Gender and Sexuality on Gethen

A Contemporary Analysis of Ursula K le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*

Kön och Sexualitet på Gethen

En samtidig analys av Ursula K Le Guin's *Mörkrets Vänstra Hand*

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Abstract

Ursula K Le Guin wrote *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) because she wanted to explore the limitations of gender and sexuality in a way that reflected the ongoing epistemic changes in her society. She created the Gethenians, an ambisexual, androgynous species that live most of their life without an assigned sex, making their entire society lack the concept of gender. Le Guin writes in her essay "Is Gender Necessary? Redux" (1988) that she wanted to erase gender to find out what was left. This essay will examine how the themes of gender and sexuality are explored in the *Left Hand of Darkness,* questioning if gender was actually erased. It is Le Guin's linguistic choices and assumption that androgyny is masculine that assigns male gender to the Gethenians, without them having a biological sex. This renders the female experience invisible, creating a severe imbalance between the male and female part of them. However, by using Genly Ai - one of the main narrators, a male character from Terra (Earth) - gender is still presented as something fluid and non-binary, even though the Gethenians are generally perceived as more masculine. Sexuality, on the other hand, is more fluid and open, presenting a completely different idea than the norm present in the world of the reader. On Gethen, sexuality is celebrated when it is controlled and separate from everyday life, contrary to the celebration of a constant, masculine and aggressive view on sex. In conclusion, *The Left Hand of Darkness* presents the reader with a safe and comfortable version of androgyny, ultimately leaving many readers wanting more from the thought experiment.

Keywords: gender, sexuality, Ursula K Le Guin, *The Left Hand of Darkness*, science fiction

Sammanfattning

Ursula K Le Guin skrev *Mörkrets Vänstra Hand* (1969) eftersom hon ville undersöka de begräsningar som är associerade med kön och sexualitet på ett sätt som reflekterade de pågående epistemiska förändringarna i samhället. Hon skapade folket Gethenians, en ras av människor som är androgyna och ambisexuella vilket gör att de lever majoriteten av sina liv utan kön i ett samhälle där konceptet genus inte existerar. Le Guin skriver i sin uppsats ”Is Gender Necesarry? Redux” (1988) att hon ville radera genus för att ta reda på vad som finns kvar. Denna uppsats kommer att utforska hur två teman, genus och sexualitet, hanteras i *Mörkrets Vänstra Hand*, samt ifrågasätta huruvida genus faktiskt blev raderat. Det är, i slutändan, Le Guins lingvistiska val och antagande att androgynitet är maskulint som ger Gethenierna ett manligt genus, även om de saknar ett fysiskt kön. Detta gör att den kvinnliga upplevelsen blir helt osynlig och skapar en tydlig obalans mellan den feminina och den maskulina sidan av dessa varelser. Dock, genom användningen av Genly Ai - en av berättarna, en manlig karaktär från Terra (Jorden) - så presenteras kön fortfarande som någonting icke-binärt och diffust. Sexualitet å andra sidan, presenteras som mer öppet och naturligt i jämförelse med normerna som existerar i läsarens värld. På Gethen är sexualitet firat när den är kontrollerad och en separat del av livet, i motsats till normen som firar en konstant, maskulin och aggressiv version av sex. Sammanfattningsvis presenterar *Mörkrets Vänstra Hand* läsaren med en trygg och bekväm version av androgynitet, vilket gör att många läsare vill få ut mer av/känner att något saknas i tankeexperimentet.

