explorations

Explorations: A Journal of Language and Literature

The temporal displacement of utopia and dystopia in feminist speculative fiction

Anna Gilarek (The State School of Higher Education in Sandomierz)

Abstract. *Feminist speculative fiction authors make frequent use of the defamiliarized context of utopian and dystopian worlds in order to explore various gender-related issues. The article discusses the use of the temporal dimension of the setting of these texts. The choice of a futuristic setting and correlating it with either utopia or dystopia helps authors to interrogate the present, as it allows not only for extrapolation regarding the future, but also for an assessment of the extratextual present from an imagined historical perspective. It creates a narrative space for comparing and contrasting different social realities, with time serving as a lens which facilitates this analysis. Such a narrative choice creates the desired effect of defamiliarization, enhancing the reader's cognition and, consequently, raising an awareness regarding issues which are central to feminist philosophy and relevant to the contemporary social situation of women.*

Key words*: Feminist science fiction, utopia, dystopia, feminism, gender*.

1. INTRODUCTION

Feminist science fiction is a speculative genre which imaginatively addresses issues crucial for feminism and expresses them in a literary way. It exposes the unfairness of patriarchal society and the mechanisms of its perpetuation, as well as the discrimination and marginalization of women. Feminist science fiction authors make frequent use of the utopian and dystopian mode in order to enter into a dialogue with feminist philosophy and to make a comment on the situation of women in contemporary society. While feminist utopias present worlds which are, to put it simply, better for women (Bammer 1991, 3) and which criticize male-dominated social orders by implication, dystopias envision feminist nightmares, inasmuch as they depict societies in which women are entirely subordinated to men. Frequently, utopia and dystopia are combined within individual texts. Such a juxtaposition of these two modes, which hardly ever exist separately, dramatizes the sharp contrast between patriarchal oppression and the social equality endorsed by feminists. These issues are presented by means of the defamiliarized context of utopian and dystopian settings, which are remote in time and/or space. These spaces are simultaneously strange and familiar to the readers, drawing their attention to problematic issues and granting them a fresh perspective. This effect of cognitive estrangement is achieved by the use of temporal displacement in establishing the settings

of feminist speculative fiction novels. Temporal displacement may be defined as a literary device whereby the perspective is shifted from the present to a different temporal domain. This technique is common to science fiction literature, of which utopian fiction is a subgenre. However, while science fiction is typically an example of futuristic writing, in the case of utopian and dystopian literature the temporal displacement may either be future or past. The invented temporal reality, which may be utopian or dystopian, is thus perceived to stand in opposition to the present time. In other words, the frame of reference is the present, be it the readers' or the characters' present, while the contrasting past or future setting is assessed by means of temporal distance. It is due to this recontextualization and the consequent defamiliarization that feminist science fiction works fulfil their social aim of raising awareness and, ultimately, instigating change – a task which may appear utopian in itself.

2. TEMPORAL DIMENSIONS OF UTOPIA AND FEMINIST SPECULATIVE FICTION

The utopian genre is characterized by a "willful transgression of time" (Sargisson 1996, 57), a temporal displacement technique which is intended to break with the linear perception of time and, consequently, to challenge accepted modes of thinking. The interplay between dystopia and utopia is mirrored by an analogous relation between the past and the future, which serve as the temporal setting of numerous feminist science-fiction texts. Thus, these notions remain in a dialectical relation, providing the means by which different social arrangements can be contrasted. Jean Pfaelzer (1990, 197) remarks that feminist utopian works exhibit "the flawed present and the future perfect, which contradict and comment upon each other". In fact, one of the defining characteristics of a feminist utopia that can be found in Sally Miller Gearhart's (1984, 296) oft-quoted definition is that it "contrasts the present with an envisioned idealized society (separated from the present by time and space)."

