

Exploring the Le Guin papers: Discovering how Ursula K. Le Guin’s beliefs shaped her creative writing

David Cynkin
Elliot Turner
Audra McNamee
Robert D. Clark Honors College

Introduction

Le Guin is one of Oregon’s most well known authors. Her work is enormously influential, particularly in the science fiction genre. One of her most well known works is *The Left Hand of Darkness*, which is the focus of this poster project. She has derived influence from many sources, however, the ones that will be focused on in this poster include her personal beliefs and interests. The sources being used to analyze our discussion question will be primary sources from the University of Oregon Library database

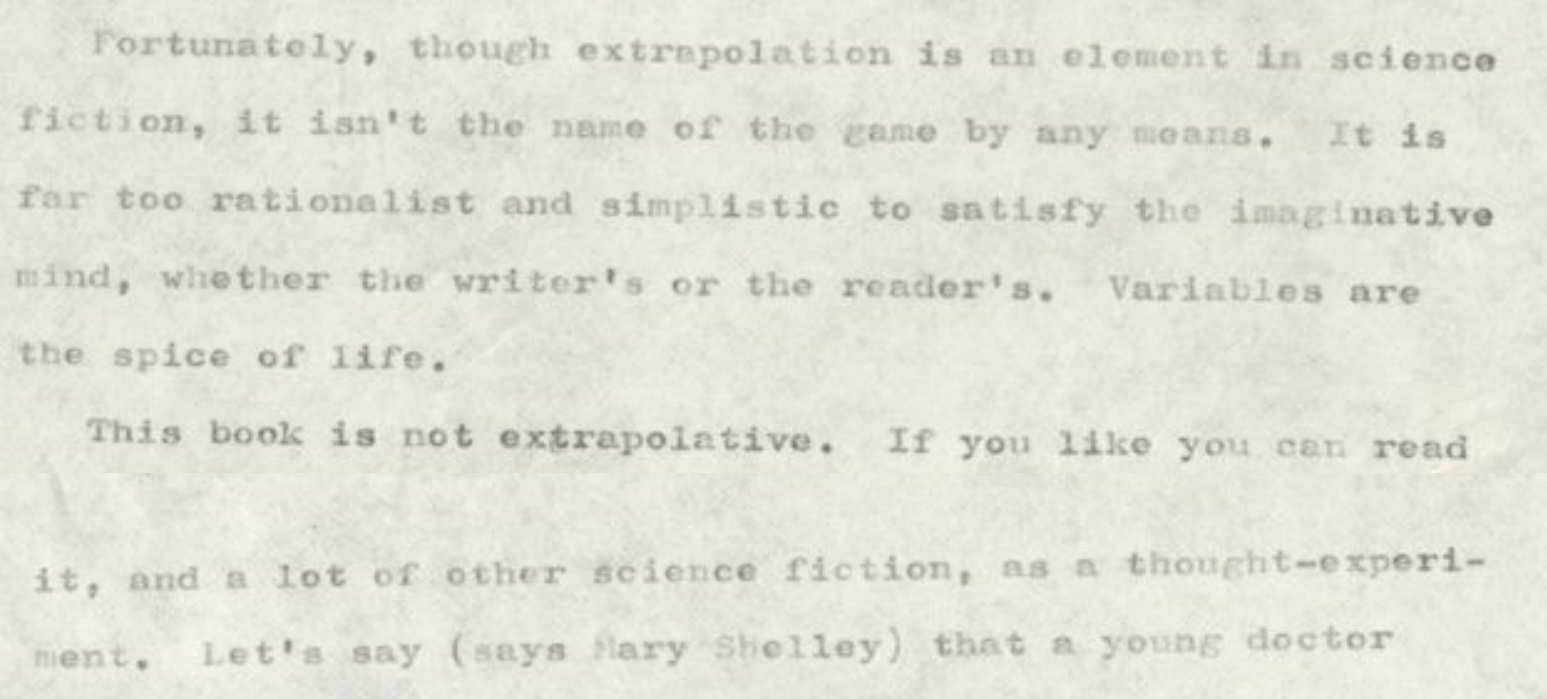


(Kolisch)

Research Question and Methods:

