living is depicted as an active woman in her group of friends, in spite of her not being very popular. She is respected by her friends at her graduate course, especially by George, who is her professor and advisor. She also has some lesbian friends who live in an underground world. Leslie becomes very active in the group when she finally decides to join the women's school. Her collaboration is done through the lessons of self-defense she

starts to give to other women, for she is a black belt in karate.

As concerning her few personal friends (who are basically Honor and Bernie), Leslie is willing to interact and share her life and experience with them. When she realizes Honor is too dependent on her mother, for instance, Leslie's first reaction is to help Honor find her liberty. Even being attracted to Honor, Leslie would help her find her balance not for Leslie's emotional profit, but to "be a good friend to another woman, and [so that] that woman would grow stronger" (HCL, p.146). Leslie succeeds in being active on three levels of relationship with friends: on the professional level, with her women friends from the school, and also on the personal level with the people she cared most.

Honor, on the other hand, has a very limited group of friends _ Leslie and Bernie are her only friends _ and is not able to develop a balanced and healthy relationship with them. Being quite demanding, Honor tries to manipulate Leslie and Bernie so that they dedicate all their attention to her, who wants to be the center. She fails both.

As concerning Vida, her scope of acquaintances when she was able to lead a public life was great. From 1965 to 1971, when she lived publicly in New York, she had "a dozen lovers, two hundred friends, thousands who had heard Vida Asch speak at rallies, millions who had seen her photograph in the newspapers or on television" (V, p.21). Later her friends are limited to the people of Network hideouts (clandestine political groups) and to some close friends she still meets whenever she can. Her activity and interaction are still perceptible, for she cares and worries about her political mates. Besides that, she also

performs illegal tasks to help women (especially battered women) who are in trouble. Even though she thinks she is "not as good with people as Joel [her lover]" (V, p.184), Vida is undoubtedly a very strong-willed woman who is capable of facing obstacles to help someone who needs it.

Another character remarkable for her consideration toward friends is Jill Stuart in Braided Lives. Although she has a large number of women friends at college, like Beth in Small Changes Jill at first feels excluded from the men's circle (basically one of academic talk). With time and practice, she learns to talk to them equal to equal, even though she dislikes their game. In fact, she has three good male friends while in college: Dick, Bolognese, and Howie, who has been a close friend since adolescence. Also similarly to Beth, Jill has ideas that "lean toward the communal," whereas Donna, her cousin and best friend, "insisted ownership be established" (BL, p.46). Thus, the same contrast that can be traced between Beth and Miriam in Small Changes can also be applied to Jill and Donna in Braided Lives. Concerned with her woman friends, Jill is always supporting other women in one way or another (to provide them safe abortions, for instance), especially Donna. Indeed, Jill risks her own skin to get the money for Donna to have a safe abortion. The latter, the "experienced" one among girl friends at college, knows she can always count on Jill. Donna, however, is not connected to other female friends as Jill is: among women Donna relates basically to Jill (BL, p.81). Taking an opposite stand from Jill's, Donna does not reach the level of honest and helpful interaction with other women.

When considering all the characters together, one finds out that, being aware of the issue of friendship among women, Marge

Piercy has managed to insert her fictional women into contexts and plots where they are able to consciously work for developing the interaction with their mates. Displaying different personalities, most of the characters show attitudes towards their friends which reveal their active concern with other people. Beth in Small Changes, Connie and Luciente in Woman On the Edge of Time, Leslie in The High Cost of Living, Vida, and Jill in Braided Lives serve to illustrate the care and respect towards friends which characterize most of Piercy's fictional women. In contrast to this group, however, Miriam in Small Changes and Donna in Braided Lives are marked by a very limited interaction with friends, and Honor in The High Cost of Living displays negative qualities (such as jealousy and manipulation) in her involvement with people around her. The latter triad of characters, thus, help to illuminate the positive force of the rest by opposition.

Even though relationships with male friends are not much stressed in Piercy's novels _ maybe due to the author's feminist concern and her consequent focus mainly on the interactions among women friends _, some women characters have men as real friends as well. Miriam in Small Changes, Luciente in Woman On the Edge of Time and Jill Stuart in Braided Lives have good relationships with friends of the opposite sex, an attitude which indicates that the writer does not deny the possibility of honest friendship between the sexes.

In general, Piercy's view of friendship seems to be one of interaction and support among women (and as an extension, among human beings in general). Piercy also seems to stress the need to develop women's sense of friendship so that, through the discussion of women's questions, a better world may come to

existence replacing the one we live in which is mostly based upon rivalry and exploitation among human beings.

III. LOVERS

Due to biological and cultural distinctions, sexuality and love have different meanings and implications for the two sexes. In sexual terms, the transition from childish sexuality to maturity, for instance, which for men is relatively simple and stimulated by society, is much more complex for women, for whom the first sexual experience traditionally constitutes a kind of violation. Moreover, biological factors also determine a more active participation for men, who "command" the physical interaction, while woman is made passive. Our androcentric society has been responsible for the extension of biological difference to cultural terms in a way that anatomic destiny has become social destiny. Such fact brings about the imprisonment of women in sexual stereotypes of "the sex," or "the flesh." Love has also had different connotations for both sexes. For man, the transcendent being, love constitutes a section of his life of projects and achievements, whereas, quoting one of Marge Piercy's chapter titles taken from Byron, "love is a woman's whole existence." Woman is taught to lose her self (body and soul) in man. Of course, such distinctions may be abolished once women are able to overcome their passivity and to establish a relationship of reciprocity with their partners in the sexual

activity and elsewhere. As concerning love, I agree with Simone de Beauvoir when she states that "genuine love ought to be founded on the mutual recognition of two liberties" (p.677), with both lovers experiencing themselves as self and as other, being, therefore, free from rigid imprisonment in given roles.

Defending the idea that political implications exist behind the relations between the sexes, in Sexual Politics Kate Millett also stressed the distinction between female biology and feminine status. Her study exposes the idea that the relations between men and women have always been a matter of politics (manipulation and power) rather than of feeling. Also aware of such issues, Marge Piercy has depicted women characters struggling to achieve a sexual identity which does not imply passivity and to reach a balanced love relationship.

In Small Changes, Marge Piercy is clearly "writing beyond the ending" as the term was applied by Rachel Blau DuPlessis: to invent strategies in order to escape or avoid conventional romance plots. Piercy has succeeded in doing that by opening her novel with Beth's wedding day in the late 60's _ a very usual ending to conventions in narrative. Thus, Beth's story starts after "the happiest day of a woman's life" as Piercy entitles the first chapter. Beth's development starts at this point: she had been a virgin up until that day and had had romantic dreams about her marriage to Jim. The artificiality of the ceremony, and the frustration of her first sexual experience on her wedding night, however, were the first markers of the unhappy life she would have with him:

> It was over in fifteen minutes, the whole thing. Then he lay on his side breathing softly in sleep and she was lying there with a

> new hole torn in her, oozing softly into the mattress. She was stretched there still wound up as if whatever she was waiting for had not yet happened. She felt much less satisfied than she had after one of those fumbling long-drawn-out sessions on the couch or the back seat of his Chevy. It was accomplished. That was it, the whole thing. They had made love finally, but where was the love they had made? (SC, p.26)

In fact, this marriage becomes a relationship of torture and oppression for Beth, leading her to complete dissatisfaction and to escaping. She literally runs away from him and goes to Boston. Her leaving by plane (flying) is symbolic of her striving to attain freedom.

Dating men who want her for a maid and sex object and being raped by her ex-husband _ from whom she escapes again by using a knife to defend herself _, Beth begins to equate being loved to being used. With Karen, her first woman lover, Beth experiments "the first consistently pleasurable sex she had ever known" (SC, p.321). Nevertheless, while in bed they were equal and both active, Beth was made passive in other aspects of their relationship, for outside Karen "played the man," the controller. Again dissatisfied, Beth leaves Karen and spends some time alone. The importance of such affair lies in the fact that Beth has found out that "being with women is one way of getting away from those [conventional] roles" (SC, p.421). Thus, she becomes open to any form of sex in which she would feel well: "I don't have any particular sexual identity" (SC, p.421), she affirms in a denial of the rigidity of imposed sexual roles. Finally, by the end of the novel, Beth falls in love and finds the balanced relationship she wanted for herself: an open

relationship with Wanda, a woman lover who appeared in her life as an alternative for the oppression of previous lovers. As it can be noted, the answer for Beth is not to be found exclusively in sex or homosexuality, but also in the kind of relationship in which both partners experience love, sex and companionship in freedom and equality.

Also in Small Changes, Miriam's early sexual education was limited to books which told what was right. Her sexual initiation had not been violent like Beth's. Her first sexual experience with Phil, her first boyfriend, was smooth and tender. As his name suggests, Phil "fills" her and helps her break the childhood traumas concerning her body and her self. After Phil, who was a lover and friend to her, Miriam goes to college and has the opportunity to go out with different men who do not satisfy her. Then, meeting Jackson, a friend of Phil's, she falls in love with him. Presented in the novel as "the father, the judge, the external patriarchal conscience" (SC, p.248), he embodies the manipulative boyfriend. In her relationship with him, Miriam is led, taken:

> Feeling inert and passive, she flung herself down on the mattress. Waiting for him to take her. They did not speak. Falling into a river where the currents took her around and dashed her onward, a river where she rose and fell under an allien power, where she might drown....(SC, p.190)

Searching for alternatives, Miriam also spends some time having an unconventional relationship when living with Phil and Jackson at the same time. Both lovers, however, unite in a game of manipulation over her, who feels herself becoming stereotyped:

"she felt herself becoming Irrationality and Distraction and the Temptress" (SC, p.251). She flees from this dangerous game of manipulation over her when she finds out that the lovers are taking all of her and molding her to fit stereotyped images.

Later in the novel Miriam, who had always worried about herself (and not about marriage), begins to follow her therapist's prescriptions and to play "women's roles" (SC, p.360). Thus, she marries Neil Stone, the man who appeared to "rescue" her. Their relationship is very conventional, with him manipulating her in a quiet tone of authority, maybe not to be noticed as controller. Miriam failed in her search for a balanced relationship and is still with Neil (=nil?) and two children when the novel closes, leading a conventional life, admitting its failures, but insisting on it, for she wants to win his love back.

In writing about "The Double Narrative Structure of Small Changes," literary critic Elaine Hansen has properly remarked that with the stories of these two women _ Beth and Miriam _, Piercy shows us "two alternative ways in which the woman writer can represent the experience of women."[4] The former is the plot of Beth's story, with the revolutionary use (re-vision) of a classic male narrative structure, the Bildungsroman, to portray a radical female experience from passive resistance to active self-defense and achievement. Beth finds her true sexual and social identity as a lesbian feminist. The second one (Miriam's plot), on the other hand, reproduces ordinary women's experience in a soap-opera way. As Hansen adequately points out, Miriam's story is archetypally feminine, ultra-conservative and not optimistic in tone.

In Woman On the Edge of Time, a similar structure of

opposition governs the presentation of Connie and Luciente _ whose sexual experiences illustrate an even wider gap between archetype and revision, between conservative and radical modes of interaction, between a pessimistic and an optimistic view of female sexuality. Connie Ramos, whose sexuality and love life are related to pain an oppression, faces triplicate social power against her: against her sex, her race, and her social status. Embodying values rejected by society, Connie is not able to reach a healthy love relationship due to the fact that either she is oppressed by some partners or she has the ones she loves taken away from her in ways beyond her control. She finds escape in her futuristic fantasy, in Luciente's world, where she meets Bee, the lover and friend she cannot have in her present life.

Sexuality and love in Luciente's time are not related to myths, nor to prejudice. In Connie's imaginary future people can develop their sexuality and their feelings openly. In such a society they "catch" sexually easily _ and since they are still children _ and they have the liberty to express their love without fear or taboo. No conventional relationships of marriage exist in that society where the friends whom one has sexual intercourse with are named pillow friends and where sex happens easily, "not for money, not for a living. For love, for pleasure, for relief, out of habit, out of curiosity and lust" (WET, p.64), in Luciente's words. Both heterosexual and homosexual couplings are faced naturally. Luciente herself, like most of the people in Mattapoisett, has had male and female lovers: between these she prefers male pillow friends (Bee and Jackrabbit are among these). No one has to fit rigid sexual roles in this utopian society. Therefore, sexual traumas and dissatisfaction simply do not exist.

