

Reading Ursula K. Le Guin:
An Analysis of Three Early Works

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Introduction to Science Fiction, the Hainish Universe, and Some Literary Themes

Defining science fiction (SF) has long been a difficult task for critics and writers. Part of this difficulty arises from SF's tendency to include a myriad of themes, settings, and characters. There is no single universe in SF. Not all SF contains rocket ships and laser canons, for example. Even the pioneers of the genre used a variety of sources and ideas to craft their scientific romances. Because SF is so complex, it is relevant to provide a brief overview of the genre and its history.

Damon Knight, one of the most prominent SF literary critics of the 1960s and 70s cared less about a descriptive definition of SF as he did an active one, one which is based on representative novels rather than a set list of topics. SF, ultimately, is defined not by what it is about but by what it does. SF brings its readers to a better understanding of humanity and the stuff of creation. It is not just speculation but an exploration of the implications that discoveries and innovation have on the world (1). The goal of SF, Knight believed, was not to describe science (although for Knight, SF must be scientifically accurate) but to answer our questions about ourselves.

“In science fiction,” Knight writes, “we can approach that mystery [the mystery of what makes us human], not in small, everyday symbols, but in the big ones of space and time” (4). This includes speculation on the foundations of human nature, but can also include practical application in politics and social criticism. As a literature invested in popular culture, SF is strongly impacted by changes in the political and social climate. The SF writer is rarely neutral towards world events but uses fiction to demonstrate how individuals might rebel against or conform to the expectations of culture.

The works of Ursula K. Le Guin are no exception. The three novels discussed here—*The Word for World is Forest*, *The Left Hand of Darkness*, and *The Dispossessed*—are unquestionably SF. A reading of these three novels illuminates the variety of topics addressed in SF and what Le Guin specifically has to say about her world. Like many SF writers, she contributes both to the literary community and to the realm of social criticism. The purpose of this document is to understand exactly what themes are strongest in Le Guin's Hainish books and how each novel addresses the conflicts of gender, environment, and social injustice.

Le Guin's early works pioneered a new realm of SF, one which redefined the possibilities for what had previously been a popular (and therefore critically disregarded) genre. A quick glance at the universe of the novels as well as their individual plots provides more evidence for their SF classification.

The Hainish novels, including the three examined here, are set in the same fictional universe. In the Hainish universe, all humans originated from the Hainish people and their multiple colonies. At some point the Hainish Empire receded, leaving colonists to fend for themselves. Because each world had a different ecology, humans adapted for their home worlds but remained essentially the same as their Hainish ancestors. This is why even though the people of Gethen in *Left Hand* are androgynous, they are otherwise visibly human. Even the natives of Athshe in *Forest* who are short, green, and hairy, are descended from the Hainish colonists and are therefore essentially human.

In *The Dispossessed*, Shevek interacts with the new Hainish Empire, not yet called the Ekumen, a union of all human worlds. Shevek, a physicist living on the socialist world of Anarres, flees to capitalist Urras in order to pursue his research. There he

invents the Ansible, a kind of intergalactic radio, and gives the technology to the newly-formed Ekumen. The novel documents both his coming-of-age on Anarres and his realization that the socialist Utopia where he grew up requires continual reform.

In *The Dispossessed*, there is little mention of Earth humans, Terrans. *Forest* occurs after the Ansible is introduced as common technology and also features Terrans as key characters. In *Forest*, Terrans have colonized the forest world, Athshe, in order to harvest its resources. The enslavement the Athsheans leads to a rebellion against the Terran logging company. All-out extermination of the natives is avoided in part by a decision made on Earth and transmitted to the planet through the Ansible. The Terrans leave, but it is clear that the once peaceful Athsheans will never be the same.

In *Left Hand*, Genly Ai—another Terran—attempts to persuade the androgynous people of Gethen to join the Ekumen. In the nation of Karhide, he uses the Ansible as proof that he is an alien. He is not believed and Genly eventually has to flee for his life with Estraven, a friend he made among the native people. In this novel, we see that the Ansible is commonly used by the Ekumen. Genly was sent, presumably from Earth, with the Ansible already onboard his spacecraft.

By following the Ansible's use in all three novels, it becomes clear that vast amounts of time occur between each book (as much as five hundred years between *Forest* and *Left Hand*). The grandiose time-scale and the theme of an intergalactic alliance of worlds is familiar to most SF readers. It is one of the tropes of SF, most notable for its use in the Star Wars and Star Trek franchises. Yet rocket ships or robots do not necessarily make a work SF. The most we can conclude is 1) that SF is literature of speculation that imagines what does not currently exist, and 2) that SF almost always begins with the question

“what if?” Individual critics might create criteria by which SF is judged as “good” or “bad,” “effective” or “noneffective,” but the foundational elements of SF rely on these two points.

Early SF writers (1850-1930) addressed global conflict through metaphors. H.G. Wells's *the Time Machine* functioned as social commentary criticizing the working conditions of street laborers in turn-of-the-century London. In the novel, he speculated that in the far future the bourgeois would transform into a weak and pampered race while the proletariats would become monsters of the underground. The tables turn against the bourgeois and the monsters consume them. This novel was a bleak warning about social oppression; however, the metaphor of the novel was directly explained by its protagonist.

Later SF (1930-1950) would drift away from the realm of social commentary, in part due to its success as popular fiction. Stories usually conformed to the society. Thus heroic men were pitted against dark monsters and triumphed by saving the damsel in distress from her alien captors. It was a literature that mostly accepted racism, sexism, and social elitism even when it did not directly support or endorse those behaviors. The Golden Age of SF (1950-1970), when John Campbell edited *Analog Magazine*, was made up of male authors marketing to a male audience. This literature perpetuated rather than challenged the existing stereotypes.

In the 1960s and 1970s, SF and its role in society changed dramatically. It was no longer a literature of conformity but one which defied cultural norms. Members of minority groups had not only begun to read SF, but also to write it and understand it in a new way. This “New Wave” literature reflected the new waves of social and political

thought of the time. The New Wave of SF not only reflected its times but also altered the SF genre as a whole.

During the New Wave, SF novel publication and readership increased and gained the recognition of literary critics. Critics like Damon Knight, Darko Suvin, and Samuel Delany recognized the merit of SF and began to outline its themes. Damon Knight founded the Science Fiction Writers of America in 1965, beginning the era of literary science fiction and the recognition of trends in the literature. Even though critics established a canon of SF, the genre was still developing and evolving. Writers looked to the canon not as guidelines for what SF was but as examples of how SF could provide social commentary through a popular medium.

Overall the greatest change in New Wave SF came in the inclusion of female voices. No writer from this period has gained as much critical recognition as Ursula K. Le Guin. She has been awarded a National Book Award and multiple Hugos and Nebulas (the most notable SF awards). Le Guin's fiction provides a glimpse into the general trends of New Wave SF as well as the atmosphere of the 1970s in general. She exemplifies the New Wave writer. Concerned with social injustices of all kinds, her literature demonstrates the way that SF writers used their writing to make political and social statements.

Le Guin's literature demands readers to reevaluate their prior conception of the world, to see it both as more and less mysterious. Le Guin opens the universe to the possibilities of telepathy, androgyny, and interspace travel. However, she also shows that humans both present and future struggle against the same fundamental problems.

Le Guin has been a prolific writer since the 1960s. The three works examined here, besides being her most popular, are also among her earliest. They typify her early stages

as a writer and are representative of New Wave SF in general. These works demonstrate Le Guin's dedication to New Wave ideas, including gender equality, environmental sustainability, and social justice.

New Wave SF was especially concerned about gender and racial equality. Samuel Delany and Octavia Butler, African American writers, came to prominence during the New Wave. Women writers also began to enter what was previously a mostly male dominated field yet the readership remained stereotypically male. As a result, women SF writers struggled to reconcile their concerns about gender with their desire for acceptance by readers. Some wrote under pseudonyms or removed feminine markers from their names.

The 1960s and 70s also saw the beginning of the second wave of feminism, a time most concerned with redefining gender roles and rediscovering lost women writers. In an essay on gender, Le Guin writes that "I just thought it was something wrong with me. I considered myself a feminist: I didn't see how you could be a thinking woman and not be a feminist; but I had never taken a step beyond the ground gained for us by Emmeline Parkhurst and Virginia Woolf" (*Language of the Night* 155).

Charles Bressler defines feminist criticism as a theory that "advocates equal rights for all women (indeed, all peoples) in all areas of life" (144). Feminist critics read literature in order to examine the stereotypes present in the canon. This criticism examines the stereotypes contained in the canon but is also interested in the ways that characters are able to rebel against social prejudice (151).

Feminism gained prominence in the 1960s and led both to the rediscovery of old feminist works—like those of Woolf and Parkhurst—as well as the creation of new ones.

Feminist writers infused their literature with their new beliefs: that women ought to be treated as equals to men, and that past generations of men had suppressed both women and other perceived minorities. Even though Le Guin later accepted her role as a feminist writer and theorist, she recognizes in *The Language of the Night* a reluctance to be too bold or confrontational about her feminism in her early works (169). This is due, in part, to the stereotypically male readership of SF and has given rise to some of the criticisms of her work discussed in part one.

The most significant criticism of Le Guin's works is that while other literature of the New Wave included strong female protagonists struggling to redefine feminine gender roles, her early novels center on male characters who typically conform to gender norms. A feminist reading of Le Guin's fiction will include a close examination of her protagonists and their views of the "gender problem" as well as the ways in which different human cultures treat women.

While one of the primary concerns of New Wave SF was gender equality, it also focused on another big issue of the 1970s: climate change. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) was founded in 1970 and the literature of the preceding decade reflects a concern about industry's impact on the environment. Novels like Walter Miller Jr.'s *A Canticle for Leibowitz* (1960) and Frank Herbert's *Dune* (1965) imagine a future of environmental scarcity as predicted by the scientists of the time. Whereas much of early SF merely documented future societies, New Wave SF was interested in investigating how a changing ecosystem impacted the structure of human societies.

As discussed in part two, for Le Guin the destruction of the environment directly parallels dysfunctional social prejudice. Her imagined planets are almost always ones

which face scarcity of some kind. Annarres in *the Dispossessed* is a desert world while Gethen in *Left Hand* is covered in ice. Environmental scarcity on Earth in *Forest* is the driving force for Earth human settlement of the forest-covered planet.

Bressler writes that ecocriticism focuses on “a profound interest and understanding of nature” (235). Ecocritical readings, furthermore, can combine a study of the exploitation of environment with the exploitation of humans, including women and minorities. An ecocritical reading of Le Guin’s novels will examine how characters are connected to or disconnected from their environment and what this suggests about the obligations that humans have towards their home world.

More broadly, the New Wave directly confronted issues of social justice. The Korean and Vietnam wars gave rise to anti-war sentiments, expressed in military SF like Joe Haldeman’s *the Forever War* (1974) and Orson Scott Card’s *Ender’s Game* (1977). Unlike previous SF, which typically glorified the soldier, these novels represent the soldier as a man fighting a meaningless war. Early SF celebrated the man who came to rescue the damsel in distress. New Wave SF rebelled against both the stereotype of Western supremacy and the soldier as hero. New Wave SF writers portrayed war as wrong or meaningless and lauded pacifist characters.