Nyckelord: kön, sexualitet, Ursula K Le Guin, *Mörkrets Vänstra Hand*, science fiction

Science fiction (sf) as a literary genre is extremely broad, which makes it very difficult to define. Several different sf writers and critics have tried to make their own definitions according to their own separate criteria. Adam Roberts, a British sf writer and critic, has compared some of these different definitions but ultimately could not find a general consensus except for the "agreement that it is a form of cultural discourse … that involves a world view differentiated in one way or another from the actual world in which its readers live" (Roberts 2). This compulsory presence of a different world view makes sf a perfect genre for exploring various aspects and versions of political, social, and economic issues, and theorize about how they affect the world we live in. By creating different thought experiments the author can attempt to reverse the reader's "habitual way of thinking" which lets the reader explore different possibilities and aspects of reality in a comfortable and safe space (Le Guin, "Gender" 150). However, for these thought experiments or ideal worlds to be relevant and interesting for the reader, they need to be grounded in reality to some extent. Therefore, it is important to follow the advice of author Darko Suvin, that sf must, and often tends to, reflect on current epistemic changes in the society in which the author lives (Suvin 4). The author chooses a current issue or topic, problematizes it, and explores different possibilities and outcomes based around the issue.

During the 1960s, both society and the sf genre were undergoing changes. The second wave of feminism was starting, as many women wanted more than just equal legal rights, leading to a movement that included every aspect of life, both political and private (Burkett, "Women's"). Simultaneously with these social changes, the sf genre was changing. When space travel became a reality, many sf fans were let down by the dullness and the limitations of real space exploration and they wanted

something more out of the thought experiments. The genre needed to be elevated in "literary and stylistic quality", as well as reflect the ongoing changes in society in order to engage the public. Simply fantasizing about a galaxy far, far away was no longer enough (Roberts 335f). A previously male-dominated genre was beginning to open up, and women writers began to emerge. Their stories would reflect the current issues of society, such as equal rights and personal freedom, in a way that male writers had previously failed to do. Female writers questioned the status quo by creating thought experiments and writing adventures where different aspects of gender would be explored and analyzed. Some distinguished feminist works from this time are Ursula K Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), Joanna Russ' *The Female Man* (1975), and Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976), which are all rightfully summarized by writer and critic Brian Attebery as "powerful feminist science fiction" that influenced the genre and made it "virtually impossible for an sf writer to take gender for granted anymore" (Attebery 6). This was because when feminist sf writers heavily questioned the role gender would have in the future, it could no longer be presumed that gender roles and gender would keep existing and go on unchanged into the future. When sf writers explored different possible futures, theorizing different outcomes of our society, the question of gender would now have to be addressed in some way, either explaining why it was unchanged or how it had evolved.

In Le Guin's essay, "Is Gender Necessary? Redux" (1988), she describes the women's movement as "just beginning to move again" (155) when she wrote *The Left Hand of Darkness*, which was exactly what it was doing. The feminist movement during the 1960s and 1970s is now called the second wave of feminism and was then

inspired by the civil rights movement from the previous decade (Burkett "Feminism"). Anglo-American feminists during this time focused on the "women's experience as a way to identify and combat patriarchy" which lead to considerable focus being put on personal politics, private lives, and the "gendered nature of everyday life" (Grant 299). Feminists would question what it actually meant to be a woman, and therefore, simultaneously question what it meant to be a man (Plain 210). This social shift made Le Guin feel a certain unease that made her want to "define and understand the meaning of sexuality and the meaning of gender", which was why she began writing *The Left Hand of Darkness*. Contrary to *The Female Man* and *Woman on the Edge of Time*, in which the current views on gender are explicitly discussed, and heavily questioned, Le Guin wanted to erase gender completely and look at a world where it had never existed to begin with. *The Left Hand of Darkness* became a way for her to "record [her] consciousness, the process of [her] thinking" ("Gender" 156) when exploring what "truly differentiates men and women" (159). She wanted to move past the stereotypes and society's lifelong conditioning of what gender is, in order to see what would be left. Therefore, she created this intricate and complicated thought experiment. She created Gethen, a planet located several hundred light-years away, where almost no people from Earth (Terra) had been before. She created a people, the Gethenians, an androgynous, ambisexual human species who lived in a society where gender is of no importance since it does not, nor has it ever, existed. She speculated on how a world where "men and women were completely and genuinely equal in their social roles, equal legally and economically, equal in freedom, in responsibility, and in self-esteem" (172) would look like and how it would function. Which is admittedly a very neat idea, although it ultimately turned

out to be, in her own words, quite "messy" (160). She manages to question the actual importance of gender and sexuality in society and explore a non-binary version of reality, but still, there are both prominent pros and cons to her thought experiment.

