Woman on the Edge of Time Study Guide

Woman on the Edge of Time by Marge Piercy

BOOKRAGS

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Plot Summary

This novel of speculative fiction tells the story of Connie Ramos, a middle-aged Hispanic woman with a troubled past who suddenly finds herself able to communicate with a future society. As she struggles in the present to retain her dignity and spiritual independence in the face of being diagnosed insane, Connie's experiences in the future awaken a fierce determination to not let herself be controlled or victimized. As the narrative details Connie's awakening consciousness, it also explores themes related to the nature of hope, relationships between parents and children, and the influence of the future on the present.

The novel begins with an intense scene of confrontation between Connie and her niece Dolly, a pregnant and drug addicted prostitute on the run from her abusive pimp. In the midst of Connie's attempts at comfort, the pimp arrives and beats both her and her niece into unconsciousness. Connie awakens to find herself in a mental institution, the pimp having brought her there and convinced the admitting authorities that his injuries (inflicted by Connie in self defense) were in fact the result of Connie's exploding into unprovoked violence. Because she has a history of such violence and of insanity, there were no questions asked and she was immediately sent into confinement.

During her imprisonment in the mental hospital, Connie makes contact with a being from the future, Luciente, with whom she had been in contact previously and who now offers to show her what life is going to become. Connie briefly becomes uncomfortable when she discovers that Luciente, whom she had thought was a man, turns out to be a woman, but soon lets go of her discomfort and travels (in her mind) to Mouth-of-Mattapoisett, Luciente's commune-like home. This is the first of several "trips" Connie makes to the future, where she discovers (among other things) that women, in the name of achieving true equality, have let go of that which has always made them truly unique - the ability to conceive and bear children. Childbearing, it seems, is now the function of a specialized machine housed in a building called the "brooder." Connie also discovers that defining identity by race or by sexual orientation has also been eliminated, that each individual in the community lives alone (in other words, the family unit has disappeared), that everyone works and celebrates communally, and that the community is under attack by people called The Shapers. These are scientists who refined the genetic experiments that led the community to taking the shape it has, and who want to continue their experiments in order to continue helping humanity "improve."

Back in the present, as Connie flips back and forth into the future, she is selected to be the subject of an experiment by the Shaper-like Dr. Redding, in which a small device implanted in the brains of people diagnosed as being chronically violent (such as Connie) electronically controls their emotions. As the experiment progresses, Connie comes to realize that those who have the implant soon lose the aspects of their personality that make them interesting, unique, and independent. This is only one of several experiences paralleling each other between the past and present, experiences that lead Connie to become more and more resistant to the idea of being manipulated against her will.

On a particularly traumatizing visit to the future, Connie is drawn by Luciente and other members of the Mattapoisett community into an armed battle with forces controlled by the Shapers. She is shocked to see that the enemy combatants have the faces of Redding and the other doctors in the present, leading her to the conclusion that the influence of the "shapers" in both time periods must be ended. With that in mind, she obtains some poison and puts it in coffee served to Redding and the others, destroying the "ancestors" of the future Shapers and, in doing so, stakes her own claim to freedom and to independence of thought and identity.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

This novel of speculative/futuristic fiction tells the story of Connie Ramos, a middle-aged Hispanic woman with a troubled past who suddenly finds herself able to communicate with a future society. As she struggles in the present to retain her dignity and spiritual independence in the face of being diagnosed insane, Connie's experiences in the future awaken a fierce determination to not let herself be controlled or victimized. As the narrative details Connie's awakening consciousness, it also explores themes related to the nature of hope, relationships between parents and children, and the influence of the future on the present.

As Connie answers the pounding at her door, she thinks "Either I saw him or I didn't and I'm crazy for real this time." She opens the door and lets in her niece Dolly, fleeing from a beating being given her by her pimp/boyfriend Geraldo. Connie (short for Consuelo) makes coffee, examines Dolly's injuries, and registers Dolly's comments that the kitchen chair she's sitting on is warm and that she (Dolly) heard voices when she was outside the door. Eventually, Connie puts the two-months pregnant Dolly to bed, trying to persuade her to get out of her relationship with Geraldo. As she does so, narration describes how Connie's thoughts turn to people named Claud, Angelina and Luciente, and to her (Connie's) previous stay in Bellevue (see "Objects/Places"). The good-looking and smooth-talking Geraldo soon arrives, prepared to force Dolly into an abortion. Both Connie and Dolly struggle with him, Connie breaking his nose with an empty wine bottle and being beaten into unconsciousness for her pains.

Connie wakes up back in Bellevue, having been taken there by Geraldo and Dolly, who had been manipulated by Geraldo into saying that Dolly's injuries had been caused by Connie. Days pass as Connie desperately tries to convince the attendants that she's not insane and that she was merely trying to defend her niece, but her every effort is dismissed with indifference. Conversation during an interview with a supervisor reveals that Angelina is Connie's daughter who had been taken from her and placed into a foster home after Connie, heavy into substance abuse after the death of her beloved Claud, struck her. Narration during this conversation reveals that Claud had been a jazz musician and pickpocket, put in prison and subjected to a dangerous, eventually fatal medical experiment. Connie eventually convinces the supervisor to let her see both a dentist and a doctor, and is visited by Dolly, who tells Connie that she (Dolly) is going to have an abortion, that Geraldo has agreed to marry her, and that she (Connie) will be let out of Bellevue in a week or so. Instead, Connie is shocked to discover that Dolly's father (Connie's brother Luis - see "Characters") has signed papers committing Connie to another institution.

As she is being driven to this new hospital (see "Quotes", p. 31), Connie wonders whether "she deserved punishment for the craziness none had guessed ... that all of the month before she had been hallucinating with increasing sharpness a strange man ..."

Chapter 1 Analysis

The novel's central narrative question, whether Connie is insane or whether her experiences of the future are real, is introduced in its opening lines as she herself calls her own sanity into question. The "he" she refers to is the Luciente that her thoughts turn to later in the chapter, and whose identity is more fully revealed in Chapter 2. The question is explored further in Dolly's comments about the chair and about hearing voices, both of which suggest that Luciente is a genuine physical presence. As later analysis will discuss, however, there are other forms of evidence that suggest Connie's relationship with both Luciente and the future is more a product of her imagination than anything else.

Another important element to note about the novel's first line is Connie's reference to being insane for real "this time," suggesting that at least in her own mind, her past experience of mental/emotional instability wasn't a genuine reflection of her state of being. This is the first layer in the thick, complex foundation of resentment, anger and pain that fuels the unhappiness and desperation that grows in her throughout the narrative and eventually culminates in the climactic murders in Chapter 19. In other words, these two words foreshadow Connie's forthcoming struggles. Another element of foreshadowing is the references to Angelina and to Luis, who both play important roles (albeit different sorts of roles) in the narrative to follow. Finally, there is the reference to Claud's death as the result of a dangerous medical "experiment," which foreshadows the emergence into the narrative (Chapter 4) of a similar experiment and Connie's resistance to participation in that experiment, resistance triggered at least in part by Claud's death as referred to here.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

This chapter narrates events that occurred on the day of the confrontation between Geraldo, Dolly and Connie. Narration describes that Connie visited Dolly earlier that day, and Connie tried to convince Dolly to leave Geraldo, but Dolly refused. Narration then describes how Connie, slightly stoned from the marijuana Dolly had been smoking, decided to walk a while before catching the subway back home and stopped by a playground, where she mused on how one of the girls there looks like how Angelina might look. Narration also describes her loving/resentful contemplation of Eddie, Angelina's father.

Connie's thoughts are interrupted by the appearance of a slender, attractive, not-quite effeminate young man, Luciente. Connie immediately suspects him of being after her money, but when he doesn't try to steal anything and, in fact, talks to her with a strangely-worded kind of affection (referring to her as a powerful "receiver"), she relaxes a little. He, however, becomes increasingly uncomfortable with all the noise and the sounds surrounding them and leaves. Before he goes, however, he tells her to think of him when she is alone and quiet.

Narration describes how Connie makes her way home, prepares a scanty supper, and eats it in the company of the television, all the while remembering her childhood and her teenage arguments with her mother (see "Quotes", p. 47). She also contemplates what Luciente said about her being a "receiver" and recalls that at various times in her life, she has indeed felt as though she has a gift, or at least a kind of sensitivity (see "Quotes", p. 43). After supper, Connie turns off the television, sits quietly, and thinks about Luciente, who appears before her. Conversation reveals that he lives in the year 2137, that he is one of a group of powerful "senders" (which includes his friends Bee and Jackrabbit), that he has been trying for some time to reach Connie's equally powerful "receiving" mind, and that he is shocked by the conditions in which she and so many other people are living. Narration makes it clear that he's not just talking about Connie's poverty, but about the artificiality of the food and the waste and pollution put into the environment by society. He tells her such things have been described in the historical records of his time, gesturing towards what looks like his watch but is in fact a miniature computer/library (his "kenner" - see "Objects/Places"), but adds that he hadn't believed they were actually true until he experienced them himself.

At that moment, Dolly pounds on Connie's door. Luciente vanishes, and the chapter ends at the moment where Chapter 1 began.

Chapter 2 Analysis

In technical/structural terms, this chapter serves as a "flashback," a narration of events previous to those which the narrative has already explored. Flashbacks are most often used in the same way as the flashback here, to offer information and to set up conflict. It could be argued that the first part of this particular flashback, Connie's visit to Dolly, doesn't really offer any new information, since most of what's discussed and/or revealed in narration has already been referred to in Chapter 1. It could also be argued, however, that the information isn't the point of including that conversation.

If the author's overall narrative intent is to define Connie's state of mind and its relationship to her dealings with Luciente, and if part of that exploration includes the question of whether Connie imagines Luciente, then the scene with Dolly defines the state of mind in Connie that makes it necessary for her to escape into Luciente and his world. In other words, operating on the assumption that Connie's mind is creating an escape from her life for herself (an idea supported by the references to her suffering from schizophrenia - see "Chapter 20, Analysis"), the scene with Dolly in the first part of this chapter is a partial indication of why Connie is trying to escape.

There is another important point to consider here in relation to the question of whether Connie is creating/imagining Luciente and "his" world - how Connie envisions the girl in the playground as (an incarnation? an embodiment? a manifestation?) of her beloved daughter, Angelina (for consideration of the metaphoric value of the name, see "Topics for Discussion - What do you think ..."). The scene here foreshadows a similar scene in Chapter 7 when Connie, in the future, sees a young girl who, like the girl here, resembles Angelina. In other words the parallel experiences, like other parallels explored in later sections of analysis, suggest that Connie is taking elements of her world and incorporating them into a fantasy.

This chapter also includes the first substantial appearance of Luciente and the first narrations of what "his" future is like. On first glance, it certainly seems like an ideal world, and on one level appears to function in similar ways and from a similar moral perspective to other futuristic semi-utopias in other works of so-called "speculative fiction." In short, it's something of an ideally happy, peaceful, safe place - but on deeper consideration, could easily be seen as the sort of place that someone like Connie could easily imagine for herself if she wanted to escape from the horrors of her "real" life.