The social criticism of the New Wave was inspired, in part, by Marxist theory. Marxist theory began with Karl Marx and Frederick Engels’ pivotal works of theory and criticism. Besides *the Communist Manifesto*, which outlines a theory for their new social order, Marx and Engels pioneered a new way of reading and interpreting literature from a Marxist perspective. Le Guin’s fiction, while not explicitly Marxist, reflects a similar concern about issues of social justice.

As illustrated in part three, Le Guin shares Marx's fundamental assumption that history has been a series of class struggles. Marx writes that "definite individuals who are productively active in a definite way enter into these definite social and political relations" (314). For Marx, the shift of individuals into social classes is inevitable. This reading examines the ways in which each novel represents the historical influences on characters. It is not merely, Terry Eagleton says, a study of social injustice but rather is a study of the entire work in context. "Marx himself believed that literature should reveal a unity of form and content" (536), Eagleton writes; therefore, a Marxist reading will consider the social impulses on characters in the novel as well as their historical background.

The aim for Marx and Engels was freedom from injustice. While Le Guin's fiction does not always conform to Marxist theory, her three novels display a similar interest in criticizing various forms of injustice. The overarching theme in all three is social criticism. Even though Le Guin's characters come from different planets and are therefore distanced from the political realm of her day, the American reader can draw parallels between Le Guin's world and their own. For the most part Le Guin's literature examines the world broadly and confronts more universal injustices that could be assigned to a variety of the countries of her day. A social reading of her literature will include an examination of individual character's social biases as well as the political and social forces exerted on them by their nation and world.

By reading Le Guin's works in the context of the three most significant issues in New Wave SF, I intend to describe her contribution to this pivotal movement in SF literature. Le Guin's novels illustrate that SF in this time was moving away from traditional culture

and was ceasing to conform to societal norms. Her fiction did more than ascribe to traditional values, rather, Le Guin's novels were on the leading edge of innovation and continue to impact choices that modern SF make about these issues. Le Guin reveals the way that both SF writers and people of the Hainish universe were developing to understand their own humanity while proposing new ways to think about gender, environment, and society.

Part One: Feminist Themes

Ursula K. Le Guin's science fictional universe is strongly influenced by the past. Her earth human characters, the Terrans, inherit the legacy of Le Guin's contemporary world even though decades or centuries separate them from 1960s and 70s America. For some characters, this connection is closer than it is for others; however, this is not Star Trek, where allusions to popular culture are common. In fact, the modern United States is rarely referenced in these three works. Even so, it is still possible to identify the characters with contemporary social and gender stereotypes because each strongly portrays a unique world-view.

In *The Word for World is Forest*, Le Guin alternates between the perspectives of three characters, Captain Don Davidson, Selver, and Raj Lyubov. Davidson is a soldier and commander of one of the logging camps established by the Terran colonists. Selver, a native Athshean, was enlisted by the Terrans as a house servant along with his wife, Thele. When Davidson rapes and murders Thele, Selver attacks him. Lyubov, the colony's ethnographer, saves Selver, who in turn teaches him the Athshean language and customs.

Selver becomes a "god" to his people by introducing war to a formerly pacifist culture. Months after Thele's death, Selver leads a small army of Athsheans to destroy Davidson's logging camp. The Terrans, realizing the threat posed by the Athsheans (who outnumber them) free the enslaved Athsheans. Peace might have been achieved except Davidson continues to attack Athshean villages. War is the inevitable result.

Davidson in *Forest* is a much more of an imperialist than Genly Ai from *the Left Hand of Darkness*, who is born centuries later. Yet both characters are Terrans influenced

by the cultural biases of Le Guin's fictional earth. Shevek, the Cetian in *the Dispossessed*, on the other hand, has no direct contact with Earth's history and culture. Despite the character's diverse backgrounds—Davidson is a soldier, Genly an ethnographer, Shevek a physicist—all contribute to an understanding of Le Guin's view on gender. By extension, these three characters and their stories reveal the gender themes most common in New Wave SF.

The characters of *Forest* have the most direct relationship to Le Guin's America and alone of the three works directly references 1970s America. This is also the most overtly political of the three texts, written out of Le Guin's frustration with the Vietnam War. The villains of the story are Terran imperialists while the guerrillas, the alien Athsheans, are the heroes.

The Terran characters of *Forest*, even the most sympathetic ones (like Raj Lyubov) are modeled after what James Clifford calls "imperial types" (221). Davidson is "sexist and predatory" while Lyubov, despite his concern for the Athsheans, is still "self-aggrandizing" and originally believes himself capable of understanding a race with which he has limited experience (*Forest* 65). Even Lyubov and the other scientists value Terran life over that of the Athsheans, though to a lesser degree than the main antagonist.

Davidson is not only xenophobic and sexist but he translates these opinions into extreme action. His attitudes towards women, other races, and the aliens are more atavistic than they are descriptive of 1970s America. Davidson functions as a symbol of the culture that second wave feminism criticized and rebelled against, that of the Judeo-Christian-west. In fact, even though multiple characters in *Forest* are of African or Asiatic origins, every Terran is a representative of this tradition, as observed by Douglas

Barbour (151). Davidson's western values, however, are not meant to familiarize him to the western reader; rather, they further alienate him. His views of women are particularly offensive to the modern reader. In the opening scene, women sent to the colony are described by Davidson as "breeding females," "212 head of prime human stock" (9), emphasizing his view of women not only as inferior but less than human.

Davidson's attitudes towards women are almost a crude caricature of the mindset Le Guin seeks to criticize. He seems composed entirely of negative stereotypes and the worst parts of humanity. This portrayal is very intentional. Davidson is not meant to portray reality. As Le Guin notes in *the Language of the Night*, Davidson is supposed to be truly evil and thus portrays the most terrible parts of society (147).

For Le Guin, Davidson represents a particular mindset and personifies the things that 1970s feminists like Le Guin were opposing: the objectification of women, the elevation of white Anglo-Saxon men, and the segregation of racial minorities. His role in the novella is to provide a model of a xenophobic, sexist culture in order to reveal its flaws. Davidson's sexual desires are paralleled with his violence (see part three).

Davidson is completely driven by his physical desires. He craves immediacy over long-term fulfillment. Having multiple women is better than maintaining a monogamous relationship. This extends beyond his views of women and taints his entire world-view. For Davidson, war has a kind of erotic appeal. He believes that "the only time a man is really a man is when he has had a woman or killed another man" (96). Dominating the landscape cannot, for Davidson, be a slow and cautious process. Only a display of force and the decimation of the entire forest, is enough. His lust for women eliminates any possibility for love or social equality. Davidson views the world and its people the same

way he views human women: they are a thing to be used for profit (see part two). When they are no longer profitable, they are to be disposed of. He cannot see women or the “other” as human.

Even though Davidson is a radical example of the worst parts of humanity, he is not alone. He is a subordinate to the logging companies. Support of the other Terrans—including the colonial government—initially facilitates his actions, including the destruction of an Athshean village and the raping of Athshean women. In fact, it is implied that many of the men, not just Davidson, have abused the Athsheans (101). Even though Davidson’s acts of wanton aggression are eventually opposed by the other Terrans, none possess the ability to stop him. The ethnographer, Raj Lyubov, for example wants to report the enslavement of the Athsheans but is afraid his reports will merely be thrown out by censorship. Lyubov views the natives of the planet more sympathetically but he cannot avoid the war. Even though Lyubov is considered the best of the Terrans by Selver, the Athshean, he is still not entirely sane (142).

Selver has a unique connection with Lyubov. When the Terrans landed on Athshe, they conscripted many of the nearby natives into working for the logging camps. Selver, who was young and clever, worked as a servant for many of the more important officers, including Lyubov. Lyubov recognized Selver’s intelligence early on and offered to set him free but Selver refused because his wife, Thele, was still in the “creechie pens.” It is Lyubov who saves Selver’s life when Selver attacks Davidson and is nearly beaten to death. As an ethnographer Lyubov is interested in the Athshean culture and learns the language and customs of the Athsheans from Selver during his recovery.

Lyubov is one of the first Terrans to accept the natives as human beings and believe that they should be cooperated with, not enslaved by the Terrans. He is even welcomed into the Athshean villages where he learns that the Athsheans are governed by women.

“Intellect to men, politics to the women, and ethics to the interaction of both: that’s their arrangement,” Lyubov writes in his journal (115). As discussed in part three, this recalls possible sources for Le Guin’s characterization of the Athsheans. The colonization of the planet might parallel European colonization of the New World and the European reaction to Native American culture. Native American tribes, especially the Pueblo peoples, often elevated women to powerful roles. Not only did these tribes have female shamans, but also, according to Leslie Marmon Silko, allowed homosexual relationships and were early champions (in the twentieth century) for gender equality (105). The Pueblo peoples tended to be less violent than other native tribes, just like the Athsheans, who have no concept of large-scale wars. Both cultures faced similar oppression by their colonizers.

The Athsheans liberal view of gender comes into conflict with Davidson’s views. Davidson has no problem raping Athshean women yet he cannot understand Selver’s genuine love for his wife. Nor can Davidson accept that creatures which seem completely alien in physiology as well as social structure might be human. Lyubov, who sees the Athsheans and their women in a different light, inevitably comes into conflict with Davidson. Selver, whose culture views women as distinctly separate yet equal with men, comes closest to the feminist ideal. The Athshean culture is being lauded as an alternative to that represented by Davidson. In *the Dispossessed*, Le Guin shows how this system can work in the modern, industrialized era and what conflicts it still faces.

For the modern feminist, the only hope for gender equality in the Hainish universe lies with the newly formed League of Worlds, the Ekumen. This League includes the Cetians whose ancestors are among the characters of *The Dispossessed*. While one of the Cetian worlds, Urras, resembles Davidson's earth, the other, Anarres, is a social and feminist utopia.

The Dispossessed alternates between the main character, Shevek, struggling to complete his research in theoretical physics on Urras and a lengthy history of his life and research on Anarres. Raised on socialist Anarres, young Shevek thinks about physics differently than his classmates (25). As an adult, he becomes a physicist and faces the institutionalized injustice of his culture when his mentor, Sabul, steals Shevek's research and labels it as his own. After marrying Takver and fighting for publication on Anarres, Shevek is invited to Urras, the world where some of the physicists he corresponded with live.

The present of the narrative begins with Shevek leaving Anarres for Urras, a one-way trip according to Anarresti law, and continuing his research there. He quickly learns that A-Io, a capitalist nation on Urras, is incompatible with his research and spends the majority of the present narrative describing and criticizing this nation before ultimately joining an uprising against A-Io's corrupt government. Meanwhile, he also invents a device for instantaneous interstellar communication, the Ansible.

The contrast between Shevek, an Anarrasti, and the Urrasti people resembles the contrast between Lyubov and Davidson. Urras, and especially the country of A-Io shares Davidson's objectification of women. This metaphor extends to Le Guin's contemporary United States. In fact, A-Io initially seems a lot like the 1970s USA. Both are countries

involved in a technological arms race against a major communist power—Thu for A-IO and the USSR for the USA. Both are capitalist nations plagued by consumerism and institutional oppression of lesser people.

A-IO might provide a good metaphor for the United States, but it is not a mirror image. The fashions of women—topless in public, shaved heads, etc.—do not parallel those of the United States at the time. In fact, the roles of women as minor members of society are more indicative of the sixteenth century. Virginia Woolf in “Shakespeare’s Sister” says that “it would have been impossible, completely and entirely, for any woman to have written the plays of Shakespeare in the age of Shakespeare” (411-416). Likewise, the women of A-IO would never have invented the Ansible or made the preliminary discoveries which led to its invention.