Depicting extreme situations _ Connie's oppressive, violent reality and Luciente's world _, Piercy stresses the existing gap between real and ideal. The writer's need to plunge into a utopian vision in order to present an ideal, optimistic view seems to be inevitable since it would be impossible within contemporary social arrangements.

Moving back from the idealized world of Woman On the Edge of Time into our chaotic reality, in The High Cost of Living Marge Piercy seems to capitalize on the main character's homosexuality (or bisexuality) as a way to "approximate" Luciente's future world to our own. In this sense Leslie can be seen as a paradigm for the radical vision while Honor stands for the opposite pole.

Having already found a sexual identity and letting herself be guided by her own impulses, Leslie describes her first homosexual relationship as new and experimental. Similarly to what happened to Beth in Small Changes, the effects of the first lesbian affair on Leslie were positive in the sense that it had changed both characters and opened new ways for them. In the case of Leslie,

> it had transformed her from a girl who suspected she was perverted, that she had nameless or too easily named dykey longings, who fell shamefully and silently in love with unattainable women who belonged to men, to a woman who could and did love another woman and who could love others.(HCL, p.95)

Facing a time of crisis in her love life which covers most of the time span of the novel, in the end Leslie regains her old balance and her sexual choice is still clear. Even though she is alone at the end of the narrative, Leslie is open to start

another relationship with anybody who may interest her. Hardened by life,Leslie has reached a step where love and sex are just one section of her life, and she condemns people who see them as the most important aspects in life, disregarding others which are equally important. "Sometimes I think we'd all be better with more jogging and less sex" (HCL, p.92), she remarks.

Honor, the other protagonist in The High Cost of Living constitutes Leslie's opposite. She lives in romantic dreams, in fantasies, whereas Leslie is used to the practicality of things. Furthermore, Honor wants "a masterly sort of man" for her (HCL, p.53), with her fantasies about the future always involving a man dominating her. With this sort of man (who takes advantage of her naiveté), Honor thinks she has found happiness and adventure: "... I feel like a heroine in a spy movie, clever and mature and wonderfully cool. It's fun" (HCL, p.276). Honor may well be the romantic heroine, but cleverness and maturity are far from being her characteristics, for there is no development in her life as concerning her life with partners, and she keeps insisting in her romantic dreams.

Jill and Donna Stuart in Braided Lives also fit the dual pattern established by Hansen concerning Small Changes and which was also perceptible in Woman On the Edge of Time and in The High Cost of Living as shown above. This time the contrast is marked by Jill's questioning of her role as partner and lover as opposed to Donna's acquiescence to convention.

In an apprenticeship about sex, Jill Stuart's experience from the innocent, casual sex among the girls in her childhood up until her life as a mature woman of forty-two can be followed by the reader. This development involves much suffering and many doubts. It is particularly difficult for a girl like Jill (and

unlike Donna) who challenges current values and who is not afraid of committing "sins." In her childhood and early adolescence Jill has secret attachments with girl friends. Those involvements make her question her sexual identity from the beginning, for she knows that is a deviant behavior from society's norms, even though she does not feel she is a lesbian: "lately reading psychology books and adult novels, I found a label for my adventuring. Am I sick? Am I depraved?" (BL, pp.24-25). Her worries also arise from the fact that she is nothing a teenager should be concerning her dreams and aspirations. She is very conscious all the time, for instance, of her being against marriage and sex as traditionally practiced. "Marriage does not figure in the tales I tell myself. I see it daily and it looks like a doom rather than a prize" (BL, p.22). She refuses, thus, both marriage and sex when acted out as a game of power:

> Is there nothing more between women and men than the secret war of marriage, sex the economic counter or submission to the alley world of smut? Rigid I lie, my hands clenched on my belly. If sex is a war I am a concientious objector: I will not play.(BL, p.79)

Her critical attitude also involves love as understood in the conventinal sense as manipulation over somebody. According to her, this kind of love is purely negative:

> "Love says mine. Love says I could eat you up. Love says stay as you are, be my own private thing, don't you dare have ideas I don't share. Love has just to gobble the other, bones and all, crunch. I don't want to do that. I sure don't want it done to me!" (BL, p.103)

She believes, thus, in a relationship of honesty and freedom, with each partner respecting the other's opinions. In this point, she comes very close to de Beauvoir's idea of genuine love.

Because the novel covers a large span of Jill's life we get to know that in her development to reach a mature relationship with a partner, she faces different people and different kinds of dissatisfaction and oppression. Each of her many boyfriends becomes symbolic, in one way or another, of varied modes of authority. Mike, the "poet", for instance, embodies the manipulative and aggressive academic; and Howie stands for conventional middle-class values (protection and security). She refuses them because, in the last analysis, they do not accept her as she is: an open person who is eager to express her love and her caring to other people (BL, p.546). When the novel ends, Jill is living alone, but not lonely, fully and happily experiencing her life.

Through the generally brief flashforwards which are scattered throughout the novel and which in a sense are apart from the narrative proper, we find out that Jill has reached a balanced and unconventional relationship with Josh, who is young and unconnected to masculinist values. Jill's relationship with him shows to be one of sexual satisfaction, love, and friendship:

> I love this man so hard it scared me, ressurecting old fears to walk through me again wearing faces and clothes I had forgotten I ever possessed. I am a person to whom sex comes easily and pleasantly and love hard; friendship is common and important, intellectual and political passion my daily

> bread, but sexual passion conjoined with love rare. Now I was with my friend who is my lover and I went back to sleep again.(BL, p.239)

Two aspects deserve attention here: the first is that Jill is the only major character in Piercy's fiction to reach a good and balanced relationship with a lover in her fictional reality without any type of hindrance; and the other is that balance in this aspect is only achieved literally "beyond the ending," to use Rachel Blau DuPlessis's words, that is, outside the time span of the main narrative line.

Also in Braided Lives, Donna Stuart feels she is the "experienced" girl concerning sex just because she had a secret involvement with her brother-in-law. In fact, however, in opposition to Jill, she is not sure about what she wants, and at college she keeps running from boyfriend to boyfriend in a continuous sequence of men who exploit and leave her. Finally, she clings to Peter as if that can eliminate the problem of having to forge her own identity. Embodying middle-class values and having a stable financial situation, Peter appears to be the security Donna needs, and she, embracing the "Cinderella" role, marries him "accepting [her] destiny as a woman," and following her therapist's prescriptions (BL, p.431). Such a marriage echoes Miriam's in Small Changes. Even though she does not feel satisfied in her relationship, she insists on it and therefore tries both to take up the traditional role of a woman and to absorb Peter's values. The marriage, however, turns out to be a failure involving even physical aggression. Discovering she is pregnant, Donna has an abortion, bleeding to death. In fact, this becomes symbolic of her aborting her self, the self she does not struggle enough to build.

Although there is no structural reinforcement of the plot division in Braided Lives, such as presented in Small Changes, its thematic similarity to the former novel can be easily perceived. Beth's story corresponds to Jill's; whereas Miriam's progression is related to Donna's. In Braided Lives there is also the contrast between the development of one character _ Jill _ in search for her balance and maturity in a Bildungsroman, and Donna's story which is typical of a soap-opera heroine. Donna's story is more pungent than Miriam's, however, because of her grater suffering and subsequent death.

Vida, the novel that follows The High Cost of Living in order of publication, remains apart from the dual pattern that guided the analysis of all the other novels because of its focus on only one main character: Vida Asch, the political fugitive. Although the emphasis of this novel is on political engagement, sexuality also plays an important part.

Similarly to Beth, Luciente, Leslie and Jill, Vida is not tied to conventional values in her relationship with partners. Like Leslie in The High Cost of Living, Vida has already reached balance in her sexual life since the opening of the novel. Her option is not for being a lesbian, but to lead an open sexual life with partners from either sex, even though, like Luciente in Woman On the Edge of Time, she prefers male partners.

Throughout the novel, we get to know that Vida has been married twice. Her first marriage was to Vasos, a Greek civil engineer. For Vida, that was supposed to be her romantic relationship, but it turned out to be a failure. He even used to rape her regularly (V, p.228), then Vida escaped from him. Her second marriage, to Leigh (a disk jockey), was an unconventional one. Both on the love and on the sexual levels their

relationship was good. When she started living underground, however, she became an outsider and Leigh became more and more affluent in his work, facts which separated them. Vida would like to have saved her relationship with him, even though she could not.

In her life underground Vida had several lovers, either male or female. It was during that time that she realized "she no longer depended on any man to tell her when she was correct. She could be argued with, she could change her mind, but she judged her own arguments" (V, p.211). In one of the refuges, she met Joel, a young outcast who is described as "a truly new breed of human being, a man untouched by old macho roles, vulnerable and open, gentle and emotional as a woman" (V, p.89), thus resembling the men in Luciente's future in Woman On the Edge of Time and also Josh in Braided Lives. Vida and Joel fell in love with each other and started having a satisfactory relationship. She felt very happy with him because, in her hard life, she was finally allowed to love and to be loved. This affair was interrupted, however, because Joel, lacking experience in that type of life, got busted at the end of the novel. What happens to Vida as concerning the men she loves can be compared to Connie's involvements with lovers in Woman On the Edge of Time. In both novels the protagonists' happiness with their partners is prevented by large social forces. Vida experiences a strong feeling of loss because nothing is left to her (again similarly to Connie). Nevertheless, she collects her strength and goes on with her political struggle in a very powerful and optimistic ending, without giving in to the loss of her lover.

We have mentioned above that when women's problems were depicted in literature these were always related to men and

generally limited to problems of courtship. Much aware of this unfair situation, Marge Piercy has written about women whose sexual and love matters, even though very important, are portrayed as only one section of their lives. Because of her dissatisfaction with the politics of power stressed by Kate Millett and unfortunately still existing behind the man/woman relationships, Piercy attempts to expose some of the problems faced by women who enter relationships with male partners. With the exception of Luciente, who lives in a world of ideal relationships and of equality between the sexes, all the other main characters face suffering and pain in their connection to the ruling sex. Such suffering comes in the form of oppression and manipulation by the male partners faced by both Beth and Miriam in Small Changes, by Connie in Woman On the Edge of Time, by Leslie and Honor in The High Cost of Living, by Vida, and by both Jill and Donna in Braided Lives.

More intense suffering than pure manipulation and oppression is brought about by rape, presented in four out of the five novels which were analized: Beth is raped by her husband and Miriam is abused by Tom Ryan in Small Changes, Connie is attacked by El Muro in Woman On the Edge of Time, Vida is also raped by her husband, and Donna by a town boy in Braided Lives, just mentioning violence when connected to main characters. Another very serious problem which is seldom mentioned in literature concerns abortion and the conditions in which it had to be carried out when still illegal. The theme of abortion as connected to major characters is presented very quickly in Woman On the Edge of Time (Connie has an abortion in that novel), also quickly in The High Cost of Living (Leslie is involved, then), and lengthly described and discussed in Braided Lives where the

topic is approached in both a personal and in a much wider political perspective. In the latter novel the two main characters undergo it, and one of them dies after one abortion. The struggle for its legalization is also portrayed.

Even though almost all the women characters face or have faced oppression in their interaction with male partners, most of them overcome the passivity supposed to be inherent to their sex. Connie, in Woman On the Edge of Time, deserves a special treatment because, in her life, sexuality and love are denied to her because of oppression from the external world. She does not remain passive before her placement in an asylum, however, for she has the power to envision a perfectly balanced relationship as concerning love and sex in her idealized future. In my opinion, her realization comes through Luciente's. Both Connie and her possible future self, Luciente, illustrate the types recognized by Hansen taken to an extreme degree. Piercy seems to be highlighting the existing gap between archetype and prototype (re-vision) when she presents her idealistic future as only possibly existing in the mind of a "schizoid" or "schizophrenic" person. Split, division, and disease are the only "balance" that can be reached.

Again quoting de Beauvoir's words about women's choices concerning their sexuality, it is worth stressing that "not all women are able and willing to solve their sexual problems in the standard fashion, the only manner approved by society" (p.423). And that is to say that conventional heterosexuality is by no means the only way of fulfilling one's aspirations and desires. Marge Piercy seems to agree with de Beauvoir's statement, because in fact , two main characters out of the five novels opt for the "forbidden ways" to express their sexuality and their

love. Offering us a new alternative for the oppression by male lovers, Beth (SC) and Leslie (HCL) choose homosexuality, reaching satisfaction and balance in their decision, even being censured because of current standards. Lesbianism in such novels does not appear as radical, but as an alternative, a break on the rigidity of the traditional heterosexual mode.