Meanwhile, important components of this first manifestation of the future include Luciente's name, a variant on the Spanish word for "light" (for further consideration of this aspect of the narrative, see "Characters - Luciente"). The fact that Luciente's name is based in Connie's mother language is perhaps an indication that Luciente and his/her world are both in fact creations of Connie's fragmented mentality. On the other hand, there is also Luciente's vocabulary, which is altered just enough to seem futuristic and evolved, but not overly technical (as vocabulary in much speculative fiction can be) and not too self-conscious - at least, not at this point. It becomes more so later in the narrative. The creativity of this vocabulary is perhaps evidence that the future

experienced by Connie does exist and is not merely being imagined - it's questionable whether Connie is intelligent enough to use language in the way the people of the future do.

Finally, there are important elements of foreshadowing. Specifically, Connie's memories of her mother foreshadow conflicts between parent and child later in the narrative, while the references to Bee and Jackrabbit foreshadow the important role both characters play in forthcoming events.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

As this chapter begins, Connie is locked in a solitary cell in the mental hospital. Lost in her thoughts, drugged into a near stupor, she recalls the circumstances of Angelina's being taken from her by child welfare authorities (see "Quotes", p. 62), and her confusion over Dolly's betrayal. Exhausted and lonely, she allows herself to slip into a quiet state in the hopes that Luciente will appear ... and Luciente does, expressing concern that it's been several weeks since they last connected and commenting that he's uncomfortable being there. He adds, however, that if she wants they can mentally travel to his time and place. At first reluctant, Connie finally agrees to go, but when Luciente embraces her in order to facilitate transport, Connie is shocked to discover that Luciente has breasts, and is in fact a woman! Uncomfortable at such intimacy with another woman, Connie says she's not going to leave, but Luciente convinces her, embraces her, and takes her into the future.

When Connie opens her eyes, she is surprised to discover that Luciente lives in a very small community (Mouth-of-Mattapoisett - see "Objects/Places") that is literally and spiritually close to nature, a cluster of simple, low-to-the-ground houses constructed of old, found materials and scattered through a grove of trees. As they go to Luciente's home, Luciente and Connie discuss the living arrangements, with Connie being surprised to learn that the adults of Luciente's time all live separately - homes are not for families; the children all live together in a larger building. After providing Connie with some clothes, Luciente discreetly leaves so Connie can change, recalling how Connie and the people of her time "have body taboos." After Connie's finished changing, Connie notices a large, TV screen-like panel on the wall which, when activated, displays information Connie doesn't understand.

Luciente then leads Connie to the "fooder," where everyone in the community eats. Connie is introduced to the people with whom Luciente lives - among them the playful Jackrabbit, the imposing Barbarossa, and the wise Sojourner. Conversation about names reveals that everyone in this time is usually known by only one name, but that names can (and do) change as a person moves from one stage of life to another. As Connie asks questions about the nature of government and police, she starts to tire, and Jackrabbit reminds Luciente that "catching" can be tiring. After promising to bring her back for another visit, and after telling her that her body is still in the cell as though it has never actually left, Luciente takes Connie back, where she immediately falls asleep.

Chapter 3 Analysis

The most important elements in this section relate to its pair of settings. The first, Connie's cell in the hospital, can be seen as a manifestation/symbol of her mental, emotional and spiritual isolation, with the walls of the cell specifically representing the

walls of rage and resentment she builds between herself and the world/people around her. It's important to note, in this context, that the narrative creates the clear impression that Connie blames the world for the construction of those walls. She feels she has been conspired against and has not been given a chance to thrive (financially, emotionally, spiritually, maritally) because of the opinions of a judgmental, narrow-minded world. It's against these walls, opinions, and judgments, that Connie's eventual act of violent defiance (see Chapter 19) is ultimately directed.

Both the literal and metaphoric values of the cell are juxtaposed, to considerable effect, with the openness and freedom of Mattapoisett. Again, there is the sense that the nature of the future community can/could be taken in one of two ways - as a genuine result of humanity's process of evolution towards a simpler, less complicated life, or as a manifestation of a peaceful, open, loving world to which Connie can escape. The question of the future's degree of reality, however, becomes complicated here and later in the narrative by Connie's resistance to, and distaste for, much of what she experiences. In other words, if she wants to escape to this place, why does she "create" so much that she doesn't feel comfortable accepting - for example, the sudden discovery of Luciente's gender? (For further consideration of this question, see "Chapter 4, Analysis).

An important element of foreshadowing in this section is the reference to the changing of names (foreshadowing a more detailed account of that process in Chapter 5).

Chapters 4 and 5

Chapters 4 and 5 Summary

Chapter 4 - As the seasons change from winter to spring, Connie is quietly overjoyed when Sybil, a friend from her previous session in the institution, returns (see "Characters"). As Connie and Sybil renew their friendship (but carefully, so as not to raise too much suspicion), they become aware that something is changing on the ward; a new doctor is coming in to look over the patients. Eventually Connie is chosen over Sybil to participate in what Sybil believes to be an experiment of some kind and is taken to a new ward - G-2. When she first arrives, Connie is taken into a hallway to wait with several other inmates, including a high-spirited young bisexual named Skip. When it's her turn to be interviewed, Connie answers all the regular questions - about the incident with Angelina, the death of Claud, the incident with Geraldo - with what she believes to be the answers the doctors want to hear. But when the head doctor, Redding, asks her whether she's ever experienced headaches or blackouts, she becomes nervous - she'd never been asked those sorts of questions before. She answers as truthfully as she can, revealing that she'd only ever experienced either after being struck by one of the men in her life. Redding tells the other doctors on the panel that Connie will be one of the subjects of his experiment and that he doesn't have enough subjects; they need to find more.

Chapter 5 - On a grey, rainy day on the porch off G-2, Connie is enjoying some rare peace and quiet when she feels Luciente mentally reaching for her. At first, Connie resists, taking too much pleasure out of her moment of solitude. But then she realizes that it's been too long since she spent time with a friend, and before she can fully realize that she's started to think of Luciente AS a friend, she (Connie) has mentally traveled into the future. There she learns, among other things, that concepts of motherhood and race (among others) have evolved or been removed from society. She makes these discoveries as Luciente takes her to the "brooder," where the fetuses of children yet to be born are incubated, floating in pools of nutritive liquid and where Connie meets Bee, a large man with dark skin who tells her that deliberate efforts have been made to genetically mix the races. As Connie is becoming more uneasy, Luciente tells her that in the name of true equality, female humans decided to give up that which, more than anything, made them different from males - the capacity to give birth. This leads Connie to recall the joys of mothering Angelina, the sorrow at losing her, the relief of realizing that she (Angelina) was being raised in a better place, and the resentment that Angelina's new "parents" didn't really have to suffer to get her. "A canned child," as narration puts it. This in turn leads to a surge of resentment towards Luciente and the ways of her time, and Connie finds herself suddenly back on the porch at G-2.

Chapters 4 and 5 Analysis

There are several important elements in this section. Narratively, there is the introduction of several important characters, all of whom act as allies and/or inspiration in Connie's struggle for self-respect and freedom - Sybil and Skip in the world of the insane, Bee in the futuristic world of escape. Also in narrative terms, there is the clear sense that those struggles are about to become more difficult - the looming, mysterious "experiment" headed by Redding and his team, the move to the more watched G-2, etc. It's important to note, meanwhile, the (deliberately?) ironic reference to the seasons changing from winter to spring - although the outside world is moving into what is traditionally viewed as a time of new life and hope, Connie is moving into a time of less hope and what she sees as a kind of death.

Another key element in this section is the introduction of circumstances existing in both the world of the insane and the world of the free - in other words, the cross-parallels between the present and the future. Specifically, the appearance of Connie's "friend" Sybil and the realization that she (Connie) views Luciente as a "friend" can be seen as reinforcing the idea that the future world is, in fact, something Connie is creating and defining for herself, an escapist idealization of what she would like her world to be. Likewise, her perception of Angelina as a "canned" child clearly echoes her perception, and the narrative's description, of the children in the brooder being almost literally canned. On some level it's possible to see parallels between Dolly and Luciente - both are sensually involved with a number of individuals, both are young and regard Connie (to some degree) as a mother figure, both speak their minds to her. The difference is that Luciente is not addicted to men, drugs, or violence in the way Dolly is. For further consideration of this parallel see "Characters - Dolly", and for further consideration of the idea of parallels in general, see "Parallel Existences".

Chapters 6 and 7

Chapters 6 and 7 Summary

Chapter 6 - After a difficult, heavily drugged day on the ward (during which she fearfully discovers that Sybil is being given shock treatments) and overwhelmed by memories of Claud and Angelina, Connie reaches out for Luciente, who speaks admirably of her being a powerful sender as well as powerful receiver. Connie then joins Luciente in her time and discovers Luciente with Bee. Bee, it turns out, is one of the three co-mothers of a young girl named Innocente, who is about to undergo what seems to be a naming ritual - being sent into the wilds to survive and meditate for a week and to emerge with a new name. The feisty Innocente is eager for the experience, but Connie is confused - protective memories of Angelina make her (Connie) reluctant to believe that letting young people like Innocente go into the woods alone is a good idea. She and Luciente watch as the community gathers to wish Innocente well. Later, as she, Luciente, Jackrabbit and others walk back to the village, Connie reveals that she has had different names (see "Quotes", p. 122) and different personalities, leading Jackrabbit to comment that maybe someone in the village could help her integrate them. As Luciente and Jackrabbit are leading her towards the children's house, however, Connie feels her mind slipping back into her solitude room on the ward, and mentally asks Luciente to help her. "For a long nauseated moment," narration writes, "she blurred over and she was no place, lost, terrified."

Chapter 7 - When Connie regains consciousness, she discovers she is still in Luciente's future world, in Jackrabbit's arms. When Connie feels well enough she, Jackrabbit, and Luciente continue their tour of the village, ending up at the children's house. There Connie is surprised to learn that there are few toys and no school; children, she is told, learn about life through living it at the side of working, living older people. She is shocked, and resentful, to discover that Barbarossa (whom she had believed to be fully male) has breasts and is capable of breastfeeding (see "Quotes", p. 134). She is equally shocked to discover that children as young as six and seven years old are allowed to explore each other sexually, and somewhat guiltily recalls her own childhood sexual explorations with her brother. "It was a silent, pleasurable game ... not one ounce of Connie's flesh believed it had done her any harm." She is shown how young people are taught how to connect with and control the functioning of their internal systems, the process of "inknowing" connecting them to awareness of things like pulse and blood pressure. Soon afterward, Jackrabbit appears with a girl riding on his back. Luciente identifies her as Dawn, one of the children Luciente co-mothers, and Connie is shocked to recognize the girl as Angelina! The surprise sends her suddenly back into the cell on the ward, where she suddenly and completely assents to Angelina living a healthy, sane, protected life where "she will never be broken ... she will be glad and strong and she will not be afraid. She will have enough. She will have pride. She will walk in strength like a man and never sell her body ... and live in love like a garden ... people of the rainbow with its end fixed in earth, I give her to you!"

Chapters 6 and 7 Analysis

Primarily, this section focuses on one of the narrative's central themes - an exploration of the relationship between parents and children (see "Themes - Parents and Children"). Within that exploration, however, there are several interesting points to consider. The idea of multiple names, for example, can be seen as relating to the psychoanalytical premise that and individual's personality consists, albeit to varying degrees, of different facets or masks that come into play on different occasions or at different times in an individual's life. This, in turn, relates to the idea in Eastern philosophy of dharma. This is the idea that each individual has a purpose on earth, and that that purpose can change through different phases of an individual's life (in the same way as the changes an individual makes to his/her name in Mattapoisett reflect their movement from one phase of their lives to another. In this context, it's particularly interesting to note that later in the novel (when Connie and other characters are about to go into battle), it's revealed that Innocente has changed her name to Hawk.