Le Guin cites Woolf as one of her favorite writers (*Language of the Night* 155). Even in her 1970s writings she shows familiarity with Woolf’s criticism. In fact, the conditions of women in A-IO mimic the 16th century conditions highlighted in Woolf’s essay “Shakespeare’s Sister.” For one thing, women have little choice over their husbands. In A-IO, Shevek observes that women are things to be bought and sold, that is owned (188). Women are not valued for their potential contribution to society but as pieces for display, just like the legs of tables which make Shevek uncomfortable because of their almost sexual appearance—another fairly explicit use of Victorian imagery.

In A-IO, like in Victorian England, women do not teach. They do not attend university and they are expected, in the upper classes, to be hostesses for parties and to bear and raise children. These struggles were very real for 1970s feminists yet the feminist theme is also tied to Le Guin’s greater attention to social injustice. As discussed in part three,

Shevek sees not only injustice towards the women of A-Io but also towards the working class. The women and the working class of A-Io struggle against a complete inability to recognize their own condition or see the potential that exists for them to be more like Takver, Shevek's spouse.

For the women of A-Io, like Vea, the idea of being an independent working woman is offensive. "Women do exactly as they like," she says yet it is clear to Shevek that she is a possession (188). Women, in Vea's view, possess a kind of power over their men. Shevek sees the truth. The women of A-Io have placated themselves with art exhibitions and fine clothing and jewelry. In other words, they are controlled by their desire to possess and cannot bear the idea of being working women. Their materialism enables them to be oppressed. Instead of recognizing the way they have been exploited and satiated by material possessions, they are "possessed" by things. While this may have been a problem during Le Guin's writing of the novel the criticism of materialism is one which extends to the present.

Vea conforms to her society's norms. It is significant that an earlier Anarresti woman, Odo, rebelled against these stereotypes. Odo, the founder of Odoism, Anarres' form of socialism, detested the social and gender inequality of Urras so much that she founded a new colony. Odo established a society which severed all ties to the culture of A-Io. Even marriage, the union of man and woman, was destroyed. Two people could still vow marital bonds, as Shevek and Takver do, but the society of Anarres is promiscuous when compared to the traditionally monogamous A-Io.

The Dispossessed exposes with harsh imagery some of the exploitation of women that continues to impact western society. Le Guin very intentionally uses nude imagery to call

the reader's attention to objectification of A-Io's women. In turn, they are contrasted with Takver, a professional woman who shares the responsibility of raising children with Shevek, her spouse. Even Takver displays some of the same characteristics as the A-Io women. When the family must be separated, she is the one to keep the children. This is not the Anarresti norm. Their children are typically raised in communal homes. Shevek's father chose to take care of his own child when Rulag, the mother, left. Takver, on other hand, seems a typical 1970s working mother. Moreover, many of Takver's other traits match 1970s gender stereotypes.

Takver has a brooding, almost mother-like love of the fish in her hydroponics tanks. She is loyal and dedicated to her spouse but also less likely to take risks and more likely to advise him to use the system to get his work published. However, Takver also rebels against the meek woman stereotype. She facilitates Shevek's self-publication of work that the university refuses to publish. Unlike Vea, who uses her sexuality as a means to control men, Takver is an intellectual, more likely to argue with Shevek about philosophy than attempt to seduce him.

With Takver as a model, Shevek is unprepared for the women he faces in A-Io. He is shocked that all of his students and colleagues are male. His reactions model the way that Le Guin seems to view the 20th century, unable to understand why it is necessary for there to be divisions between men and women, especially in intellectual pursuits. She investigates this question further in *Left Hand*. By far the most feminist of these three works, *Left Hand* is a novel that not only provides a stunning alternative to traditional gender roles, but also forecasts a future of the fictional Terran understanding of gender.

The protagonist, Genly Ai is a Terran like Davidson but he recognizes and reacts to his prejudice in ways that Davidson does not.

Left Hand is set centuries after *Forest* and *The Dispossessed*. By this time, the Terrans have joined the Ekumen and are sending their own emissaries to other worlds. In this case, the world is Gethen and the emissary, a Terran, is Genly Ai. Surveys of Gethen revealed a complex society based around an intricate honor code. They have also shown that the people of Gethen, while human, have developed an interesting adaptation to their world. The Gethenians are androgynous. For the majority of the year they are genderless except during kemmer when an individual will take on male or female characteristics and be capable of reproduction. The major conflict of the novel surrounds Genly's attempts to convince the planet to join the Ekumen as well as his internal conflict as he struggles against his ancestral biases. He befriends and is later rescued by Estraven, a Gethen politician who listens to and supports Genly's testimony.

On one hand, Genly is very close to Davidson and Le Guin's contemporary world. Genly originates from a male-dominated culture and associates the feminine with homemakers, the weak, and the overly friendly. On the other, Genly is far removed from the Earth of *Forest*. Unlike Davidson, Genly recognizes the flaws in his culture and seeks to suppress the part of himself which is inclined to categorize people into male and female roles. As an ethnographer, Genly acknowledges his biases and seeks to move beyond them in order to see Gethen in a neutral light. For instance, he writes "My efforts took the form of self-consciously seeing a Gethenian first as a man, then as a woman, forcing him into those categories so irrelevant to his nature and so essential to mine" (12). Here Genly is clearly trying to see the Gethenians as they view themselves. He also acknowledges

that he has internal cultural biases which cannot be wholly thwarted. Genly continues to use the masculine pronoun for the Gethenians and appears unable, at least initially, to recognize Estraven's feminine qualities. In the same way, Le Guin and New Wave SF writers struggled to break free from cultural bias.

For Genly, coming from a gendered culture makes it difficult to grasp the concept of a society without one. This is the problem with gender that Le Guin confronts throughout the entire novel. Through Genly, she investigates the ways Americans see gender. Biological differences, along with cultural ones, separate men and women and affect how they function in society, yet the Gethenians, who have no gender, are liberated from that particular cultural constraint. As a result they can have no discrimination between genders.

As an ethnographer, Genly is a fitting character to reveal flaws in a gendered society. "In most societies it (gender) determines almost everything. Vocabulary. Semiotic usages. Clothing. Even food... it's extremely difficult to separate the innate differences from the learned ones. Even where women participate equally with men in the society, they still do all the child-bearing, and so most of the child-rearing" (253). This extends even to the Cetians—Shevek and Takver—who play traditional male-female roles in their family despite their equal status in society.

More than revealing the reader's own perceptions of gender, Genly's character extends to race as well. Le Guin demonstrates the error in judging a person based on gender by comparing gender, something that the 1970s culture was far more ambiguous about, to the more familiar struggle between races. "We begin by viewing Ai as a male, I would argue we initially see him as a white male; so when we find out later that he is

black, we must reassess our interpretation of Ai” (Pennington 355). By forcing the reader to reconsider Genly’s race, Le Guin provides a salient demonstration of Genly’s own revelations. The reader, who expects Genly to be white, must suddenly come to terms with his race just as Genly, who assumes Estraven to be mainly masculine, must suddenly come to terms with Estraven’s femininity when Estraven enters kemmer.

The Gethenians, who are androgynous, are equally curious about the functions of a gendered society. They help answer the reader’s questions by asking Genly about his own culture. Yet in answer to their questions about the nature of women, whether they are truly inferior to men, Genly replies uncertainly. “I don’t know. They don’t often seem to turn up mathematicians, or composers of music, or inventors, or abstract thinkers” (253). For Genly and the Terrans of Le Guin’s future earth, the status of women is still uncertain and the impact of the second-wave of feminism, which rediscovered lost female artists, seems mostly forgotten.

Just like Shevek and Lyubov, Genly holds contradictory ideas of what women can be based on what they do. When Genly says few women are composers of music what he actually means is that he knows of few. The canon of western artists generally excluded women artists like Clara Schumann, Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel, Emily Dickinson, and the Brontës. Genly’s earth has not progressed beyond the 1970s in terms of recognizing female artists, nor does it seem that women have gained recognition as scientists or politicians either.

From Genly’s own reflections and what can be deduced from his explanations of his own culture, it is easy to see that Genly has not been raised or trained to be receptive to the unique condition of the Gethenians. Despite his training as an ethnographer and his

time spent on the planet, when the reader meets him—two years after he lands—Genly still struggles to think about the majority of the Gethenians as possessing a dual nature. Time is apparently not the solution to bias. After two years, his “landlady” is the only Gethenian to whom he assigns a feminine pronoun. All others are “he” throughout the novel, even the pregnant king.

In fact, one of the greatest criticisms of *Left Hand* is that Genly uses male pronouns, rather than sexless ones, to describe the Gethenians. While there are multiple reasons for this it is important to note that the pronoun use holds true even today. Le Guin does not “reject the possibility of creating a “new language” to replace English sexist pronouns” (351) as Pennington argues, rather, she uses the existing, sexist language, to demonstrate a crucial element of Genly’s character: that he still sees a polarized male-female world. Quite simply, Genly does not use a gender neutral pronoun because he is unable to see the Gethenians as ungendered. Rather, the vast majority are male while the weaker members of society—like his fat land lady—remain female. His use of the male pronoun does not reflect Le Guin’s lack of social conscious but instead Genly’s inability to see beyond traditional roles, a trait which is essential for his character development. He cannot realize a fully androgynous being and therefore his selection of pronouns is, as Cornell says, “consistent with his tendency to masculinize the world around him” (323).

It is impossible for Genly to see Estraven as both male and female. His struggle is, eventually, the reader’s struggle. Genly is the ultimate lens by which the readers view Le Guin’s feminism. He is bound by Davidson’s bias but liberated by Shevek’s self-examination. Pennington goes a step further to suggest that the novel functions as a kind of correction: “This novel tempts us to misread it through our gendered eyes, correcting

us and reminding us of our limited perspectives” (354). The novel itself forces an androgynous reading and the reader must let go of their innate gender biases in order to see Estraven, and the Gethenians, fully. In fact, Pennington views this as one of the novel’s greatest qualities that, in a time when SF was mostly read by men, the novel required the same things of both male and female readers, mainly a rejection of traditional gender stereotypes (356).

While Genly is unable to fully accept the sexual nature of the Gethenians, he is not Davidson. He is liberally minded. The most important aspect of Genly’s narration is that the reader is able to see him verbally struggling against his prejudice. He knows that he is unable to fully accept the Gethenians as androgynous and sees this as a personal flaw. A flaw which Le Guin observes in herself and her society.

After Estraven’s death, Genly realizes that, despite viewing Estraven as masculine for the majority of the novel, there is something in the loss more than grieving for a lost friend. It seems that he is actually mourning someone he loved deeply:

He (Estraven) was the only one who had entirely accepted me as a human being: who had liked me personally and given me entire persona loyalty, and who therefore had demanded of me an equal degree of recognition, of acceptance. I had not been willing to give it. I had been afraid to give it. I had not wanted to give my trust, my friendship, to a man who was a woman, a woman who was a man... ..but it was from the difference between us, not from the affinities and likenesses, but from the difference, that that love came: and it was itself the bridge, the only bridge, across what divided us. For us to meet sexually would be for us to meet once more as aliens. (267)

By the end of the novel, Genly has realized something that Davidson never learned: a person's quality extends beyond their gender. During their voyage across the ice, Estraven enters kemmer and becomes temporarily female. For the first time Genly is confronted with his companion as a sexual being and struggles with his reaction. He realizes that Estraven's identity cannot be defined as male or female but both and neither.