While utopia was originally associated with distant locations in space, it has also come to be understood as a futuristic vision, hence the Blochian term for utopian schemes – the "not yet." In accordance with Ernst Bloch's principle of hope, feminist authors frequently opt for temporal, rather than spatial displacement of their utopian visions. This is also the case with dystopia, which inherently constitutes a warning against a bleak future. Dystopia is typically a futuristic vision, often post-apocalyptic, which, in contrast to the "not yet," might be referred to as the "not-so-fast" (Bartkowski 1991, 15). However, a dystopian angle may also characterize the perception of the present or the past, both of which contrast with the utopian future. Moreover, in feminist utopian fiction the temporal aspect is endowed with an additional dimension. The reader's perception of utopia and dystopia as future worlds is juxtaposed with perception on the diegetic level. Hence, in dystopian texts utopia might constitute either a still unfulfilled dream or a nostalgic recollection of a lost past. In fact, one of the ways in which utopia and dystopia are interwoven is reflected in the dystopian tendency to "recall a pleasant contrastive past" (Sargent 1975). Conversely, the reverse is true of most feminist utopias – utopian ventures are commonly built upon the vestiges of gruesome male-dominated regimes which exist in the memory of the characters. Both realities are usually separated by an "apocalyptic moment" (Walker 1990, 148) – a catastrophic event that entailed a revolutionary change in the socio-political situation. Due to the incorporation of this plot

device, many feminist utopian works can, in fact, be classed as postapocalyptic texts, in which the times from before the turning point are contrasted – positively or negatively – with those after it. The temporal distance and the succession in time of these realities enhances the perception of the distinction between two disparate worlds and social systems.

The contrast between utopia and an inferior reality is effectuated on two levels, extra- and intratextual. Both the readers and the characters are brought to certain realizations regarding the factors which make utopia superior to their respective worlds. Similarly, in the case of dystopian visions, an awareness of the parallels between dystopian flaws and the reader's reality develops. The non-diegetic perception activates the readers' recognition of contemporary social problems, impelling them to work toward the achievement of the "not yet."

The "not yet" is a key concept in Ernst Bloch's utopian theorizing. It stems from the utopian impulse, regarded by Bloch as an element anthropologically inherent in the consciousness of the human kind (Baccolini and Moylan 2013, 54). It represents the visualization of a better world that arises in the human imagination. The envisioning of the "not yet" is closely associated with hope, which is yet another concept crucial for Bloch (Bloch 1988, 105). The philosopher emphasized the difference between wishful thinking and the utopian function proper. The latter is in operation when "the ideas of imagination . . . carry on the existing facts toward their future potentiality of otherness of their better condition in an anticipatory way" (Bloch 1988, 105). Therefore, future literary utopia is linked with the extratextual present, inasmuch as it proceeds from the realization of its flaws combined with an anticipation of a better alternative. The fact that future utopia is always rooted in reality is also evident in another concept introduced by Bloch – presentiment. It represents the not-yet-conscious realization of "what [individuals] lack, what they need, what they want, and what they hope to find" (Zipes 1988, xxi).

Angelika Bammer perceives a strong correlation between utopian schemes and the feminist agenda in the fact that both are "oriented toward the future, yet grounded in a present they [are] committed to changing, they [are] simultaneously situated in the (historical) Now and the (utopian) Not-Yet. Both feminism and utopianism set themselves as antitheses to the existing order of things" (1991, 57). Therefore, feminist utopian fiction consciously utilizes the tension between the present social inadequacy and the utopian anticipation, so as to enlighten the readers regarding the necessity of implementing reforms.

Consequently, the future often serves as the setting of feminist utopian works. The location of utopia in the same world, but in a different time, offers a lesser degree of estrangement than that engendered by other worlds or alien races, but sufficient to achieve a defamiliarizing effect. This temporally displaced perspective allows the reader to recognize more unequivocally real problems which are hinted at. The defamiliarizing strategy reveals "evils in society through shocks of recognition in a different context" (Booker 1994, 175). Such estrangement, or alienation, is achieved owing to the inclusion of "the novum," signifying an element of novelty which in the case of utopian fiction is the introduction of the new world itself. The Novum is another concept introduced by Bloch and later applied to science fiction by Darko Suvin (1998, 68). In Bloch's understanding the Novum was a "genuinely new thing" (Brown 2003), something that raises awareness of future prospects and provides new energy to transcend the present (Csicsery-Ronay 2008, 48). Suvin sees it as a "cognitive innovation," a literary creation

which deviates from "the norms of reality known to the reader" (1998, 68). It is a prerequisite for any literary work to be classed as science fiction, as opposed to the realist or naturalist mode (Suvin 1998, 70).

The inclusion of the Novum causes both utopian and science fiction to fall into the category of the "literature of cognitive estrangement" (Donawerth and Kolmerten 1994, 3; Booker and Thomas 2009, 4), but also of "historical displacement" (Bammer 1991, 83). The latter performs the function of "displacing us from our accustomed position in relation to time and history [and] disorient[ing] us in a most productive way" (Bammer 1991, 83). Thus, both these literary categories are aimed at enhancing the readers' cognition and expanding their horizons by offering a fresh perspective upon problematic issues, by the introduction of a novelty – a new utopian future which is viewed from a temporally displaced perspective – an imagined historical angle.