A related point is the way in which Innocente's quest for her next name/identity strongly resembles the Native American tradition of the vision quest and other similar rituals in so-called "primitive" cultures and societies. In all such cases, a young person on the verge of adolescence is sent into an isolated, perhaps even dangerous location in order to prepare for and experience visions of his/her emerging identity. In the context of the novel as a whole, and specifically of its central question (whether Connie's experience of the future is real or schizophrenically imagined), is the story of Innocente's sojourn in the forest a manifestation of some knowledge of Connie's that she incorporates into her fantasy? Or, if her experience of the future is real, is Innocente's story a re-awakening to a lost tradition?

Finally, Connie's reactions to Innocente and to Dawn are clearly drawn parallels to her experience of/feelings for Angelina. Here again, the parallel is so clearly defined as to again make the very strong suggestion that the future world is, to a considerable degree, an escapist creation of Connie's admittedly troubled mind.

Chapters 8 and 9

Chapters 8 and 9 Summary

Chapter 8 - In the first part of this chapter, Connie is taken through a chain of dank underground tunnels for the next in Dr. Redding's series of tests. In the waiting room she reconnects with Skip and with Sybil (who has also been selected to participate in the tests) and is introduced to a tall, outspoken black woman (Alice Blue Bottom). The next day, a depressed Connie reaches out for Luciente and is again taken into the future, where Luciente takes her to see how "government" works, describing how the participants in the governing process are chosen by lot, serve only a year, and make agreements by consensus. After leaving the government meeting, Connie is taken to the deathbed of Sappho, a wise old woman who has asked to be taken to where she can hear the river. Frantic communication establishes that Bolivar (one of Sappho's "children") is late, as always. As everyone waits, Luciente and Connie discuss the ways of death and dying in their respective societies, with Luciente arguing that it's better to accept and acknowledge death as part of life (see "Quotes", p. 162). Bolivar eventually arrives, sits at his "mother's" side, and Sappho quietly dies. As her body is moved to a resting place, Luciente explains that that night someone will go to the brooder and make arrangements for a new child to be born. As Connie reacts with shock to the apparent "heartless"-ness of the arrangement ("one in, one out!"), she suddenly feels a violent pull back to the ward, where she regains consciousness and finds herself being shaken awake by an angry nurse, who forces her into line for supper.

Chapter 9 - At her next round of tests, Skip tells Connie that all the testing subjects are to be moved to a different ward. Connie borrows some money from him so she can call Dolly, which she does that night from a tightly-regulated pay phone on the ward. She gets Dolly's new answering machine and leaves a message begging for Dolly to visit her and to bring money and clothes when she does. A few days later, she gets a letter from Dolly saying that she and Geraldo have separated and promising she will visit. That night, too excited for her usual drugs to work and too excited to sleep, Connie reaches out for Luciente, and is taken back into the future where she joins in the community's festivities celebrating a decision from the government going in its favor. Luciente dresses her up in a "flimsy," a light and pretty unisex garment made of "algae and natural dyes" that's composted after a festival and takes her Connie into a banquet.

As Connie eats heartily, Luciente compares her culture's celebrations of truth and evolution with celebrations in Connie's time (see "Quotes", p. 174), and then takes Connie out to watch the games and the dancing. Connie excitedly tells Luciente about the impending visit from Dolly, whom she describes as being "free" from Geraldo. This leads to a conversation about freedom and how freedom is so often corrupted by hate, which in turn leads Luciente to suddenly comment that she doesn't understand a great deal about what, in Connie's past, led to Luciente's present, and to strongly urge Connie to remember that that present is only one possible future in Connie's present. "Alternate universes co-exist," she says. "Probabilities clash and possibilities wink out forever."

She then calls Connie her "ancestor" and Connie laughs. Their attention returns to the games, and Connie notices Dawn, strong and agile. Before Connie can pay too much attention to her, however, Luciente takes her to see a "holi," an audio-visual presentation prepared by Bolivar and Jackrabbit portraying the behavior of past human beings in placing animals into extinction.

After the performance, Luciente calls Dawn over, and Connie gives her a kiss. This triggers in her a recollection of Angelina's childhood in which Connie had no choice but to feed her dog food. Luciente, seeing the sorrow in Connie, dances with her - a dance interrupted by the sexually imperious arrival of Diana, one of Luciente's former lovers. Luciente's place in Connie's arms is taken, however, by Bee, who re-awakens Connie's sensuous memories of Claud. It's not long before Bee takes Connie back to his residence, where they make love - and where Connie is surprised to discover that Luciente, her "psychic" contact, has been enabling her to share that contact with Bee. Bee assures her that everyone in the community cares for her, and with that Connie returns to the mental institution - where, on visiting day, she eagerly waits for a visit from Dolly that never comes.

Chapters 8 and 9 Analysis

As her present becomes bleaker, as she finds herself increasingly abandoned and manipulated, Connie's relationship with the future world deepens and enriches. Her understanding of the future's government, perspectives on death, and awareness of the role of the past in defining the present and future, all become both broadened and more thoroughly defined. As a result, the slow process of chipping away at the psychological walls within which Connie defines herself (said walls paralleling the physical walls of the various wards and hallways through which she moves) becomes somewhat more intense, building to her climactic confrontation with the doctors (Chapter 19) that illuminates just how thoroughly those walls have been demolished. But that comes later. For now, the narrative portrays her sense of freedom in/with/as the result of the future grows in parallel to her increasing fear of the experiment through which Redding and the other doctors on his team are preparing to put her and the others.

A particularly intriguing moment in this section is the point at which Luciente, quite forcibly, tells Connie that the future she's visiting is only one of several possible futures. The implication of this statement is that Connie has the power to determine the future, a power she ultimately decides she must exercise and finds she is able to after her above-referenced psychological walls are demolished. The statement foreshadows at least one previously discussed development in the novel, and just as clearly foreshadows another - Connie's visit to a future in which she enters into an apparent war, a future which Luciente later tells her is not part of her (Luciente's) existence or experience. There is also the possibility that the statement also foreshadows another visit to the future - the more frightening, corrupt future of Chapter 15. Finally, the reference to possible futures foreshadows the moment in Chapter 10 in which Connie is referred to as being a "crux" of possible futures. Connie's life and her choices about how to live that life, are seen by the future as determining and defining that future. By the

end of the narrative, Connie has clearly accepted this aspect of her experience as part of her destiny and acts the way she does (i.e., murdering Redding and the others) in order to ensure that the future she has come to cherish will come into being.

A not-unrelated moment is the point at which Luciente refers to Connie as her "ancestor," a reference that functions on several levels. First Connie is, like all the people of her (our?) time, ancestors for the people of the future. Second, and on a very literal level, Connie seems to come to see herself as Luciente's spiritual ancestor, by the end of the novel fighting to achieve the same kind of personal freedom that Luciente has. Third, and as discussed above, Connie by the end of the narrative comes to see herself and her choices as defining the future - her choices are therefore essentially ancestral in nature.

Chapters 10 and 11

Chapters 10 and 11 Summary

Chapter 10 - When Connie, Skip, Sybil and the others are moved to their new ward, they discover Alice Blue Bottom already there and that she has already had a round of surgery which she says involved putting electrical nodules in her brain. A desperate visit to Luciente in search of support results in Connie becoming aware that drinking coffee is almost ritualized, and that she is living (according to Barbarossa) at "a certain crux in history ... forces are in conflict. Technology is imbalanced ... alternate futures are equally or almost equally probable ... and that affects ... the shape of time." Bee then urges Connie to continue to struggle for freedom and enlightenment, telling her that he and the others have to continue fighting "to be the future that happens. That's why we reached you." When the confused Connie returns to the present, Alice is the subject of a demonstration by Dr. Redding, performed in front of video cameras for the purpose of raising money to fund further experiments in his procedure - the controlling of violent emotions through radio-transmitted electrical impulses. Connie and the others watch, along with a film crew, as Alice, under Redding's control, veers back and forth between her natural state of being abusively violent and being calm. After the demonstration is finished, Connie vows that she will never let herself be controlled in that way.

Soon afterwards, Connie reaches out for Luciente, only to find that her responses are sluggish and preoccupied. She is taken into the future by a young woman named Parra, who is acting as a mediator in a conflict between Luciente and Bolivar, a conflict that seems to have arisen as the result of Luciente's jealousy about Bolivar's intimate relationship with Jackrabbit. As members of the community debate the reasons for and manifestations of the conflict, Parra explains that conflict of any sort isn't tolerated. Individuals who rebel against the peace of the community are punished by isolation, hard work, banishment, and even execution. The community decides that Luciente and Bolivar must spend time simply looking at each other and reaching for each other in that way. While they're doing so, Connie returns to her present life, reflecting on the love she experienced with Martin, her first husband, and imagining herself successful in Parra's role of mediator.

Chapter 11 - Shortly afte a doctor tries unsuccessfully to get Connie to sign a form giving permission for an operation like Alice's, Dolly arrives for a visit. Connie is grateful for the money and clothes she brings but is shocked and saddened to see that Dolly is evidently on drugs, and happily so. Connie is also disappointed that Dolly is unable and unwilling to help Connie leave the mental hospital. Soon afterward, Connie visits with Luciente, desperate for help in making an escape. Luciente consults with several other members of the community, eventually deciding that the best way to help Connie is to teach her to slow her metabolism to make it look like she's in a coma. Conversation between training sessions reveals the growing influence of Shapers, a social-political movement that wants to breed people for selected traits. Luciente tells Connie that the struggle against Shaping is being played out at the highest level of government.

Meanwhile, as Connie trains herself, she plots quietly with Sybil and eventually puts their plan into action - first Sybil distracts the attendants and then fakes a confrontation with Connie, which, in turn, enables Connie to fake unconsciousness. Then, while left unattended, Connie escapes the hospital, triggering an alarm when she can find no exit but an emergency door. Eventually she finds her way off the hospital grounds and makes her way into the wilderness, evading the searching police cars as she goes. Finally she finds her way into a secluded grove of trees and falls into a deep sleep.

Chapters 10 and 11 Analysis

Several new elements are introduced in this section. The first is the reference to coffee, which at first may seem somewhat trivial, but becomes less so when it is noted that there are several references throughout the narrative to the fact that Dr. Redding is overly dependent on coffee, and that in an effort to gain favor with Redding, several of the doctors on his team are following his example. In other words, where the ritual of coffee has a relatively positive connotation in the future, in the present it is, for the most part, a symbol of the kind of spiritual corruption that leads self-important insensitive people like Redding and the others into the destruction of others. All of this lends an intriguing, almost paradoxical, aspect to the fact that Connie kills Redding and the others by putting poison in their coffee. Is this a manifestation of the future-defined sense that coffee is a ritualized aid to the process of clear thinking, truth, and freedom? Or is Connie, in using a symbol of the corruptness of the powers controlling her to end the lives of those who hold those powers, herself falling victim to their corruption, their disregard of human life?