Le Guin acknowledges the differences between men and women. They are physically different and have different roles. The woman bears a child. The man cannot bear a child. These differences make love between a man and woman possible. Le Guin is not prescriptive in her text but speculative. As she says, she is not demanding that we ought to be androgynous (*Language of the Night* 158). Nor is she implying that transgender people are biologically coded that way. Yet the relationship between Genly and Estraven demonstrates that the differences are not as great as culture and biology suggests. If all humans are the same, then there is no place for gender-based inequality in the world. Her hope is that, like Genly, the reader can move beyond culturally ingrained stereotypes and come to see the world of Gethen, and Earth as well, as more complex than male and female but also as fundamentally linked (Cornell 325).

This is a realization that all Terrans seem to have assimilated as part of the Ekumen who, according to William Marcellino, have achieved a "cultural and political ambisexuality" (206). In a time when all races of humans (Cetians, Terrans, etc) have achieved equality, all that remains is an equality between genders. On Gethen, this equality is more than fulfilled. Just like the struggle for social equality seen in *The Dispossessed* (see part three), the struggle for gender equality in *Left Hand* is modeled but not easily imitated.

Genly uses the Yin-Yang symbol from Daoism to describe the nature of gender for the Gethenians. “Light is the left hand of darkness...how did it go? Light, dark. Fear, courage. Cold, warmth. Female, male. It is yourself, Therem. Both and one. A shadow on snow” (287). Estraven (Therem) is a symbol of the Yin-Yang, of the duality embedded in every human. Each human is combination of masculine and feminine characteristics. Le Guin notes in a 1993 interview that “by the end of the book, most of the characters are both mothers and fathers.” This is no accident. By blurring the lines between male and female, mother and father, Le Guin asks “What are men? What are women? What are the essential differences?” The things left over in the androgynous Gethenians, who are free of gender, are the essential parts of humankind. Yet for Genly, who sees Estraven as completely whole, it seems that there is little to separate male and female. Rather they are interconnected, even in a gendered race.

Le Guin writes that SF is a metaphor (*Language of the Night* 157). *Left Hand* is a metaphor about the world that might be. Earth is Gethen and we are Estraven. If everyone is both male and female, a manwoman, then it makes little sense to discriminate based on gender. This message, expressed in *Forest* and *the Dispossessed*, is emphasized in *Left Hand* and demonstrates New Wave SF’s growing concern for gender equality.

New Wave writers began to view gender in a new way but they did not achieve the ungendered unity of later forms. Rather, New Wave SF is a forecast of literature to come. For Genly, who has finally learned to accept Estraven’s feminine nature, romantic love is not possible. This still seems like an act of dominance, too connected to the tradition of his ancestor, Davidson. He still views the woman as the passive and unequal member in a relationship and is unable to breach the barrier to become like the Gethenians. In order to

preserve the respect he now has for Estraven, Genly cannot act upon his love. In the end, the reader, like Genly, is left uncertain about Estraven; however, we are left with hope. Like Genly, the Terrans show the potential for equality among gender and among all humans in the Hainish universe.

Part Two: Ecocritical Themes

Le Guin's worlds possess unique ecosystems that pose unique challenges and opportunities to the characters of her books. Mismanagement of these worlds has consequences. They are not direct metaphors for Earth; however, these planets do reveal some of the dangers of human actions in the modern world. Other New Wave novels, like Brian Aldiss' *Helliconia Trilogy*, use a similar model. In New Wave SF, alien planets represent possible Earth ecologies. An ecocritical reading of these three works shows Le Guin's concern for environmental justice and is indicative of the ecocritical theme of New Wave SF.

The planets of Le Guin's novels are not entirely alien. For one thing, humans can live and work there without special equipment. The planets have breathable atmospheres and contain animals and plants very similar to those found on Earth. For example, Urras has horses and otters and both Gethen and Athshe have deer. These elements contrast the Hainish worlds with the majority of planets in the galaxy, like Mars, which has a toxic atmosphere, or Jupiter, which could never be a home to terrestrial life.

The Hainish worlds are Earth-similar planets. Any of the ecological crises faced on these fictional worlds could potentially happen to Earth. Because these books occur in the same universe, the characters' experiences with each planet can be assumed to impact the ways their descendants cope with environmental scarcity and plenty. The two earlier novels, *Left Hand* and *the Dispossessed*, occur on planets where the residents must adjust to their ecology. In *Forest*, Le Guin forecasts the worst end of scarcity on fiction Earth which is so barren that the Terrans are forced to colonize other worlds.

The desert planet of Anarres is sharply contrasted with verdant Urras. Even though Anarres has social liberties, it is a desert world. Urras, despite lacking some of the freedoms of Anarres, is a world of biodiversity that has mostly preserved the existing ecology. While the events of *the Dispossessed* occur before *Forest*, fictional Earth is not much different than it is during *Forest*. This is confirmed by visitors from Earth who remark that even technologically advanced Earth does not have as many public parks or untouched wildernesses as Urras does. Earth has become an urbanized wasteland.

It seems odd that in a world of abundance, like Urras, people would be more oppressed than they are on a world of scarcity, like Anarres. In Earth history, the opposite seems to be true. Wars occur, in part, because of scarcity and the desire of one people to have the possession of another. For Le Guin especially, the need for warfare comes from scarcity. In an essay, she says that “the ethic which approved the defoliation of forests and grainlands and the murder of noncombatants in the name of peace was only a corollary of the ethic which permits the despoliation of natural resources for private profit” (151).

The difference between Earth and Anarres is one of intentions. The Terrans made their world into a desert whereas the Anarresti came to a planet that was already a desert. It is not the conditions of scarcity that create injustice, then, but conditions of injustice that ultimately lead to scarcity. Profit-minded societies exploit humans and are more likely to exploit their environment. In fact, the biological scarcity of Anarres may be one reason why their socialism works while all those of Earth seem to have failed.

For Ursula K. Heise, the ecological scarcity mimics and supports, rather than threatens, the economic scarcity that is a fundamental part of Odoism (101). The nature

of the two novels, in Heise's opinion is "suggesting both that they open up modes of life beyond the crass inequalities of consumer capitalism...in existential ways that exceed mere material need" (103). The lack of resources on Anarres, like the lack of resources on Earth, are motivators for innovation. Whereas the Terrans responded by reaching into space, the Anarresti respond by sharing more with their neighbors, and uniting as a people.

Urras is a world of plenty where the common man is oppressed. Anarres is a world of scarcity, yet it is a world where humans thrive. The two planets represent two different climates. In a climate of scarcity, like that on Anarres, humans are forced to innovate and cooperate. Viewing each other as part of the same social organism—what Samar Habib calls the Daoist unsegmented whole—the Anarresti see capitalism as an indefensible crime against the social whole (343). This does not mean that humans ought to tolerate ecological catastrophe because it unifies them or because it creates solidarity. The example of the Terrans, who did not unite in adversity but became more xenophobic, in the case of Davidson, demonstrates that some responsibility still lies with humans.

Nevertheless, in the case of Anarres, scarcity pulls the community closer. Socialism works there because everyone has nothing. There is nothing to steal or exploit from others; nothing, that is, except for information, knowledge, and discovery. These things are exploited by Sabul, who publishes Shevek's ideas as his own. On Anarres, Shevek is oppressed. He cannot progress in theoretical physics because his society demands practical science that brings advances in agriculture and biology. There is liberty of thought and movement on Anarres but no liberty of innovation. Anarres can only provide for practical discoveries. Advances like Shevek's, which deal with the space outside their

world, are not viewed as beneficial to society and cannot survive while Takver's work in marine biology thrives and advances.

Like a tree growing in the desert, Shevek's ideas are quickly choked and must remain sterile and stunted. This provides a metaphor for the larger human condition: theoretical scientific advancement—and perhaps any intellectual pursuit—cannot exist in a people just struggling to survive. Only practical science remains.

From this, however, it is not to be assumed that a world of plenty would be a place of intellectual liberty. Nor should the reader assume that Le Guin uses her novel to demonstrate how much better a socialist world like Anarres is. Rather, this is another thought-experiment. "Physicists often do thought-experiments," Le Guin says, but these experiments rarely have an immediate practical application (163). Anarres does not model a real political system nor does it directly recommend one—Le Guin is not writing her own version of *the Communist Manifesto*. Still *the Dispossessed* is markedly more critical of capitalism than it is of socialism, as demonstrated by Shevek's experiences on Urras and especially on A-Io.

Shevek goes to Urras thinking that a world of plenty—plenty of green planets, wildlife, and fellow physicists—will free him to do his work. But Shevek accomplishes less on Urras than he did on Anarres. He is free to spend all his time working on the Ansible but finds he cannot. Urras provides no motivation for its scientists, at least no motivation that will suffice for Shevek.

Here it is important to note that Shevek is not the only thinker on Urras or Anarres. Many of the physicists, like Sabul, function perfectly well in their respective societies, yet for Shevek, and many of his friends, both cultures are equally oppressive. From his

experience it is clear that scientific thought is not dependent on leisure to work or proper monetary reward. A plant can be parched but it can also drown.

The biodiversity of Urras indicates that this is a world on which humans should thrive, instead, the majority suffer and only a few experience the full benefits of such bounty. This is because the abundance is not shared. The socialist Utopia of Anarres models proper resource management. Yet even here humans cannot thrive. A balance between the two must be reached. Shevek reaches this balance at last when he denies the comforts of the university and fights for the freedom of the common people.

Shevek's spouse, Takver, demonstrates an ideal relationship with nature. Where for Shevek, biological scarcity most impacted his ability to work as a scientist, for Takver the marine biologist, ecological scarcity is not a great concern. Anarres' seas are as full of life as its shores are empty. Takver's maintenance of fish hatcheries shows not only an alternative means of survival for modern Terrans, but also the way that humans are able to develop personal connection to other creatures.

"She (Takver) had always known that all lives are in common, rejoicing in her kinship to the fish in the tanks of her laboratories, seeking the experiences of existences outside the human boundary" (19). For Takver, the natural world is essential not for the monetary benefits of a sustainable forest, for instance, but for the psychological benefits which come with caring for other creatures.

In fact, Takver has taken the role of ecologically savvy native reminiscent of the Athsheans in *Forest*. Even though the Anarresti are actually an invasive species which originally colonized Anarres to mine it, Takver finds it impossible to remain disconnected from the natural world. It is part of Habib's unsegmented whole (336).

Heise believes this is because, for Le Guin, “social systems are based on, or disconnected from, natural environments” (102). Those which are connected—the Anarresti—thrive while the disconnected—the Terrans and the Urrasti—fail. As seen later in part three, abuse of the environment in Le Guin’s universe is almost always associated with the abuse of humans. For Heise and Cary Wolfe, an animal rights theorist, denying rights to non-human species—including fish, trees, and non-animal landscape—legitimizes the oppression of fellow humans (103).