This good future is commonly contrasted in feminist speculative fiction with an evil past and separated from it by an event of apocalyptic character that marks the onset of the social transformation. In feminist utopias, in particular the radical and separatist ones, the future is typically female-dominated, while the past is characterized by various forms of patriarchal abuse. The transition is usually triggered by male disregard for the environment and their militaristic tendencies. Once the old system is utterly destroyed, feminist utopias are built upon the remnants of male-dominated social orders. Such utopias need not be women-only. Liberal feminists, for instance, depict egalitarian societies which do not dispense with men. Instead, all males are socialized into cooperative and peaceful behavior or, alternatively, prevented from regaining power and kept in subjugation. Whichever is the case, the newly created futures are characterized by their adherence to such feminist values as freedom and equality. They offer conditions conducive to professional and personal development of either just women, or both sexes on equal terms.

Alternately, the future may be a consequence of a dystopian development instead of a utopian transformation, serving as a warning against following certain trends in the present. Dystopian worlds in feminist science fiction are characterized by male domination, rampant sexism, oppression of women, and gender inequality. Moreover, incorporating dystopian visions into inherently utopian settings is also practiced – authors depict worlds which exist simultaneously within the same temporal space. This device helps to emphasize the superiority of feminist solutions over the patriarchal status quo by means of a direct comparison, whose perception is enhanced by the temporally distant viewpoint of the reader.

3. THE FUTURE AS UTOPIA – LITERARY EXAMPLES OF FEMINIST UTOPIAN "NOT-YET"

Among the most well-known feminist utopian works which present the future as a feminist utopia are *The Female Man* (1975) by Joanna Russ and *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976) by Marge Piercy. Both depict worlds called, respectively, Whileaway and Mattapoisett, which represent a later, more advanced stage in the evolution of the human kind. Both are accessed by time travel, a motif which is frequently utilized to introduce and justify temporal displacement in classic science fiction. The near-perfection of these worlds is a corollary of the elimination of social problems connected with sex-based

oppression and discrimination of women. They are set against the America of the 1970s, which constitutes a contrastive dystopia. The utopias are viewed from the perspective of twentieth-century female characters, for whom the shifted perspective entails realizations concerning their own suppressed dissatisfaction with life under patriarchy. Thus, even though the two novels envision utopian futures, it is in fact the present that comes into focus, both as a secondary setting on the diegetic level and as the reader's contrastive reality on the non-diegetic one. Both angles successfully displace the reader's perspective, helping to expose the harmfulness of patriarchal institutions prevalent in the 1970s and the consequent underprivileged status of women.

Whileaway is separated from the author's contemporary reality by ten centuries. Even the name of this future world implies temporal rather than spatial distance – it is a place that is a while away from the present reality. Whileaway is a lesbian separatist utopia, in which the absence of men is shown to be beneficial for women. They are free to perform all kinds of jobs and to make their own reproductive choices. Whileaway is presented as a land of freedom and opportunity, of activity and development. Mattapoisett, a twenty-second-century utopia, does not eliminate men but establishes a genderless society – one in which gender is so inconsequential that it is not manifested in one's appearance or behavior. In fact, gender distinctions are considered to be imposed and restrictive forms of classification, unfairly predisposing individuals to fulfil certain preestablished social roles. Thus, the people of Mattapoisett do not use gender-specific names or pronouns; they are also predominantly bisexual. Living in a degenderized society, they do not perceive maleness and femaleness as "a useful set of categories" (Piercy 1991, 214). Instead, they "tend to divvy up people by what they're good at and bad at, strengths and weaknesses, gifts and failings" (Piercy 1991, 214). Thus, it is not gender that defines human beings, but their highly individualized characteristics, specific to each person, regardless of their biological sex. Such an arrangement is perceived as the only solution to the inequities that are intrinsic to a patriarchal society, whose structure relies on a clear-cut binary division into sexes and sex roles.