Three out of the nine characters who were analysed do not overcome passivity in their relationship with male partners. It proves appropriate to point out that two of these (Miriam in Small Changes and Donna in Braided Lives) try to justify their behavior of clinging to a man _ to their husbands in their case _ even when the relationship turns out to be oppresive for them as the "full acceptance of their womanhood" as prescribed by their therapists. The other character who does not grow mature in this aspect is Honor in The High Cost of Living. Living in dreams and fantasies, Honor is manipulated by the man with whom she has her first affair, and, at the end of the novel she is about to start a similar relationship and thus to reenact Miriam's and Donna's plot.

In considering the three of them together, it may be observed that the end of these novels mark different stages of the same path for the characters: Honor is probably going to find a conventional husband; Miriam has found one and lives under his pressure and manipulation; and finally Donna who, after having gone through the two stages above, literally finds her death in her failure to go on in her search for balance, constituting, thus, the most dramatic plot among these. The three characters play typically "feminine" roles and accept the passivity and submission they imply. Therefore, they are imprisoned in stereotyped images. Nevertheless because Piercy

portrays most of her women characters in their denial of relationships with manipulative and oppressive lovers, these three characters may be understood as negative examples, throwing light upon the others. Therefore, the author's concern seems to be basically with women's reaching a sexual and a love life based on equality and honesty, and thus with a reversal of the assumptions pointed out by de Beauvoir, Chodorow and Ellmann. Most characters are not imprisoned in immanence and search for the "genuine love" as mentioned by de Beauvoir. They do not show resignation to inferiority (pointed by Chodorow) nor do they illustrate the kind of intellectual and emotional "complementarity" focused on by Ellmann. They are true human beings struggling to define their own ambitions and desires through their experience.

Piercy's underlying message shows a clear indictment of stereotypical relationships. She condemns manipulation and oppression in favor of freer and more equalitarian interactions between kin, peers, and lovers. In this sense she upholds feminist ideals by opposing any form of domination _ whether economic, social, intellectual or sexual _ in the personal realm. The next chapter will examine the characters' responses to and interactions with the wider social environment around them so that we may have a more comprehensive understanding both of their lives and of Marge Piercy's vision.

Notes to Chapter Two

[1]Nancy Chodorow, "Being and Doing: A Cross-Cultural Examination of the Socialization of Males and Females," in Vivian Gornick and Barbara K. Moran (eds.) Woman in Sexist Society: Studies in Power and Powerlessness (New York: Mentor, 1971), p.286.

[2]Marge Piercy, Small Changes 1973 (New York: Fawcett Crest Books, 1974); Woman On the Edge of Time 1976 (New York: Fawcett Crest Books, 1977); The High Cost of Living 1978 (New York: Fawcett Crest Books, 1985); Vida 1979 (New York: Fawcett Crest Books, 1981); and Braided Lives 1982 (New York: Fawcett Crest Books, 1983). From now on the novels will be referred to in the text by their initials followed by page numbers.

[3]The term double standard is currently used in feminist theory to denote the patriarchal system of two different principles ruling the ways of socialization imposed on the two sexes. Patriarchal ideology has established two standards (one feminine and one masculine) _ the double standard _ which assure the perpetuation of male dominance.

[4]Elaine Hansen, "The Double Narrative Structure of Small Changes," in Catherine Rainwater and William Scheick (eds.) Contemporary American Women Writers: Narrative Strategies (Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 1985), p.215.

CHAPTER THREE

PASSIVITY IN THE PUBLIC LIFE

The weight of the Tower is in me. Can I ever straighten?
You trained me in passivity to lay for you like a doped hen.
You bounce your gabble off the sky to pierce our brains.
Your loudspeakers from every television and classroom
and your transistors grafted onto my nerves at birth
shout you are impregnable and righteous forever.
But any structure can be overthrown.

London Bridge with the woman built into the base
as sacrifice is coming down.
The Tower will fall if we pull together.
Then the Tower reversed, symbol of tiranny and oppression,
shall not be set upright.
We are not turning things over merely
but we will lay the Tower on its side.
We will make it a communal longhouse.

Marge Piercy _ "The Tower Struck by Lightning Reversed; The Overturning of the Tower"

Western society with its male-oriented culture has imprisoned women in nature. In fact, the repeated association woman/nature and man/culture constitutes one of the patterns underlying stereotypes of women as pointed out by Mary Ellmann and many others. Anthropologist Sherry B. Ortner,[1] for instance, focuses upon this dichotomy. In her analysis she investigates several aspects in women's lives _ physical, social, psychological _ to try to find the reason of their current association to nature. She concludes that, in fact, women are not closer (or farther) to nature than men, once both sexes have a consciousness and are mortal. Ortner also states that some social mechanisms and institutions are responsible for the repetition of such association.

Because men hold the power, they are the subjects of history, ruling over culture _ law and custom _ and thus rendering women legally incompetent and powerless. As remarked by Engels in his famous The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State, when private property appeared, women became a patrimony in masculine hands and even more passive historically.[2] The very few examples of women of action throughout history are limited to a small group of remarkable queens, saints, and women of rank who constitute exceptions to the general mode.

The nineteenth century saw the beginning of the agitation of the feminist movement. In fact, John Stuart Mill's The Subjection of Women, mentioned in the Introductory Chapter, is representative of this time when groups of women went to the streets to claim for their Civil Rights, especially for the right to vote. They followed the ideas of the intellectuals of the time, who, like Mill, defended equality between the sexes.

This political agitation brought about some improvements in the situation of women. The abstract rights women succeeded in attaining for themselves, however, were unaccompanied by concrete possibilities, for these rights were equal only in theory.[3]

Kate Millett in her Sexual Politics has properly pointed out some of the counterrevolutionary forces which in this century have acted to suppress the voice of the woman's movement: the reactionary policy of Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, and also the reaction in the ideology of Freud's psychoanalytic thought with its reflection on social sciences and on literature. Women, therefore, remain in subjection and their role in society is in general still limited to conventional social duties. According to Simone de Beauvoir, seeing that the future is not open to her and that she is imprisoned in routine tasks, inessential roles, woman is led to tears, hysteria, and suicide (pp.620-21). Still according to de Beauvoir, even the few independent and autonomous women of this century still face serious hindrances in their struggling for a place in society because of belonging to the female sex (p.691).

A new wave of the feminist movement has arisen since the 60's and we are once again living a time of changing values concerning women's roles in society. Women who, according to de Beauvoir, have had no history, no past, no solidarity, and who, therefore, have failed to bring about social change (p.19), begin to question the old roles imposed on them. In her search to open a road for the future and to take her chances, the modern woman belonging to the new feminist movement has striven to assert her place in society and to rescue and record her historical experience.

As a product of this stage in women's history, Marge Piercy shows her responsiveness to the political currents of her time. The consequent commitment to the social aspects of women's lives can be more obviously perceived both in the writer's political militance as an activist and also in her writing of pamphlets. Moreover, as mentioned in Chapter One, her connection with social issues also becomes evident in her fiction through the depiction of female characters who strive to participate in the experience of contemporaneity, as stressed by critics Martha and Charles Masinton. The feminism in her novels has to be regarded in the light of Piercy's socialist and new humanist learnings, for it appears as a reflection of these. In "Marge Piercy's Revolutionary Feminism," Joyce R. Ladenson has noted that her "women characters struggle not only with personal feelings _ relationships of profound psychological dimension _ but with socio-political ideas."[4] Because we have already emphasized the characters' struggle to overcome passivity on the personal level (in Chapter Two), we now turn to their relationships on the public level by analysing interactions in the social sphere: their education, their profession and occupation, and their response to the social organization as a whole.

I. EDUCATION

The importance of an equal education _ or of one following the same model _ for both sexes is unquestionable. In fact, such

was one of the basic issues Mary Wollstonecraft claimed for in A Vindication of the Rights of Woman. In the present study, the term education is used in its broadest sense, meaning both the knowledge and development resulting from an educational process _ from schooling _, and also the action or process of educating (or being educated) so that one may develop mentally and morally. The present process of socialization in Western society still tends to limit the education of women to the domestic realm, and even the need for schooling is not much stimulated _ when stimulated at all. Although the situation has been gradually changing, in general terms only men are educated to the matters of the world and expected to fully develop mentally and morally to fulfill useful public tasks. In touching the issue of educational sexual politics, Kate Millett stressed that patriarchy imposes ignorance upon women as one of the means to keep the sex under control (p.58). Here, I intend to investigate how far the women characters depicted by Marge Piercy have succeeded in achieving an education (both in its institutional and systematic sense and in the sense of a development in character), and also to observe whether the education they had (or craved for) helped the wider process of their complete growth.

The process of education of the two protagonists in Small Changes follows opposite directions. Beth's schooling is one of high school only, for her parents could not afford to send her to college, even though they were able to manage an expensive wedding ceremony for her. Part of the responsibility is hers as well because she did not insist on her will and soon gave up her plans of having a college education to get married:

> When she wanted to go to college _ she had wanted badly to be a lawyer, like Portia in the play, like Perry Mason, and everybody thought that was funny _ they [her parents] had told her there was no money. But they had spent enough money on this day [of the wedding party] for two years of studying. She must not think about that. She would be married to Jim, and that was the important thing.(SC, p.20)

Frustrated in her relationship with Jim, Beth realizes how much she has lost concerning learning different things. Then when she goes to Boston to start her new life alone, Beth becomes eager to learn and struggles to provide an education for herself by auditing different classes at college, by going to women's meetings where problems are discussed, by living in the commune and thus having to read and learn about all sorts of practical things such as carpentry, painting, planting, etc, and also by attending the women's theater group which provides her with a new knowledge: the knowledge of her body. Her education turns out to be very comprehensive, though in an unsystematic way.

Miriam, on the other hand, has the opportunity to go to college _ having temporary jobs during this period so that she may save money for her studies. At college in Michigan, Miriam becomes more self-reliant and "through her freshman and sophomore years she worked hard and got straight As" (SC, p.99). Miriam's specialization in mathematics and later in computer science constitutes a break with the traditional assumption that such fields are typically male. After college, she goes to graduate school in Boston where she gets a PhD. Though apparently more successful in her educational life, Miriam's path is narrow because directed to professional success only. Piercy clearly contrasts the two forms of education (Beth's and

Miriam's) and seems to favor the former _ a wider, more comprehensive type of education which is less "status-oriented" than the traditional male vision.

Similarly to Beth, Connie Ramos in Woman On the Edge of Time had always wanted to go to college in spite of her family's poverty. "At fifteen and full of plans and fire" (WET, p.47), Connie challenges her mother by screaming: "I'm good at school. I'm going to college. You'll see!" (WET, p.46). She really succeeds in going to a community college where she takes a psychology course for nearly two years. During this time she holds temporary jobs to get the money for her studies. She is even exploited by a professor at CUNY who uses Latin girls as secretaries and mistresses. Even though she loves her study, Connie has to quit because of lack of money. Her education is therefore much hindered by her financial deprivation, and then it is limited to reading old newspapers she finds in the streets or to watching TV. The social organization in classes prevents Connie from having the education she craved for.

Obstacles like the ones faced by Connie do not exist in Luciente's time, for everybody in Mattapoisett has the right to have a free and open education:

> "We study with any person who can teach us. We start out learning in our own village, of course. But after naming [their ritual of initiation into adulthood], we go wherever we must to learn, although only up to the number a teacher can handle.... Where you go depends on what you want to study...."(WET, p.53)

Luciente herself had to wait for two years for her teacher, Rose of Ithaca, to take her. Such training with specific persons

refers to specialized education (such as Luciente's on biology), because in fact, everybody in her time _ both children and adults _ "never leave school and go to work. [They're] always working, always studying" (WET, p.131). In her time, there are no toys for children because they do not need imitations of reality. Children learn to be responsible early in real life by working and studying together with adults. The process of education in this futuristic world is complete and, therefore, also involves entertaiment: parties, games, art, and so on. Piercy thus again emphasizes the desirability of an unconventional, diversified education as a break with patriarchal modes.