This essay will examine how the themes of sexuality and gender are explored and dealt with in Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness,* as well as analyze how she uses the sf genre to present new ideas regarding femininity and masculinity to an audience that would usually not come in contact with these type of ideas. The themes of sexuality are fairly straight forward as sex is simply seen as something natural and beautiful with consent being the highest priority, while heavily criticized when it is used to exert power and dominance over someone else. The theme of gender is, however, more complicated. Le Guin does not manage to fully erase gender: it is used both as a plot device and a motif for character development throughout the novel; yet, it is explored as something non-binary and fluid while raising the question of its actual importance in society. This essay will focus on two main areas of criticism against *The Left Hand of Darkness*: the linguistic choices, and the overtly masculine representation - both rendering the female experience invisible while feeding into the patriarchal idea that the male experience is universal, to then discuss how the view on gender evolves throughout the story, as well as how it is used as a motif and its importance in the story.

In order to contextualize and clarify, the premise of *The Left Hand of Darkness,* the novum[1] for Le Guin's thought experiment, the Gethenians will be briefly explained, since both their sexuality and gender are somewhat complicated and understanding these concepts is essential when understanding the discussion in

[1] "A novum of cognitive innovation is a totalizing phenomenon or relationship deviating from the author's or implied reader's norm of reality" (Suvin 64).

this essay. The novel itself consists of different narratives and short stories, providing the reader with several layers of cultural insight, as well as different perspectives of the Gethenian society. The main narrative, concerning Genly Ai and Therem Harth Rem ir Estraven, is narrated by both Genly and Estraven in separate chapters, alternating throughout the novel. Genly is a "conventional, rather stuffy, young man from Earth" ("Gender" 160) who has been sent as an envoy to Gethen with the goal to have the Gethenians join the Ekumen, an intergalactic trade federation. He has, before being sent out, been provided with some training regarding the culture and language on Gethen through field notes from previous envoys, such as Ong Tot Oppong[2] (*Left* 89), in order to prepare him for his mission – making his understanding of life on Gethen very limited. Estraven, on the other hand, is a born and bread Gethenian working as the King's ear when we first meet "him",[3] and "he" is responsible for providing Genly with an audience in government and to help him succeed with his mission (5). These two narrators provide the readers with both a connection to their reality, as Genly functions on the basis of a bisexual society, while they are also given insight into a new way of life through Estraven's narration. Life on Gethen is presented through both the eyes of the alien and the native.

The Gethenians, the supposedly genderless species inhabiting the planet of Gethen, work as the subject, the main novum, for Le Guin's entire thought experiment. Since she wanted to explore a world where everyone basically has the same opportunities in life, they needed to have the same limitations and risks as well. The result became a species that randomly morph into either a biological female or

[2] One of the investigators from the first landing party on Gethen (*Left* 89).
[3] "He"/ "him" will be the pronoun used throughout when referring to the Gethenians. The citation marks are used to acknowledge the fact that they are actually not men, but that the same pronouns used in the novel will be used nonetheless for clarification.

