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ABSTRACT

Helen Forbes, in her short story "The Hunky Woman," written in 1916 for "The Masses," an eclectic Socialist magazine, undermines particular categorical propositions. By using narration with a shifting of narrative voice, Forbes calls into question the validity of the traditional teaching of argumentation. Forbes demonstrates the danger in women's acceptance of the dominant ideology cast in the form of propositions. She also shows how these propositions, buttressed by money, power (in the form of the police), and the institution of marriage can, in effect, cause themselves to become partially true. Although the main conflict in the story seems to be whether one character, Mrs. Atwood, will accept her husband's oppressive general statements, in fact, the story is itself an argument, and the primary conflict is in the mind of the reader. (KEH)

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Fictional Narrative as Resistant Argument in Early Twentieth-Century Feminist Writing

Early twentieth-century feminist writers, "speaking to women," as Inez Haynes Irwin said in 1921 of one of them, "about women, in the language of women" (The Story of the Woman's Party 48) demonstrate what deconstructionists are now noticing--that one of the bases of Aristotelian logic, the categorical proposition, or general statement, supported by inductive reasoning, functions as an epistemological prop for Western white male institutions. These feminist writers, publishing in journals at least nominally in support of feminism, undermined school-taught logic by shifting modes from argumentation to narration, often writing stories within stories, to include the voices of the marginalized in a manner impossible within traditional argumentation. Such findings are of particular interest to those of us who teach composition, because most of our training and textbooks are Aristotelian in nature, and we often still teach description, narration, exposition, and argumentation as mutually exclusive modes of discourse. In the following essay I will be showing the ways in which Helen Forbes, in her short story "The Hunky Woman," written in 1916 for The Masses, an eclectic Socialist magazine, undermines particular categorical propositions. I will show as well that by using narration with a shifting of narrative voice, she calls into question the validity of the traditional teaching of argumentation.

The period just before U.S. entrance into World War I was one of heightened rhetorical activity. Period notable for two reasons: increased availability of education to middle-class women and to workers, both men and women; thus members of these groups had access to training in rhetoric; second, there was increased agitation for economic and social equality. The control exerted by most U.S. institutions was questioned, debated, and struggled against. Socialists, anarchists, syndicalists, and feminists all spoke, wrote, organized, demonstrated and struck in order to erase economic and social inequalities and injustices. Among women, although the fight to gain suffrage gained national attention, that battle was only symptomatic of a much larger discussion of patriarchal social control. Not only was this a time during which women were being formally educated in greater numbers than ever before, but college-educated women were unprecedentedly active in such organizations as the Settlement Houses, the Intercollegiate Socialist League, the College Equal Suffrage League, and many others. Women college students worked on and sold copies of many of the socialist, feminist, and anarchist publications, such as the New York Call, Mother Earth, and The Masses. Thus, not only was this a period drawing on the rhetorical skills of marginal groups, but these groups were gaining entrance into education and thus learning the traditional rhetorics--and adapting them to their own needs. What is interesting is this resistance and adaptation.

Why were the school-based rhetorics unsuited to the

rhetorical needs of marginal groups in the culture? There are several reasons. First, traditional rhetorics assume a state of equality between the rhetor and audience. All speakers, it is presumed, have equal access to language and speech. In other words, the teaching of rhetoric doesn't take into account power differences. Second, traditional rhetorics teach students to make statements in a single assertive voice, a voice which denies the existence of other voices. Moreover, discourse is artificially divided into types based not on the purpose of the writer, but on an arbitrary classification system much like that used in the sciences to classify plants and animals.

The argumentative strategy taught in most texts seventy-five years ago as well as today is the categorical proposition, a general statement consisting of subject and complement usually joined by a form of the to be verb. This method is adapted from Aristotle's discussions of logic. In their 1982 textbook, A Rhetoric of Argument Jeanne Fahnestock and Marie Secor tell us that a proposition is "any claim that we can affirm or deny, say yes or no to" (28). "And a categorical proposition," Fahnestock and Secor say, "is one that relates its subject term to its predicate in one of the following ways: The subject term is either included in the predicate" (All politicians are liars), "has something to do with the predicate" (Some politicians are liars), "or is completely separated from the predicate" (No politicians are liars) (28). Inductive reasoning is simply the use of examples to support a categorical proposition.

Teaching writing by means of classifying discourse into modes dates back to the late eighteeenth century and George Campbell's The Philosophy of Rhetoric. Later textbook writers adapted or modified Campbell's system, most notably Alexander Bain, whose categories of description, narration, exposition, persuasion, and poetry are still used in many textbooks today. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the teaching of writing was the teaching of the modes, with only a few short-lived exceptions.