Very far from this idealistic future of Woman On the Edge of Time, we meet Leslie in The High Cost of Living having to face hardships to acquire an education. Coming from a very poor family, Leslie does not count on their support. She is aware, however, of how important it is for her to get a degree and to fully develop as a human being. Therefore, she strives for that: "But after all, I'm educating myself. Later I can do what I want," she states (HCL, p.214). Studying very hard and loving it, Leslie is already a second year graduate when we meet her. She is working on her PhD thesis and has an assistantship grant for her survival, working with George, her professor and friend who respects her for her competence in the fields she chooses: economics and history.

> It was true. She did love her work. She felt privileged to be allowed into the stacks of the library, she loved her desk in George's anteroom, her books and papers. It was orderly. It went somewhere. It built and made sense. It was different from blood on the

> floor and diapers in the pail and the smell of spoiled fish.(HCL, p.36)

Just like Miriam in Small Changes, and Luciente in Woman On the Edge of Time, Leslie's choice concerning her career also constitutes a break with the conventional occupations for which women in literature (as a reflection of reality) are generally led to take up.

Besides her college education, Leslie cares a lot about educating her body and learning about it in her karate lessons. She also reads a lot about different matters, especially books by famous women and about women's social struggles: for her "books retained a special power: tickets to elsewhere" (HCL, p.36). In brief, Leslie's awareness concerning the issue of acquiring an education in both the institutionalized and the wider, unsystematic senses (and her overcoming the social hindrances in order to fulfill it) may be viewed as an approximation to Luciente's world.

Honor _ the other protagonist in The High Cost of Living _ however, has a very poor education when compared to Leslie's and to that of the other protagonists discussed so far. Confined to her home by her mother, Honor does not seem to be aware of the importance of an education. At the end of the novel, she mentions finding a job to save money for college. This, however, does not sound convincing, for she had never mentioned following a college course she liked. Honor's future is more inclined to be dedicated to finding a husband than to her own education and development.

The lack of perspectives for a college education found in Honor meets its opposite in Vida Asch. Plans of taking up a

college education abound in Vida's youth, for she imagines herself an academic in comparative literature. She wants to learn all languages _ she also speaks Greek _ and to follow a career in the humanities. Indeed, Vida has a college education in such a field. There are no indications, however, whether she finishes her course or not. At a certain point in her life, the focus of her process of development changes from becoming a college professor to entering the public realm of politics, in which she finds satisfaction and also a way of developing intellectually.

Braided Lives displays the stories of two women struggling to have an education: Jill and Donna Stuart. They both go to to college at Ann Arbor to fulfill their desire to have a systematic education. Jill succeeds in finishing her course by working during vacation so that she could pay for it and by dedicating herself a lot to that field (the humanities). She is very aware that schooling constitutes only a part of the educational process, for it lies mostly in the individual's own hands and in his/her interest to learn:

> Education? That comes from each other. We go in fierce noisy knot through exhibits and galleries.... We dismiss chunks of culture and gobble others.(BL, p.154)

Jill is eager to learn about everything from art appreciation to cooking different, exotic foods. And although she criticizes the "very academic" teaching of literature in college and claims for a different university (BL, pp.274-76), she recognizes its importance. In fact, Jill succeeds in grasping different aspects of culture and therefore improves her criticism of society.

Among all the characters discussed so far, Jill seems to be the most critical one concerning the theme of education and also the one who _ together with Luciente _ succeeds in attaining the most comprehensive grasp and knowledge of various matters and of herself.

Unlike Jill, Donna, who has the same opportunities, fails to define and accomplish an education on both levels. At a given stage of her indefinition, she remarks:

> "Can't even tell what I want. One week I'm a political scientist. The next, I'll be a prominent critic. Then I think I should study science. But whatever I turn to, it never feels real because it's still just me...."(BL, p.260)

In fact, Donna abandons her plans of studying in order to get married as if that would free her from the responsibility of educating herself; meeting dissatisfaction also in marriage, she fails to develop.

After analysing the novels under the theme of education, I have reached the conclusion that Marge Piercy's concern with this issue is striking. The characters' preoccupation with their educational process is presented in all five novels. Piercy stresses most obviously the hindrances the protagonists face to achieve their education _ and more specifically, schooling. With the exception of Luciente, whose society provides a good education to everybody, all the protagonists who want to have a college education, all belonging to the middle-class or low middle-class, have to struggle hard to afford it. And sometimes they even have to give it up because of financial difficulties: the case of Connie in Woman On the Edge of Time. Social forces

which were stronger than the character prevented her from proceeding with her development. Among all nine characters, only two failed to reach an education when they could have had it: Honor in The High Cost of Living and Donna in Braided Lives were not able to establish goals to be achieved.

In brief, Marge Piercy's view of this topic seems to be that, in spite of smaller difficulties imposed by the androcentric society we live in, women can succeed in attaining a good education once they are strong willed enough to battle for it. Nevertheless, once the social structure imposes a very high barrier (in Connie's situation, for instance), the characters are unable to overcome it. Also, she seems to imply that women would have a better chance of achieving an education, were it not for the strict and conventional ways provided by society. Piercy signals unconventional, alternative forms of education when she describes Beth's, Leslie's, or Jill's process of educating themselves. However, the strongest hint for an ideal sort of education lies in Mattapoisett, in Luciente's time, and therefore, out of our reach.

II. PROFESSIONAL LIFE

In A Room of One's Own, Virginia Woolf gives a lot of emphasis to the material difficulties women face and to the importance of economic independence in women's lives. In fact, this issue constitutes the central focus of her work, giving it

its title. We should notice that at the time Woolf's treatise was written (1929), except for the factories and industries which exploited female labor, literature constituted one of the few professions open to women, and that since then a wider range of activities have been undertaken by them, although not in equal terms with men. In approaching the same topic in Sexual Politics (1970), Kate Millett exposes the economic form of sexual politics responsible for sexism in wages and in jobs, for in most cases women perform tasks which are menial, ill-paid and without status (p.56). Still according to Millett, women have not been allowed full equality in this aspect of profession, and therefore remain economically dependent upon men (p.54). She states that "discrimination in matters of hiring, maternity, wages and hours is very great" (pp.56-57).

In this section I intend to examine the main business of the characters' lives, that is, the activities in which they engage receiving financial return so that their economic independence may be reached. I also intend to observe the characters' performance in their occupations and professions under the light of Patricia Meyer Spacks's assumption in The Female Imagination that "it seems [that] the idea of success has failed to engage the female imagination,"[5] an issue that was retaken by Carolyn Heilbrun a few years later in Reinventing Womanhood, mentioned in the Introductory Chapter. Besides checking whether Marge Piercy has depicted characters who reached success in their professional lives, I also intend to observe whether the author has succeeded in resolving one of the basic and most mentioned conflicts in women's lives: the oscilation between longing for public achievement through an active professional life and the desire to be happy in their relationships within the private

sphere. Also in The Female Imagination, Spacks poses this question: "Is the cost of achievement the loss of relationship?" (p.318). Within our social frame, in most cases the answer seems to be yes. Piercy's answer to that through her women characters, then, will also be relevant in this section.

Much aware of the competitive society around her, Miriam, one of the protagonists in Small Changes, is not afraid of it. She was a brilliant student at college and therefore grew confident in her own competence. The first job connected to her career is in Boston, where she works providing the computer know-how at M.I.T in her own project office. She likes this job and feels much more useful there than when she was working with pure maths.

> For one thing she thought that this work felt real. During her senior year, purer mathematics had come to seem more and more alienated and alienating.... She thought that her mind was really more suited to this work than to pure mathematics, and the feedback with the machine at one end and the biochemists on the other end was interesting in itself. Even debugging the programs that she wrote was fun.(SC, pp.174-75)

This job becomes meaningful both because of the break with the traditional mode it implies and also because for Miriam it means financial security and an opportunity to find a subject for her thesis. Later, Miriam gets a more creative job also with computers at another company. Feeling better at the new job, Miriam becomes very good at her work, gaining people's respect for that.

Marriage and motherhood for Miriam meant the end of her

professional life. In this new job she meets Neil, the man she marries, and when she gets pregnant she quits her work not to go back after she has children. In the following passage, when talking to Beth, Miriam states her desire to fulfill different aspects of her life:

> "I want to be a good technical person and creative in my field. I want to be happily married, I want to be a good cook, I want to be a good mother and have lots of babies _ I want everything!"(SC, p.384)

By creating a character who embodies the tendency known as "the super-woman syndrome," Piercy is fictionalizing real-life problems faced by the female sex in her generation and in her middle-class American society, when women felt the urge to fulfill both the nurturing and the professional roles. Miriam fails in having everything, and, at the end of the novel, she is limited to the domestic sphere, to housework and childcare _ which are unpaid for because these are assumed to be a woman's duty in our society _ and to financial dependence upon her husband. In recognizing her failure on the professional level, Miriam starts to carry on some smaller activities (reading the computer stuff, compiling a private list of access codes, and other smaller tasks). These, however, are minor and done in her free time only. Her work as a useful and specialized technical woman has really stopped for the sake of her husband, her children and her home.

Also in Small Changes, Beth, on the other hand, was married and did all the housework alone, besides having to work at a boring job (in a Department Store) to complete the family

income. She flees from that state of stagnation and goes to Boston where she does secretarial work most of the time. Although she does not like company hierarchy and the clerical work she has to do, she has to cling to it because of her lack of training and specialization, and consequent impossibility to get a more creative job. Working with the women's theater group and in the commune where she lives are the creative activities she likes most. Such activities, however, are very discriminated against by society besides being unpaid for. Sometimes the theater group is even forbidden to perform in some cities (SC, p.465), and life at the commune is severely criticized by Beth's colleagues at her secretarial jobs (SC, p.407).

Having to lead an underground life with her woman lover (Wanda) with false names (because Wanda has been politically persecuted), at the end of the novel both Beth and her lover work as cleaning women in small office buildings in Cleveland.

> Their jobs were badly paid female labor not covered by social security or paid vacations or sick leaves, but work that brought them into contact with virtually no one.(SC, p.531)

Beth, then, is obliged to take this kind of menial job because the wider social structure hinders her professional development. Even so, Beth's story is much more optimistic than Miriam's, because Beth learns how to reach financial independence through her work, and is open to professional growth _ as the last scene where she appears in the novel suggests (SC, p.532). By contrasting the two characters _ Miriam and Beth _ in Small Changes and their activities, Piercy shows the gap between the pursuit of professional status in the traditional sense, which

in the end turns out to be narrow and hierarchic, and the choice of a more encompassing and equalitarian form of professional fulfillment, still rejected by our society as a whole.

In Woman On the Edge of Time, Connie's experience resembles Beth's in that the social system discriminates against her and therefore Connie has to submit to the same badly paid female labor just mentioned above in relation to Beth. Because she had not been able to finish college due to her financial deprivation and because of social discrimination concerning her race and sex, Connie has to work on what was left to somebody in her situation: she has to take small jobs at factories which exploit women's labor. She also works for her brother, again doing humble and ill-paid work. Exploitation in jobs also come from the state in the form of welfare program, for which Connie has to work scrubbing the city floors in return for almost nothing. In remembering herself when she was a teenager, Connie wonders:

> So who was the worst fool, then _ herself at fifteen full of plans and fire, or the woman of thirty-seven who had given up making any plans? Despair had stained her with its somber wash and leached from her all plans and schoolbook ideals.(WET, p.47)

Against the oppression of her reality, Connie dreams of Luciente's time in the future, when everybody is allowed an education according to their inclinations. Society in Luciente's time has also solved the problem of who is to execute more physical and mechanical although necessary tasks: they adopt a rotative system so that everybody does a little of the unwanted work, and so, nobody becomes overburdened with it.

Besides the tasks everybody has to undertake for the

maintenance of the order in their village, people in Mattapoisett can get specialized in whatever they want to. Luciente, for instance, is a scientist _ a plant geneticist _, again a break in our conventions concerning women's occupations, but something that is completely normal and usual in their nonsexist social organization. Art is considered a worthwhile occupation as all the others: one is neither more nor less important for being an artist. Another important principle is that people work for the common good, and not to have a salary in return. In Mattapoisett, everybody studies and works all the time, they produce even during their "official" rest:

> "Every seven years you get a sabbatical," Luciente said. "You're off production for a year and all you're liable for is family stuff. Some go study in their field. Some learn a language or travel. Hermit in the wilderness. Pursue some line of private research. Or paint. Or write a book."(WET, p. 131)

Aware of their responsibility towards themselves as individuals and towards the community, people in this futuristic society are constantly growing intelectually and morally in their search to improve their social system. All are bound to be successful in the area of their choice due to the freedom and the opportunities they have. Also, owing to the absence of sexism in such a society, a balance is reached between a useful public life and deep personal relationships.

