

FEMINISM AND DIALOGICS: CHARLOTTE PERKINS GILMAN, MERIDEL LE SUEUR, MIKHAIL M. BAKHTIN. Carolina Núñez Puente. Valencia: Universidad de Valencia, Servicio de Publicaciones, 2006. pp. 212. ISBN: 8437064562 ISBN-13: 9788437064567.

FATEMEH SABER
University of Malaya
f.saber@siswa.um.edu.my

Carolina Núñez Puente is an associate professor in the English Department at the Universidade da Coruña (Spain). She has published on and beyond Gilman, Le Sueur and Bakhtin, as can be seen in the selection included in Works Cited. In her book, Carolina Núñez Puente proposes a ‘feminist dialogics’ perspective on the works of Mikhail Bakhtin, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and Meridel Le Sueur. The book does not present a mere “application” of Bakhtin’s theories to Gilman and Le Sueur but a dialogue between the three thinkers. Mikhail Bakhtin is a respected critical theorist with complicated and challenging concepts, which can be useful to different fields of study, particularly to literary criticism. His main theory, dialogism, has undergone considerable debates and critical studies; in fact, it even works as an umbrella term interacting with his other theories such as those on the novel and Bildungsroman, and his key terms polyphony, heteroglossia, carnivalesque, and chronotope. Núñez Puente focuses on issues concerning gender, genre and other female(-related) subjects in Gilman’s and Le Sueur’s fiction, as well as dialogism, chronotope and Bildungsroman both in Bakhtin and a few selected works by Le Sueur and Gilman.

Núñez Puente’s *Feminism and Dialogics: Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Meridel Le Sueur, Mikhail M. Bakhtin* has three main parts; the first part is on the ‘short story’, the second on the ‘novel’ and the third one on ‘gen(d)eric particulars’. In the first part, the author selects two short stories, Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper” (1892) and Le Sueur’s “Annunciation” (1935), and studies them under the light of Bakhtin’s dialogism and Hélène Cixous’ feminine écriture. Through a dialogue created between Bakhtin’s ideas and feminism, Núñez Puente argues that Le Sueur invented a gendered chronotope which is a ‘pause’ to criticize and rethink gender issues in society. Later she states that Gilman and Le Sueur created hybrid genres; Gilman in “The Yellow Wallpaper” invented a new genre, the realist-gothic, in order

to express the voice(s) of (a) gender while Le Sueur's "Annunciation" derives its genre innovation from the combination of realism, biblical discourse, and feminine writing, among other genres. Gilman's and Le Sueur's artistic hybridizations symbolize their refusal to be confined within one genre/gender. At the same time, the protagonists of these stories challenge traditional ideas of subjectivity, for example (re)presenting the emergence of the female subject. Núñez Puente considers both 'short story' and 'gender' as Bakhtin's blind spots since they were almost never discussed by him. Studying the short stories of women writers, and considering gender issues, while reading everything from a Bakhtinian perspective involves a new approach, not only to Le Sueur and Gilman, but also to Bakhtin.

In part two, Núñez Puente comments upon Gilman's *Herland-Ourland* saga—that is *Herland* (1915) and its sequel *With Her in Ourland* (1916)—and Le Sueur's *The Girl* (1978), through Bakhtin's notions of genre and *Bildungsroman*. Both Gilman's *Herland-Ourland* saga and Le Sueur's feminist *Bildungsroman*, *The Girl*, serve to expand and modify Bakhtin's theories. Through both a chronotopic and discourse-oriented analysis, Núñez Puente deconstructs dialogism in Gilman's fiction; the *Herland-Ourland* saga is considered both as a novel and not a novel. In fact, it is Bakhtin's deconstructing of the novel, discussed in "Epic and the Novel", which is emphasized and developed through the practical evidence given by Núñez Puente. Then, she goes on to study the chronotope in the *Herland-Ourland* saga through both a sociological and literary lens. Furthermore, Núñez Puente speculates and proves that *The Girl* can fit into the type five *Bildungsroman*, a concept which was only sketched out by Bakhtin. Núñez Puente argues that this female *Bildungsroman* is necessarily a centrifugal genre, since the female protagonists are speaking subjects who belong to the subaltern and, therefore, subvert the status quo. Finally, *The Girl* is considered as a model of a Bakhtinian novel of becoming, not finalized and not monologic.

In the third part of the book, Núñez Puente compares the terms 'female' to 'genre' and 'male' to 'style', and discusses more about Gilman, Le Sueur and their created feminist utopias. Núñez Puente examines the female utopian communities created and fictionalized both by Le Sueur and Gilman; she concludes the book encouraging a move from 'feminist dialogics' to a 'dialogical (practice of) feminism,' in which all feminist perspectives appear as a multiplicity of voices in dialogue with each other. Since this is the part where Núñez Puente's theorizations come all together, I will come back to discuss it below.