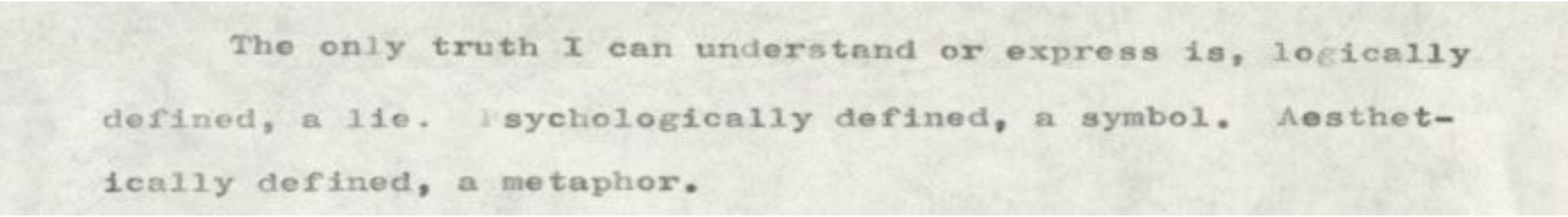
While initially our question was examining Le Guin’s writings about science and philosophy to consider how her personal beliefs and interests shaped the direction of her creative writing, our limited archive access forced us to reformulate our question. We decided to ask: **How can the items in the Le Guin archive we have access to bring insight into how Le Guin’s beliefs shaped the direction of her creative writing, as well as illuminate the way her beliefs and, correspondingly, her writing changed over time?** We formed our answer to this question by closely reading archive materials, bringing in background information from *The Left Hand of Darkness*, from interviews, and from essays by Ursula K. Le Guin. to construct an analysis of these texts and Le Guin’s beliefs when creating them.

Introduction to the new edition of *The Left Hand of Darkness*



In this draft of the introduction to *Left Hand*, Le Guin describes that science fiction, and her novels, should be seen as a “thought experiment”

Le Guin believed science fiction is, in part, explorative, however this should not be the main focus of the genre. Instead, her work, along with other sci-fi authors’ works, should be thought of as a “thought experiment”, something that causes the reader to think and question a hypothetical situation. This is what shaped the world Le Guin was attempting to create in *The Left Hand of Darkness*. An example of this is seen in the single-gender society on the planet of Gethen. By having a society that exists with only one gender, Le Guin forces us to consider what our society would be like if there were no gender roles present.