Connie, the protagonist who lives in the contemporary world and travels to the utopian future of Mattapoisett, discovers there an alternative to her bleak existence in a world where she is marginalized due to her ethnic origin and social status. However, it is made clear in the novel that the superior future is not a given – it is conditional on decisive and conscious endeavors of contemporary people – it is only them who can bring it into existence. Piercy indicates that "present actions create future probabilities" (Walker 1990, 179); utopia is thus perceived as a matter of conscious choice – to resist patriarchy (Booker and Thomas 2009, 243). Connie's growing defiance culminates in her act of poisoning the sexist doctors who mistreated her. This is perceived by the protagonist as an empowering act of liberation, as well as one which will guarantee the future materialization of Mattapoisett, owing to Connie's opposition against patriarchal abuse. Connie's rise to self-awareness and readiness to confront patriarchy result from her contact with a utopian future. This experience of displacement in time alters her perception, which provides the impetus for transformative action, however radical it may appear. The envisioning of an as yet non-existent utopian future is an incentive to undertake measures which might change social reality.

In a similar fashion, *The Female Man* is based on the belief in the conditional availability of utopia. The text shows a utopian traveler, a woman from Whileaway, who travels in time to the America of the 1970s in order to enlist the help of four women in a

war with men, which is to secure the existence of the women-only utopia. Thus, both texts present contemporary America as a dystopian world. Moreover, it is the dissatisfaction with this known reality which is seen as a factor that should propel those inhabiting it into action. Whileaway and Mattapoisett are clearly examples of the "not-yet," as in considering these two utopias the point of reference is the present, with utopia located in a distant future. This shifted temporal perspective is shared by both the reader and the characters. Hence, Whileaway and Mattapoisett may be seen as projections of Blochian hope, which "embodies the tendency and the tension toward the future" (Levy 1997, 183).

Nevertheless, some feminist utopias are future worlds only from the perspective of the readers, while the intratextual reality constitutes the present and the only known reality for all the characters on the diegetic level. Such a solution is adopted by Sally Miller Gearhart in *The Wanderground. Stories of the Hill Women* (1978), Pamela Sargent in *The Shore of Women* (1986), Sheri Tepper in *The Gate to Women's Country* (1988), or in *The Y Chromosome* (1990) by Leona Gom. All of these texts show future worlds in which a complete emancipation of women has been achieved by means of quite radical solutions – either by sex-based segregation, or by the elimination of men. From the feminist perspective, they are utopian worlds as they are free from violence, inequality and injustice. Most importantly, they are inhabited by women who are free to find fulfillment in any and all spheres of life, according to their choosing. They have achieved personal, professional and reproductive freedom – liberties which were perceived to be sorely lacking in the reality of the 1970s and 1980s. In these texts, the reader's present constitutes the dystopian patriarchal past on the diegetic level. The novels envision the twentieth-century America as the historical predecessor of a future utopia that is the primary focus of the text and its main setting. In such novels the extratextual present becomes the intratextual past which is approached and assessed from the perspective of the invented future. Moreover, it is frequently distorted by dystopian exaggeration, insofar as it is shown to have been transformed by patriarchal influences so that it is simultaneously unrecognizable and familiar.

Since male rule as a sinister and admonitory memory features prominently in these texts, they may be accused of a preoccupation with the past which might appear "un-utopian" (Ferns 1999, 198). Yet it has been intrinsic to these utopian visions as it provides the starting point for the utopia to arise. Thus, two types of displacement take place: within the extratextual domain the perspective is shifted towards the future, whereas within the intratextual one the past perspective is considered crucial for the appreciation of the utopia. This is the basic premise of *The Gate to Women's Country*, *The Shore of Women* and *The Y-Chromosome*, where the patriarchal past is referred to, respectively, as pre-Convulsion, pre-Destruction and pre-Change times. Even though these three utopias are in many respects questionable due to their totalitarian tinge, their male-dominated history is always evoked to diminish the relevance of any deficiencies that the utopias might have. Should any of the utopians question the current order, they may always be reminded of its indubitable superiority over the patriarchal standards that were successfully eradicated. Invariably, the male violence against women is invoked, as well as their destructive influence on the environment. The myths of male belligerence circulate as a sort of warning:

Three hundred years ago almost everyone in the world had died in a great devastation brought about by men. It was men who made the weapons and men who were the diplomats and men who made the speeches about national pride and defense. And in the end it was men who did whatever they had to do, pushed the buttons or pulled the string to set the terrible things off. And we died . . . Almost all of us. Women. Children. (Tepper 1998, 301)

The cautionary character of such tales is mirrored by Sargent's female characters: ". . . they used their power . . . to destroy the world, and can't never be allowed to do that again. . . Men had used their power for evil, and the world had been devastated and poisoned in ancient times by the weapons men had controlled. The great fire came and, after it, the long winter" (1987, 95). The warning against male weapons is a recurrent element. The legends paint a grim picture not only of the transformative moment, but also of the times preceding it: "Before the Change was Chaos, and it was Male. Male is danger and death" (Gom 1993, 71). Sargent specifies what the dangers included: "they had armies with weapons . . . they beat and killed women, beat and killed each other, raped, terrorized whole cities" (1987, 98). Gom (1993) also alludes to actual dangers posed by men in our world, such as the Renaissance Witch Trials, domestic violence or the exploitation of women for labor, all of which resulted from the desire for power.