The second, related, new element introduced here is the concept of the Shapers. There is a clear parallel here between the Shapers of the future and the "shapers" of the present - Redding and the other doctors who are trying to "shape" the way the brain functions and therefore shape society. The introduction of the former to Connie clearly affects her perception of the latter. Because Connie is taught about the evil of the Shapers in the future, she is more convinced than ever of the evil of the "shapers" in the past, and is therefore strongly motivated to end their corrupt existence and eliminate their influence on herself and on the future. This relationship between the past and future "shapers" is another example of parallels between past and future that on some level suggest Connie is making up an escapist future defined by the horrors of her present.

Meanwhile, the escape into the wilderness that takes place at the conclusion of this section and develops further in the following chapter can be seen as a metaphoric representation and/or foreshadowing of Connie's eventual escape into the wilderness of psychological freedom.

For further consideration of Parra's point about the treatment of conflict, see Chapter 19 Summary, Chapter 19 Analysis, "Quotes", p. 370, and "Topics for Discussion - To what extent is ..."

Chapters 12, 13 and 14

Chapters 12, 13 and 14 Summary

Chapter 12 - After forcing down some mostly-rotten food stolen from a garbage can, Connie calls for Luciente to come into the past and help her. At first Luciente is reluctant, but when she realizes the desperation of Connie's situation she agrees, and helps Connie find water, edible weeds, and some fruit. At one point, Connie pleads for Dawn (the girl who reminds her of Angelina) to be brought, and the reluctant Luciente agrees. Dawn is both excited to be in the past and repulsed by the waste and the pollution. Later, after Luciente and Dawn return to their time and Connie has lit a fire, she loses herself first in memories of her beautiful first husband (Martin) and then in a dream of becoming a mother in Luciente's time, co-mother (with Sojourner and Jackrabbit) of Selma, a beautiful girl with skin as dark as Bee's. When she wakes, Connie walks for hours and miles, miles and hours, until she gets into the city. After eating a meager breakfast, she makes her way to the bus depot, where she has trouble getting a disagreeable clerk to help her. She eventually manages to buy a ticket to New York, but before she can get on the bus, she is captured. "By twelve thirty," narration writes, "she was back in the hospital, on her ward."

Chapter 13 - Connie and the other patients/inmates/test subjects are moved to a new ward at the beginning of this chapter, one much more comfortable and with more amenities. Connie and the others watch as Skip is prepared for surgery, aware that down the hall Alice Blue Bottom spends most of her time staring blankly at the ceiling. After Skip is taken away, Connie is interviewed by Acker, the psychologist on Redding's team who tries to convince her that the surgery is in her best interest. Connie, however, continues to refuse to see things his way, especially when Skip returns, doesn't react to the procedure in the way Redding wants him to, and is taken away for another surgery, this one undertaken to remove a portion of his brain that the doctors think is responsible for his "inversion" (homosexuality). In the meantime, Connie takes refuge in the future with Luciente and Jackrabbit, who is arguing with them that because Jackrabbit is an artist, he should be exempt from military service; their conversation revealing the nature of the war their community is fighting (see "Quotes", p. 267) - essentially a war between corrupted technology and nature. As the chapter concludes, Connie strives to convince herself that Skip, now apparently behaving in less flamboyant ways, is in his own way rebelling, giving the doctors what they want so that he'll be allowed to go free.

Chapter 14 - With Jackrabbit away doing his defense service, Connie has time alone with Luciente, time in which they plan for Connie's next escape attempt. They also discuss the role of science in the future, with Luciente telling Connie that the progress of science (including the question of whether to extend human life) is decided by consensus among the people, not just by scientists. Back in the ward, Connie spends a sleepless, restless night thinking about the surgery that's going to take place the following day, feeling "anger swelling up inside her like sour wind...", anger at how the ways of the world had made her live. The next day, Connie is sedated but conscious as

her skull is cut open, her brain examined, and a device the size of a quarter is implanted and hooked up. "Her head felt wrong as they put it in," narration suggests. "Everything felt wrong." Over the next few days, as she recovers, she learns that Alice is to have another operation (apparently she's not responding to the procedure the way Redding would like) and Skip is to be sent home (apparently he is). The night before he goes, Connie pays him a visit, and he tells her to never give up trying to escape. A few days later, Connie hears rumors that Skip has killed himself, the latest in a series of suicide attempts. She believes that Redding's operation had been a success, that he had cured Skip "of fumbling, of indecision. They had taught him to act, they had taught him the value of a quick clean death."

Chapters 12, 13 and 14 Analysis

In spite of the assistance of her friends (both those from the future and those in the present), Connie's present betrays her over and over again throughout this section. The world of nature in which she finds herself after her escape (corrupted by pollution and waste), the world of freedom (corrupted by fear and judgment), and above all the world of safety within her own mind (corrupted by Redding and his surgery) - all end up lost to her. These losses contribute to the previously referred to foundation of resentment, fury and pain that eventually lead Connie to her defiant act of violence in Chapter 19. But that's still a few chapters away. In the meantime, the internal and external pressure is building to the point where her explosion is inevitable.

Meanwhile, the narrative develops another parallel between past and present, this one in the characters of Skip and Jackrabbit. Both are young men; both are emotionally impetuous; both experience what might be described as unconventional sexuality; both are seen as difficult but inspiring by those with whom they live in community, and both end up experiencing death in a way that the narrative clearly contends they shouldn't have. Jackrabbit's doesn't occur until Chapter 16, but the point at which the parallel actually appears doesn't diminish its validity. The similarities between Jackrabbit and Skip are perhaps the most overtly drawn of the entire book, with the sensually pleasurable parallels between Bee and Claud coming a close second. The result of these, and all the similarities between past and present, is to reinforce the idea that Connie might be creating the future she's experiencing and escaping to.

Finally, it's worth noting the irony in the final lines of Chapter 14 - specifically, narration's definition of the end of Skip's life as "quick" and "clean." The irony arises when the ending of the novel is considered - specifically, what the reader can safely assume will be the end of Connie's life, trapped in and essentially tortured by life in the ward for the violently insane.

Chapters 15 and 16

Chapters 15 and 16 Summary

Chapter 15 - In her attempt to travel to visit Luciente, Connie transports herself to the New York of the future and into the "partment" of Gildina, a surgically-altered sexual service provider. Initially reacting with disbelief to Connie's presence, Gildina eventually shows Connie around the completely enclosed "partment," chattering about what she has to undergo to stay in the right kind of condition to please her man, how that man is largely cybernetic and becoming more so, and how the ways of the world are controlled by the few rich families remaining. Connie is shocked to discover the complete artificiality of Gildina's life - of the woman's body, of the food, the view, and Gildina's values. Suddenly their conversation is interrupted by the angry arrival of a cybernetic guard, who tells Gildina she will be turned over to the "organ bank" for talking to someone she shouldn't and who threatens to take Connie into custody. He is surprised, however, by Connie's lack of fear in his presence, a lack of fear springing from Connie's certainty that she can escape the situation easily. It's not as easy as she thinks, but escape it she does, finding herself back in the ward with a splitting headache, caused by the device in her brain reacting to her anger at the state of things in New York. As she subtly reassures Sybil that she's okay, she realizes that "that was the other world that might come into be. That was Luciente's war, and she was enlisted in it ..." (see Chapter 9).

Chapter 16 - The first, relatively brief part of this chapter focuses on the changes to Connie's life in the aftermath of her surgery and her subsequent visit to the New York of the future - doing only what she has to do when she is made to do it. A visit from the even more drugged up Dolly upsets her, and becoming reluctantly involved in the ward gossip about the various doctors depresses her even more. Suddenly she is yanked into the future by a surge of powerful emotion from Luciente, who reveals that Jackrabbit has been killed while doing his defense and that it's time for his wake. The lengthy remainder of this chapter is taken up with a detailed description of the wake - of the stories told by Jackrabbit's "mothers" and friends, how the intense grief of Luciente and locked up grief of Bolivar both find release, how Jackrabbit's body is buried, and how a tree is planted in his grave. As had happened with Sappho, the final act of the wake is to travel to the brooder to witness the beginning of a new life. There, Luciente and the other mourners are told that Jackrabbit's exact genetic makeup is to be incorporated into the life of a new child - in other words, Jackrabbit will be born again. Luciente is careful to point out to Connie that no-one knows where the new "Jackrabbit" will be born, and no-one knows whether he'll turn out the same way (environment, she says, does play a role in defining identity). Luciente and Connie both, however, take significant comfort from the idea that at least part of what made Jackrabbit special will continue. As they're walking away from the brooder, Luciente's fatigue leads her to tell Connie that it's time to return to her own time, which she does ... and discovers that she has been in a coma for twelve hours, that the doctors and her friends are both worried, and that as a result the doctors have delayed further surgeries. She tells the worried

Sybil that this was her first victory, narration commenting that "with Luciente's help, she might be able to scare [the doctors] again. What else could she do? It was the only way she could see to struggle."

Chapters 15 and 16 Analysis

Chapter 15 stands out from the rest of the narrative for several reasons. The most obvious is that it is the only time in the narrative Connie travels to a future and doesn't meet Luciente and/or any other members of the Mattapoisett community. The other reasons this chapter stands out are related to the main one - in terms of the language used, for example; in this chapter the futuristic terms and references are far more numerous, more self-conscious, and more incomprehensible than they are anywhere else. This, in turn, is perhaps the result of this nightmarish, artificial New York being so different from the dreamy, ultra-earthy Mattapoisett. In a world where everything (feelings, views, body parts, food, etc) is artificial, it makes sense that the language used to describe that world is artificial also. Finally, this chapter stands out as a clear and vivid portrayal of a world that could conceivably come into existence if Connie makes the wrong choice and allows the "shapers" of her time (Redding and the others) to succeed in their experiments. There is the sense from this chapter that Redding's emotion-control mechanism is the thin end of the wedge - that if he succeeds, he and other scientists will look for, and find, ways of "improving" the lives of human beings to the point where their souls, like Gildina's and her guard's, no longer exist. In the meantime, there is a very clear parallel between future and present in Chapter 15 - the parallels between Gildina and Dolly, and between Gildina's cybernetic guard and Geraldo, are obvious. So, too, is the warning inherent in the parallel.

Chapter 16, on the other hand, is almost as self-indulgently humanistic as Chapter 15 is self-indulgently anti-mechanization. The detail and depth of the narration describing the feelings of those who loved Jackrabbit, the stories told at his funeral, the frankly heavy-handed implication that his "being" will go on - all seem to be striving a little too hard to make the point that the future, as lived by Luciente, Jackrabbit and the others, must be protected.

The juxtaposition of these two contrasting (and slightly overdrawn) visions of the future serves to motivate Connie even more strongly, propelling her with even greater firmness towards her act of murderous destruction in Chapter 19.