George Pierce Baker's Principles of Argumentation, first published in 1895 and revised in 1905, was the text most widely used for the teaching of argumentation. In it, Baker begins by stressing the importance of the proposition in argumentation. He says: "For a start in description, narration, or exposition, a term, that is , the name of a thing or quality, is enough, and as we regard it from one point of view or another, we describe, narrate, or expound it; but we cannot, in argumentation, start with a term,--for instance, 'the Japanese in Korea.' We must first formulate a proposition in regard to the term,--that is, make an assertion about it, as 'Japanese control of Korea is desirable'" (17). (Note here Baker's assumption that U.S. students should be making assertions about the Japanese and Koreans--a blatant form, it seems to me, of verbal imperialism.)

Unlike narration, description, and exposition, then, Baker insists that "the first end of argumentation is to produce in the mind of another person acceptance of ideas held true by a writer or speaker" (18).

There was, however, a rhetorical movement away from the strict division of modes. This movement wook place within some educational institutions and outside of them, particularly among women writers. Among professional rhetoricians, Sterling Leonard was unusual in suggesting in 1914 that "useful as this [classification system] is for sorting completed pieces of writing, it does not view the process of composition from the side of the thoughts or ideas the writer has to express, and particularly of his purpose in expressing these" (D'Angelo 135). Prior to Leonard, Gertrude Buck, professor of rhetoric at Vassar, commented in her volume, Argumentative Writing, that "the principles of argumentation should be derived by the student from its practice before the practice is made to conform to the principles" (iii). She claims that argument is the result of "natural outputs of typical mental processes" (v). Despite their apparent acceptance of the traditional forms of argument and their reliance on psychological theory of individual processes, both Leonard and Buck attempt to resist the traditional teaching of written argumentation. However, just a social change organizations gave way to the pressures of the Espionage Act and later the Palmer raids, so also the voices of rhetoricians such as Leonard and Buck were lost to the discursive control of the Century Handbook, Warriners Handbook and other current-traditional texts.

What can be helpful to us now, however, is to look back to see what efforts women did make to resist the dominant discourse. Although Gertrude Buck, for example, organized her

text in the traditional fashion, she revealed her openness to alternative forms of discourse by including as examples in her text selections from George Eliot's The Mill on the Floss, selections which contain arguments submerged within the narrative.

This argumentative feature of The Mill on the Floss has been noted by Mary Jacobus in her article entitled "The Question of Language: Men of Maxims and The Mill on the Floss". Although Jacobus' main point is that Eliot was an early feminist critic, commenting upon the impossibility of inscribing women's desire in language, she also reveals the use of maxims, or categorical propositions, in the language of men in The Mill on the Floss and Maggie's consistent undermining of them, thus pointing to a heritage among women of disruptive discourse.

Although I have found several stories which exhibit this undermining of categorical propositions, because of time constraints I will discuss only one today.

In her story, "The Hunky Woman," Helen Forbes demonstrates the danger in women's acceptance of the dominant ideology cast in the formof propositions. She also shows how these propositions, buttressed by money, power in the form of the police, and the institution of marriage can, in effect cause themselves to become partially true. Although the main conflict in the story seems to be whether one character, Mrs. Atwood, will accept her husband's oppressive general statements, in fact, the story is itself an argument, and the primary conflict is in the mind of the reader.

The setting of "The Hunky Woman" is a private home in the U.S., and the central question of the story is about the safety of a mother's children in a patriarchal, authoritarian culture. Forbes uses the situation of a house maid and mistress to explore the difficulties of Central European immigrant women in the U.S.

The term Hunky is a slang variation of Hungarian; it is a term of disparagement. Immigration patterns shifted dramatically around the turn of the century. The largest wave of immigration took place between 1900 and 1920, before the Immigration Act of 1921 put a stop to the streams of newcomers. Between 1901 and 1910, there were close to nine million immigrants. Whereas previously the majority of immigrants had come from the British Isles, Germany, or Scandinavia, almost a quarter of the new immigrants came from Austria-Hungary ("Migration," Encyclopedia Britannica).