Takver demonstrates the value of nonhuman life and argues for the equal treatment of all living things. Le Guin writes in *the Language of the Night* that she participated in multiple protests against the war in Vietnam (151), and that one of the greatest conflicts in SF is the treatment of the Other (97). In her 1970s works, the Other is often very easy to pinpoint: the green-skinned aliens of Athshe, the androgynous aliens of Gethen, but in *the Dispossessed*, not only is the Other the literal other human (socialists versus capitalists) but also the environment itself. The humans of A-Io have become alienated from their environment and thus have lost the ability to see themselves as fellow creatures. The humans of Anarres, out of necessity, are closer to nature and as a result closer to their fellow humans.

“All lives in common” means that the life of Takver and the life of her fish are really extensions of a greater life force (19). The captive fish in the laboratory cannot survive without Takver’s care nor can the Anarresti survive without the fish. From this need stems Takver’s resolve in staying in the laboratory even during the crippling dust storm that cuts off the supplies lines to the town. One cannot prosper if the other is oppressed or neglected. When the planet of Anarres suffers, so do the people living there. This total

reliance on each other for survival is something that Takver innately understands. The fish are not the Other; rather, they are an extension of the self.

It is an oversimplification to say that the Anarresti are environmentally conscious. They act out of necessity. Shevek is disgusted by the throw-away-culture of Urras. It is cheaper to burn old clothes and make new ones, even though such waste is less environmentally sustainable. The conservation of Anarres, however, is one that springs from necessity, not a desire to maintain a pristine environment. The Anarresti are not environmentalists; they are realists. They know that an unhealthy exploitation of their planet is not sustainable, that they must care for what they have because they have nothing else—there is no trade between worlds.

Despite the selfish motivations behind the Anarresti's conservation practices, their society models a sustainable earth. They conserve materials, never taking more from the earth than is necessary and practice sustainable farming of fish. This provides a model for conservationists on Le Guin's Earth. Le Guin's Terrans are able to travel to other worlds but, for modern Terrans, no other world is yet available to us. Therefore, we must maintain the one world we have.

While Le Guin is fairly vocal about the political messages in her earlier works, it is important to note that her novel is written in the third person. These are not necessarily her own opinions or words. They are Shevek's and Shevek is an ethnographer. While he is inherently biased towards his own culture, his criticism of Urras can be taken seriously due to his attempts at a third-person, impartial perspective. Likewise, his criticisms of Urras and especially A-IO parallel possible criticisms of the United States. However, A-IO is not the United States of the 1970s. It is a nation in the midst of an industrial revolution.

Like the Earth analog this created plentiful jobs but unsanitary conditions for workers. The mistreatment of her people forecasts A-Io's treatment of her environment and, like the fictional Earth, Urras seems to be a world doomed to destruction.

For Le Guin, the mistreatment of humans and the mistreatment of the environment are linked. Paradoxically, on worlds where resources are scarce, like Anarres and Gethen, humans are forced to work together and create social bonds. On Gethen the conditions of scarcity force a kind of unity between its inhabitants that even extends to a unity between, and an abolition of, the two sexes.

Genly Ai is an Earth human. As already discussed, Le Guin's fictional Earth has been severely exploited. Despite this connection between Genly and the decimated Earth, Genly still views the planet of Gethen as a place completely inhospitable to human life. In reality, its people are perfectly adapted to their environment. Cities are specially designed to withstand snowstorms with one road for good weather and an underground road which accommodates travel even in the middle of winter. As an ice planet, Gethen is almost the antithesis of Anarres.

Gethen is an ice world, a world of extremes. Its people are a people of extremes—either extremely asexual or extremely gendered during kemmer. There is little life on the planet outside of humans. A few plant species and, in Genly's records, only two or three named animals which are hunted for food but not domesticated.

On one hand, Le Guin's portrayal of Gethen provides a glimpse at a world that might come. With the increasing concerns about climate change in the 1960s and 70s, New Wave SF writers were motivated to consider how humans could survive in such brutal conditions. The harshness of the landscape, and the lack of control over fate that it

implies, necessitates human solidarity and fellowship. The people of this world, more than those of present-day Earth, must rely on each other. They are far more communal and, while they establish nation-states and tribes, seem to have no concept of large-scale war. Their social structure is dictated by their landscape. These images of light and dark, shadows of plenty and scarcity “are also deeply embedded in the ecology of the planet, the warm shadows of the hearths opposing the snow, the terrible cold, so bright with danger” (Barber 148).

Much like the Athsheans of *Forest*, the people of Gethen have learned to live in harmony with their world. Perhaps this is because there is little that their world can provide for them to exploit. This is a world where “a common table implement is a little device with which you crack the ice that has formed on your drink between drafts” (12).

On the other hand, the biological scarcity might allude to the things that are lost in a genderless society. While having no gender stereotypes or discrimination—and no sex taboo—is something that the second wave of feminism might applaud, a truly genderless society would be a sterile one. Gethen is a sterile, cold, unwelcoming world. It seems that a world without diversity of gender would also be lacking in wildlife diversity.

Most significantly, the Gethenians have learned to cooperate with the environment without losing the advanced technologies of present-day Earth. Unlike the people of Earth, who transcended their planet’s loss of resources by building ever larger cities, or the people of Anarres, who fled a world of social oppression, the people of Gethen have grown and developed on their world both biologically and technologically. Despite a lack of resources, the people of Gethen have a sophisticated, modern civilization. They build cities and crown kings. They form nations and build kemmer-houses. They even have

motorized vehicles although their speed is always limited, slow and methodical. Nothing is done without great thought, including joining the Ekumen. The Gethenians are a stout, hardy people, who have adapted to their world's conditions.

A major criticism of environmentalists is that they would return to a primitive way of life, banning gas-burning automobiles and polluting factories. Environmentalism is distasteful, in part, because it would seem to require an abandonment of a modern lifestyle. In *Left Hand*, this is not the case. The Gethenians enjoy the luxuries of modern technology without their negative effect because the Gethenians set reasonable societal limits on its use.

The harmonious industry of *the Dispossessed* and *Left Hand* are only one possible solution to the environmental crisis of the 1970s. The more radical, but more idealized solution is highlighted in one of Le Guin's most ecological works: *the Word for World is Forest*. The two earlier novels occur on planets of scarcity where residents must adjust to their ecology. In *Forest*, Le Guin forecasts the worse end of scarcity on fictional Earth, which is so barren that the Terrans are forced to colonize other worlds. Unlike Anarres and Gethen, Athshe is almost entirely untouched by the human inhabitants. The Athsheans live in harmony with nature.

Like James Cameron's film, *Avatar*, *Forest* presents a native culture that is deeply connected with their forest home. Cameron's Na'avi, according to Hannes Bergthaller, are "another iteration of the venerable stereotype of the 'Ecological Indian.'" (156). This is something that critics of *Avatar* observe as relying too heavily on existing tropes—like that of the white man as savior. Le Guin's novella avoids many tropes. For example, in Cameron's film a white man, albeit disguised as a native, is the one responsible for

saving the Na'avi (Bergthaller 156). In *Forest* his analog, Raj Lyubov, saves Selver from Davidson but it is Selver, a native, who liberates his people.

The parallels between Athshe and the New World extend beyond the treatment of its people. The metaphor of colonial power applies to the ecology of the world itself. Athshe is the most pristine landscape in the three Hainish books. The majority of the planet is a vast ocean and every island is covered in forest. Like many tropical islands settled by Europeans in the eighteenth century, this is a place where the native people cooperate with their landscape. Any changes that the natives make are cosmetic—planting flowering trees around their homes—or, at the most extreme, the actions of a gardener tending his flowers so that they will flourish. They integrate rather than subjugate their world.

The Earth humans (Terrans) come to the planet with the express purpose of mining its resources, in this case the trees. Like Spanish conquistadors, they push out native peoples in their lust for precious materials. Men like Davidson are more interested in logging as quickly and efficiently as possible than preserving the native species. He would strip the planet of its trees and then move on to another world. Other Terrans are more conservative. They have colonization in mind and seek to maintain some of the agricultural utility of the land by experimenting with different planting techniques. The natives, on the other hand, are outraged by both practices, wishing to maintain the global forest in its original condition.

Forest provides three images of man's interaction with wilderness: destruction, cultivation, and harmony. Davidson's model is inherently the most destructive and unsustainable. His mindset has left fictional Earth in such a state that real wood is

suddenly more valuable than precious metals and gemstones. In the fictional Earth, most of the world's forests have been eradicated. A few, it seems, remain as natural preserves but this is a very low percentage of the entire biosphere. The regrowth of forests is a long process and even if the Terrans tried to restore their old forest they would have to wait several generations to have an abundance of harvestable wood.

The Terrans came to Athshe with two purposes. While logging is Davidson's goal the primary purpose of settling on Athshe is to establish an Earth colony. This means it has to be prepared for Terran habitation and agriculture. The Terrans naturally want to recreate Athshe in an image of the familiar. This means an eradication of the forests which are suspicious and even dangerous for the Terrans. Even Lyubov, the more liberal of the Terrans, initially feels uncomfortable in the forest.

The goal of colonization, and therefore the transformation of the forest into arable farmland, is one of Davidson's main motivators. The narrator seems particularly interested in Davidson's ideas about agriculture. His theories of land management are indicative of his complete disregard for the intrinsic or even the practical value of nature:

“He [Davidson] still could not see why a soybean farm needed to waste a lot of space on trees if the land was managed really scientifically. It wasn't like that in Ohio; if you wanted corn you grew corn, and no space wasted on trees and stuff. But then Earth was a tamed planet and Athshe wasn't. That's what he was here for: to tame it.” (10)

Davidson believes the forest is a thing to be harnessed and tamed, isolating himself from any potential connection to nature. In contrast, a minor character in the novella, Gosse, believes in a balance between maintaining existing ecosystems. He wants to

cultivate Athshe's existing vegetation, like fiberweed (85). "To log off a forest doesn't, after all, mean to make a desert—except perhaps from the point of view of a squirrel" Gosse notes (85). This distinction is important. For Gosse, creating a world habitable for Terrans is more important than maintaining native wildlife, including the Athsheans. His goal is colonization. This is in line with the directive of the Terran government, which sends more women in part to establish a more sustainable colony.

According to Bergthaller, Cameron's *Avatar* and by extension *Forest*, does not force the audience to choose between natural and artificial. Rather, both works demonstrate that humankind, far from being distant from nature, is an integral part of it, something that Davidson misses. "The very distinction between the natural and the artificial" is put into question by Le Guin (159). Davidson and the villains of *Avatar* see their respective planets as resource wells and both fall prey to the land they cannot fully understand because they refuse to be fully part of it.

For Davidson and Gosse, man's relationship with nature is a transactional one. You put seeds in the soil and harvest food or wood. This mindset—portrayed as destructive and unsustainable—is one which the novella clearly opposes. Davidson is not only the major villain of the story, but he is also an embodiment of the some culture that decimated the ecology of fictional Earth. So much that, in *the Dispossessed*, the one Terran remarks that the industrialized country of A-Io appears to him to be a wilderness.

A destructive methodology, despite its early success, will ultimately one which will make Athshe completely unusable to its colonists. Davidson creates his own destruction. "If more than a certain percentage of the forest is cut over a certain area, the fiberweed [which is the staple food of Athshe] doesn't reseed" (85). If the ultimate goal of the

Terrans is colonization and settlement of the planet, Davidson's method of complete deforestation is a self-defeating one. Even if wood was suddenly more valuable than diamonds, it would be suicide to completely destroy them. Gosse's model of cultivation sustains the planet's usability for humans but changes the planet. A pasture, however fertile, does not hold the same biotic potential as a woodland. Different species use these sources and the wildlife of Athshe is almost exclusively dependent on woods, not fields. On Athshe, the entire ecosystem hinges on the health of the trees.