Chapters 17 and 18

Chapters 17 and 18 Summary

Chapter 17 - After several failed attempts to connect with Luciente, Connie finally succeeds, encountering Luciente and Bee in the woods in the middle of a battle with the other side. As they're running to escape the effects of a sonic weapon, Connie suddenly finds herself back in the ward, being examined by doctors and nurses after suffering what they call an hallucination. Just as suddenly, she's back in conflict, this time in a trench (again with Luciente and Bee, but this time with a few others) with a weapon in her hand and about to fire on approaching android forces. As they're beginning their attack, Connie flashes back to the occasion when she witnessed a street fight in which the beautiful Martin (her first husband) almost lost his life. Back on the ward, Connie is again being examined by the staff, frantic because they are unable to get hold of Dr. Redding. Back at the conflict, Connie rides an airborne transport, a "floater," with Luciente and Hawk (the renamed Innocente - see Chapter 4) about to engage in airborne combat. As they and advance on the floaters of the enemy, Connie is shocked to see that the combatants in the other fighters have the faces of the doctors and nurses in charge of her (Redding, Acker and the others) as well as the social workers, police officers and judges who have directed her life into its downward spiral. Her vision is interrupted by the sound of Dr. Redding ordering her into an ambulance and taken to another hospital where her implant is removed. After she recovers from the surgery, narration describes how, and why, Connie becomes a model patient - see "Quotes", p. 337.

Chapter 18 - As she continues her efforts to prove herself a good and cooperative patient worthy of at least a degree of freedom, Connie copes with Sybil's resentment, Dolly's flightiness, and the wary gratitude of the doctors and nurses for whom Connie is working. She manages to make a couple phone calls to her brother Luis, begging him to let her come visit for Thanksgiving in the hopes that she'll find, or make, an opportunity to escape. Eventually he agrees, and as she leaves, Sybil wishes her well, hoping that she does escape and that they never see each other again. When Connie arrives at Luis' home, she finds the sudden sense of freedom overwhelming (see "Quotes", p. 351) but is nonetheless able to keep her eyes open for any opportunity to escape. She soon realizes, however, that it's going to be difficult; there is no way to climb down from her second-story bedroom window, and Luis keeps her both locked in and constantly supervised. On the last full day of her visit, Luis takes her to his greenhouse, where he puts her to work pulling plants from his stock for a big party he's throwing. Again, her attempts at escape are thwarted by Luis and his watchful staff, but she does, however, manage to steal a few minutes alone in a shed where she fills a bottle with poison (see "Quotes", p. 362). That night she attaches a false label to the bottle of poison, disguising it as shampoo and putting it among the other discarded personal effects given to her by Adele so it won't be confiscated when she returns to the hospital. On her way back, she wonders what happened to Luciente after the battle.

Chapters 17 and 18 Analysis

There are several notable elements in this section, most of them in Chapter 17. The first is the reappearance of Innocente, now with a new name that seems particularly appropriate to her attitudes and actions in this section. The second important element is related - the sudden sense that Mattapoisett and the people who live there are in danger, not just of being killed but of having their whole way of life destroyed. Though Luciente and other members of the Mattapoisett community have referred to conflict with outsiders and to their obligation to fight in that conflict, this is the first time Connie has any concrete indication of what that conflict actually is. The irony, of course, is that in Chapter 19, Luciente reveals that the scene never took place, meaning that either Connie made a visit to an alternative future or that she imagined the whole thing. There are arguments in favor of both, with Connie's visit to Gildina in the corrupt, future New York supporting the former and Connie's recognition of familiar faces as the warriors in the airborne fighters supporting the latter.

There is a particularly telling detail here - the faces Connie recognizes are not only those of the doctors currently in control of her life, but of everyone in her life who has judged her, controlled her, and wounded her—all the people she blames for her current condition. This is strong evidence that at least there is a degree of paranoia at work in her psyche, and at most her whole experience of the future is a sub-conscious creation of her deeply troubled mind. This evidence is further supported by the way in which this chapter is written. It is by far the most jaggedly-structured section of the book, the most jarring in its abrupt shifts of emotion and intent. The disjointed structure evokes the disjointed nature of Connie's thought processes; she is becoming psychologically fragmented, with her different realities (imagined or no) crossing over into one another. This, in clinical terms, is generally considered a symptom of schizophrenia, again adding substance to the premise that Connie is creating her alternate reality. The point must be made, however, that although her future is probably less than fully real; the decisions she makes about herself and her physical/psychological freedom are VERY real ... just, perhaps, more insane than rational.

Finally, the end of Chapter 17 marks a turning point for Connie; it seems obvious that she now has a clear alternative in her mind to escape, an alternative defined by her determination to preserve her ideal future from the attacks/influence of the Shapers and their ancestors (Redding and his ilk).

Chapter 18 is essentially about Connie's exploration of both alternatives - escape and murder - and investigation of the tactics necessary in order to achieve either or both. In her mind, whatever alternative plays out, she has clearly decided she is not going to live her life on the terms of those who imprison her (who now include in their number her brother Luis).

Chapters 19 and 20

Chapters 19 and 20 Summary

Chapter 19 - Connie and Sybil again start talking about escape, but this time Connie will provide the distraction and Sybil will, in the plan, go free. As they develop their plan, Sybil becomes concerned about the hard anger she sees in Connie's eyes, but Connie refuses to tell her what she has planned, saying only that she's fighting a war. The night before the escape attempt, Connie lies awake and manages one last contact with Luciente and the others, discovering that the battle she believed she fought in (Chapter 17) never actually happened, but according to Luciente may have happened in another continuum or as the result of the device planted in Connie's brain. Conversation reveals that the Shaping controversy is continuing, that Hawk (Innocente) has decided to join a touring group of performers, and that Luciente is gradually getting over her grief over Jackrabbit. Connie asks Luciente whether she believes it's always wrong to kill, even if the victim is someone who has control or power. Luciente indicates that sometimes killing is necessary (see "Quotes", p. 370), and realizes that Connie is planning to kill someone. For her part, Connie is being overwhelming by her feelings for Dawn, beautiful and still resembling Angelina as she brushes away newly falling snow. Back on the ward, Connie wonders how things might have been different if she'd been left just one person to love (see "Quotes", p. 372). The next day, Redding and the other doctors overrule Connie's objections to another operation, saying Luis has already approved it. As they take a break, their decision made, Connie makes them a fresh pot of coffee, putting the poison from Luis' greenhouse into it. She then retreats to her room, indicating to Sybil that she should be ready to make her escape attempt. She sits on her bed, listening as the effects of her poisoned coffee are discovered, aware that she is cut off forever from Luciente and the others, and proudly defiant (defiantly proud?) that for once in her life, she has fought (for everyone she loved, for everyone who was beaten down, and for everyone in her beloved future) and won.

Chapter 20 - This chapter consists mostly of transcripts of Connie's medical reports (see "Quotes", p. 380), all of which conclude that she suffers from schizophrenia. The novel's final lines of narration portray Connie as having been sent back to Rockover (the institution for the violently ill).

Chapters 19 and 20 Analysis

This chapter marks the book's climax, its emotional and narrative high point, the moment of most intense confrontation between protagonist and antagonist, and the moment at which the protagonist (Connie) achieves her goals. There are several noteworthy elements here - the reversal of roles between Connie and Sybil, Connie's accepting the mantle and responsibilities of the warrior for the first time in her life, and the reappearance of Dawn/Angelina, who is the core trigger for Connie's act of violent rebellion. It's also important to note the future's attitude towards killing (see "Quotes", p.

370), in which Luciente justifies what is essentially capital punishment in the name of making life easier for those in control. The irony here, of course, is that this is on some level the same attitude as Redding and the others - while they're not necessarily killing their patients (Alice, Skip, etc) they are in essence rendering them non-threatening and harmless, ending their psychological and emotional lives rather than their physical ones but still bringing them to an ending.

It's difficult to say with any certainty whether the author intends Connie to be considered a hero - to herself, to the people she thinks she's acting on behalf of and/or defending, or to the reader. On the one hand, there is clearly at least some intent to suggest Connie has achieved a place of freedom, accomplishment, independence and personal integrity. On the other hand, there is also clearly a similar degree of intent to suggest that Connie's actions are grounded (if the term is not inappropriate) in an insane concept of a future for which she becomes determined to fight. Connie's heroic action comes across as being built upon a foundation of paranoia, blind anger, and misplaced affection. Does that make her action any less heroic? Or does it make her simply psychotic, killing for its own sake?

In the middle of considering all this comes Chapter 20, with its references to schizophrenia, the only references in the book to that psychologically dissociative disease. The references, however, are far from definitive - while they clearly suggest Connie is deeply unstable, Connie's (and therefore the narrative's) experience of the medical profession is so negative that the reader can't help questioning the validity of the schizophrenia diagnosis. The diagnosis points to a possible explanation, but here at the novel's end it's important to consider its beginning. If Luciente and her future truly are Connie's creations, would the second chair in Connie's kitchen have been warm? Would Dolly have heard voices? And later, when Connie's out in the field after her escape, would she have known on her own which herbs to eat to sustain herself? The author leaves it for the reader to decide - and, perhaps, to define his/her own definition of heroism as the result of that decision.

Characters

Consuelo (Connie) Ramos

Connie is the novel's central character and protagonist, a middle-aged, Hispanic woman with a troubled history - several love affairs with what most people (certainly the authority figures in her life) would call "unsuitable" men, several experiences of violence (physical and emotional) and of substance abuse (both drugs and alcohol), and perhaps most importantly, a record of mental/emotional instability. There is the sense throughout the novel that in her own mind, in her perceptions of herself and of her life, she is a victim - that throughout her life various authority figures have dismissed her, controlled her, and punished her simply because she does not conform to what they think she should feel and how she should behave. This sense of victim-hood, justified or no (and the novel makes no clear statement whether it is or it isn't - see "Style - Point of View"), is the principle motivation for what Connie comes to believe is an act of rebellion and freedom, the killing of the latest (and perhaps most torturous) authority figures in her life.

The main question of the novel is whether the world of the future into which Connie travels (escapes?) is real or a product of her troubled, fragmented psyche. Does she truly go there or does she merely imagine that she does? Again, the novel makes no clear statements one way or the other. It does, however, make the very clear point that Connie, for all her troubles and bad choices, is a human being, and for that reason deserves to be treated with respect, integrity, and a degree of sympathy/empathy. Is the author making this point to suggest that the same should be afforded to all similarly emotionally/mentally ill people? Not necessarily - but it does seem quite plain that through narrating Connie's experience, she (the author) is advocating for the right to dignity of the individual.

Luciente

Luciente is what might be described as a non-combative antagonist, a character who is the main trigger for change in the protagonist but who is not hostile. Such a character inspires, guides and supportively confronts the protagonist with uncomfortable truths in order that the protagonist undergoes a necessary process of change. Luciente does all this simply by being who she is, the androgynous embodiment of all the positive values Connie believes are missing in her life - freedom, intelligence, sensuality, power and above all courage. In psychoanalytical terms, Luciente might be described as a projection, an externalization of internal characteristics - in this case, the positive ideals and attitudes that Connie desperately seeks to develop in herself. All these definitions and/or interpretations of Luciente's character hold true whether she is a creation of Connie's schizophrenic mentality or not. If she's real or if she's imagined, Luciente is a mentor and teacher, a guide and guardian, apparently having little or no independent existence apart from what Connie needs her and wants her to be.

An important piece of evidence supporting this theory about the nature and purpose of Luciente's character is her name which (as discussed in the analysis of Chapter 2) is a variation on the Spanish word for "light." Light is traditionally a symbol of wisdom, intelligence, insight, and power. In naming Luciente as she does, the author (or Connie, if Luciente and her world are her creation) is defining the individual as a source of psychological and/or emotional illumination, a torch lighting the way to Connie's claiming of a truer identity.