Feminism and Dialogics: Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Meridel Le Sueur, Mikhail M. Bakhtin is an enlightening book regarding Bakhtinian concepts and the feminist criticism of Gilman's and Le Sueur's works. Bakhtin's umbrella concept of dialogism has involved many critics in analyzing and developing the current of thought known as "feminist dialogics". This feminist current was founded by Dale M. Bauer and was considered as a "new school of criticism" by Lynne Pearce in

1994. Among the very few sources which read Bakhtin and feminism, Núñez Puente's book quite interestingly develops from "feminist dialogics," exploring dialogism in Gilman and Le Sueur's works. Feminist dialogics stems from Bakhtin's ignoring gender, his blind spot, which leads to a deeper investigation in order to find how his thought can be useful in a feminist evaluation of literature. Núñez Puente successfully expands the connections between 'gender' and 'genre' as she suggests some new conceptualizations such as: the 'dialogic man', the chronotope as a dialogic pause, the 'pregnancy chronotope', the other heteroglossia of women's voices, and the patriarchal authoritative word versus the feminist 'inner' voice. Furthermore, as I show below, Núñez Puente moves from 'feminist dialogics' to 'dialogical feminism'.

Both Le Sueur's *The Girl* and Gilman's *Herland-Ourland* saga fictionalize women's communities, developing the concept of sisterhood. However, Núñez Puente finds that both writers discriminate among different groups of women: Gilman preferring white women over women of colour and Le Sueur middle-class women over working-class ones. Needless to say that Gilman's racism has been under a great deal of criticism before Núñez Puente mentions it in her book. Núñez Puente finds that Gilman's *Herland* community is neither polyphonic nor heteroglossic; Gilman's racial, ethical and class prejudices do not allow her to consider other women as well. Some voices, such as those of the "Over Mothers" and the "Temple Mothers" lead and dominate the others. Besides, Ellador, the female protagonist of *Ourland*, has no dialogue with the women of lower classes.

Núñez Puente states that 'dialogics' has to include all individuals, not a special group of them. Thus, she moves from 'feminist dialogics' to 'dialogical feminism' which implies a self-consciousness and tolerance of the plural feminist communities/feminisms. According to her, 'dialogics' requires to have 'both-andism' rather than the 'either-or' binary opposition. Núñez Puente invents such interesting compound words to express her ideas regarding female communities in a democratic manner. On the whole she tries to reveal that feminism and dialogism are in dialogue, producing hybrid genres.

Núñez Puente's *Feminism and Dialogics: Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Meridel Le Sueur, Mikhail M. Bakhtin* is invaluable in its skillful interweaving of social and feminist analysis, as well as in its exploration of Bakhtin's concepts. The book is clearly written and Núñez Puente leaves no stone unturned in her analysis of the mentioned thinkers (Gilman, Le Sueur, and Bakhtin). It is written in a fluid style and addressed to an academic audience interested in feminism, literature and linguistics. Above all, the book is a useful source in Bakhtinian feminist criticism as the author studies Bakhtin's notions in Gilman's and Le Sueur's texts creating a dialogue between Bakhtin, even though he is considered misogynist by some feminists, and two feminist writers, Gilman and Le Sueur. Finally, apart from presenting an enlightening and convincing Bakhtinian critical analysis and interpretation of

Gilman's and Le Sueur's fiction, Núñez Puente makes her own contribution to this field of research, particularly through her introduction and coining of the new concepts described above.

WORKS CITED

- BAUER, Dale M. *Feminist Dialogics. A Theory of Failed Community*. New York: State of New York Press, 1988.
- KNIGHT, Denise D. "Charlotte Perkins Gilman and the Shadow of Racism." *American Literary Realism* 32:2Winter 1999: 159-169.
- NÚÑEZ PUENTE, Carolina. "Cantos de sanación. Una entrevista con Renato Rosaldo, antropoeta." *Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies*. Spring 2012. 37:1 (217-227)
- _____. "Criticism on the Margins: Bakhtinian (and Feminist) Responses to Ethics," *Periphery and Centre III*. Eds. Rubén Jarazo Álvarez y Lidia M. Montero Ameneiro. A Coruña: UDC, 2008. 87-99.
- _____. "The Dialogics of the Sexual-Maternal: Multiple Births in Gilman and Le Sueur," *From the Personal to the Political: Towards a New Reading of Maternal Autobiographies*. Eds. Andrea O'Reilly & Silvia Caporale Bizzini. Susquehanna, PA: Susquehanna UP, 2009. 156-169.
- _____. "Thousands of Living Years, of Loving Relations, from Dryden to Cisneros and Beyond," *Interpreting the New Milenio*. Eds. José Antonio Gurpegui y M. Carmen Gómez Galisteo. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008. 40-47.
- _____. "The Yellow Hybrids: Gender and Genre in Gilman's Wallpaper," *Short Story Theories: A XXIst Century Perspective*. Ed. Viorica Patea. Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi, 2012. 139-154.
- PEARCE, Lynne. *Reading Dialogics*. London: Edward Arnold, 1994.