In the novel that follows, The High Cost of Living, we meet Leslie striving in the real world to become professionally successful. Even though the difficulties are many, Leslie is

bound to reach a high level in her professional life, because in the novel we see her as a very competent student who is about to finish her PhD thesis on history and economics and who is respected by her colleagues at the department where she works. Her place in the competitive male world seems to be assured. As concerning finding a balance between the professional life and the personal relationships, this seems to be possible for Leslie because she is open and anxious for satisfying these two aspects in her life. Honor, in turn, still depends on her family financially, for she does not work, and does not seem anxious or enthusiastic concerning a career. The reader does not even get to know about her tendencies and inclinations as to an occupation or profession. As already mentioned, Honor's future seems to lie in conventional marriage and wifehood, not as a result of critical choice, but due to her immaturity as a human being.

Similarly to Beth in Small Changes and Connie Ramos in Woman On the Edge of Time, the professional life of Vida Asch is restrained by the repressive social environment which forces her to lead a life underground. A very intelligent woman who abandoned her dreams of becoming an academic to dedicate herself to political struggles, Vida could have become a prominent politician or a journalist, had she not been persecuted and obliged to remain at the margin of society. When she led a public life, Vida always worked for she had always enjoyed being economically independent (V, p.132). Immediately before her going underground Vida had worked in a well-paid job as a secretary doing translations from Greek to English and vice versa. She was fired, however, because of her political involvement. When her life as an outsider starts, she goes on

"working": for Vida, her political action underground constitutes work. According to Vida herself, on survival ground her occupation becomes war against oppression _ a war she fights by carrying on political tasks (researches, bombings, etc); by sketching political projects; and by writing internal papers which cannot appear publicly:

> Unless she tried publishing it under a pseudonym? She played with that fantasy briefly, watching a boat being winched up. Monthly Review, say. It would feel so wonderful to have an impact out there.(V, p.61)

The professional aspect constitutes another section in Vida's life (together with others such as her family ties, friendships, and her love life, as shown in Chapter Two) which was partially denied to her by the strictness of the social environment. It is worth noticing that even having to lead such a life, Vida never stops her political struggle.

In Braided Lives we follow the development of Jill Stuart towards her balance in the professional aspect. Her tendency to the writing of poetry is presented since her childhood, for she has written poems since then. Because of the severe criticism of one of her college boyfriends _ Mike _ she stops writing for some time, to resume it later in spite of the hardships and the discouraging criticism coming from Mike: "Inevitably, you're a woman first. And most of what you write is just merde" (BL, p.205); from professors who are against her "personal outcries" (BL, p.64); and later in her life, when she has her volumes of poetry already published, by literary critics who attack her with pieces of what nonfictional literary critic Mary Ellmann

has named "phallic criticism"[6]:

> Her poetry is uterine and devoid of thrust. Her volume is wet, menstruates and carries a purse in which it can't find anything.(BL, p.500)

Besides exposing the difficulties faced by women poets in the form of orthodox criticism, Marge Piercy also stresses the material difficulties faced by Jill in her path to become a well-known poet. When she finishes college, for instance, and goes to New York, Jill has to find small jobs so that she can survive and also have time left to write.

Throughout her development as a poet, Jill undergoes different stages. The first one of immature writing, the crisis of silence and of intellectual distancing from her work, and finally the waking up to her art again.

> I realize... that it is possible to write with the whole entire live self. My self. It is possible to dare to write poems starting immediately tomorrow morning about what I care most for.... You can write about fucking, you can write about supermarkets, you can write about your mother, you can write about the Bomb. You can write your politics. You can actually write poems that say what you feel and think.(BL, p.499)

In such a passage we may feel the mingling of poet Marge Piercy and the fictional poet Jill Stuart, and thus confirm one of the characteristics of contemporary women's literature as pointed out by Elizabeth Janeway: the mingling of fiction and autobiography.[7] Indeed, of all her novels, Piercy herself points out Braided Lives as "the closest to being autobiographical."[8]

The importance of work in Jill's life is stressed more than once throughout the novel, and especially emphasized in the following passage:

> Work is a room where every object has a significant place, a room where I can have what I want or at least name what I have and name what I want. Without work I am too small. My writing justifies me: What I am doing here? Writing two poems. All is not waste. I am the alchemist, turning leaden failure into golden work.(BL, p.297)

Being the poet herself, and not the poet's muse as it has been usual, Jill feels "in the service of a muse that is part art and part politics and part rebellion and part identity" (BL, p.275). And it is for this muse that she writes her poetry regularly (she already has seven published volumes of poetry when she is in her forties). Part of her time is also dedicated to giving conferences and lectures. By portraying Jill Stuart, Marge Piercy has created a character who reached success in her professional life and also who found the balance between achievement and a good personal relationship _ albeit an unconventional one _ with her partner.

The other protagonist of Braided Lives, in turn, is not able to have a balanced professional life. As remarked in the section about education, Donna Stuart does not follow any career because marriage seemes more attractive to her. After getting married and beginning to feel the emptiness of her life, Donna gets small jobs on TV because she feels the need to work. These, however, are in minor programmes which, like her marriage, also demand a stereotyped behavior from her. Donna fails, then, to pursue an activity which satisfies her desire to become

professionally useful and economically independent.

As remarked by Woolf, the problem of financial independence in women's lives constitutes one of the central issues in Piercy's novels. This becomes clear after this analysis when we find out that even though some of them fail to reach a balance in their professional lives, all nine characters work (or have worked) for a living. An exception to such a statement is Honor in The High Cost of Living, who depends upon her family for financial support and who is bound to transfer this dependence onto a future husband. Miriam in Small Changes and Donna in Braided Lives have failed to proceed their development towards their own satisfaction in the professional life due to the fact that they chose to get married and to quit their intellectual and professional activities. It seems worth remembering that Miriam had already reached competence and respect in her work when she quitted it.

All the other characters succeed in reaching economic independence. Status _ as recognized by society and implying respect _ and professional success, however, are only reached by three of the characters who opt to proceed and to develop in their professional lives: Luciente in Woman On the Edge of Time, Leslie in The High Cost of Living, and Jill in Braided Lives. As shown in the analysis, the other three characters (Beth in Small Changes, Connie in Woman On the Edge of Time, and Vida) have their professional development interrupted by social forces which are much wider than these protagonists' will to overcome them. Among these, Connie and Beth are obliged to take menial jobs in order to survive. Piercy seems to be implying that custom and law still hinder women's participation in equal terms with the opposite sex in a professionally productive life, and

thus reiterating Millett's statement of the existing professional discrimination toward the female sex.

Another important aspect concerning the characters' activities is the fact that the occupations which were chosen by most of them (regardless of their being able to fulfill their vocation) constitute breaks with the traditional, stereotyped, and supportive functions generally undertaken by women. Success in the professional life as concerning respect, appreciation and financial reward is possible for some of the characters, and some of them also succeed in reconciling their public professional lives with their relationships with partners. Conciliation between achievement at work and motherhood, however, is only possible in the futuristic utopia _ where they have completely different concepts for motherhood and childcare. In our sphere, the problem is left unsolved by Piercy in terms of the traditional familiar frame.

Finally, Marge Piercy's opinion concerning women's professional lives seems to be that such aspects of economic independence and satisfaction in the chosen activities constitute a fundamental step in women's search for freedom from stereotype. Piercy also seems to stress that the difficulties and discrimination imposed by society sometimes completely hinder women's professional development. Success, however, is already possible (in a reversal to Heilbrun's and Spacks's assumption that success has failed to engage the female imagination), and a balance between the professional life and the personal relationships too, which is a partially optimistic view. Equal opportunities in the professional field for everybody, however, do not exist in our society.

III. RESPONSE TO THE SOCIAL ORGANIZATION AS A WHOLE

As we have seen in the two previous sections in this chapter _ part one about the character's education, and part two about their professional lives _, Marge Piercy's novels show us that patriarchy still imposes a series of hindrances for women's development as men's equals concerning those two issues. Moreover, the social organization as a whole, that is, its form of government, its values and institutions, also corroborates with the oppression of the female sex, and, as a consequence, with the oppression of humanity in general. In fact, in The Female Imagination, Patricia Meyer Spacks properly points out that "the dreariness of social frustation permeates much writing by women" (p.320).

Piercy's novels, however, are a step beyond the mere exposure of the social oppression of women and of their dolefulness. I agree with Joyce R. Ladenson when she states that

> Marge Piercy's guiding vision is distinguished largely by its broad, radical social and political concerns, which give her art energy and usually provide guideposts for a better life while signalling warnings of a decaying social structure.(p.24)

My interest in this part has to do with the characters' response _ or passivity _ to this decaying social structure around them. In fact, I intend to check whether the characters' political action _ if it exists _ serves as guideposts for the building of a life of equality and harmony between the sexes (and, as an extension, among human beings in general), and therefore, to

check whether they really participate in the contemporary historical experience, as suggested by critics Martha and Charles Masinton mentioned in Chapter One.

In the first novel of the sequence, Small Changes, the protagonists' involvement in politics can be clearly contrasted. Miriam's involvement is limited to the time when she was at college and "was active in the left-liberal campus groups" (SC, p.99). After that, Miriam's interest concentrates in her personal life, and she becomes politically passive. Beth, in turn, undergoes a development in the political sense, growing from a woman oppressed in marriage to somebody who proposes alternatives concerning society's structure. As she becomes a very practical person, Beth's action is perceptible first of all through her denial of conventional social values in the beginning of the novel. Then it comes through the women's communes she lives in, through the theater plays she participates in , through the women's liberation groups she attends, and also through the public demonstrations she takes part in. Even though she is forced to lead an underground life at the end of the novel, Beth is still active, still attending women's groups, and open to be reintegrated in society. She has her participation in the public life restrained by the larger legal structure surrounding her.

In Woman On the Edge of Time, the social restriction imposed on human beings reaches an extreme. A very poor Mexican-American catholic who was brought up in poor surroundings, Connie Ramos had been controlled throughout her life by people and institutions who manipulated her directly or indirectly: the police, lawyers, social workers (of the welfare program), her family (especially her brother), professors, pimps, and doctors.

These brought her anger, sorrow and loss.

Hospitalized in mental institutions, "place[s] of murder of the self" according to Connie herself (WET, p.31), throughout most of the narrative, Connie is expected to behave according to stereotyped social rules. In this sense, by exposing the functioning of a mental asylum, Marge Piercy depicts a microcosm of our decaying society as a whole:

> This ward was peculiar because it was like a hospital ward. The mental hospital had always seemed like a bad joke; nothing got healed here. The first time in [Connie] had longed for what they called health. She had kept hoping that someone was going to help her. She had remained sure that somewhere in what they called a hospital was someone who cared, someone with answers, someone who would tell her what was wrong with her and mold her a better life. But the pressure was to say please and put on lipstick and sit at a table playing cards, to obey and work for nothing, cleaning the houses of the staff. To look away from graft and abuse. To keep quiet as you watched them beat other patients. To pretend that the rape in the linen room was a patient's fantasy.(WET, p.194)

The manipulative power of such an institution reaches its extreme in the experiment some patients (including Connie) have to submit to: a microminiaturized radio is to be implanted in their skull so that the doctors can electrically trigger almost every mood and emotion in the patients (WET, p.204) in accordance with stereotyped standards. In her sanity, Connie realizes that "she was the experiment," that they would "rape her body, her brain, her self," and that she would become "their tool" (WET, p.279). Then her reaction against the institution _ which becomes symbolic of her rebellion against the society it

represents _ takes place: first in the form of escape from the hospital, and later, when she is recaptured, in the form of murder. She kills the doctors who were carrying out the experiment by poisoning their coffee, having in mind that "there's always a thing [one] can deny an oppressor" (WET, p.328), and becoming therefore thoroughly conscious of her war against them.