Dolly

Dolly is Connie's niece, the daughter of her brother Luis (see below). Dolly is young and vulnerable, ambitious and superficial, lazy and easily manipulated. She is addicted to drugs and to men, falling (willingly?) into prostitution as a means of filling her need for both. She loves Connie but is weakly unable and/or unwilling to stand up for her and/or help her in any meaningful way. As such, she is a powerful contrast to Luciente, who is in many ways everything Dolly is not. In the same way as Luciente is a projection of the ideal Connie, she could also be an imagining of an ideal Dolly.

Geraldo

Geraldo is Dolly's pimp, a violent controlling man who threatens violence to both Dolly and Connie if they don't do as he says. He can be seen as representative of the kind of controlling, violent authority figure that Connie blames for the misery of her life and against which she becomes so determined to rebel.

Angelina / Dawn

Angelina is Connie's daughter and a catalyst for much of Connie's state of being. On the one hand, Angelina is the focus of much of Connie's powerful maternal instincts and her desire to love unconditionally. On the other hand, Angelina is the unwitting source of much of Connie's misery - Angelina's childish and lonely temper was the trigger for the explosion of physical violence that sent Connie into psychiatric care for the first time and Angelina into adoption. Angelina never actually appears in the novel, but the memory of her and hope for her are both powerful motivators for Connie.

Dawn, meanwhile, is a young girl from the Mattapoisett community in the future who Connie believes strongly resembles Angelina. On the occasions when Dawn appears, Connie has difficulty believing that Angelina and Dawn are different people. The resemblance between the two characters is a strong contributing factor to the novel's overall sense that Connie is creating the world of Mattapoisett out of memory and longing for that which, in her real world, has been taken from her.

Luis

Luis is Connie's hard working but self-centered and unsympathetic brother. He is selfishly interested in his own life and in power over other people, both of which are key factors in why he repeatedly acts in ways to keep Connie from being a distraction (signing her into hospitals, authorizing surgery on her, etc).

Martin, Eddie, Claud

Connie loved, and was loved by, three men in her life - the beautiful and sexy Martin (her first husband), the charming and roguish Eddie (second husband), and Claud, a blind musician and pickpocket. All three were taken from Connie's life as the result of criminal behavior, and all three have (to varying degrees) become idealized in Connie's mind in the years of her single-hood.

Bee, Jackrabbit, Barbarossa, Sappho, Sojourner, Parra, Diana

All these individuals are members of the futuristic Mattapoisett community to which Connie travels. They each, at different times in the narrative, play key roles in bringing Connie to a deeper understanding of both her future and her self. Their combined influence moves Connie gradually but consistently in the direction of greater freedom, confidence, and determination to live a life of more personal integrity.

Sybil, Skip, Alice Blue Bottom

These three characters are fellow "patients" in the mental hospital in which Connie finds herself, and become fellow "subjects" (guinea pigs" for the experiments conducted by Redding and the other doctors. Sybil is portrayed as tall, elegant, self-willed and strong, and as believing that she is a witch. Skip is bisexual (leaning towards the homosexual), outspoken, flighty and passionate. Alice is also outspoken, but to the point of violence. All three are, to varying degrees and in varying ways, inspiration for Connie to make her stand against the destructive power and control of the doctors (see below)

Redding, Acker, the other doctors

Redding is the lead surgeon on the team that is experimenting with mind/emotional control on Connie and the other patients in the mental hospital, while Acker is the psychologist assigned to monitor the mental/emotional responses of the patients to what is happening to them. They and the other doctors on the team (not to mention the financial investors in the project) treat Connie and the others as essentially inhuman, as though they have no emotions and/or sensibilities that might be affected by their experiments. As such, they are all perceived by Connie as the latest in a long string of

authority figures who have kept her from living a full life. As the most immediate, available and present of these figures, they become the targets of her murderous act of war, her claim of freedom.

Shapers

In Mattapoisett's futuristic world, the derogatory term "Shaper" is given to scientists advocating complete genetic control over the society, its inhabitants, its animals and plants. They are the embodiment of everything Luciente, Connie and the other inhabitants of Mattapoisett reject, although there is the sense that all the Shapers are really doing is taking the policy of genetic manipulation that has turned Mattapoisett into an apparent ideal a step or two further. Mattapoisett is what it is, free of racial and gender tensions, free of the tensions and conflicts associated with sexual reproduction, as the result of genetic manipulation. The Shapers, it seems, merely want to continue a process already begun.

It's also important to note that in Connie's perception and experience, the Shapers are the ideological and scientific descendants of Redding and the other doctors. She sees the latter as present-day Shapers, determined to continue their experiments in the name of increasing and exercising control rather than in the name of improving humanity. This, she comes to understand, is the reason the "shapers" of the present must be destroyed, to prevent their work from becoming an inspiration to the Shapers of her beloved, almost sacred, and certainly idealized future.

Gildina

In the frighteningly artificial New York accidentally "visited" by Connie in Chapter 15, Gildina is the equivalent of a prostitute or call girl. Surgically enhanced and manipulated in almost every way, Gildina lives a life entirely devoted to and defined by giving pleasure to the men who contract her. She is unaware that life can be lived any other way and is shocked and aghast when Connie suggests the possibility. Gildina is a powerfully, if unsubtly, defined contrast to the free, natural, open-minded and open-hearted Luciente.

Objects/Places

Connie's Apartment

The opening chapters of the novel take place in Connie's shabby, run-down apartment in the barrio in New York City. The apartment is the setting for the violent confrontation between Connie, Geraldo and Dolly which results in Connie being sent to Bellevue. It's also the setting for Connie's conversation with Luciente, in which she's told that Luciente is from the future. The apartment is a setting for juxtaposed scenes of despair and hope.

Luciente's Watch

The "watch" (which Luciente says is actually called a "kenner") is a portable computer, similar to today's Blackberry or cell phone, offering access to information and communication.

Bellevue

This is the renowned/infamous hospital for the mentally ill in New York to which Connie has been committed in the past as the result of her actual violence towards her daughter and to which she is again committed, but only briefly, in the present as the result of her presumed violence towards her niece's pimp.

Rockover

From Bellevue, Connie is moved to Rockover, an institution specifically geared towards the incarceration of violent offenders. Narration at the novel's conclusion suggests that after her murderous act of rebellion (the poisoning of Redding and the other doctors) Connie is returned to Rockover.

G-2

After being moved from ward to ward in Rockover, Connie and the other subjects of Redding's experiment are moved to a special ward designated G-2. This ward is more open and more comfortable than the other wards but is nonetheless clearly a situation in which Connie has no control over her own destiny.

Mouth-of-Mattapoisett

This is the name of Luciente's home community, where all the residents/citizens live as independent but communally-minded individuals. There is a real world Mattapoisett in the same way as there is a real world New York City. That Mattapoisett is a community in Massachusetts, originally built around the ship-building industry at the "mouth" of the Mattapoisett River, and now a suburb of Boston. For consideration of the metaphoric value of "Mattapoisett," see "Style - Setting".

The Brooder

This is the first of three important buildings in Mattapoisett, specifically the building where babies are conceived, gestated, and born, all through the control of machines.

The House of Children

After leaving the brooder, children move to the House of Children, where they are raised and taught communally. Each has three co-mothers specifically responsible for the child's emotional well being, but every member of the community is responsible for their social and intellectual development.

The Fooder

The fooder is a dining hall. Everyone in Mattapoisett eats together; everyone takes turns preparing food, and everyone takes turns cleaning up.

The Dialytrode

This is the name for the device implanted in the brains of Connie, Skip, Alice, and the other subjects of Redding's experiment. It monitors and controls through injections of drugs and/or the application of small electrical currents, their stronger, more violent emotional responses.

Coffee

Throughout the narrative, coffee is perceived and treated as a ritualistic beverage. The coffee that Connie starts to make for Dolly is a manifestation of her desire for comfort - the coffee that she saves "for special." This coffee is never served, however - the making of it is interrupted by Geraldo. In Mattapoisett, coffee is served only on very rare occasions, specifically, when negotiations and conversations in government are going to go on for a long time. According to narration, coffee not only serves to keep the participants awake, it serves to remind them they are doing something special and important for their society. Finally, Redding and the other doctors conducting the mind

control experiments on Connie and the others are, according to narration, addicted to coffee. Redding is portrayed as being addicted to it, while the other doctors drink it as frequently as he does in order to ingratiate themselves with Redding. There is the strong sense that for the doctors, coffee is a symbol of power and authority. This is what makes Connie's choice to put the poison that ends the doctors' lives into their coffee a symbolically important choice - she is, in metaphoric terms, destroying their authority, their self-importance, and their power along with their lives.

Themes

Parents and Children

This theme is explored on two main levels. The first is related to and defined by, Connie's relationship with her own mother, with her mother's mother (see "Quotes", p. 225), and with her daughter Angelina. The first is examined only on occasion, but on those occasions is portrayed quite vividly as confrontational and, on Connie's part, full of resentment. There is the clear sense that Connie wants to be free of everything her mother represents, but as an adult is frustrated, hurt, and angered that she has been unable to do so. This, in turn, seems to color the various aspects of her relationship with her daughter Angelina, which is on one level loving and sensitive, on another level violent and destructive. This aspect of their relationship, in Connie's past and in her present, is what gets her into her situation of incarceration and powerlessness. Meanwhile, Connie's relationship with her mother's mother is only referred to once, in terms that could either be ironic or respectful - Connie's grandmother is portrayed as stoic, strong, and powerful. The narrative isn't clear whether Connie sees this as positive or negative, but is clear that Connie is fully aware of the history of female suffering in both her family and culture of origin (Hispanic).

An additional manifestation of Connie's relationship with both her mother and her daughter shows up in the future when Connie encounters a young girl (Dawn) who, in her mind, is everything Connie wanted to be and everything she thinks Angelina could and should be - beautiful, free, intelligent, spirited. Given that there is the strong possibility throughout the narrative that Connie is inventing and/or imagining this future, there is the equally strong sense that Dawn is, for Connie, an idealized projection of both herself and of Angelina. In an interesting twist, Dawn (or rather Angelina as Dawn) is at least part of what gets Connie into her situation of freedom and empowerment. The irony, of course, is that this sense of freedom leads Connie into an even more intense act of violence than the violence Connie does to Angelina in the first place.

The second main level of exploration of this theme occurs in the narrative's portrayal of parenting in the future. The biological/reproductive aspects of it have been eliminated; a child does not come into the lives of its parents as the result of the sexual act. The scope of parenting has also been expanded; each child now has three co-mothers of any gender rather than a parent of each gender, while each member of the community has equal responsibility for ensuring the child's educational and experiential well being. The old saying "it takes a village to raise a child" has, in Mattapoisett, come into practice. There is a certain sense that the author, and therefore the narrative, regards this style of parenting in positive terms, but the point to keep in mind (a point necessary to remember in all discussions of this book) is that Mattapoisett could very well be simply a projection of Connie's thwarted desires. Mattapoisett's ways of raising children may be more a result of the character's perspective (wounded, victimized, guilty, bitter) than the author's.