The environmental movements had only recently begun at the time Le Guin wrote *Forest* and it is presumptive to assume that Davidson's attitudes towards the native forests is one-sided. His perspective is indicative of a culture that is willing to destroy its future for the lure of profit now, and his attitude toward nature extends to touch his views of other humans as well.

Davidson is Le Guin's way of answering the same question that James Cameron struggled to answer: "how can such a sense of oneness be induced in people who don't already feel it?" (Bergthaller 153). Ecological fiction, that is, fiction written in part to inspire change in people's attitudes towards environmental justice, not only exposes the wrong thinking but shows its consequences. In *Forest* these consequences are very immediate. Deforestation and the wanton slaughter of Athsheans is the direct cause of Selver's attack on Center. Davidson mimics the loss of connection to the natural world which Le Guin feels is pervasive in her society. By "approximating the lost sense of oneness" she inspires in the reader a desire for a restored relationship with nature and with others (Bergthaller 154). This includes and is expanded in her criticism of the Vietnam War (elaborated upon in section three).

Ecological destruction by Terrans is inextricably linked to their tendency for war and social injustice. Davidson repeatedly slurs the Asian and African members of his team. His attitudes towards the native peoples as well as the land they inhabit is one which resembles a conquistador or British imperialist in the early twentieth century.

Viewed as a novel of conquest and colonization, *Forest* is very firmly opposed to the subjugation of native peoples by conquerors seeking to exploit their land. The negative portrayal of Davidson and his ultimate defeat make this clear. Even the Terran name for the planet—New Tahiti—indicates this. Like imperialist colonizers, the Terrans came to the planet to exploit both land and people without the intervention of any kind of “prime directive”. The main issue here, and in later works of ecological SF like Card’s *Speaker for the Dead*, is that the ecology is completely foreign. The Terrans cannot see or understand the basic ecology of the planet and therefore cannot possibly understand the impact they have on the world and its people (Heise 105). Likewise, ecologists in the 1970s were only beginning to recognize the negative long-term impacts that chemical warfare had on the ecology of the planet.

The parallels to the 1970s are intensified in the final chapters, when Davidson employs chemical warfare against the native rebellion. Direct reference is made to the Vietnam War and indirect references to Agent Orange, which destroyed the forests of Vietnam (leading to mass extinction of native wildlife) in an attempt to flush out the Vietkong. This reference, for Ian Watson, is “fairly explicit” (231). During the Vietnam War, Agent Orange was used to rapidly destroy forests used by guerilla fighters. Davidson uses a similar method. He burns the forest all around the Athshe villages in order to flush

the natives out of hiding and slaughter them all. The policy of total destruction, besides killing Athsheans, also kills the trees and wildlife living in the region.

Genocides, deforestation, and injustice in general form an inspiration for the work. For Watson, the novella can often “intoxicate the reader with the gung-ho mood of combat and the lavishly presented technology” (231). For an anti-war book, it is often violent. Rather than discover a non-violent, Daoist solution to the invaders, the Athsheans become warlike in defense of their planet. Yet *Forest* is, for Le Guin, an expression of her frustration with the Vietnam War and, by extension, the ecological catastrophe of chemical warfare.

The novella, as discussed in section three, is one of many anti-war books of the period, one which features natives as champion and colonizers as backwards archetypes of conqueror man. By paralleling Davidson’s antiquated notion of women with his desire to massacre the native peoples, Le Guin links both sentiments in modern man. Those who support the war, she suggests through Davidson’s character, are the same kinds of people who suppressed women and who destroyed the forests of fictive Earth.

The natives, on the other hand, hold a third view independent of either Davidson or Gosse’s perspective. They live in harmony with the planet and each other. They are also peaceful, suggesting that the peaceful nature and ecological stewardship are linked. It is during war that the land is most abused. This is for practical purposes. A nation at war cannot consider long-term consequences when failing to fight might mean complete annihilation. In part, this is a reaction to the use of Agent Orange in Vietnam, which drove many species to the brink of extinction and decimated entire regions of forest.

However, a more general connection can again be made between the tendencies for injustice and the tendency for environmental abuse.

Those who, like Davidson, cannot see the humanity of the Other tend not to see any goodness in the natural world outside of its monetary worth. Davidson considers himself superior to his Asian coworkers and the native Athsheans. Davidson believes that man has transcended nature. The natives, like Selver, believe that the forest makes them human. Not only is their word for world forest, but forest is an essential part of their individual being. Their entire culture is formed around a relationship with the forest.

For Davidson, things exist for his own use, for pleasure—like women—or profit—like the trees and the Athshean slaves. For the natives, the world exists for its own sake. This is similar to how Takver in *the Dispossessed* views her fish. They have value because they are alive, independent of utilitarian needs. The Athsheans still clear land, build homes, and plant gardens, but theirs is a relationship of equals. They do not see themselves as above the forest and practice mercy even towards their greatest enemy—Davidson—who is not killed but merely exiled, like one of their insane.

Beyond condemning the mindset that leads to Earth's deforestation, *Forest* provides the reader with a glimpse into the long-term effects of climate change. Fictional Earth has essentially become a planet-wide city, a disaster for readers who cherish the wild spaces of the planet. Yet it is very likely that the barren conditions of Earth not only encouraged but perhaps forced space exploration. Earth humans ventured into space in search of resources on other planets and thus achieved another dream of mankind: space exploration.

This is a complex issue and the last two options—sustainable harvesting and a harmonious noninterference with nature are equally appealing. Gosse's sustainable model still leaves a planet altered. It creates a world of fields instead of forests, a world that is not what it was, that serves the purposes of human only and holds no value in itself.

Athshe provides an extreme example of desertification, the process by which once fertile land becomes desert. This can happen naturally or because of negligent practices. In the case of *Forest*, the ecological struggles faced by the Terrans are their own fault. By logging too quickly, the Terrans destroyed one big island on Athshe. By selective cutting, they were able to convert the forest to arable farmland. However, in *the Dispossessed*, the characters struggle against their desert environment despite their best efforts to live sustainably.

The people of Le Guin's worlds have different strategies for coping with scarcity. The Terrans fled inevitable disaster and continued to exploit natural resources at an unsustainable rate. They seemed not to realize from their own history that such wanton destruction would be harmful for everyone. The people of Urras seem ignorant of their good fortune with Urras' wealth of resources and may easily lose what they do not appreciate. The people of Anarres cultivate a relationship with nature and see it as something equal in value to their own lives much as the Athsheans of Athshe are inextricably linked to their forest home. The people of Gethen, on the other hand, have no bounty to exploit. They must make do with what they have, conserving it out of necessity. For Le Guin and the New Wave SF writers, modern Terrans should also practice conservation and live in harmony with Earth so that it can sustain them for centuries to come.

Part Three: Social Criticism

During the New Wave of science fiction, authors' attention turned away from glorification of the West to issues of social justice. Perceptions of what counted as injustice varied. For some, it was enough to identify problems in society by expanding the possible repercussions of prolonged injustice. The "if this goes on" novels forecast the potential damage that injustice might cause. One of the earlier examples of the forecasting novel is H.G. Wells' *the Time Machine* which reveals how social injustice eventually leads to humanity evolving into two species. New Wave novels like Orson Scott Card's *Ender's Game* are sometimes more subtle in their social criticism. Le Guin's New Wave novels, rather than speculating on the impact of certain injustices in Earth's future, study the reactions of characters to the injustice they face. For the Anarresti in *The Dispossessed*, it means establishing a completely new colony. For the Athsheans, this means armed resistance. A reading of Le Guin through the lens of social commentary will look at the assumptions she makes about her world as well as the issues most on the mind of New Wave SF writers in general.

Forest focuses on one main injustice: the exploitation of the Athsheans by the invading Terrans. Its key injustice and the cause of the gender and environmental exploitation is that of colonial rule. The characters, despite being from different parts of earth, all model the "attitudes of the Judeo-Christian-Rationalist West" (Barber 151) and fit the stereotype of inconsiderate colonizer, mimicking European colonial rule in places like India and the West Indies. The novel functions like other post-colonial literatures in that it focuses on the negative impact of colonial rule. The connection to imperialism even includes direct reference to the Vietnam War, the source for Davidson's prejudice

against his Vietnamese coworker, Colonel Dongh. These scenarios directly as well as indirectly criticize Le Guin's contemporary world.

One such statement is made by Davidson early in the novel and reflects a mindset which has historically been a source of injustice in the colonial era. "Men were here to end the darkness" (16). By men, Davidson means white, Terran men. He believes that the apparently more primitive and therefore inferior Athsheans are in need of salvation from their own backward ways. A similar attitude was adopted by twentieth century colonizers. Barber draws a parallel between colonists on earth and in space. Both "believe they are kings of the universe. They have no desire to understand, or more important, to learn from the hilfs [higher life forms]" (151). Davidson's main error is in seeing himself as the savior of the native peoples even though they neither asked for help nor needed it. Davidson believes that the native peoples must conform to his opinions of them. He is incapable of seeing the Athsheans as humans. Instead they are "animal-creatures; that is, non-human and therefore to be treated as animals" (151). Davidson is shocked when the "pacifist" Athsheans suddenly launch into war against him because he believes them to be, like animals, incapable of organized resistance.

Like other colonial rulers Davidson is concerned more about what is best for him and the Terrans than what is best for the colonized people. Le Guin draws upon the examples of the British occupation of India and the United States' residence in Vietnam to portray the impact that occupation has on the native peoples. The Athsheans are taken from their homes. Entire villages are lost and the people relegated to slave labor. Their enslavement is justified under the assumption that they are not "human" and therefore can benefit from

the instruction of “civilized” people. As Davidson says, “primitive races always have to give way to civilized ones. Or be assimilated” (21).

For Davidson, there is no middle ground. No compromises can be reached. The Athsheans must either be completely destroyed or completely conform to his standards of civilization. Yet these standards are ones that the Athsheans can never meet. The Athsheans are small, green, and furry; they can never look like the Terrans and therefore, for Davidson, they will always be inferior. However, like many colonized people, the Athsheans believe themselves to be equals with the humans. They fight back against Davidson’s expectations with the only means left to them: rebellion.

The Athshean culture, one of nonviolence and equality, is not necessarily meant to be a solution to oppression. Le Guin recognizes that her novels are not prescriptions of what culture ought to be, but an investigation into what might be. The planet is a thought experiment. This time, instead of asking “what if this people existed,” as she asks of the people in *Left Hand*, Le Guin asks a more sinister question: what would have to happen to make a pacifist people turn violent? The answer, for Le Guin, is articulated through Selver’s struggle against Davidson’s men.

As explained in part two, this is the same question posed by James Cameron’s film, *Avatar*, and draws an even more obvious parallel between the colonized aliens and the American Natives. For Le Guin, whose father was an ethnographer working among Pueblo peoples, the connection between the Athshean and Native American cultures appears to be intentional. Le Guin draws upon these cultures in order to symbolize the kind of oppression brought to Athshe by the Terrans and uses it to forecast what would happen to the Athsheans if they were not saved by Selver’s intervention.