In analysing Joyce Carol Oates's work, Elizabeth Janeway gives a justification for murder in women's fiction which fits Piercy's use of it in Woman On the Edge of Time. Janeway states that, caught in the tension between their looking for a natural identity and the false goals of a chaotic present, the characters

> move easily to violence, which has its own validating force, so that murder becomes a kind of reassurance: if one could do something as extreme as to kill, one must surely be in possession of a truth important enough to kill for. Action authenticates meaning.(p.379)

Thus, Connie's action _ murder instead of suicide _ constitutes one of Piercy's breaks with conventionally "feminine" plots. Furthermore, murder loses its alleged pessimism through the readers' sympathizing with Connie's point of view:

> "I murdered them dead. Because they are the violent-prone. Theirs is the money and the power, theirs the poisons that slow the mind and dull the heart. Theirs are the powers of life and death. I killed them. Because it is war."(WET, p.375)

Nevertheless, by the end of the narrative Connie is forever

hospitalized, confined, which signals society's power imposed upon her. Her share in the battle against oppression, however, has already been accomplished.

By winning this battle against the oppressors, Connie helps to forge a better world. In her imagination, this world is Luciente's time and place, in which society has evolved to a state that assures everybody's participation in political matters. The form of government adopted by them is a democratic planning council where the representatives are always changing in a rotative system (WET, p.151-52).[9] Like everybody else in her village, Luciente takes part in the political decisions of Mattapoisett. Their policy is planned in a way to provide a good and balanced life (as concerning eating habits, education, housing, etc) for the whole population whereas they look back at our society and call it "the Age of Greed and Waste" (WET, p.55).

The dystopia which also appears, although briefly, in Woman On the Edge of Time serves as a caricature of the present and as a warning concerning our present decadent social structure, whereas the utopian life in Mattapoisett constitutes the most striking of Piercy's guideposts for a better life. It seems ironic that political balance and harmony is only possible in Connie's _ "a crazy woman's" _ imagination.

After the powerful depiction of a visionary future in Woman On the Edge of Time, Piercy returns to exposing our chaotic present in The High Cost of Living. The two protagonists in this novel assume radically different stands towards society. On the one hand, Honor, the younger one, is completely passive politically, by assimilating the conventional values this society preaches without questioning them. And on the other

hand, the reader is presented with Leslie, a character who feels divided, and therefore in conflict concerning her public duties. This conflict arises from the tension between her desire to participate actively both in the academic world and in the alternative, feminist world. The former, represented by George _ her professor _, simultaneously threatens her existence due to its rigid values but also means a promise of professional success and transcendence; and the latter, represented by Tasha _ a radical feminist activist _ constitutes the means through which transformations in the social system may come to be.

Leslie finally succeeds in finding a balance between the two worlds. She will go on striving to have her participation in George's world which means her connection to the "real" world (a male-centered one), but she also has a political role in Tasha's world by helping the women's cause mainly through the classes she starts giving to women:

> They [the women] had put themselves in her hands to learn something new about how to be in the world, a new relationship to their bodies, to possibilities. She was to teach them a slim measure of safety and strength. (HCL, p.283)

By portraying such a situation, Piercy signals one of the possibilities for a woman to be active on both levels. She also touches the issue of the double bind of feminism, between working side by side with and denying patriarchal values. As Piercy has remarked in her "Statement for Mountain Moving Day" she seems to be

> in defense equally of women who want to work

> to create a female culture and of those who want to contribute to what has been a male culture and change it to a broader, less oppressive culture.[10]

Leslie in The High Cost of Living embodies both tendencies.

Among the nine characters under analysis, Vida Asch in Vida is undoubtedly the one who is most involved in public politics. The novel evokes the turmoil of the years of leftist revolutionary politics in American society - the 60's. Piercy experienced such period at first hand and depicts her character as an example of the new-left woman. Vida's first involvements dated from her teens, when, according to herself, she "began to live in history" (V, p.288). From that time on her participation grew stronger and stronger through SAW (by making public speeches and attending political demonstrations) and through other organizations. Her sense of connection to the world comes through her political activity:

> How wonderful to be connected widely and richly to people all over the world, she thought _ people trying to change things, move them forward _ to a web of the caring in every city and college town.(V, p.152)

Persecuted by the FBI for taking part in left-wing political demonstrations and actions, Vida is forced to live underground using disguises and false I.D.'s. Therefore she has her scope of action much limited by society's political frame. Even so, Vida continues to be politically active mainly by founding the Network and executing tasks connected to it, a clandestine political group which "exists to service fugitives" and "as a political expression for fugitives" (V, p.416). She has to face,

however, all the restrictions her living underground implies. And once again we notice Piercy's depiction of a social mechanism which, being bigger than the individual, restrains the character's activity and highlights the "subversive" role of women who see beyond male values.

The same opposition concerning political involvement and action between the protagonists noticed in Small Changes and in The High Cost of Living can also be perceived in Braided Lives. In the latter novel, Donna and Jill behave in contrastive fashions concerning politics. Donna remains completely out of political issues and finds them dull (BL, p.232). In fact, just like Miriam and Honor in the above mentioned novels, Donna assimilates society's values (BL, p.440).

Jill, in turn, has been politically involved since she went to college, where she fought for Civil Rights and where she joined PAF (Political Alternatives Forum) _ a recognized student group. "At those timid meetings [at PAF]," Jill recognizes, "I live for a few moments in a world larger than that bounded by dormitory and classroom" (BL, p.232). Jill's political concern gets stronger in its focus on the women's cause. Much preoccupied with the transformation of women's lot in society, she embraces the responsibility of being a woman and of fighting for equality:

> I have a vision of myself just before sleep as a mountain composed of millions of women, keening, begging, demanding the fulfillment denied them. All their thwarted wills flow through me.(BL, p.394)

Jill's concern with women's issues is presented not only through

her art, but also through active political participation (such as the help to provide them safe abortions, parading in the streets for their cause, etc). Through the depiction of a character such as Jill Stuart, involved in different areas of social struggle and who has politics as her daily bread, Marge Piercy seems to have succeeded in pointing out an optimistic and credible possibility for political activity in our society, without many of the restrictions imposed over the other women characters who were concerned with transforming society.

In observing Piercy's characters together in terms of their participation in transforming the decaying social structure around them, we can notice that their responses towards the social environment follow three patterns. A first group comprehends characters who can be considered fully successful in terms of socio-political action. Here, Luciente in Woman On the Edge of Time (most intensely perceptible for the novel describes an idealistic world), Leslie in The High Cost of Living and Jill in Braided Lives can be included. Because of her direct participation in the political decisions of her town, Luciente can be viewed as the most active character concerning the planning and the government in her society. On a smaller scale, Leslie and Jill are able to give their political contribution so that American society may become more humanistic. Then there are characters who, in spite of society's forces trying to suppress their power of action, also succeed in overcoming passivity. These are Beth in Small Changes and Vida, who are restrained by law _ both having to lead an underground life but still struggling against oppression. In a similar although more dramatic situation is Connie Ramos in Woman On the Edge of Time. Restrained by health institutions, she is hospitalized in a

mental asylum to spend the rest of her days after having fought against the doctors. Finally, a group of characters who are politically passive is also presented, comprehending Miriam in Small Changes, Honor in The High Cost of Living, and Donna in Braided Lives. As a rule, however, we can notice that Piercy's characters give their share in participating in socio-political matters in spite of society's repressive forces acting upon them. They reflect Piercy's view of the importance for women of being connected to the world and responsible for historical experience and change as well as the shaping of culture (in a denial to the strict woman/nature association).

On the whole, Piercy's characters reflect the questioning of orthodox social values imposed upon them. Such questioning can be perceived both in the personal and social realms as shown in Chapters Two and Three. Piercy's awareness of women's historical subjection and imprisonment in inessential tasks together with her consciousness of the need for social change have impelled her to portray characters struggling to assert their places in society as men's equals and to participate in the historical experience by searching for an education, for economic independence, for a political voice, and most important of all, for an identity. Thus, as suggested by the Masintons, most women characters in Piercy's fiction do participate actively in contemporary historical experience.

The author's didacticism _ very perceptible in the novels _ propels and energizes her vision and recording of events as Joyce Ladenson remarks (p.24). In my view, her commitment to social change through her feminism cannot be labelled as mere propaganda. In this sense, I also agree with Ladenson when she remarks that

> [Marge Piercy] strives consciously and successfully, ..., to fuse craft with ideological and social issues, and does not sacrifice her art for the sake of wrenching a message.(pp. 24-25)

Piercy reveals women's experiences and, in doing so, she defines for herself and for her readers women as they are and as they dream, thus denying Heilbrun's charge that contemporary writers have failed to create characters with autonomous selves.

After this analysis, we have reached the conclusion that the women she portrays face the two possibilities we women are so acquainted with. One is to conform to social expectations, to passivity, and, therefore, to embody stereotypes (as observed in Miriam's, Honor's, and Donna's choices). The other road, chosen by most of the characters, imply courage and action turned to openness and self-definition. However, desirable as it may seem to some of us women, the latter road, taken by Piercy's "daring" characters, still implies maladjustment and inadequacy in our society. These women are misfits according to orthodox values.

The depiction of "misfits" relates to the author's view that "any structure can be overthrown." Having the power of action (though in a limited way), these "daring" characters give their share in the overturning of the Tower _ symbolic of orthodox principles _ by rejecting the "training in passivity" imposed upon them. Thus, they envisage a more humanistic society, with "the Tower reversed into a communal longhouse."[11]

Notes to Chapter Three

[1]Sherry B. Ortner, "Está a Mulher para o Homem Assim Como a Natureza para a Cultura?," in Michelle Z. Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere (eds.) A Mulher, a Cultura e A Sociedade, trans. by C. Ankier and R. Gorenstein (Rio de Janeiro: Paz e Terra, 1979), pp. 95-120.

[2]Friedrich Engels, A Origem da Família, da Propriedade Privada e do Estado (Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 1981), p.80.

[3]For a detailed description of the subjection of women throughout history, see part III - History - in Simone de Beauvoir's The Second Sex.

[4]Joyce R. Ladenson, "Marge Piercy's Revolutionary Feminism," Society for the Study of Midwestern Literature vol.10, nº 2, Michigan State University (Summer, 1980), p.24. All future references are from this edition.

[5]Patricia Meyer Spacks, The Female Imagination (New York: Knopf, 1975), p.319. All future references are from this edition.

[6]For a broader explanation of the topic, see section II (Phallic Criticism) in Mary Ellmann's Thinking About Women, previously mentioned in Chapters One and Two.

[7]Elizabeth Janeway, "Women's Literature," in Daniel Hoffman (ed.) A Harvard Guide to Contemporary American Writing (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979), p.347. All future references are from this edition.

[8]Marge Piercy, "Mirror Images," in Piercy Parti-Colored Blocks for a Quilt (mentioned in the Introductory Chapter), pp. 217-18.

[9]It seems appropriate to stress that the term democracy is never used in the novel. Piercy's description of the political organization in Mattapoisett, however, shows a government which is led by the people with the rule of the majority and in which the supreme power is vested in the people and exercised by them (directly or indirectly). Moreover, in this government, the absence of hereditary or arbitrary class distinctions or privileges may be observed. These seem to be the principles of an ideal democracy, and therefore justify my use of the word.

[10]Marge Piercy, "Statement for Mountain Moving Day," in Piercy Parti-Colored Blocks for a Quilt, p.3.

[11]The quotations in this paragraph are taken from the poem by Marge Piercy which opens this chapter.

CONCLUSION

TRANSCENDING THE STEREOTYPE: "MISFITS"

The sun is rising, feel it: the air smells fresh.
I cannot look in the sun's face, its brightness blinds me,
but from my own shadow becoming distinct
I know that now at last
it is beginning to grow light.

Marge Piercy _ "The Sun"

Keeping in mind the imagery of the Tower, which represents patriarchal authority, we can observe that Marge Piercy's female protagonists assume two basic stands in their relations to it. A minor group (three out of the nine main characters in the five novels) do not give their share in "laying down the Tower," and therefore connive passively with oppression against their own sex. In Small Changes, one of Miriam's dreams which become symbolic of her failure to define herself as an autonomous, active human being may be seen as the core of the frustration experienced by all passive characters (Miram, Honor, and Donna):

> She had been looking up at a big beautiful Christmas tree hung with shiny globes.... This was too perfect to be a real tree. In each round ornament she saw the room reflected and herself. A red world with a red Miriam, a green world with a green Miriam, a silver Miriam world, a gold Miriam world, long worlds of elongated giraffe Miriams, fat flattened Miriams, Miriams with gyroscopes revolving in their bellies, tinsel Miriams, shimmery translucent Miriams. She had reached up to choose, understanding she must pick, must pluck. Then it had fallen on her. The tree of selves had fallen forward, catching fire, burning her. She had awakened in terror.(SC, p.536)

Miriam succumbs before her tree of selves, and so do the other characters who are unable to choose, to act,and thus conform to the stereotype of passivity.