male body when they are sexually active, making it impossible to tell who will bear children and who will not, as well as creating the possibility of one person being "the mother of several children [as well as] the father of several more" (91). Since everybody on Gethen spends the majority of their lives without having an assigned sex, the concept of gender is non-existent, and therefore no one faces any limitations or is discriminated against because of it. Where they go in life is generally based on their abilities, not their sex, gender identity or gender expression, the exception being the "perverts". Some Gethenians have a biological mutation, causing them to be in constant kemmer[4] and always presenting as either male or female. The Gethenians call them perverts as they are always believed to be completely controlled by their sexual urges, constantly sexually attracted to everyone. They are, however, not completely ostracized and excluded, but tolerated with a level of distain and disapproval that Genly likens with the way "homosexuals [are tolerated] in many bisexual societies" (63). The public often refers to them by using the male or female pronouns used for animals, as well as the nickname "halfdead", when referring to them in order to dehumanize and antagonize them. The general view of this constant sexuality is made clear when Genly is talking with the King, Argaven XV, for the first time and "he" cannot trust people who are always driven and motivated by their sexual desires. "He" asks Genly if "… all of them, out on these other planets, are in a permanent kemmer? A society of perverts?" (36) while repeatedly calling Genly a "sexual freak" (32). That this distain is the norm on Gethen, is proven when Genly repeatedly is distrusted because of his perceived permanent state of kemmer. They

[4] The period of time when they are sexually active. Their sexual hormones are released in a way similar to the menstrual cycle, causing the to become extremely horny and to morph into a male or female biological body (*Left* 95).

cannot understand why they would want to create an alliance with such a feral people, permanently controlled and consumed by such a trivial thing as sex. How can they trust a people who will always have an ulterior motive?

The general attitude, however, towards sexuality and sex on Gethen, is very relaxed and open – which is mentioned by both Genly and Ong Tot Oppong since it plays such a crucial role in how the Gethenian society functions.

> The kemmer phenomenon … fascinates us, but it rules the Gethenians, dominates them. The structure of their society, the management of their industry, agriculture, commerce, the size of their settlements, the subjects of their stories, everything is shaped to fit the somer[5]-kemmer cycle. … Everything gives way before the recurring torment of festivity of passion. … Room is made for sex, plenty of room; but a room, as it were, apart. The society of Gethen, in its daily function and its continuity, is without sex. (93)

Sex can be openly discussed and there is no shame connected to their sexual desires, as long as it is within the norm. They can openly visit kemmerhouses and participate in whatever form of sexual intercourse they would like, with whomever they would like. The perverts, however, with their constant sexual desire, are seen as something lesser, their permanent kemmer becoming the ultimate weakness. Sex is encouraged and seen as a natural part of life, but it functions as something separate, not thinking about it at all outside of kemmer. In *The Left Hand of Darkness,* Estraven is never

[5] The periods of time in between kemmer when they are sexually latent (*Left 95).*

narrating when in kemmer, and "him" being in kemmer is only mentioned once towards the end by Genly. The reader is never given first-person insight into what it is like to be in kemmer, probably since we already experience the world through a lens of a constant sexual drive, which means we do not need a description from Estraven of what it is like to understand. The lack of descriptions regarding the experience of kemmer also contributes to the idea that sex exists on Gethen, but in a separate space, outside of the daily routines.

As a theme, Le Guin uses the dualistic view on sexuality to question the norms existing in the world of the reader. For example, Véronique Mottier discusses how female sexuality often has been seen as purer and more innocent throughout history, compared to male sexuality, and that it is the job of women to protect their innocence from being corrupted by men (52). Women's sexuality, much like the Gethenians, has been seen as something manageable that can be ignored as it is nearly non-existent without a man awakening it. This means that women, again like the Gethenians, could theoretically live their life without being ruled by their sexual needs, yet female sexuality has always had negative connotations and been seen as something bad, which is a notion that Le Guin questions by presenting a more feminine version of sexuality as the norm, while shunning masculine sexuality. Men's sexuality was, as sociologist Michael S. Kimmel highlights, described as "predatory, lustful, and immoral", while also being combined with the aggression commonly associated with traditional masculinity. Men were seen as slaves to their own sexual desires as their needs were assumed to take over completely, causing them to have no control over their actions (41). So, to present the reader with a new perspective on this aggressive sexuality, Le Guin created the perverts and had the Gethenians despise them because

of their constant kemmer and strong desire to always have sex. On Gethen, being constantly driven by one's sexual desires is weird, unnatural and a huge obstacle in life as those controlled by it are believed to not be trustworthy. Being aggressive and constant in your need to mate is seen as abnormal, while consent and control is desired.