The Nature of the Future

As is the case in many novels of speculative/futuristic fiction, the future in this novel is (in general) portrayed as functioning more idealistically than contemporary society. There is no pollution, environmental abuse, abuse of individuals based on sexual orientation, gender, or race, no rich/poor conflict, etc - in Mattapoisett, the community in which most of the future action takes place. In the midst of all this idealism, Mattapoisett (see "Objects/Places" and "Setting") is also spoken about, and at times portrayed as, being at war with the sides of humanity that have corrupted Connie's world, and by extension our own - greed, ambition for power, sexual narrow mindedness, money as a manifestation of worth all exist in the society at war with Mattapoisett. In this sense, there is little difference between the Mattapoisett world and our own.

This is not to say that the ideals of the Mattapoisett world are invalid. For the most part, the people of Mattapoisett live lives that many in the contemporary world would envy. Aside from the above mentioned in this book people automatically like, respect and trust each other, as opposed to contemporary society in which people automatically mistrust, disrespect, and barely tolerate each other. And in the future, when such negative feelings exist, they are handled and disputes are resolved through conversation, mediation, and connection rather than through violence, confrontation, and destruction. The narrative does explore elements of a more totalitarian, controlling and dehumanized future which appears in almost as many speculative narratives as the more idealized versions. But while Gildina's highly artificial, decadent New York and the violence of Mattapoisett's confrontation with the Shapers are ultimately presented as alternative possibilities rather than genuine realities, the fact remains that both visions (like the darker futures in narratives like Orwell's 1984, for example) warn of the dangers of submission to totalitarian control - the abandonment of freedom as a goal of both the individual and of society. This freedom is, for the most part, the core ideal in Mattapoisett, the core ideal at the heart of Connie's personal journey of transformation, and the core ideal in the narrative's thematic warning to contemporary society to shape up or face the loss of freedom to the Shapers and their psycho-social-political-moral ilk.

Parallel Existences

Throughout the narrative, there are clear parallels between Connie's two levels of existence. Some are equivalent (Bee and Claud, Dawn and Angelina, Jackrabbit and Skip), some are contrasting (Luciente and Dolly). All add support to the argument that the future visited by Connie is a creation of her so-called "schizophrenic mind (see "The Nature of the Future" above). Complicating the question of the nature of the future, and specifically the question of the parallels, is the question of Connie's relationship to those parallels, a question thematically explored several times throughout the narrative.

If the future world is Connie's invention, sub-conscious or otherwise (and the narrative presents a great deal of evidence to suggest this is the case), why does Connie inject so much into it that she finds distasteful? Physical/sexual freedom, the removal of

gender roles, the absence of race-defined identity are all held up by Luciente and the other inhabitants of Mattapoisett as ideal but are viewed by Connie (at least initially) as inappropriate. Some of these ideals, sexual freedom and the removal of race as a defining factor in identity, she comes to accept. Others, most particularly the removal of gender roles (specifically motherhood), she finds less easy to integrate into her belief system. And it does seem that by the end of the novel Connie has concluded all the aspects of the future she experiences, whether real or not, are worthwhile - such a conclusion, in fact, seems to play a key role in her murderous decisions in Chapters 18 and 19. Because there is so much in the narrative (the parallels between the present and future, the references to schizophrenia) that suggests Connie's experience of the future is being created rather than lived, the appearance of so much that she initially resents seems incongruous and almost jarring.

But there is also this way of looking at this question. Are Connie's resistances to the breakdown of defining characteristics in the future in fact resistances to what she sees as a perverse kind of safety in her present (being defined as Chicana/a mother/sexually unattractive/a victim)? Does Connie on some level believe that if she stays within safe, socially-imposed definitions of who she is, she doesn't have to take responsibility for her own identity and freedom? There is the strong sense throughout the narrative that the answer is yes. This, then leads to the idea that, as Connie realizes in the future, she can be self-defined as free, she can find courage to break free of the "safety" of the present, and she can take the risky chance of accepting responsibility for herself and for her own life. This is her journey of transformation throughout the narrative - as she, inspired by the future, breaks free of what has been painful but safe, she feels empowered to express her own inner freedom and investment in the future that has inspired her.

The Importance and Value of Individual Freedom

This is the novel's essential core theme, in that its events, themes, and settings, the journeys of its various characters - all, in one way or another, are connected to the ideal of individual freedom. It's what Connie struggles to achieve, and it's at the core (in terms of both ideal and practice) of the inspiration provided by the people and community of Mattapoisett as her struggles increase. It's at the core of the narrative's explorations of family relationships, of the nature of the future (in that the ongoing struggle for freedom defines that future), and of Connie's parallel existences (all of which celebrate freedom or mourn its loss). The ideal is inherent in the narrative's various settings, in that Connie's apartment and the various mental institutions in which she finds herself in are symbolic of a lack of freedom, while Mattapoisett is the total embodiment of that freedom. Finally, the stories of the characters other than Connie are all about variations on the theme of freedom - Dolly thinks she has it but doesn't; Angelina has been given freedom from that which confines her mother; Luciente and the people of Mattapoisett have the sort of freedom that Connie can only dream of, and those same people struggle to maintain it. Then there is Gildina, who accepts a complete lack of freedom as her ordained lot in life, and the two generations of Shapers - Redding in the present and the unnamed warriors of the future - who act out of a desire to reduce individual freedom.

Freedom is what WOMAN ON THE EDGE OF TIME is all about - what both the ideal of it and the reality of it (or the reality of its absence) drives people to think, feel, and do.

Style

Point of View

The novel is written from the third person point of view of its central character, Consuelo (Connie) Ramos (see "Characters"). This point of view is extremely subjective in that it presents events, circumstances and other characters solely from her perspective. There are no diversions into the thoughts, beliefs and feelings of other characters outside of Connie's own experience of them. The single exception can be found in Chapter 20, which contains what appears to be transcripts of Connie's medical records; they are about Connie, but not written from her point of view.

That one exception aside, the most intriguing aspect of the narrative's strictly-defined point of view is that there is no indication of whether Connie's visits to the future are genuine experiences of an alternative reality or projections/manifestations of her admittedly very troubled psyche. Is Connie living these experiences or making them up? Again, the novel offers no clear answers; its highly subjective point of view narrating events such as the time shifts as Connie experiences them and occasionally wonders about them is inconclusive as to the nature of the reality of a future world. Connie's questions about what is really happening occur more in the beginning of the narrative, when Connie is unsure about everything in her life. As she becomes more sure of herself and of her purpose, she simultaneously becomes less questioning of the circumstances in which she's living out that purpose. She unquestioningly accepts both the experiences and the unpredictability of those experiences (i.e., the apparently random shifts into the apparently-alternative futures of Gildina and the battle with the Shapers), absorbing them and transmuting them into motivators for her personal transformation. Ironically, this inner transformation, implied in both external events and the intensity of the narrative's point of view in recounting those events, can be seen as suggesting that while Connie feels she is becoming more connected to her personal reality, the reader feels she is becoming more disconnected from the reality of the world around her.

Setting

Setting plays an essential role in defining the narrative. More specifically, the novel's two main settings (the mental institution and Mattapoisett) illuminate and reinforce the contrasting dimensions of Connie's two lives.

The present day, mental institutional setting is a manifestation of her psychological/emotional/spiritual imprisonment. Its walls and regulations, and perhaps most importantly the people who embody both, are clear portrayals of the judgments Connie feels have been made of her all her life and the restrictions those judgments have placed on her. The settings of both the novel's early and later chapters (Connie's apartment, the home and business of her brother Luis) echo these constrictive values.

Meanwhile, the future/Mattapoisett setting is a manifestation of her idealized desires for freedom. In Mattapoisett, all the aspects of her life that she feels have defined her and restricted her (gender, race, income, education, intelligence) have been eliminated. By visiting Mattapoisett, Connie is in effect visiting her true self and emerges from her visits there with a clearer vision not only of how she could be but how she can bring that alternative self-reality into being.

Meanwhile, as discussed in "Objects/Places," it's important to note that there is a real Mattapoisett, in Massachusetts. While the narrative contains no indications of why the author chose to set her (Connie's?) ideal society here, it might be worthwhile remembering that Massachusetts (specifically, Boston) was the scene for a defiant act of freedom and rebellion similar to that which Mattapoisett inspires in Connie—the Boston Tea Party, which played a part in triggering the American Revolutionary War, which in turn led to what is often held up to the rest of the world as a beacon of individual independence - the United States of America. The real world aspect of the novel's setting can be seen as reinforcing its thematic valuing of freedom.

Language and Meaning

There are several ways in which language is used to considerable effect in this narrative. The first is to shape its point of view as defined above, with language being used to convey the sense that the story is being told from Connie's highly individualized, intensely emotional perspective. This is done through the description of characters using vocabulary and images that Connie might use, through the employment of stream-of-consciousness (narration of rapid-fire thoughts as Connie experiences them), and through imagery that reflects Connie's experience of events (see, for example, the quote from p.32). This is Connie's story told in Connie's words; there are occasional lapses into jargon that undermine this use of language somewhat, but they are relatively sparse.

In terms of dialogue there is first the language of Connie's present life in the barrio of New York City (rough, coarse, peppered with curse words, raw with violent emotion) as contrasted with the language of Mattapoisett (respectful, quiet, explanatory rather than confrontational). An interesting element of the Mattapoisett dialogue is how it portrays, at times self-consciously, the evolution of language and technology. For example, there are no gender-defined personal pronouns - him, her, his, hers; instead, individuals are referred to as "persons" or "per" for short. So the phrases "his house" becomes "per house" or "her daughter" becomes "per daughter." Some readers might find this and other similar "developments" in language somewhat artificial and/or contrived, but they do serve to illustrate the author's (Connie's?) point about the idealization of the future world.

In stark contrast to the warmth and openness of language in Mattapoisett, there is the cold, very calculated narrowness of the language used in Gildina's New York (Chapter 15), all high tech coldness and scientific abbreviations, many more than occur in Mattapoisett. This is where the author's manipulation of language becomes quite self-

conscious and comes close to taking the reader out of the story. There are so many clever terms that the reader is likely to spend as much time figuring out what they mean (and marveling at the author's cleverness) as s/he spends following the story.

Structure

For the most part, the novel's structure is straightforward and linear, Event A leading to Event B leading to Event C eventually to the climax and denouement. The only significant exception to this linear progression is Chapter 2, which follows Connie through the chain of events that preceded Chapter 1. There is a certain lack of momentum, a certain sense of narrative movement that at times disappears under the expositional weight of Connie's exploration of life in Mattapoisett - or, more specifically, the various explanations of that life. The novel's plot sometimes gets derailed as the narrative explores, in almost too much detail, events in Mattapoisett such as the death of Sappho (Chapter 8), celebration (Chapter 9), and Jackrabbit's wake (Chapter 15).

This point is not made to suggest that these narrations should not exist, or even that they should be shorter; instead, the point is made to suggest that anchoring these narrations more tightly and/or more intimately to a forward moving structure might have gone a long way towards increasing momentum building towards the novel's climax—Connie's confrontations with the Shapers in both present and future. There is almost the sense that these confrontations just happen, rather than occur as important triggers and/or the inevitable results of Connie's journey of transformation. Structure in storytelling is about building that momentum and creating inevitability. Structure in WOMAN ON THE EDGE OF TIME seems almost to be more of an excuse, a reason for a lot of clever, inventive, speculative evocations of Connie's idiosyncratic, perhaps indulgent, likely insane definition of hope.

Quotes

"Connie lifted her hands to show them empty, always empty." p. 10.