In "Women's Literature," Elizabeth Janeway states that stereotypes, "the images of women that exist in men's eyes, and have been accepted as limiting definitions, cannot be ignored; they can only be transcended" (p.358). In this sense, Piercy's depiction of these stereotypical characters seems to be founded

upon contrast with her fictional women who overcome such limiting images. In fact, the former group works as foils to the latter group, a polarity which constitutes a pervasive characteristic of Piercy's fiction. Except for Vida (in which only one main character is depicted) all novels display opposing characters: Miriam foils Beth in Small Changes, Luciente illuminates Connie in Woman On the Edge of Time (even though both characters may be considered active), Honor contrasts with Leslie in The High Cost of Living, and Donna foils Jill in Braided Lives. The existing symmetry uniting these characters can be perceptible firstly in their development since one character "grows down" so that the other may "grow up." Another marker of this correspondence can be found in Piercy's physical description of the characters. In Small Changes Miriam is big and dark, and Beth is small and fair; and in Braided Lives, besides the similarities of both characters being poor students, roommates, and conspirators, the physical symmetry can also be observed. In fact, Jill says the following about Donna: "Like negative and photo _ me dark and you light" (BL, p.234). The physical complementarity can also be observed in The High Cost of Living, for Honor is big, dark and a bit fat, whereas Leslie is small, red and slim. In Woman On the Edge of Time, the correspondence between Connie and Luciente can be perceived on a different level. Connie perceives Luciente as

> a voice in her ears, good-natured, chiding: Luciente as a fraction of her mind, as a voice of an alternate self, talking to her in the night. Perhaps she was mad. Perhaps she was merely close to exhaustion and strung out on Thorazine and barbituate withdrawal.(WET, p.252)

Luciente, thus, appears as Connie's alternate future self. Instead of being the proof of Connie's schizophrenic mind, in my view she is simply the product of a wild but highly perceptive imagination which is so thoroughly oppressed and whose hallucinations mean a channel to activity, even in a different world. Connie appears as more than a passive "catcher," transcending her present with such a vision of the future.

Back to Miriam, Honor, and Donna, it seems appropriate to stress that these characters remain involved in a shroud of innocence. Through their inability to tear it off comes the inertia which is their basic trait at the end of the narratives: Miriam remains stuck to a failed marriage, Honor is waiting for prince charming to rescue her, and Donna is annihilated. Thus, they embody the victim, sleeping beauty, and the sacrificial lamb roles. On a symbolic level, their fall appears as sacrificial for the sake of their foils' uprise. As opposed to their atonality, the action and experience of the remaining characters appear as vivid, intense. And it is to these women that we now turn.

All five novels present characters who reject being fitted into closed images. As acknowleged by Beth in Small Changes, much of this process "is undoing things. Finding that [she is] not what people told [her she] was," refusing to "fit those idols" crystallized by the male norm (SC, p.247). Nonconformity to feminine stereotypes also involves self-discovery and, therefore, these characters face crises of identity. In Braided Lives Jill Stuart questions:

> Who am I? I feel lost and invisible. Nowhere can I find images that give me aid or comfort in determining what kind of human being I must

> try to be, what is a woman fully enabled and alive.(BL, p.404)

And in The High Cost of Living, Leslie clearly states her desire: "I don't think I want anything but permission to be myself.... I'm working on what I want to be, but nobody can stand it" (HCL, pp.27-28). "Nobody can stand it" means that society does not accept these women who deny the stereotyped behavior imposed on them, which limits their full grasp of the world.

"All women are misfits," Jill Stuart thinks, "we do not fit into this world without amputations" (BL, p.108). Indeed, the characters who transcend stereotypy and conformity to male-oriented values are considered "misfits," outsiders, invisible people, or second-class citizens to use Martha and Charles Masinton's words previously mentioned in chapters One and Three. In Piercy's fiction, these women's inadequacy in a patriarchal society is symbolized in different ways. On the physical level, Beth's exaggerated smallness, for instance, may represent the worldly insignificance imposed on her.

> Beth had always felt the wrong size. She was convinced she had been bred to be miniature, like a toy poodle or a dwarf peach tree, in a world where everybody else was twice her size and ready to push through her like a revolving door, ready to step on her and overlook her and keep her from seeing whatever the rest of the crowd was yelling about. In chairs her feet never quite touched the floor. If she sat forward,then her back was without support. Shelves were out of her reach and she was always groping impossibly for straps in buses and clawing at luggage racks and she never could shut windows....(SC, p.16)

Still on the physical level, in Woman On the Edge of Time, Connie's age, sex, race, class, and body (an overweight and homely thirty-seven-year-old brown-skinned Chicana) imply oddity in a WASP American society. In the same novel, Luciente's androgynous appearance also highlights an opposition to "feminine" standards, a fact which caused Connie to doubt about her sex in the beginning:

> Luciente spoke, she moved with that air of brisk unselfconscious authority Connie associated with men. Luciente sat down, taking up more space than women ever did. She squatted, she sprawled, she strolled, never thinking about how her body was displayed. (WET, p.67)

And later, when Connie's doubts are cleared:

> Luciente now looked like a woman. Luciente's face and voice and body now seemed female if not at all feminine; too confident, too unselfconscious, too aggressive and sure and graceful in the wrong kind of totally coordinated way to be a woman: yet a woman. (WET, p.99)

Furthermore, another "queer" character for her physical description is Leslie in The Hight Cost of Living. In a denial of the assumption that speed, freedom and skill belong to men, Leslie enjoys motorcycling, speed iceskating, and karate _ a sport in which she is a black belt. Unlike most "feminine" women, she has a strong, educated, well-built body which guarantees her self-defense.

Marge Piercy's use of unusual animal imagery as related to her female protagonists constitutes another device which

emphasizes their "peculiarity." Beth studies herself as a turtle: no one could teach a turtle to do tricks, they were slow but dogged, they had a shell they could draw into when threatened (SC, pp.39-40). Jill, in turn, does not feel particularly feminine as defined by society. She does not feel male either. She must be something else: "like a giraffe maybe" (BL, p.52).

Cat imagery, however, is the most pervasive imagery in Piercy's fiction. In Woman On the Edge of Time, Luciente _ as well as everybody in the future _ communicates with cats (WET, pp.97-98). Leslie's swift dignity in her movements is compared to a cat's (HCL, p.210), and so is Vida's sensuality (V, p.30). Piercy's focus, however, seems to be on the stray, the alley cat as opposed to the domestic animal, as suggested in the passage that closes Braided Lives. Here, Jill's attitude intermingles with a cat's:

> For my totem, the alley cat. All cats really want to live with me: this is one of my quiet secrets. Sensuality speaks to sensuality. We blink. They allow the approach of my hand and their sleek flanks delight me in return. We find each other beautiful and each of us means by the hand as well as the eye. We share too the situation of small predators who easily become prey. I have my equivalent of claws and teeth, and indeed my arched back and loud hiss are my best defenses. When I need to hide my size and weakness, I can look fiercer than I am, but when I cannot talk or threaten or argue my way out of trouble, then I am in a lot of trouble. We are scavengers in the alleys and streets of a society we do not control and scarcely influence....(BL, pp.550-51)

Being a turtle, a giraffe, or an alley cat _ instead of a "bird"

and a "little squirrel" as recurrent metaphors for women in literature _ relates to the characters' incomplete assimilation by society. This fact has led them to a marginal position as oddities or misfits.

Social discrimination against the women characters who are seen as "different" pervades Piercy's fiction as a reflection of real life. These women are seen and treated as outsiders, and therefore have their power of action much hindered by the patriarchal society surrounding them.

Social repressiveness in the novels appears in different ways. In Small Changes and Vida, the oppressive instrument of patriarchal ideology is law, for Beth and Vida are both fugitives obliged to lead an underground life with false names. In Woman On the Edge of Time, mental institutions confine Connie Ramos: she is due to spend the rest of her life placed in a mental hospital and labelled as a highly violent personality (as suggested by the last pages of the novel, written in hospital report form). Sex role discrimination as perceived against Beth in Small Changes and Leslie in The High Cost of Living also constitutes an oppressive force. Leslie is even attacked in the streets because of her sexual choice.

> She could still see that man's face bloated with righteous anger then a fist coming. She had not known how to fight.... All she had done was scratch the man's cheek before he had left her in the parking lot with a broken jaw. (HCL, pp.16-17)

In fact, this sort of violence led her to learn self-defense. Finally, even Jill in Braided Lives, the most successful survivor among all women characters in Piercy's works, still

suffers under the social charges against her. Identifying with the alley cat, she feels she is "the wrong sex, wrong class, wrong ethnic mixture [with her Jewishness also implying freakhood], wrong size, wrong volume level" (BL, p.396).

Among the characters who transcend passivity, Luciente deserves a special attention for constituting "the most perfect misfit," paradoxical as the expression may seem a first. Because she belongs to a different reality from ours, Luciente is a paradigm for all the other characters' aspirations and a culmination of the author's political thinking. Described as a happy and secure person who is active sexually, politically and professionally, she embodies the perfect reversal of the "womanly woman" image. I agree with Joanna Russ when she states that science fiction constitutes the "perfect literary mode in which to explore 'innate' values and 'natural' social arrangements," although in general terms genuine speculation about gender roles does not exist in most science fiction works.[1] In my view, Piercy's work constitutes one of the exceptions to Russ's remark, for Woman On the Edge of Time offers the genuine speculation Russ talks about. The utopian vision of the future portrayed by Piercy seems vivid, possible and, therefore, consistent, and women no longer appear as second-class people. The author's craft in the depiction of this idealistic world where men and women are equal is mostly perceptible when we readers realize the ambiguity underlying such description, as also pointed out by Susan Kress: on the one hand there is the reader's wanting of that future to be "real," that is, possible; and on the other hand there is the realization that such future is possible only in Connie's _ an institutionalized woman's _ imagination.[2] The latter aspect

constitutes the means through which Connie can be perceived as an active character, transcending oppression through her vision of a "future of light," as Luciente's name suggests.

As mentioned above, except for Luciente who lives in an idealistic world, all the characters who do not connive with patriarchal social values and, therefore, "pull together" to overthrow the Tower hierarchy are seen as outsiders. Marge Piercy's underlying message seems to highlight their importance for social development and transformation. These women are proud of being "different" and, in spite of their limited power, they are very aware of their contribution in such process of transformation.

In Chapter Three _ Passivity in the Public Life _ it was pointed out that, although most characters overcome passivity as imposed by a male-oriented society, social forces still hinder women's full educational, professional and political participation. Giving a wider context to Kress's remark about Small Changes and applying it to all five novels as a whole, Piercy's view seems to be that

> even if people have changed and can change somewhat, however, society does not change much at all. Moreover, most of the small victories are won at enormous personal cost. (p.115)

Being bigger than the individual, social forces restrain his/her action in these novels. The "daring" characters, however, do not corroborate with oppression. Much to the contrary, social discrimination seems to reinvigorate these characters' political consciousness. Thus, Piercy's novels display an optimistic tone

which energizes her writing while soothing the negative charge of women's situation in American society. This can be illustrated with the closing lines of Vida: in spite of feeling thoroughly at loss because nothing was left for her, not even her lover, Vida does not give in. She goes on with her political struggle:

> I am at the mercy of history, she thought, feeling its force concretely as a steel press closing on her chest, but I can push it too a bit. One thing I know is that nothing remains the same. No great problems in this society have been solved, no wounds healed, no promises kept except that the rich shall inherit. What swept through us and cast us forward is a force that will gather and rise again. Two steps forward and a step and half back. I will waste none of my life.(V, p.477)

Like Vida, the other characters who transcend stereotypy do not give in even after exposed to extreme suffering (such as experienced by Connie) as shown in the analysis.

