

# Teddy Bears at Greenham Common

## Diana Brown Sheridan

At Greenham Common Royal Air Force Base in Newbury, Great Britain, nine miles of chain-link fence divide two worlds. The fence straddles what was once an idyllic English park, Greenham Common, purchased in 1938 for the enjoyment of local people. On one side are the wildflowers, gorse, heather, and silver birches of the park; on the other is an air base, jointly constructed by the United States and Great Britain. The base contains silos built from enormous mounds of concrete and movable offensive launching vehicles that can roam the countryside with cruise missiles of incomprehensible destruction.

In response to the construction of this military complex, 40 Women for Life on Earth walked the 110 miles from South Wales to this new base in August of 1981. Balking at society's enactment of military power and its incursions on the well-being of the human race, these women started the protest that came to be known as the Women's Peace Camp at Greenham Common, a 12-year testimony to women's commitment to waging peace. Although the Camp closed in 1993 with the end of the Cold War, the legacy of the women's life-affirming visions continues to affect the consciousness of those who work for peace around the world.

The fence, separating the protest and military groups, enshrouds a plethora of intense symbols that reflect the protesting women's intentions to soften the hard and sharp contours and angles that represent the unwavering persistence of military power. Over the years, women decorated, painted, encircled, climbed over, and cut through the fence in an effort to transform it into a celebration of life and beauty in contrast to its intended pronouncement of sterility and fear. They attached balloons, posters, baby clothes, stuffed animals, and photographs of children and loved ones. Weaving yarn, string, and ribbon in and out of the links in the fence, the women tried to revise the concept of the fence as an imprisoning chain, reformulating an image of repression into multiple webs, representing women's interconnectedness with all of life.

My purpose in this essay is to examine one personal form of expression that appeared on the fence in order to determine how personal symbols operate rhetorically in public protest action. I have chosen as my rhetorical artifact a pair of small, dark, furry-looking teddy bears

This essay was written while Diana Brown Sheridan was a student in Sonja K. Foss' rhetorical criticism class at the University of Oregon in 1988. Used by permission of the author.

adorning the fence. One is perched a bit higher on the fence than the other and has a small bow around its neck, arms hanging by its side, and ears bent forward slightly. The other is wearing a pair of light-colored overalls, has white hands and eyes, and its ears are perked up.

In a pentadic criticism of the pair of teddy bears, I have identified as the five terms:

Act: Hanging objects on the fence at Greenham Common

Scene: Fence surrounding the missile base at Greenham Common

Agent: Protesting women at Greenham Common

Agency: Pair of teddy bears that are soft, cuddly, lovable, and endearing

Purpose: To protest the placement of missiles at Greenham Common

After examining the ratios, I suggest that *agency*—the teddy bears' soft, enduring, and human qualities—stands out as the most significant element in the pentad. The bears' soft, cub-like characteristics serve to transform the scene of the fence from a hardened barrier to an animated playground of action. The snugly qualities of the bears make the protest act of hanging bears a reminder of motherly devotion to the often-playful nurturing of children, a nurturing that well might cease if the missiles are ever put into action. The lovable qualities of the bears determine that the Greenham women, as *agents*, are imbued with the same essence of softness and life-affirming affection that distinguishes the teddy bears, in contrast to the hardness and lack of emotionality that define weaponry. The distinctiveness of the bears alters the women's purpose by turning a commonly shared feeling—fondness for a favorite childhood memory—into a humanizing and personal element in their protest against an apparently inhuman and brute military force.

An emphasis on *agency* leads me to conclude that the symbol of the teddy bears on the fence creates a new vision of the slogan, "the personal is political." By using beloved teddy bears, the women are tapping into a commonly shared and cherished memory of childhood that they transfer from the private arena of home to the public setting of anti-militarist protest. They use a gentle toy of childhood to show the folly of such grown-up and fearful toys as missiles. The bears are cuddly, reminiscent of the human condition; they are innocent, signifying an untainted world; and they are endearing and lasting, epitomizing the continuity of the human experience.

In full view of patrolling soldiers and protesting women, a pair of tiny teddy bears becomes the humanized symbol for the kind of armor required to protect the human race. Qualities such as endearing softness are needed, according to the women, to replace the oppressive and hard

characteristics of huge weapons capable of destroying the earth. In addition, the teddy bears personify the connectedness of shared childhood, making the women's action one of inclusiveness, in contrast to the exclusiveness of an impersonal weapon system.

The function of the teddy bears on the fence, revealed in a pentadic analysis, suggests that when a personal symbol of humanity and connectedness is made public, the political no longer remains beyond the scope of everyday life for most people. What is personal becomes political—as a means of action, a new form of armor, and a context for creating a changed reality. The observable consequence of absorbing the teddy bears' qualities, therefore, becomes a pragmatic one in which new meaning is constituted through the women's protest action. The qualities of the personal symbol are brought into the public sphere, providing a source of power for action for those who previously felt they lacked agency and power in that sphere.