In Gearhart's *Wanderground* a sex-separated society replaces twentieth-century patriarchy. The rationale behind this solution is the failure in reforming the patriarchy and the conviction of the unfeasibility of any attempts to do so. Accordingly, the only way to secure a safe and satisfying existence for women is to break all relations with men, which is precisely what the Hill Women did a few decades back. While the women retreat to the world of nature, the industrialized city is the haven for men and the locus of their continued oppression of the women who still remain there.

Since in this text the lesbian community leaves the patriarchal system behind, the worst abuses of the patriarchal order are merely a bad memory, cultivated by the women in order to maintain both the awareness of the male threat and faith in the rightness of segregation. Here, as well, the novel's present is contrasted with patriarchal past, whose abuses are not to be repeated. Dana R. Shugar refers to these memories as the "past imperfect," as opposed to "the future perfect of an (almost) safe place for women" (1995, 126). The recollections shared in the so called "remember rooms" include all the individual instances of violence that exist in the collective consciousness, but also the record of the actual political actions undertaken by patriarchy to overpower and disempower women. It might be argued that the women consciously utilize a temporally displaced perspective – a practice which is seen as necessary for the maintenance of their liberated status.

The dystopian antithesis is typically representative of the past, however, as Jennifer Burwell notices, utopia may also be set against "a devalued space that exists outside of the utopian society's borders" (1997, 84). Nearly all of the texts discussed so far include a dystopian counterpart, parallel in time and one that constitutes the absolute opposite of the depicted utopia as far as the social situation is concerned. Some are shown to be different contemporaneous dimensions, others are merely dystopian enclaves occupying the same future world. For instance, in *Woman on the Edge of Time*, during one of her mental journeys in time Connie travels to a dystopian alternative of Mattapoisett, which exists in a parallel world and is similarly located in the future. The future where Connie

lands is an "aberration" (Bartkowski 1991, 61) and the least desirable path of development. It is the future New York – an urbanized nightmare whose inhabitants have never seen the sky. It is a world governed by "multis," large corporations with total control over society and individuals. Also *The Female Man* features such a dystopian antithesis to Whileaway. It is a dystopian future world where men and women are engaged in a seemingly endless violent war with each other.

By showing that decisions in the present may have divergent consequences in the future, authors challenge the linear conception of time, which is seen to lock one in "a world governed by laws of causality, dualism, linearity, and struggle" (Pearson 1984). Feminist utopias opt for relative time instead, whose emancipatory power lies in its capacity to destabilize and deconstruct. Such handling of the temporal aspect signals that there are in fact many possible futures and their availability is conditional on the conscious efforts of the characters on the diegetic level, and the readers on the non-diegetic one.

4. THE FUTURE AS DYSTOPIA IN FEMINIST SPECULATIVE FICTION

Feminist speculative fiction authors occasionally venture into the territory of full-length dystopian novels. In these texts, the future is not a "not yet" to strive for, but a warning against undesirable developments. Still, the temporal displacement is applied and functions in the same manner as in the case of utopia – the readers perceive these futures from their present perspective, drawing parallels between the two realities – the extratextual and the intratextual.

The two dystopian classics of this kind are *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) by Margaret Atwood and *Walk To the End of the World* (1974) by Suzy McKee Charnas, which feature what may be referred to as masculinist dystopias. A masculinist dystopia is defined as "a place where men still rule and where division by sex and gender is basic to social life" (Bartkowski 1991, 93). In more straightforward terms, it is a ghastly world of male dominance in which women are reduced to the roles of servants, sex slaves and reproduction tools. This arrangement is supposed to mirror, in a highly exaggerated manner, similar problems that characterize, even if to a lesser extent, contemporary patriarchy.