In addition to this angle on both feminine and masculine sexuality, Le Guin gives sexuality the chance to thrive. During the 1960s and 1970s, a sexual revolution accompanied the second wave of feminism, since feminists strongly associated personal freedom with sexual freedom and therefore advocated for a sexual liberation that brought a new view on both sex, love, and relationships (Mottier 57). The discussion was, however, later on shifted to focus on men's power over women and how sex was used to further that power, bringing the issue to a political arena (59). On Gethen, in Le Guin's thought experiment, sex has reached the potential that the sexual liberation movement had reached for. Almost everyone has the right to sexual pleasure, they have the right to refuse any sexual advances while having their choice respected, rape is non-existent, contraceptives are available and respectable to use, and prostitution is redundant as the chance of two people being in kemmer at the same time is extremely high while kemmerhouses create a safe place for these people to meet and have sex without having fear of judgment (*Left* 91ff). Le Guin present the reader with a view on sex and sexuality that is vastly different from the reader's usual reality, while dealing with a highly topical issue which keeps the thought experiment from being too far fetched. Sf has here been used to expand the norms and possibilities of sexuality, in some sense furthering the sexual liberation movement.

The theme of gender is, on the other hand, a lot more complex – both in *The*

Left Hand of Darkness and in general. Just like with the definition of the sf-genre, there are still debates regarding the general definition for gender, and what it is that creates one's gender. The Oxford English Dictionary defines it as "the state of being male or female as expressed by social or cultural distinctions and differences, rather than biological ones; the collective attributes or traits associated with a particular sex, or determined as a result of one's sex" ("Gender, n3b"). However, some still argue that gender is directly linked to one's biological sex, and that sex and gender are not two separate things at all, which would technically make Gethen completely genderless and neutral. But if we were to assume that gender is, like Simone de Beauvoir argues, a constructed learned behavior, a social concept that is like a "free-floating artifice" (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 6), gender is very much still present on Gethen, even if it was not Le Guin's intent when writing the story. Claiming to have created a society without gender – "I eliminated gender, to find out what was left" – is a very bold thing to claim, and *The Left Hand of Darkness* received a lot of criticism since her goal was actually not fulfilled. A combination of linguistic choices and a general underrepresentation of the feminine creates an overtly masculine version of androgyny, which reinforces the idea that the masculine is somehow more neutral than the feminine (Calvin 188).

First, the most common critique concerning *The Left Hand of Darkness,* the use of male pronouns across the board throughout the novel will be discussed in relation to how it affects the perceived gender neutrality of the Gethenians. For Genly, a man from Terra, a patriarchal planet where the male experience is seen as default, it becomes natural for him to call Gethenians "he", or describe them as "man", or "king" (*Left* 5). Since Genly has no other pronoun ready for them, he uses

the ones he knows from his own social and cultural context, where "he" is most likely used as the default regardless of situation. For example, when describing the Ekumen to Argaven XV, Genly refers to all the people in the galaxy as "men" and "sons", as well as calling Argaven "sir": "We are all men, you know, sir. All of us. All the worlds of men were settled, eons ago, form one world. Hain. We vary, but we're all sons of the same Hearth …" (35). However, what makes Le Guin's choice of words problematic is that the masculine is used as the norm no matter who the speaker is. In the second chapter, an old hearth-tale about two "brothers" is told (21), and in the fourth chapter, a story about a "man" looking for someone to help his "lord" is recited (44). Even Estraven, the born and bred Gethenian, otherwise used to provide the reader with insight into the culture of this foreign planet, uses masculine words when describing "his" people. In chapter six, "he" calls "his" children "sons" in a letter to his kemmering (71), [6] and in the first chapter "he" very stoically tells Genly that "he" is "not anyone's servant. [And that] a man must cast his own shadow" when asked about how "he" feels about serving the king when their interests differ (19). "He" clearly calls both "himself" and "his" children for men, even though they are supposed to be without gender, or at least an equal mix of male and female.