Besides offering resistance against social forces on the public level, these characters also refuse to perpetuate orthodox values as imposed on their private lives. In Chapter Two, it was shown, for instance, that the women characters are against the decadent family structure as perceived in American society in the sixties and seventies and, therefore, they evade its control and search for alternatives. Also, they show concern and respect for other human beings. More specifically, through the discussion of women's questions, interaction and support among the women characters are achieved. Honest friendship is, thus, authenticated in Piercy's novels. Furthermore, the protagonists reject relationships with manipulative, oppressive

lovers and search for a sexual and a love life based on equality and honesty. In brief, in the personal realm Piercy's female protagonists overcome the passivity alleged to be inherent to their sex and thus reflect the author's indictment of stereotypical relationships while envisioning more equalitarian interactions between kin, friends, and lovers.

Originating from the questioning of decadent social values, women's consciousness leads to action. Piercy's women embody a point of view that questions strict modes and, consequently, they do act. Even though very limited in the social sphere, in the last analysis their action in the private realm can be viewed as a means to a wider social transformation. As remarked by Carol P. Christ, women's spiritual quest _ the definition of their own identities, of their place in the universe, of their experience _ is interwoven with their social quest _ the struggle to gain respect, equality, and freedom in society. She believes

> that women's spiritual and social quests are two dimensions of a single struggle and it is important for women to become aware of the ways in which spirituality can support and undergird women's quest for social equality.[3]

Marge Piercy seems to agree with Carol P. Christ's opinion. Indeed, Piercy stresses that she is "not able to make the distinction between the personal and the political...,"[4] an attitude which is reflected in her fiction through her concern with the individual _ the woman character _ and its relation with the collective _ American society.

Questioning man-made myths which work in the perpetuation of

a patriarchal ideology (whose mechanism was shown in Chapter One), Marge Piercy succeeds in creating characters who transcend male assumptions. In an act of revision of old forms, Piercy goes beyond stereotypy in search for new mythical representations which shift the point of view away from a male focus. Christ remarks that

> the simple act of telling a woman's story from a woman's point of view [a pervasive characteristic in Piercy's fiction] is a revolutionary act: it never has been done before.(p.7)

Christ also stresses that a new language, new metaphors, new themes have to be created to express women's experience. In fact, Piercy has collaborated to the mapping of a woman's poetics. Resuming the issue pointed out by Alicia Ostriker and mentioned in Chapter One, it seems appropriate to stress that Piercy has worked for the "deconstruction of prior (man-made) myths and stories," and for the creation of new ones which include women.

Evidences of the rupture with a literature that conforms to traditionally male literary modes can be perceived all through Piercy's works. First of all, her novels are written from women's point of view and thus present women's problems and values. Piercy also tries a new language (such as in Woman On the Edge of Time where the people from the future speak a nonsexist language) and new plots, in a revision of old plots which limit the heroines' scope of action. She is also innovative as concerning modifying old forms and adapting them for a woman's reality. She makes use, for instance, of the

Bildungsroman pattern. According to Ellen Morgan, such form has been typically male because women have been viewed as static. In Small Changes and Braided Lives Piercy resorts to the female Bildungsroman, which, still according to Morgan, appears to be becoming one of the most salient forms for literature influenced by neo-feminism, that has the aim to integrate all women's fragmented parts in the process of becoming.[5] Ruthven remarks that in a Bildungsroman, "traditionally, our hero secceeds; but our heroine, if she is lucky, merely survives" (p.121). Thus, women writers have adapted it into a narrative of growth and survival. "Writing beyond the ending" such as defined by Rachel Blau DuPlessis (and mentioned in previous chapters in this study) constitutes another innovative device used by Piercy.

Central to this study, however, is Piercy's innovation concerning the characters she depicts. As shown in previous chapters, most of the women in her fiction reach the state of transcendent selfhood and, therefore, do not conform to stereotypes of women as dictated by patriarchal ideology. Bearing in mind DuPlessis's statements that "narrative is a version of, or a special expression of, ideology" and that "any fiction expresses ideology" (p.x), we conclude that the portrayal of Piercy's women characters accord to feminist ideology, for in discarding patriarchal myths, the author rewrites them and creates what DuPlessis has named "prototypes" (see Chapter One) which replace archetypes and stereotypes. As mentioned above, Piercy does portray a few stereotyped characters (Miriam, Honor, and Donna). Nevertheless, they highlight the revisionist experience undergone by the transcendent group _ most of the characters. On the whole, her fictional women surpass the passivity of situations like being

resignated to inferiority before the lover, being totally controlled by doctors, being led to repress "forbidden" sexual impulses, not having a political voice, or even being the poet's muse. In fact, Piercy reverses these by giving her characters the power of action, so that they may embody alternative roles (embody prototypes) to replace the old myth of woman.

One of the basic premises of this dissertation stated in Wendy Martin's words in the opening lines of the Introductory Chapter is that fiction mirrors current social values while passing them ahead. Thus, the value of Piercy's writing about women instead of "their images" lies in the consequent identification coming from women readers, which certainly leads to action. In "The Value and Peril for Women of Reading Women Writers," Nancy Evans touches this point. She states that

> seeing one's self staring out from a book makes it extremely difficult to avoid facing one's problems and after encountering women heroes uncannily similar to ourselves a number of times, we finally have to act.[6]

Approaching the same issue, Carol P. Christ also recognizes the crucial importance of stories to selves:

> In a very real sense, there is no experience without stories. There is a dialectic between stories and experience. Stories give shape to experience, experience gives rise to stories. (pp.4-5)

Writers like Marge Piercy provide women with the fictional realization of their own experience. Women, who have resented the man-made boxes they are supposed to fit in, are finally

offered consistent depiction of the female sex. In my view, this constitutes one of the greatest steps the feminist literary movement has made possible.

In the context of the wide feminist movement surrounding her, Marge Piercy upholds liberal humanist feminist ideals, instead of following separatist trends. She actualizes the feminist principle of affiliation discussed by Lipking (and mentioned in Chapter One). Overcoming her own limitations of being a white, educated, middle-class American woman, in her fiction Piercy portrays characters from a wide range of different backgrounds. Her emphasis, however, lies on working-class women. As for her political thinking, tracing a line of evolution which includes these five novels, we perceive Piercy's development as a feminist. Her works reflect a progressive movement from incipient, awakening feminism of the radical sixties toward a fuller expression of women's lives.

The author's growth may be observed by looking at her novels in a sequence. Small Changes, "the first time [she] addressed women's issues head on"[7] in Piercy's own words, portrays a radical development in a woman's life. Beth grows from an oppressed wife into a militant lesbian feminist. The title itself suggests very small victories won at enormous personal cost, and the tone of the book is radical and bitter. Then, the coherent utopian vision of Woman On the Edge of Time departs from present suffering going very far from Western patriarchy. The world of the future depicted in this novel is for both men and women, and repressive practices have been abolished. It reflects Piercy's feminist humanist ideals and stresses a need for a sexual revolution such as Millett claims for, that is, involving freedom from rank, from economic class, from the

tyranny of sexual-social role. With The High Cost of Living Piercy comes "back to the chaotic, painful, absurd present," as Kress describes it (p.121). Although Leslie may be viewed as an approximation to Luciente, again the personal cost of living is extremely high in our oppressive society. This idea is repeated in Vida, a novel that also exposes the sad conditions of our times in opposition to Luciente's world in Woman On the Edge of Time. The protagonists in these two novels are much discriminated against by society. Braided Lives, the novel that follows, displays one possibility of complete success. Jill Stuart constitutes the first wholly successful survivor in Piercy's fiction. Having also made an enormous effort and undergone much oppression before reaching the status of fulfilling the different aspects of her life, Jill Stuart signals the author's cautiously optimistic tone. Ladenson has properly remarked that Piercy's feminism "reflects an emerging, increasing affirmation of women's lives and the potential power of women to radically alter society" (p. 31). This can be clearly observed when we look at her writings as a whole. Moreover, her feminism provides the guiding force for these five novels while constituting part of her vision of social justice. Such vision of an ideal life, of a "Peaceable Kingdom" which is also underneath Piercy's poetry as suggested by Victor Contoski, "remains impressive precisely because she must work so hard to maintain it."[8] We, readers, have to wait to see where Piercy's feminism goes after Braided Lives. Indeed, she has published another novel in 1987: Gone to Soldiers.[9] This, however, departs from feminist issues to carry out an analysis of the effects of World War II upon the lives of ten characters. Therefore, the continuation of Piercy's feminist thought still waits to be made

into fiction.

So far, besides all other formal and thematic innovations, Piercy's main achievement lies in her portrayal of women characters who go beyond the stereotype of passivity. In a reversal of de Beauvoir's assumption that "she can only be, not act" and as a product of the new wave of feminism as described by Kate Millett (both mentioned in the Introductory Chapter), Piercy's woman character is and acts. Therefore, she has discarded the otherness (the man-created stock-role images) in which she had been imprisoned. This female protagonist has reached freedom from immanence and from the passivity it implies, though in a limited way for our androcentric society still hinders her full development. Not alone, this woman helps to "pull together to lay down the Tower" with the aim "to make it a communal longhouse."

In the last century, Margaret Fuller, the first American woman to write a feminist tract, tried to define women's aspirations, which can be summarized in the following paragraph:

> It is not the transient breath of poetic incense that women want; each can receive that from a lover. It is not life-long sway; it needs but to become a coquette, a shrew, or a good cook, to be sure of that. It is not money, nor notoriety, nor the badges of authority which men have appropriated to themselves... it is for that which is the birthright of every being capable of receiving it, _ the freedom, the religious, the intelligent freedom of the universe to invent its means, to learn its secret, as far as Nature has enabled them, with God alone for their guide and judge.[10]

In this century, Fuller's words are still up-to-date. The new

wave of feminism, which arose in the sixties, revived Wollstonecraft's, Mill's, Fuller's, and de Beauvoir's ideal of a new humanism (just to mention some of the thinkers). It has made it possible for woman to see herself as a "shadow becoming distinct."[11] Finally, a new woman seems to have been taking shape both in fiction and in society, such as proved by Piercy's answer against stereotypy. This woman has been able to articulate her hunger, as Jill Stuart does in Braided Lives:

> Hunger is a wind that blows through me most of the time.... I am hungry for food, hungry for work, hungry for learning, hungry for love, hungry for sex, hungry for friendship. I experience my self as a clamorous need, a volume level of desire turned too high.(BL, p. 283)

Moreover, she is able to strive to fulfill her desire. Though still viewed as a misfit, for she is an exception to the rule, this woman is able to survive and thus signals social change. In Piercy's own voice,

> She's part of that growing women's culture already, a great quilt for which we are each stitching our own particolored blocks out of old petticoats, skirts, coats, bedsheets, blood, and berry juice.[12]

And thus, we wait for the time when the quilt is completed, when this woman will no longer see her "shadow becoming distinct," but her own entire live self being fully respected. Then, with a redefinition of the concept of femininity, feminine stereotypes shall be completely eliminated, different sexual principles equally valued, and the "misfits" integrated.

Notes to the Conclusion

[1]Joanna Russ, "The Image of Women in Science Fiction," in Cornillon (ed.), p.80.

[2]Susan Kress, "In and Out of Time: The Form of Marge Piercy's Novels," in Marlene S. Barr (ed.) Future Females: A Critical Anthology (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1981), p.120. All future references are from this edition.

[3]Carol P. Christ, Diving Deep and Surfacing: Women Writers on Spiritual Quest (Boston: Beacon Press, 1980), p.8. All future references are from this edition.

[4]Marge Piercy, "Reading Recipes, or What I Have Learned on the Yellow Brick Road," in Piercy Parti-Colored Blocks for a Quilt, p.183.

[5]Ellen Morgan, "Humanbecoming: Form & Focus in the Neo-Feminist Novel," in Cornillon (ed.), pp.183-84.

[6]Nancy Burr Evans, "The Value and Peril for Woman of Reading Women Writers," in Cornillon (ed.), p.314.

[7]Marge Piercy, "An Interview with Denise Wagner of Plexus," in Piercy Parti-Colored Blocks for a Quilt, p.205.

[8]Victor Contoski, "A Vision of the Peaceable Kingdom," in Modern Poetry Studies 8, pp.205-16.

[9]Marge Piercy, Gone to Soldiers (New York: Fawcett Crest Books, 1987).

[10]Margaret Fuller, Woman in the Nineteenth Century (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1971), pp.62-63.

[11]See the quotation from Piercy's poem which opens the chapter.

[12]Piercy makes use of the quilt imagery in her criticism on Canadian writer Margaret Atwood in "Margaret Atwood: Beyond Victimhood," in Piercy Parti-Colored Blocks for a Quilt, p.299.

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