Cameron's Na'avi and Le Guin's Athsheans share things in common with several native tribes. As discussed in part one, the Athsheans have female rulers and consider women as equals. They have a profound, harmonious relationship with the environment. The Athsheans are also Dreamers, believing in two worlds, the waking world and the world of dreams. They call the greatest Dreamers gods, just as the Paiute plains people named their great Dreamers, like Wovoka, gods. James Clifford observes that "prophetic dreaming religions played a role throughout native California in the late-19th and 20th centuries" (223).

The Athsheans might also have shared in the Native Americans' fate if not for Selver's intervention. In fact, Davidson has a gruesome plan for the Athsheans, one which sharply reprimands historical treatment of Native Americans. Davidson proposes a systematic eradication of the Athsheans through biochemical warfare. This parallels the rapid die-out of Native Americans after exposure to European disease. Davidson even intends to leave a small group, a kind of alien reservation, to maintain the culture for study.

Selver and the Native Americans historically, must choose between extermination or war. The injustices faced by the Athsheans become intolerable when Selver's wife is raped and murdered by Davidson. Selver leads his people into war against the Terrans, but even the spread of war to the people does not entirely destroy their culture. There is hope that injustice can be thwarted while the integrity of those threatened is maintained. This is only possible if they retain their humanity, as Selver does by refusing to kill Davidson at the end of the novel. In the final chapter, Le Guin emphasizes that even the liberty of Athshe comes at a price. Selver brings murder to the Athsheans. "Selver was a

god, a changer, a bridge between realities” (46). In times of great injustice, reality itself is altered.

Injustice changes the culture of the Athsheans into one of violence. Selver forecasts that his people will never be able to forget what Davidson taught him. The true injustice here is not the mistreatment of the Athsheans at the hands of the Terrans, but the transformation they are forced to undergo as a result. War is imposed upon them. It is not something that they were able to choose. In *Forest*, Le Guin shows a negative form of colonization, one based in greed and exploitation. In *Left Hand*, Le Guin proposes an alternative. The Ekumen demonstrate a more cross-culturally aware form of colonization, one modeled by the Christian narrative embedded in Genly’s character.

The Ekumen are a massive intergalactic power which could easily force assimilation into its union. Yet they are also benevolent, not forcing anyone to join them and wanting all nations of a planet to unite equally. The ambassador is always sent alone, so as not to seem a threat. Of the three novels, this is the most mystical. Inspired by Daoist themes like the Yin and Yan, *Left Hand* emphasizes, not the injustices faced by people on Gethen, but both proper and improper ways for a stronger nation to interact with the weaker one.

As in *The Dispossessed*, the nations of *Left Hand* partly parallel real world nations. Orgoyen, the second nation Genly visits, most closely resembles the USSR. It is totalitarian, industrial, and pushing for a world war. People are assigned jobs and allotted food from government stores. The government is corrupt and politicians must constantly keep in favor of whoever is in power. At first, when Genly visits Orgoyen he is favored; this favor quickly dissipates when it becomes clear he cannot give Orgoyen the upper

hand against the neighboring Karhide. Then Genly is sent to a work camp in the most hostile part of the nation, their Siberia.

Karhide is not a perfect analog for the United States. In fact, with Karhide Le Guin again suggests an alternative society, not necessarily a better one, but one which is different. In this thought experiment, the people of Karhide have no war. In part this is due to a strict code of honor which Genly, even after two years on the planet, does not quite understand.

Both nations reject joint union with the Ekumen initially because they cannot unite on their own planet. The solution of the people of Gethen cannot be an internal one. They are not able to be changed from within as the Athsheans are by Selver, nor can they be changed by rebellion as the Anarresti were. For the people of Gethen, an outside force is needed to unify them. They need the witness that only Genly, an outsider, can provide.

Genly's alien nature separates him from the people of Gethen. He is the image of the missionary-ambassador, who comes to unite with rather than force assimilation on another culture. Like Shevek, he functions as an ethnographer of Gethenian culture, analyzing their practices and trying to make sense of their world. Yet Genly's greater narrative purpose is that of emissary. He is the Emissary of the Ekumen. "In his presence, lines drawn on the earth make no boundaries, and no defense" (93). Genly comes to bring all of Gethen into the Ekumen or none at all. For the Ekumen, there are no national, racial, or social boundaries between peoples. Likewise, the only change demanded of the Gethenians are that they forsake internal conflict (war).

Even though the three novels provide little information about the Ekuman social structure, it is, from Genly's report, one that requires the assent of the people it

assimilates. It is not a harsh colonial ruler nor does it believe in withholding technology from willing planets. There is, however, a noninterference policy. After first contact, no other member of the Ekumen comes to the planet and the Ekumen will do nothing (they will not even interfere if their envoy is imprisoned or killed) until the entire planet agrees to join the Ekumen. The nations of the planet must join as one entity. No one nation is given precedent over another.

The Ekumen are not the ultimate socialists. They do not share everything they possess. But they do recognize and protect the autonomy of individuals. At the end of *Forest*, for instance, the Ekumen tell Selver that they will honor their agreement to leave the Athsheans alone until they are ready to join. Force is not used. Planets that do join the Ekumen are granted all their powers—including being taught telepathy. If Genly were killed by the people of Gethen the Ekumen would not invade. They would recognize that the planet is not yet ready to join in a harmonious relationship and would try again with a new generation.

The benevolent force of the Ekumen, and Genly as their ambassador, is almost like that of the Christian God. This is surprising. Le Guin, an agnostic, did not necessarily intend for Genly to fill the role of Christ yet this is what he seems to do. For the people of Gethen, who believe in mystical prophets, belief in a higher power is more than reasonable. “Unproof is the ground of action. If it were proven that there is no God, there would be no religion. But also if it were proven that there is God, there would be no religion” (75). For Le Guin, unproof is essential to faith both in God and in the power of the Ekumen. Religion is a belief in what is unseen as truth. If God is proven, then the belief in God is impossible. Proof forces belief but also negates it.

If God is proven, and if the Ekumen display force in assimilating the people of Gethen, then belief is not something unique or admirable. Obedience is an obedience of fear, not one of faith in a greater good. The same can be said of the ideal or perfect society. If it is forced upon people, rather than accepted of their own free will, then the society is no longer perfect. Here Le Guin is critical of both Marxism and capitalism, which both (in different ways) impose their will upon people.

The Ekumen must provide the possibility of both doubt and belief. They do this by sending Genly, who can neither persuade with force nor fact. If the Ekumen invaded Gethen—as Davidson’s Terrans invaded Athshe—they would claim for themselves the knowledge and wealth of the people. The Ekumen do not want unwilling followers. Because invasion ultimately results in inequality between invader and invaded, the Ekumen refuse to invade other worlds. They know what Americans learned through experience. Invading a nation and forcing democracy (or communism) upon it results in a false conversion. The nation might conform for a little while but as soon as it is granted autonomy again it will fall back into its old ways or, worse, rebel violently against its oppressors.

This is a mystery that the king of Karhide cannot understand. “If there were anything these Ekumens wanted from us, they wouldn’t have sent you alone” (41-42), he says to Genly. But for the Ekumen this is the only way. The Ekumen is a great united federation of inhabited worlds. It is all powerful. The Ekumen have interstellar drives, the Ansible, and superior weapons. They want Gethen to join their federation, not to exploit the planet’s few resources, but so that they can share knowledge. It is a completely

benevolent relationship. The Ekumen want to give to Gethen, not take. In this, they model an ideal relationship between ruler and ruled, God and man, powerful and weak.

Instead of sending an army, the Ekumen send one man. Genly was sent alone so that it would be “impossible to fear [him]” (42). In the same way, Christ came alone, without the force of God or angels behind him. He came in the most humble form possible (Christ a lonely carpenter’s son, Genly a lonely ethnographer without weapons or physical strength). Christ performed signs and miracles just as Genly used the Ansible to demonstrate the powers of the Ekumen. Yet he refuses to perform more miraculous signs—like bringing his spaceship down to the planet. Neither overturns nations with power but rather use subtle logic to slowly begin a revolution.

Even Genly, like Davidson, is prone to judgment of the culture he encounters. As Genly says, he was sent alone because “alone, I cannot change your world. But I can be changed by it. Alone, I must listen, as well as speak. Alone, the relationship I make, if I make one, is not impersonal and not only political: it is individual, it is personal, it is both more and less than political. Not We and They; not I and It; but I and Thou” (279).

A political force does not get to know its people. It does not learn names or fall in love. In contrast, an individual creates personal connections. By the end of the novel Genly realizes that he loves Estraven. He has a personal investment in the planet. He must recognize the humanity of every Gethenian and therefore is their best ambassador.

Genly models the way that any ruling power ought to extend its rule, not through the violence of forced assimilation practiced by Davidson nor by the xenophobic isolationism of Anarres, but by building personal relationships with its people. He does not force sudden change. For Shevek in *the Dispossessed*, rebellion is a way of life. *The*

Dispossessed is Le Guin's most obviously socialist text and Shevek, like Genly, is a harsh critic of both his society and our own. Like many New Wave SF characters, Shevek especially targets industrial, materialist cultures and emphasizes that cultural criticism must be a continuous process, a constant renewing of the value on which his nation was founded.

The characters of Le Guin's three novels are pulled along by forces beyond their control. In *Left Hand*, prophets predict the planet's joining with the Ekumen before it happens. This will happen no matter what Genly or Estraven do. In fact, Genly believes that his action cannot change the future. Selver in *Forest* becomes a god because he must, not because he desires power. For Shevek in *The Dispossessed*, it seems as though individuals have little say in what they are and what they do. "They were not playing the role now, it was playing them" (34). Even when they believe they control their own roles they are actually controlled by them. Shevek chooses the role of scientist but the role plays him. In order to pursue science he must sacrifice his wife and children, leaving them on Anarres when he knows that he will probably never see them again.

In fact, Shevek's life seems far from the utopia promised by Odo when she developed her socialist theory. As Samar Habib observes, Odoism is not strictly communism or socialism. Rather, it is "a combination of Taoist thought and anarchist theory" (336). The differences between Anarres and other socialist and communist republics familiar to the reader are significant.

Anarres is a realistic world in that it includes both positive and negative aspects. Yet it is, at its most simple, socialism that works. Unlike earlier SF novels like George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, which represented socialist and communist civilizations as

negative and dysfunctional, the system on Anarres actually appears to function. Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward*, one of the earliest socialist SF novels, reads like a field guide to a future utopia. Even the original *Utopia* of Thomas More did not grapple with the negative traits of his hypothetical society but only its function. *The Dispossessed*, in contrast, is realist.

The Dispossessed is an anarchist novel that not only points out flaws in the author's world but offers a real alternative, albeit that of anarchy. Yet *The Dispossessed* is not a clear one-way advocacy for Odo's socialism. Shevek is not entirely satisfied with his world but he does not attempt to destroy the entirety of the political system either.

Compared to earlier novels which were critical of socialism, *The Dispossessed* seems to advocate it. However, compared to other socialist literature, it is almost critical. Like the other novels, *The Dispossessed* is a thought experiment that asks how ordinary individuals like Shevek would function in a real, working socialist utopia.