The Handmaid's Tale is a dystopia in the true sense of this word, inasmuch as it offers a chilling depiction of a nightmarish world, nearly completely devoid of any hope for change. Also, as is characteristic of dystopia, it features a bleak vision of a totalitarian state, in which human rights are not respected. The text envisions a grim transformation of the United States from a democratic country into a militaristic quasi-religious regime – Gilead. Critics generally agree that Atwood's intention in inventing Gilead was to issue a warning about the rise of fundamentalist right-wing religious organizations that took place in the United States in the 1980s (Lefanu 1998, 73; Fitting 1990, 144). The author extrapolates about the possible negative impact of their growing popularity both on the country as a whole and on individual citizens, particularly women.

The main premise upon which the social organization of Gilead rests is the division into castes, some of which enjoy certain privileges, while others have their freedoms continuously violated – all justified by religious ideology which in Gilead has become the law. The group which fares worst in this new system are women – a subservient group

whose sole function under the regime is to contribute to the state through the input of labor or reproduction. The latter is much in demand due to a sudden drop in fertility, which coincided with a coup and an environmental disaster. Gilead is a patriarchal regime which uses religion as a controlling tool, employing conveniently selected biblical precepts to justify state-sanctioned subjugation.

Thus, in the novel, the future is a development to be avoided, far removed from the Blochian "not-yet." Here, the contrastive quasi-utopian reality is located in the past – it is the extratextual reality, the America of the 1980s, which, even if imperfect, is still greatly superior to the social order of Gilead. Its quasi-utopian character on the diegetic level stems from the fact that it is recalled with fondness by the female protagonist, whose liberty in the future of Gilead is severely limited.

The idea of a gender-polarized society is explored in a similar but decidedly more terrifying manner in *Walk to the End of the World* by Suzy McKee Charnas. The novel explores the possible consequences of excessive concentration on sexual difference. In fact, it may be said to dramatize the conviction that "women's exploitation is based upon sexual difference" (Sargisson, 1996, 77). In the depicted future land of the Holdfast, the treatment of woman as "the other" is taken to the extreme – men and women are not merely antagonists, as was the case in *The Handmaid's Tale*, but mortal enemies. The men in the narrative do not seem to regard women as their female counterpart within the same species, but rather as subhuman animals. As a result, women are indeed dehumanized; due to the barbaric treatment they receive and the conditions in which they are forced to live they are reduced to a degenerate state and are contemptuously labeled "fems." As in Atwood's novel, women are considered merely laborers and breeders. The Holdfast fems are separated from men, who impose sex-based segregation to protect themselves from the supposed dangerous influence of the fems.

In the text, just like in Atwood's novel, there is a contrastive utopian reality to which the Holdfast may be compared. However, it is not located in the past but in the future. In *The Handmaid's Tale* it was represented by pre-Gilead times; here it is to be found in the songs sung by the enslaved women. The songs provide a vision of the utopian counterpart to the dystopian present. The hope for a better future is kept alive by the legends about free fems – women who supposedly dwell in the Wild, far from the interference of men. They are expected to return to the Holdfast one day with the aim of saving the remaining fems from the male stronghold.

In both novels the temporal displacement functions on two levels – the first is the characters' notion of utopia as a past or future temporal location which remains unavailable in their present dystopian circumstances. The second is the readers' perception of the possible progression of present trends towards a future dystopia. Both of the dystopias discussed, be it Gilead or the Holdfast, constitute an extrapolation of misogynist attitudes that truly existed in American society at the time of writing the novels. Sexism and phallocentrism are identified as major problems, which are often disregarded or even dismissed as figments of the imagination of oversensitive feminists. The texts make it clear that condoning such tendencies would lead to developments which should never be allowed to arise. Thus, they serve as a reminder that the future is not always an awaited "not yet," and that the present may evolve into its exact opposite.

5. CONCLUSIONS

While utopia typically utilizes invented spatio-temporal dimensions, in feminist utopias and dystopias the temporal aspect seems to be more pervasive. It may be argued that the temporal displacement of the depicted worlds is considerably more effective than situating them in a hypothetical physical location, as it renders these utopian and dystopian spaces more real – they are the futures that could be. They are thus more deeply rooted in the present reality on the extratextual level, as they may be perceived as a projection and extrapolation of current trends. This engenders a sense of relative realness, potentiality and concreteness, which cannot be achieved to such a degree by the depiction of spatially distant, abstract realities. The texts posit futures that are related to the known reality, establishing an awareness of its deficiencies.