Ritch Calvin, a professor in gender and literature, underlines the importance of proper language use since it affects the way we, the reader, perceive reality, and consequently how we perceive Le Guin's novum and thought experiment. When a new, fictional world is created, the language used to describe it must be sufficient in describing it to make "the questions we ask of the world" relevant. This is because the

[6] Gethenian equivilant of a spouse in a monogamous marriage. Kemmering has no legal status but it is a traditional and ethical practice used by the upper classes (*Left* 92).

words used carry meaning and create "suppositions about the world and the categories we test and measure" (175). Using, for example, "he", "man", "brother", and "king", brings along associations, causing the Gethenians to be perceived as men, rather than the genderless, or mixed, beings that they are. Ong Tot Oppong even tells the reader that using the male pronoun causes her to see them more as men, than "menwomen", which they are according to her (*Left* 94). She tries to explain her reasoning for using "he" while also revealing that there are Karhidish[7] pronouns used for persons in somer, by writing in her field notes:

> [Y]ou cannot think, of a Gethenian as "it". They are not neuters. They are potentials, or integrals. Lacking the Karhidish "human pronoun" used for persons in somer, I must say "he", for the same reasons we used the masculine pronoun in referring to a transcendent god: it is less defined, less specific, than the neuter or the feminine. But the very use of the pronoun in my thoughts lead me to continually forget that the Karhider I am with is not a man, but a manwoman. (94)

This passage was of course heavily criticized for implying that the masculine would somehow be more neutral than the feminine and represent a universal experience. Calvin argues that Le Guin's constant use of he/him, renders the female experience invisible, erasing it completely, while only strengthening the historically, already dominant, male experience. In addition, he argues that "he" is just as specific and weighted with association as the feminine or the neuter, but that "within [the]

[7] The language spoken in the nation of Karhide on Gethen.

patriarchy, the assumption is that the masculine equals the universal" (Calvin 188), a notion that is strengthened by Le Guin's linguistic choices. The only instance when a gender neutral term is used in *The Left Hand of Darkness,* is when the new King's ear is talking over the radio, preaching "pride of country and love of the parentland" (*Left* 100) – the term parentland being used to replace the more commonly used motherland, erasing any trace of women being a part of these menwomen. Le Guin therefore fails in this regard when erasing and questioning the importance of gender, while instead, feeding into the patriarchal idea of the masculine as discussed by Calvin.

Furthermore, there is no reason for the Gethenians not to have a word for people in somer, or for the different states of kemmer, since there are other words and concepts mentioned throughout the novel, both in Karhidish, or Orgota,[8] e.g. kemmer, somer, shifgrethor, or hearth. They even have a completely different calendar and clock than Terra, which are both explained at the end of the novel (*Left* 301). Le Guin did not create an entirely new language, which most sf writers tend to avoid, but as there is a lot of lore and untranslatable concepts, the lack of a new, gender neutral pronoun, as well as gender neutral versions of "king" or "brother", becomes even more problematic. The female part of the menwomen is completely erased on a linguistic level, in a way that makes it seem deliberate while also distracting the reader from seeing a world truly without gender. The thought experiment is derailed by the overrepresentation and use of a masculine vocabulary.