This socialism (or Odoism) attempts to address many of the major criticisms of socialism. The major criticism addressed is that of Sigmund Freud whose worldview was heavily influenced by capitalism. "For Freud, if people are to co-exist in a social situation, they must accept that they will always endure some discontent as a result of repressing immediate or anti-social desires" (Libretti 307). Furthermore, in a capitalist, or Freudian worldview, "people not only will not of their own impetus work but also will not have the compulsion to do their best work...without some kind of external impetus or incentive" (Libretti 307). A Freudian worldview supposes that monetary incentives—like those in capitalism—are needed for anyone to work. Under this logic, Odoism, because it provides no incentives, cannot logically function. No one would work.

In *The Dispossessed* at least, monetary incentive is not viewed as a necessary motivator. On Anarres, “a lot of people didn’t care where they were posted to and changed jobs all the time” (Le Guin 42). “People like to do things,” Shevek says, “they like to do them well. People take the dangerous, hard jobs because they take pride in doing them, they can—egoize, call it—show off?—to the weaker ones... a person likes to do the work he is good at doing” (Le Guin 132).

For Shevek, there is no difficulty in motivating work. The goal is instead to identify the right work for the individual. By allowing individuals to choose their employment, they are given the opportunity to do the work they are best at doing. When this happens, Libretti explains, “individual creativity necessarily and inevitably serves the interests of society as a whole” (309). Shevek’s report of Odoism demonstrates the ways that socialism can work. On Anarres, establishing sexual liberty does not destroy monogamy. Sharing everything equally, while resulting in hardship for all, does not make society unproductive. Rewarding work with money and punishing laziness is only one of many options for humanity.

This seems to be an ideal system, yet Shevek is not entirely satisfied with Odoism. As an ethnographer, he turns his lens onto his own culture and criticizes it almost as much as he does the culture of A-Io. Shevek is a true anarchist, advocating perpetual reform to fend against the corruption inherent in political systems. As a hypothetical socialism system, Anarres can only function if its citizens do whatever works needs done. This includes maintaining their socialism against the inherent selfishness of men like Sabul. Le Guin does not attempt to argue whether or not it is possible to found such a society, nor does she investigate how it would be founded; this is not a manifesto and Shevek

does not propose an alternative to modern society. The events of the novel take place long after Odo founded Anarres.

Shevek does not see Anarres as perfect. It is ambiguous, both Utopia and Dystopia, both good and bad. Besides being a far more realistic analysis of the world, this kind of reading suggests it is not possible to create a perfect society. The corruption of Shevek's mentor, Sabul, demonstrates Le Guin's understanding that something in human nature tends towards selfishness. If Anarres hopes to remain free, it must rebel against this sentiment. This requires perpetual revolution. This concept is similar to Marxist theory but Shevek's message remains complex and elusive.

Le Guin's novel diverges from typical Marxist writing. She neither documents nor recommends a specific culture. There is no strong advocacy for the government of the Anarresti or Urrasti. Nor is the novel propaganda. In fact, portrayals of each nation and government in *The Dispossessed* are largely negative. Capitalism is viewed as harshly as socialism. Thu, the communist nation on Urras, is ruled by greedy and corrupt politicians. The people of Thu are selfish. Like the people of Orgoyen in *Left Hand*, Thu will only join the Ekumen if they can be assured of their own power as a result. The people of A-Io who take Shevek in are bourgeoisie oppressors who abuse their working class and objectify their women. Both nations portray different beliefs about human purpose and fulfillment. A-Io, represented by the university professors with whom Shevek works, is a symbol of capitalism and Freud's interpretation of Darwin's theories (Habib 339). The politicians of Thu represent the communist form of government (Habib 339).

The common people of Anarres are not much better. Sabul, Shevek's mentor, in particular, fails to meet Odo's standard. Habib explains that even in a system where

individuals are stripped of “an infrastructure that would enable the power-hungry to exercise that power” (334) those individuals still exist. Le Guin does not attempt to create a perfect humanity. Flaws still exist. They struggle with each other for the common good yet the government stifles the creative force of playwrights and scientists when their craft questions the indoctrinating process of the education system or the necessity of isolation. Their xenophobia blinds them to the potential good that might come of Shevek’s collaboration.

By granting flaws to each government, Le Guin exposes the reality of her world: that flawed humanity naturally creates flawed societies. Shevek believes there is no society in which he and his ideas truly belong. He loves Anarres because he was raised there but it is apparent that he cannot thrive there. Nor can he really live in A-Io. He leads a rebellion against the government there and opposes the attempts to sell his work “to the highest bidder.” He is not home anywhere and so he is dispossessed. He owns nothing but is still owned by his desires: to pursue science, and later, to liberate the people of A-Io. Those who own things, he remarks, are “themselves possessed” (66). The people of Anarres, because they have nothing, are not possessed (dispossessed).

In the later parts of the novel, Le Guin’s focus shifts from presenting a hypothetical political system to criticizing her own society. In this case, it is a criticism of materialism in American culture. Americans are like the people of A-Io, who throw away clothing after one use and view owning lots of things as the greatest possible achievement in life. They are possessed by the things that they possess. Libretti explains that Le Guin’s novel suggests that the culture of the United States, “far from encouraging people to access their full potential, instead foster(s) conditions of alienation from ourselves, our

creativity, and work, nature, and the world at large” (306). Furthermore, this is something built-in to the structure of capitalism, especially in a Freudian sense. Under Freud’s ideas of capitalism, not only is material possession a motivator for work, but also one of the goals of mankind, yet for Shevek, possession is destructive. Placed in a context of capitalist motivation, Shevek is unable to complete his work. He has become possessed.

In biblical accounts, people would fling themselves on fires or injure themselves as part of their demon affliction. Possessed people are not in their right minds and are ostracized from society. They are viewed negatively while those who are not possessed are viewed as sound of mind, rational, and safe. By possessing things, the people of a materialist society—like A-Io and the United States—also become possessed by them. As in a traditional market economy, the driving forces behind all advancement is to increase wealth and security so that one can own more things. Owning things, possessing them, is the sole motivator in a consumer culture like that of A-Io. Yet the culture of consumerism, which Le Guin lived in and experienced as she worked on her novel, does not lead to satisfaction. Nor do these societies function as cohesively as that of Anarres. The capitalist-consumer nation of A-Io is one of marked dichotomy between the working class and the consumers. As a result, the rebellion of A-Io, unlike Shevek’s quiet rebellion on Anarres, is a violent one.

The possessed of A-Io are contrasted with the people of Anarres who possess nothing and are therefore “unpossessed.” Le Guin uses the term dispossessed, suggesting that the possessions have been taken from them. In *The Dispossessed* two people groups are dispossessed. The first, and most obvious, is the community on Anarres. Yet the second group, the socialist rebels of A-Io, are also dispossessed. Possessions have been robbed

from them by the bourgeois of A-Io. The bourgeois cannot even recognize their dependence on the exploitation of others, as Libretti observes (315). Instead, they make decisions based on financial gain rather than ecological or social benefit. “The primary objective of economic behavior under capitalism is to make money, and the meeting of human need is subordinate and epiphenomenal to this mission” (Libretti 318). Even though the mission of Anarres is human fulfillment, it fails its mission because the Anarresti will not allow others to come. They will not share their utopia with the rest of the world. This is in stark contrast to Earth communists—Soviet Russia especially—who advocated for violent assimilation.

For Libretti, the parallels between A-Io and the modern United States are obvious. The idea that “people serve the economy” is shared by both nations and in both nations resources are destroyed in order to preserve a false sense of market security. “In order to sustain the price of commodities, milk is flushed down sewers, crops are burned, and cattle are destroyed while at the same time people starve” (Libretti 319). This situation, viewed by the stark contrast between A-Io’s professors and the working class, is seen in Libretti, and Le Guin’s earth. In both worlds, “‘cost’ and ‘price’ do not adequately reference or comprehend our material reality but alienate us from it, distorting our comprehension of our world and fostering behaviors counterproductive to individual and collective interests and happiness” (319).

In its harsh criticism of capitalism and its anarchic nature, *The Dispossessed* follows its Marxist tradition. Marxist literature is supposed to be revolutionary. It is supposed to confront the reader’s society and ask how that society might be changed for the better. As a novel of perpetual anarchy, *The Dispossessed* more than meets the criteria. In the

treatment of the working class, Shevek observes a great injustice which parallels injustices in Le Guin's own world. "You can't crush ideas by suppressing them. You can only crush them by ignoring them. By refusing to think, refusing to change. And that's precisely what our society is doing" (145), one of the working class rebels remarks. Like Shevek, Le Guin cannot ignore the injustices that she sees in the world and these injustices work their way onto the page.

Marxist literature, because of its revolutionary nature, tends to be directly confrontational. As such, it uses social criticism in an attempt to shed light on issues of injustice previously ignored. Yet this is also a Taoist novel. Taoism, unlike Marxism, is open to constant change. It acknowledges the imperfections of any system and the necessity of change even in a society founded as a Utopia (Habib 337). In one sense, *The Dispossessed* is just a book about Shevek's life, but it is also a book of social criticism. Through Shevek's observations as an ethnographer, he criticizes the cultures of both A-Io and Thu, and their multiple earth counterparts. With salient observations about the nature of socialism in his culture, Shevek suggests a new way to think about socialism on Earth. Ignoring an idea is the best way to destroy it. The solution is to refuse to let these ideas be ignored. When Shevek's scientific discoveries were ignored on Annarres, he rebelled against his culture and printed them himself. When Odo's ideas were ignored on Urras, she established the colony on its moon.

Shevek is "an idea. A dangerous one. The idea of anarchism, made flesh. Walking among us" (257). Shevek's existence says that socialism could work and that is a dangerous idea for both A-Io and the 1970s United States. The anarchists of A-Io innately know that Shevek is an image of the successful revolution, that equality can be

attained. Perhaps, by performing this thought-experiment, Le Guin also suggests that equality can be reached, that, like Shevek, *The Dispossessed* is an idea, a dangerous one, the idea of anarchism made flesh.

Conclusion

SF itself, and New Wave SF in particular, threatens the status quo. As demonstrated by the literature of Le Guin, SF can reveal all kinds of injustice. By presenting metaphors of real life, SF disguises criticism in the web of story. Like Shevek, at first SF writers hid and outwardly conformed to society. During the New Wave writers grew more bold and began to write about the issues faced by their world.

For Le Guin, these issues were similar. She links all forms of injustice as being caused by the same fundamental selfishness expressed by individuals like Davidson. A society that cannot recognize the Other as human is as likely to persecute its women as minorities as it is to abuse its environment. In American culture, Le Guin saw a trend of injustice. In her early novels she did not seek to correct this flaw; rather, Le Guin's early novels were experimental. In part, they imagine a world without her present injustices. However, Le Guin's novels also acknowledge the reality of injustice. By exposing it, she illuminates for the reader the way that all injustices are linked. Cultures that mistreat women tend to destroy the environment and mistreat the lower classes. On the other hand, cultures like that of Athshe, which values nature, also lacks the social injustices of war and gender inequality.

Unlike most early SF, Le Guin's SF rebels against her society. This not only influenced the New Wave but also current trends in SF. Despite her experimental intent, Le Guin's fiction helped change the role of SF in her world. New Wave SF is an idea, a dangerous one. It was a dangerous idea that Le Guin exploited in order to reveal injustice in her world. In doing so, she advocated a new kind of SF literature, one that continues to question the assumptions made about our society and our world.

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