

Feminist Science Fiction: Cherie Priest's *The Clockwork Century*

Diploma Thesis

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Abstract

Marleen S. Barr, one of the pioneers of feminist science fiction criticism, is an outspoken commentator on gender inequality in this genre. In *Feminist Fabulation: Space/Postmodern Fiction* and *Future Females: A Critical Anthology*, Barr defines feminist science fiction as metafiction about patriarchal fiction. She speaks out against both authors and critics who recycle narratives restricted by a patriarchal view of the world in which women are silenced and/or relegated to the position of an accessory of the male hero, made to behave in a stereotypically feminine manner. While Barr does not include steampunk fiction but focuses on science fiction oriented towards the future and space exploration, her analysis of the female character's plight is nonetheless applicable to the steampunk genre. In this respect, feminist steampunk fiction can be read as a meditation on established gender norms.

Cherie Priest's work is a prime example of such an innovative re-examination of gender stereotypes that Barr calls for in her critical work. As both a woman and a writer of science fiction, the author has adopted a feminist approach in her steampunk series *The Clockwork Century*. Among other things, Priest examines the role of gender in nineteenth-century America. She portrays the struggle of women for equality of opportunity while, at the same time, having to constantly re-assert their own identity. *The Clockwork Century* novels all feature strong female protagonists who, in their own ways, challenge established notions of femininity and masculinity.

The aim of the thesis is thus to examine feminist attitudes in *The Clockwork Century* series, and to discuss how they impact and redefine women's place in Priest's fictional

rewriting of the American Civil War. Barr's feminist science fiction theory will be applied to identify and analyze how Priest's heroines rebel against the perceived status quo. I will argue that the author emphasizes gender equality through conscious self-empowerment of her heroines who liberate themselves from gender constraints by refusing to submit to the conventional feminine roles assigned to them by the patriarchal Western culture.

Key Words

Cherie Priest, gender roles, feminism, Marleen S. Barr, science fiction, steampunk