Second, feminine traits and appearances are almost non-existent, again causing an overrepresentation of the men, in the menwomen. Creating true

[8] The language spoken in the nation of Orgoreyn on Gethen.

androgyny, a perfect balance between masculine and feminine, is admittedly very difficult as it is only a placeholder, a metaphor, used to explain and explore something else (Attebery 133). Androgyny is whatever the beholder wants it to be, and has been used for very different things throughout history, for example; "wholeness, narcissism, fashion, … heterosexual marriage, liberation of women, decadence, the balance between yin and yang" etc. (133), never being completely one thing. In addition to this controversial adaptability, androgyny can be problematic as it contributes to the existing hierarchy in gender and gender roles. The power given or taken by androgyny is affected by where the person started off – moving from masculine to feminine is to move down in the hierarchy and to lose power, while moving from feminine to masculine is to move up and instead gives power (135). Le Guin's version of androgyny in *The Left hand of Darkness* simply reinforces the idea that being masculine is more desirable and neutral than being feminine, and that true androgyny is based on the absence of femininity. The physical form of the Gethenians is usually short and sturdy for them to withstand the harsh and cold climate of Gethen (*Left* 8), and Genly seldom comments on the appearance of them unless it is to state that they look more feminine than he expected. As his standard, his normal, is the male form, the masculine form – he does not register their appearance when it meets his norm of a neutral gender expression, which is masculine. For example, Genly points out that he thinks of his lessor as a landlady, because of "his" physical form and feminine nature.

> I thought of him as my landlady, for he had fat buttocks that wagged as he walked, and a soft fat face, and a prying, spying, ignoble, kindly

> nature. … He was so feminine in looks and manner that I once asked him how many children he had. He looked glum. He had never borne any. He had, however, sired four. (48)

Or when he meets a young child in a hearth, he comments on how "he [has] a girl's quick delicacy in his looks and movements" (298), and the only thing he feels weird about when meeting the other people for Terra, is meeting women again. "It was strange to hear a women's voice, after so long. … Their voices sounded strange: too deep, too shrill" (296). For Genly to be uncomfortable around women and feel like he has not seen them in so long means that the majority of Gethenians are, by him, perceived as more masculine in appearance. The only exception is Estraven, but "he" instead becomes more feminine than masculine, again, not creating a balance between the two but simply replacing one with the other. When describing Estraven's body, Genly says: "He was a head shorter than I, and built more like a woman than a man, more fat than muscle …" (219), and when describing Estraven's personality, Genly says: "[Estraven was] womanly, all charm and tact and lack of substance, specious and adroit …" (12). When creating androgyny, there must be, like Ong Tot Oppong stresses, a balance between the "man" and the "woman", creating a "manwoman" which is neither, at the same time as it is both.

However, contrary to the previous points, which all create obstacles in the thought experiment, Le Guin still manages to present a non-binary and fluent notion of gender, at least to a certain extent. By using Genly's personal growth and his inner monologue, the reader is taken along on his journey of discovering gender as something more than simply two separate ends of a spectrum. At first Genly tries very

hard to gender the Gethenians, despite Ong Tot Oppong's warning against doing what "a bisexual naturally does, which is to cast [the Gethenians] in the role of a Man or Woman" (94), which is what Genly is used to as he originates from a bisexual, or binary, society where only two genders exist, and it is therefore normal to try and put people into one of these two boxes of what their gender expression should be like. So when Gethenians project a gender that does not match with their physical appearance, or simply project what Genly would think of as a mix between male and female, he finds it difficult to deal with and it confuses him at first, which is especially clear when it comes to Estraven. Estraven confuses Genly and he cannot seem to decide on whether "he" is more female or male, contradicting himself throughout the story, questioning what it actually is with Estraven that makes him not trust "him".

> Was it in fact perhaps his soft supple femininity that I disliked and distrusted in him? For it was impossible to think of him as a woman, that dark, ironic, powerful presence near me in the firelit darkness, and yet whenever I thought of him as a man, I felt a sense of falseness of imposture: in him, or in my attitude towards him? His voice was soft and rather resonant but not deep, scarcely a man's voice, but scarcely a woman's voice either … (12)

"He" is neither completely feminine nor masculine, which, to Genly, creates a sense of falsehood since it negates Genly's perception of what gender is or should be. Furthermore, it is apparent that Genly has studied the field notes from previous envoys (37), yet he does not fully understand how and why it is not reasonable to cast

Gethenians into the role of men or women until he personally creates a bond with one of them and sees for himself what they truly are, which is neither.