However, the actual means of achieving utopian perfection and avoiding its dystopian antithesis remain a contestable issue. While Bloch associated the origins of utopia with hope that a person has for a more rewarding existence, for Ruth Levitas it is not hope that lies at the root of utopian dreaming, but a crystallized desire for improvement (2007, 221). While some utopian novels do point to certain steps that could be taken to approach the future utopia, reaching it may also be shown to lie outside human capacity. This, Levitas asserts, is the point of millenialist utopias, in which "human agency may not be capable of implementing the good society, but a literal *deux ex machina* may be invoked to do so" (2007, 224). Considering the fact that a majority of feminist utopias are post-apocalyptic, this description can be applied to most of them. The change frequently follows in the wake of a man-inflicted nuclear and ecological disaster, which destroys the face of earth but also purifies it for the future utopians in a sort of cleansing-through-fire ritual. It removes either men, or the social order created by men. Still, Anne Runyan comments that such a perception of the possible onset of social reform is a dismal one, as it is presented to have its only probable source in destruction (1994, 210). Other solutions are decidedly even more fantastic due to their entirely non-human origin, which arouses critical comments concerning the vagueness of the depicted emancipatory measures and their relation to the attainment of utopia. These solutions include mysterious plagues or selective evolution, both of which entail the complete elimination of men. Such plot devices result in a "diminished sense of agency" (Ferns 1999, 201). Angelika Bammer shares this opinion: "by locating hope in the realm of fantasy and myth, . . . utopia [is presented] as a separation from reality rather than a process of intervention" (1991, 89).

However, even if authors are not able to trace the exact path of change, the very presentation of a superior (or nightmarish) future may be seen as an encouragement to action, as change, whatever its physical origin, "begins with a vision of what could be" (Bammer 1991, 57). Tom Moylan rightly observes that "while appearing to concern itself with the future, science fiction actually gives a fresh look at the present, as it is represented in the past of a fictionally extrapolated future" (1986, 41). Hence, the temporal displacement in feminist utopian fiction is meant to develop a consciousness of the present. It is aimed at instilling in the reader the willingness to go beyond the status quo of the flawed reality and to act with a view to eliminating social problems connected with sex-based discrimination. Interrogating the linearity of time allows writers to play both with history and the potentialities of the future. It enables them to "try these futures out in imagination" (Patai 1983, 150), but also to combine the main tasks of both feminism and utopianism: "to seek out a past, to examine the present critically, to posit a future, and to tell a tale of and for that imagined future" (Bartkowski 1991, 24).

Experimenting with the temporal aspect makes the readers realize that the course of history is not predetermined, fixed and inevitable, but that the future can be shaped to fit whatever dreams and ideas people might have about living a better life. Therein lies the reality-altering potential of feminist speculative fiction.

REFERENCES

Bammer, Angelika. 1991. *Partial Visions: Feminism and Utopianism in the 1970s*. New York: Routledge.

Baccolini, Rafaella, and Tom Moylan. 2013. Introduction to *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination*, edited by Rafaella Baccolini, and Tom Moylan, 1-12. New York: Routledge.

Bartkowski, Frances. 1991. *Feminist Utopias*. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press.

Bloch, Ernst. 1988. *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature: Selected Essays*. Translated by Jack Zipes and Frank Mecklenburg. Boston: Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Booker, Keith. 1994. *Dystopian Literature: A Theory and Research Guide*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.

Booker, Keith M., and Anne-Marie Thomas. 2009. *The Science Fiction Handbook*. Singapore: Fabulous Printers Pte.

Brown, Judith. 2003. "Ernst Bloch and the Utopian Imagination." *Eras Journal* 5. Accessed June 23, 2015. http://artsonline.monash.edu.au/eras/ernst-bloch-and-the-utopian-imagination/.

Burwell, Jennifer. 1997. *Notes on Nowhere: Feminism, Utopian Logic, and Social Transformation.* Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press.

Csicsery-Ronay, Istvan. 2008. *The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction.* Middletwon, CT: Wesleyan University Press.

Donawerth, Jane L., and Carol A. Kolmerten. 1994. Introduction to *Utopian and Science Fiction by Women: Worlds of Difference*, edited by Jane L. Donawerth, and Carol A. Kolmerten, 1-14. New York: Syracuse University Press.

Ferns, Chris. 1999. *Narrating Utopia: Ideology, Gender, Form in Utopian Literature.* Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.