The characters in the story are Mr. and Mrs. Atwood, Annie Szorza, a policeman, and Mrs. Tapolsky, an older immigrant woman who watches Annie's children while she works. The story begins as Annie has just finished dampening the linens to be ironed the next day. She goes upstairs to collect her day's pay from Mrs. Atwood, who tries to encourage Annie to confide in her about her life. Annie has no interest in this; she wants only to return home to feed her children. Just after she arrives home, a policeman enters her apartment and arrests her for bigamy. Her husband, it seems, had been married in the old country, and his brother-in-law has come over to the U.S. to set matters

straight. Her husband is in hiding; she is forced to stay in jail for several days. When she is finally released, she comes home to find that her baby has died, and her girl has been placed in a home. When, after finding her girl, Annie returns to Mrs. Atwood's to work, Mrs. Atwood questions her about her absence. Unable to speak clearly, Annie cannot convince Mrs. Atwood that she is innocent of wrongdoing. Mrs. Atwood refuses to rehire her. Mr. Atwood comments to her after Annie has left that "Hunkies" are not human, and Mrs. Atwood feels inclined to agree.

Mr. Atwood's function in the story is simply to utter the categorical propositions. His is the voice of hegemonic discourse. he responds to Mrs. Atwood's bewilderment at Annie Szorza's lack of emotional response to her by announcing a proposition: Hunkies have no emotion. Mrs. Atwood is capable of defending Annie Azorza in only a minimal fashion. "But she's such a good laundress," she says, indicating her inability to see Annie beyond her role as servant. To this, Mr. Atwood responds with two more propositions: They are meant to work. And they are only half human.

Mrs. Atwood is the pivotal character in the narrative. It is she who is open to the possibility of understanding the truth of Annie's life and, by extension, the function of capitalism and patriarchy in oppressing Annie and other women, immigrant and native-born alike. However, because she is unable to step outside of her own role as an employer--a role that she is able to occupy only because of her husband's money--she is unable to

hear Annie and can only see her in the terms of her husband's propositions.

Forbes' narrator, however, allows the reader to see what Mrs. Atwood cannot see. She thus undermines by means of narrative the limiting nature of the categorical propositions. She counters the hegemonic voice with Annie's story, showing her at her most fully human, "sobbing," "swaying back and forth in...misery," and "absorbed in the hope of seeing the children." Later, when Annie tries to tell Mrs. Atwood what has happened, she is at first overwhelmed by Mrs. Atwood's imposition of her own story, but then is impelled by "courage and anger" to tell what really happened to her and her children.

At the same time, Forbes shows the power of propositions to make themselves come true by means of their economic and social effects on people's behavior. Annie on her way home from what must have been an exhausting work day is described in animal terms: "her eyes fixed on the ground, just as a tired horse hangs his head as he draws the empty wagon back to the barns at the end of the day." Moreover, later, when Mrs. Atwood refuses to believe her, "[t]he heavy lines in Annie's dull face moved strangely: square and stupid, with short nose and wide nostrils, it resembled the face of an ape." At this point it is not clear to the reader to whom Annie appears in such a fashion. Is this a universal statement about her? The next line reads: "The sight of her was repulsive." This sentence reads like a categorical proposition, and we feel inclined to accept it as truth. However, the next sentence tells us to whom Annie looked

repulsive and why: "Mrs. Atwood continued, turning away her eyes, "How could I ever trust you, after the way you failed me last week? You left the clothes all damp. They might have been ruined."

The climax of the story comes at this point, when Mrs. Atwood refuses to hear Annie's story, superimposing upon it her own story and her own categorical proposition: "things like that doen's happen in this country." However, because this story is not a simple narration, provided for the reader's entertainment, but is in fact a sophisticated piece of argumentation, there are two climaxes to the story, one in which Mrs. Atwood's struggle to understand Annie is resolved and one in which the reader's struggle with Mr. Atwood's propositions is resolved. The climax to the reader's story comes at the end, when the reader must decide whether she will agree with Mr. Atwood that all Hunkies are animals, a difficult choice to make after having witnessed Annie's experience with the policeman, or if she will risk her privilege and the ease of believing that "things like that don't happen in this country" in order to accept the truth of Annie's humanity. This second choice is the one toward which the author seems to be guiding us, yet it is one which is considerably more difficult because it require's the reader to examine the causes of Annie's seeming inhumanity. Ultimately, the author asks us to choose between Mr. Atwood's hegemonic discourse--a discourse which has been responsible for the death of Annie's baby--and an as-yet only partially written discourse of women, a discourse signified by Annie's stumbling,

frightened, yet courageous speech.

In her autobiography, Inez Haynes Irwin, historian of the National Woman's Party, says, "In time I came to abhor the general statement" ( ). She adds, however, that she realizes that without arguing in this fashion, women could not have won the vote. In other words, in order to enter male-controlled public discourse, women needed to argue from categorical propositions, propositions that limited and distorted their experience. Helen Forbes and other feminist writers, in the relatively friendly atmosphere of The Masses, criticized this school-taught argumentation, suggesting narration as a strategy at least minimally capable of presenting the speech of the marginalized whose discourse is erased in traditional rhetorical strategies.

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