During Genly's and Estraven's long journey across the ice in the latter part of the novel, a strong bond between the two characters is created. When Estraven is in kemmer and tries to avoid Genly as much as possible, Genly realizes that Estraven is the only person on Gethen that fully accept him for who he is without judging him based on his physical differences. Estraven genuinely likes and trusts him, which causes Genly to reflect on why he is unable to trust "him" in return, and question what his motivation for this distrust comes from, ultimately leading to him understanding Estraven for what "he" is – a person without gender, "he" simply is.

> And I saw then again, and for good, what I had always been afraid to see, and had pretended not to see in him: that he was a woman as well as a man. Any need to explain the sources of that fear vanished with the fear; what I was left with was, at last, acceptance of him as he was. Until then I had rejected him, refused him his own reality He had been quite right to say that he, the only person on Gethen who trusted me, what the only Gethenian I distrusted. … I had not wanted to give my trust, my friendship to a man who was a woman, a woman who was a man. (248ff)

In his fear of losing his only ally, Genly understands that his own fear of creating this foreign friendship was completely irrational. Even if he has read about how he should not act, and how he should think about the Gethenians, he is unable to fully accept them until he sees for himself what kind of creatures they are and his empathy for

Estraven makes him see that it does not matter that "he" lacks gender. The interpersonal connection matters more to him than the theory he has been taught before arriving. Genly and Estraven never have sex, even if Estraven is in kemmer, which is, according to Genly, a good thing. Their physical bodies are too different and for them to simply have sex, to only meet physically, would not have created the same connection, understanding and friendship that form without it (249). Instead, they become emotionally vulnerable with the other and a "profound love between two people" is created (249). In *Undoing Gender* (2004), Judith Butler argues for how this emotional connection, a practical approach, is essential in the debate of gender equality, as the time of solely presenting theory must end for real social change to take place (204), which Le Guin's thought experiment reinforces. Butler also argues that since gender is largely a philosophical discussion, and based around different belief systems, it stems from a discussion of knowledge and how we know what is true or false (*Undoing Gender* 215). Genly believes that his view on gender is true, and he has the right to do so as his version of reality reinforces it, and him simply reading a book does not change that. Convincing someone to change their belief system, to change what they think is true, takes more than theory. By using Genly as an extension of the reader, Le Guin carefully, using pathos, presents a way for people to have a more open view on gender. It might not be erased completely, but it is used to theorize a new world view and possibilities in a way that might alter the reader's "habitual way of thinking" ("Gender" 150), which was part of Le Guin's goal, both for this specific novel and for sf as a genre.

Le Guin explores sexuality and gender as something different than what we are used to by using the metaphor of androgyny and ambisexual bodies to push the

limitations of norms, even if it can still be argued that the boundaries are not tested enough. Creating a completely new view on gender or sexuality can be difficult, as there are certain limitations to what we think we know about the two subjects. They are both heavily connected to the current discourse surrounding them and the linguistic limitations of the time. However, the main objective of *The Left Hand of Darkness* does not have to be creating a completely new possibility, but to simply question or "redescrib[e the] possibilities that already exist" (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 148), presenting a new angle on a current issue. The two themes of sexuality and gender are, in *The Left Hand of Darkness*, quite messy and contradictory, which reflects the current state of the social discussion when the novel was written. The novum reflects how confusing the topic of sex and gender can be, the androgyny presents attempting a unification of contradictions. Le Guin mirrors her own thought process regarding the themes, being limited to her own impression of what they entail. Growing up in a patriarchal society, Le Guin is, just like Genly, predisposed to thinking of masculine as being more gender neutral which is reflected in her interpretation of androgyny. *The Left Hand of Darkness,* is, like Attebery says, "feminism for men" (131), gently presenting them with the idea of androgyny, while women are left wanting more of the thought experiment.

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