Fitting, Peter. 1990. "The Turn from Utopia in Recent Feminist Fiction." In *Feminism, Utopia, and Narrative*, edited by Libby Falk Jones, and Sarah Webster Goodwin, 141-158. Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press.

Gearhart, Sally Miller. 1984. "Future Visions: Today's Politics: Feminist Utopias in Review." In *Women in Search of Utopia. Mavericks and Mythmakers*, edited by Ruby Rohrlich and Elaine Baruch. New York: Schocken Books, 296. Quoted in Sargisson 1996, 30.

Gearhart, Sarah Miller. 1985. *The Wanderground: Stories of the Hill Women*. London: Women's Press. Quoted in Sargisson 1996, 30.

Gom, Leona. 1993. *The Y Chromosome*. Toronto: Second Story Press.

Lefanu, Sarah. 1998. *In the Chinks of the World Machine. Feminism and Science Fiction.* London: The Women's Press.

Levy, Ze'ev. 1997. "Utopia and Reality in the Philosophy of Ernst Bloch." In *Not Yet: Reconsidering Ernst Bloch,* edited by Jamie Owen Daniel, and Tom Moylan, 175-185. New York: Verso.

Levitas, Ruth. 2007. "The Imaginary Reconstitution of Society." In *Utopia Method Vision: The Use Value of Social Dreaming*, edited by Raffaella Baccolini, and Tom Moylan, 46-68. Oxford: Peter Lang.

Moylan, Tom. 1986. *Demand the Impossible: Science Fiction and the Utopian Imagination*. New York: Methuen.

Patai, Daphne. 1983. "Beyond Defensiveness: Feminist Research Strategies." In *Women and Utopia. Critical Interpretations*, edited by Marleen Barr, and Nicholas D. Smith. 148-169. Lanham, MD: University Press of America.

Pearson, Carol. 1984. "Of Time and Space: Theories of Social Change in Contemporary Feminist Science Fiction." In *Women in Search of Utopia. Mavericks and Mythmakers,* edited by Ruby Rohrlich and Elaine Baruch. New York: Schocken Books, 260. Quoted in Sargisson 1996, 57.

Piercy, Marge, 1991. *Woman on the Edge of Time*. New York: Ballantine Books.

Pfaelzer, Jean. 1990. "What Happened to History?" In *Feminism, Utopia, and Narrative,* edited by Libby Falk Jones, and Sarah Webster Goodwin, 191-200. Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press.

Runyan, Anne Sisson, 1994. "Radical Feminism: Alternative Futures." In *Women, Gender, and World Politics: Perspectives, Policies, and Prospects*, edited by Peter R. Beckman, and Francine D'Amico, 201-215. Westport: Bergin & Garvey Publishers.

Sargent, Lyman Tower. 1975. "Utopia – The Problem of Definition." *Extrapolation* 16.2 (May):138. Quoted in Schlobin 2004, 12.

Sargent, Pamela. 1987. *The Shore of Women*. London: Butler and Tanner.

Sargisson, Lucy. 1996. *Contemporary Feminist Utopianism*. New York: Routledge.

Schlobin, Roger C. 2004. "Dark Shadows and Bright Lights: Generators and Maintainers of Utopias and Dystopias." In *The Utopian Fantastic: Selected Essays from the Twentieth International Conference on the Fantastic in the Arts*, edited by Martha A. Bartter, 11-16. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.

Shugar, Dana R. 1995. *Separatism and Women's Community*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.

Suvin, Darko, 1998. *Positions and Presuppositions in Science Fiction*. Kent, OH: Kent State University Press.

Tepper, Sherri, 1998. *The Gate To Women's Country*. New York: Bantam Books.

Walker, Nancy A. 1990. *Feminist Alternatives: Irony and Fantasy in the Contemporary Novel by Women*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.

Zipes, Jack. 1988. "Introduction. Toward a Realization of Anticipatory Illumination." Introduction to *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature: Selected Essays*, xi-xxiii. Translated by Jack Zipes, and Frank Mecklenburg. Boston: Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

AUTHOR'S BIO: Anna Gilarek received her Ph.D. from Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin and her doctoral dissertation was devoted to utopia and dystopia in feminist speculative fiction. She is a senior lecturer at The State School of Higher Education in Sandomierz, where she teaches American and British literature. Her academic interests include gender studies, utopian studies and science fiction, in particular feminist speculative fiction, alternate history, postapocalyptic novel, and climate fiction.

E-MAIL: agilarek(at)gmail.com