"She had sold the pills for a little extra money, for a piece of pork or chicken once a week, soap to wash with. She found it hard to believe anybody would take that poison intentionally, but you could peddle any kind of pill in El Barrio." p. 10

"The dream was like those paper dolls, the only dolls she had had as a child, dolls with blond paper hair and Anglo features and big paper smiles. That she knew in her heart of ashes the dream was futile did not make it less precious. Every soul needs a little sweetness." p. 14

"Most people hit kids. But if you were on welfare and on probation and the whole social-pigeonholing establishment had the right to trek regularly through your kitchen looking in the closets and under the bed, counting the bedbugs and your shoes, you had better not hit your kid once." p. 26

"Into that asylum that offered none, the broken-springed bus roughly galloped ... as she was beckoned out with rough speed, she was surprised to see gulls wheeling above, far inland, as over other refuse grounds. Little was recycled here. She was human garbage carried to the dump." p. 32

"[Connie's] husband Eddie had called her a witch more than once - for instance, when he had been with another woman and came home with that presence and his pride and guilt flickering sulfurlike around him in small yellow flames." p. 43

"At fifteen, at seventeen, [Connie] had screamed at her mother as if the role of the Mexican woman who never sat down with her family, who ate afterward like a servant, were something her mother had invented." p. 47

"Captivity stretched before her, a hall with no doors and no windows, yawning under dim bulbs." p.60.

"The act was past in a moment. The consequence would go on as long as she breathed." p. 62.

"'Our madhouses are places where people retreat when they want to go down into themselves - to collapse, carry on, see visions, hear voices of prophecy, bang on the walls, relive infancy - getting in touch with the buried self and the inner mind. We all lose parts of ourselves. We all make choices that go bad.'" Luciente to Connie, p. 66

"It reminded [Connie] of the old intensity of a man wanting ... something - her body, her time, her comfort - that bearing down that wanted to grab her and push her under. But she was weary and beaten and she let herself yield. What had she to lose?" p. 68

"Well, what did I expect from the future, Connie asked herself. Pink skies? Robots on the march? Transistorized people? I guess we blew ourselves up and now we're back to the dark ages to start it all over again." p. 73

"Spring in the violent ward was only more winter, except for a little teasing of thee eyeballs when [Connie] stood at the high, heavily barred window." p. 80

"A little brain damage to jolt you into behaving right ... sometimes a woman forgot what had scared her, what she had been worrying about. Sometimes a woman was finally more scared of being burned in the head again, and she went home to her family and did the dishes and cleaned the house. Then maybe in a while she would remember and rebel and then she'd be back for more barbecue of the brain." p 81

"'Who wants to be a hole ... do you want to be a dumb hole people push things on or rub against? As for sex, it reminded me of going to the dentist the only time I indulged.'" Sybil to Connie, p. 85

"As long as her will kept her hair black as it had always been, as it should be, she was some part Consuelo who had won the scholarship to junior college, who had had the guts to depart Chicago for a strange city to get away from a rapist, who had broken Geraldo's nose - yes, she was proud of that. Her definition of Connie included black hair." p. 89

"[Connie] could feel minds stirring like poplars in a storm all through the ward, and occasionally a brittle branch would break off and crash to the floor." p. 110

"'We have found no way to break dependencies without some risk. What we can't risk is our people remaining stuck in old patterns - quarreling through what you called adolescence.'" Bee to Connie, p. 116

"'Consuelo, my given name ... [is] a Mexican woman, a servant of servants ... the woman who suffers ... then I'm Connie, who managed to get two years of college - till Consuelo got pregnant. Connie got decent jobs ... and fought welfare for a little extra money ... she got me on a bus when I had to leave Chicago ... then I'm Conchita, the low-down drunken mean part of me who gets by in jail, in the bughouse, who loves no good men, who hurt my daughter ...'" Connie to Jackrabbit and Luciente, p. 122.

"[Connie] felt angry ... how dare any man share that pleasure. These women thought they had won, but they had abandoned to men the last refuge of women. What was special about being a woman here? They had ... let men steal from them the last remnants of ancient power, those sealed in blood and in milk." p. 134

"'To pretend we are not made of elements ancient as the earth, that we do not owe those elements back to the web of all living ... for us a good death is one come in the fullness of age, without much pain and in clear mind. A full life is a used life!'" Luciente to Connie, p. 162

"The poorest most strung out fucked up worked over brought down junkie in Harlem had more freedom, more place, richer choices, sweeter dignity than the most privileged patient in the whole bughouse." p. 170

"'The history you people celebrated - all kings and presidents and Columbus discovered a conveniently empty country already discovered by a lot of people who happened to be living here - was just as legendary ...'" Luciente to Connie, p. 174.

"'... for my birthday last year I wore a sable cloak like the Queen of the Night. I have worn emeralds and for a month a Michelangelo hung were I could see it every day. All the pleasure I can suck from these things I've had and pass on to pleasure others!'" Luciente to Connie, p. 176.

"In their real future, she had been dead a hundred years or more; she was the dead who lived in them. Ancestor." p. 182.

"The first time in ... 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 ... 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." p. 194

"'...we can electrically trigger almost every mood and emotion - the fight or flight reaction, euphoria, calm, pleasure, pain, terror! We can monitor and induce reactions through the micro-miniaturized radio under the skull.'" Redding to the press, p. 204

"Suddenly Connie saw her mother's mother: a peasant woman dressed in black with her hair pulled back tight as if to punish it. With eight children, with close to forty grandchildren, with cows and pigs and chickens, she stood with that calm weighing expression as crisis after crisis broke over her. Everyone would be fed, everybody would be comforted, everyone would be healed, to each would be given a piece of herself." p. 225

"[Connie] ran, panting terribly, coughing, under the sliver of crescent moon, sharp enough to cut herself on. White as the metal span Sybil had pretended to attack her with. Bright as freedom. Skinny as her chances." P. 232

"'...we are born screaming ow and I! The gift is in growing to care, to connect, to cooperate. Everything we learn aims to make us feel strong in ourselves, connected to all living. At home.'" Luciente to Connie, p. 248.

"'This is the first time in you're life you've ever had quality medical attention. The affluent hire psychiatrists, but you've never had real treatment. We want you to function again, but without risk of committing those out-of-control acts. Without danger of your attacking some child again, or some other person near and dear to you.'" Acker to Connie, p. 262

"'Luciente ... you don't understand. Never in your life have you been helpless - under somebody's heel. You never lived where your enemies held power over you, power to run your life or wipe it out. You can't understand. That's how come you stand there feeding me empty slogans!'" Connie to Luciente, p. 263

"'The enemy is few but determined. Once they ran this whole world, they had power as no one, even the Roman emperors, and riches drained from everywhere. Now they have the power to exterminate us and we to exterminate them. They have such a limited base - the moon, Antarctica, the space platforms - for a population mostly of androids, robots, cybernauts, partially automated humans, that the war is one of attrition and small actions in the disputed areas, raids almost anyplace. We live with it. It's the tag end. We fear them, but we've prevailed so far and we believe we'll win ... if history is not reversed." Luciente to Connie, p. 267.

"Ugliness had surrounded her, had imprisoned her all her life. The ugliness of tenements, of slums, of El Barrio ... the grimy walls, the stinking streets, the stained air, the dark halls smelling of piss and stale cooking oil, the life like an open sore, had ground away her strength." p. 279

"Suddenly she thought that these men believed feeling itself [was] a disease, something to be cut out like a rotten appendix. Cold, calculating, ambitious, believing themselves rational and superior, they chased the crouching female animal through the brain with a scalpel." p. 282

"Slowly tears coursed down her own face, perhaps more for Skip than for Jackrabbit, perhaps for both, perhaps for old losses and him too and above all for Luciente and the pain tearing her." p. 316

"'There's always a thing you can deny an oppressor, if only your allegiance. Your belief. Your co-[operating]. Often even with vastly unequal power, you can find or force an opening to fight back. In your time many without power found ways to fight.'" Bee to Connie, p. 328

"The war raged outside her body now, outside her skull, but the enemy would press on and violate her frontiers again as soon as they chose their next advance. She was at war." p. 337

"So much space around her, it was almost frightening. It made her dizzy, it distracted her as if it were freedom instead of fancier imprisonment." p. 351

"We are not three women, Connie thought. We are ups and downs and heavy tranks meeting in the all-electric kitchen and bouncing off each other's opaque sides like shiny pills colliding." p. 359.

"...this was a weapon, a powerful weapon that came from the same place as the electrodes and the Thorazine and the dialytrode. One of the weapons of the powerful, of those who controlled ... she was stealing some of their power in this little bottle." p. 362

"'Power is violence. When did it get destroyed peacefully? We all fight when we're back to the wall - or to tear down a wall. You know we kill people who choose twice to hurt others. We don't think it's right to kill them. Only convenient. Nobody wants to stand guard over another.'" Luciente to Connie, p. 370

"Only one person to love. Just one little corner of loving of my own. For that love I'd have borne it all and I'd never have fought back. I would have obeyed. I would have agreed that I'm sick, that I'm sick to be poor and sick to be sick and sick to be hungry and sick to be lonely and sick to be robbed and used. But you were so greedy, so cruel! One of them, just one, you could have left me! But I have nothing. Why shouldn't I strike back?" p. 372.

"This patient is a socially maladjusted individual subject to periodic dysphorias accompanied by fear, leading to violent episodes and aggressions." p. 380.

Topics for Discussion

Do you think Connie's experience of the future is real or imagined, genuine or a manifestation of her diagnosed schizophrenia? Explain your answer.

What do you think are the symbolic/metaphoric layers of meaning in the name of Connie's daughter? Consider not just her "real-world" daughter, but how she also manifests in Luciente's world.

What are the different names you have had in your life - nicknames, childhood names, etc. What did they mean? Why did they come into being? Why did they change?

What is your reaction to Luciente's comments in Chapter 5 about women choosing to give up what makes them uniquely female (the capacity to give birth) in order to gain full equality? Do you believe this is a valid or invalid idea? Why or why not? Is it necessary, do you think, to reduce and/or eliminate the differences between the genders, or should those differences be honored and/or celebrated?

Consider the quote on p.81 relating to Connie's perspective on gender. To what degree do you think what happens to her in the present is the result of her gender? To what extent do you think gender roles and/or politics define both the novel's action and its themes? Also consider, in this context, what happens to the non-heterosexual Skip.

Consider the quote on p. 328 relating to the growth of power in the originally dis-empowered. What resonances are there between this comment and contemporary society of the last fifty years? What resonances are there between this comment and Connie's personal struggle/journey?

To what extent is the narrative's exploration of conflict and its resolution acceptable to you? Consider the resolution of the conflict between Luciente and Bolivar in Chapter 10, Parra's point about the treatment of conflict in that same chapter, and also Luciente's comments on "Chapter 19 Summary / Analysis" and "Quotes", p. 370. Is there an argument here for capital punishment? Why or why not? What is your position on capital punishment? Debate your answers.

What do you see as the positive values of the future as experienced (created?) by Connie? Consider, but don't limit your discussion to, the following - its lack of race/gender roles and discrimination. Its views of government by consensus. Its views of conflict resolution. Its views on the raising of children.

Do you agree with Luciente's attitude towards killing/capital punishment (see "Quotes", p. 370)? Why or why not? Do you think that Connie did the right thing in killing Redding and the other doctors? Why or why not?