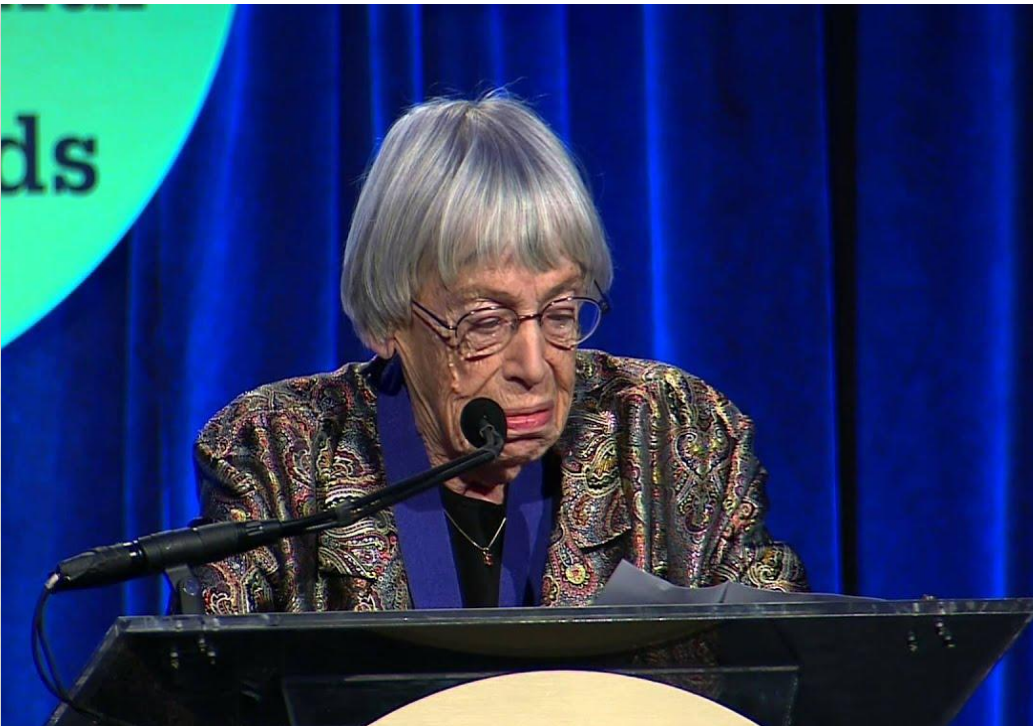
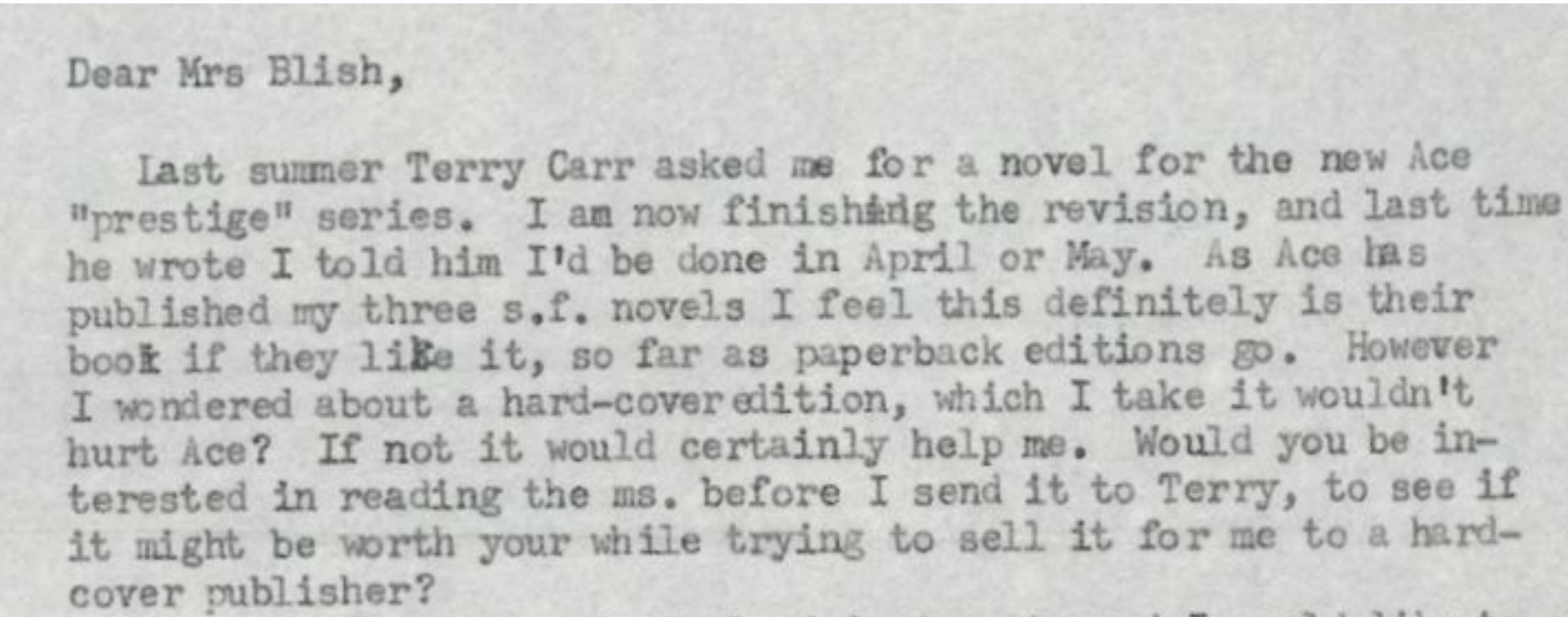


Le Guin believed it was a science fiction author’s responsibility to “lie” to the reader. More specifically, it is the job of the author to present the reader with a fictional story, so immersive, that it appears to be real, while also providing the reader with some sort of moral guidance. She wanted her novel to be seen more as a metaphor/ symbol that the reader can form ideas from, rather than something they aim to directly replicate. This is seen in the thriving society of Gethen that has been making slow and sustainable progress for thousands of years. Le Guin is not literally telling us to slow down our industries to help our environment, but it begs the question “what would our world be like if we slowed down?” We can form our own ideas from this and decide if it may be a beneficial idea to follow in their footsteps to any extent.

Conclusion:

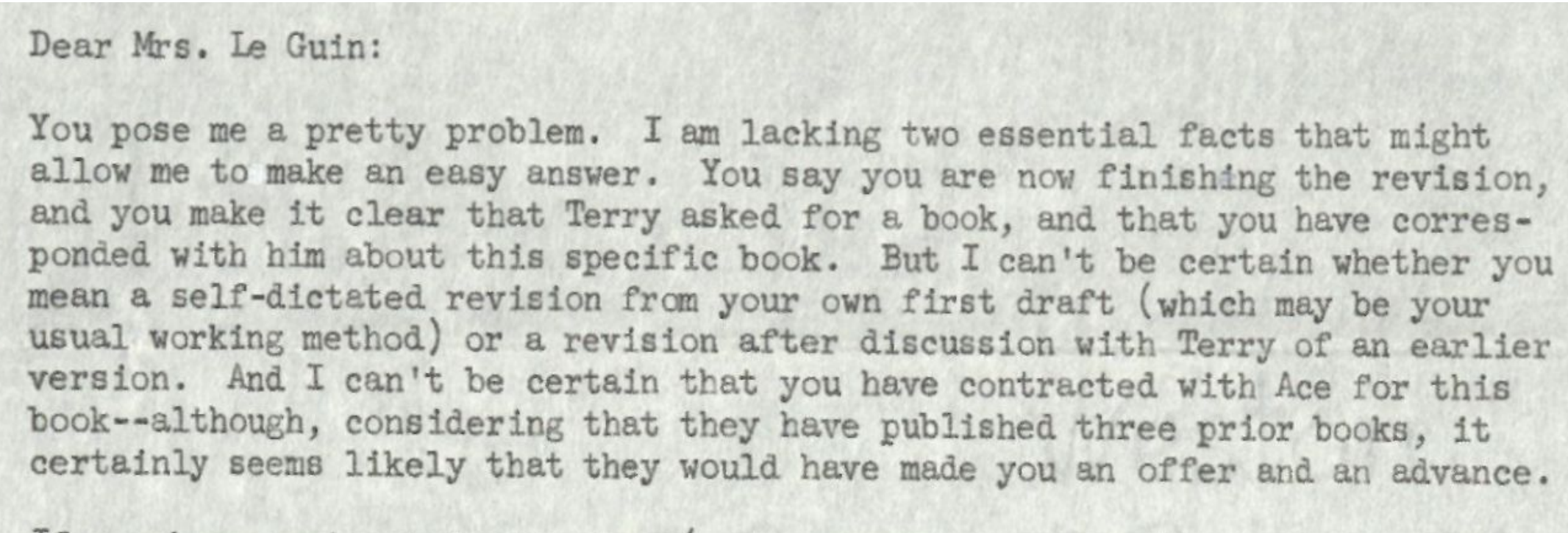
Ursula Le Guin’s creative vision was deeply impacted by her beliefs, both explicit and implicit. We have looked at introductions, letters, and drafts of her work that all have a connection in how her creative genius played a vital role in how and why she wrote the the way that she did. This not only showed in her novels but in life as we saw her beliefs carried out in activism and community involvements throughout her career. Those are some of the ways in which our viewing of Ursula Le Guin shifted from just an author, to a life role model and hero. A question we have that can further our understanding of Le Guin would be to learn more of what could be in these outside sources and Le Guin Archives that we haven't dived deeper into yet.

Ursula Le Guin’s Letters to Virginia Kidd and the response:



(National Book Foundation)

The first letter shows Le Guin’s true creative direction in how she envisions her work to be portrayed and published. She does this by explaining her vision in having one of her works being hardcover and where she got that inspiration from without coming off stern or aggressive. This is very important for a writer’s relationship with the rest of her staff that help with the works.



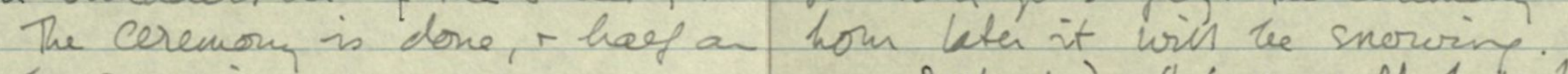
The second letter in the form of a response to Le Guin is a supporting factor in how Le Guin’s creative genius was slow and handled with care which resulted in some opposing views from others.

This shows how Le Guin was a creative pioneer not just in writing but in her operational thinking and way of doing things. The way she believed was the best for her work may not have been the easiest or the fastest but it was the best and highest in quality which exemplified her activism and contributions for future writers.

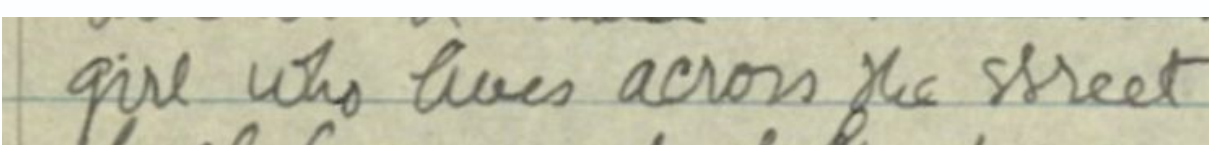
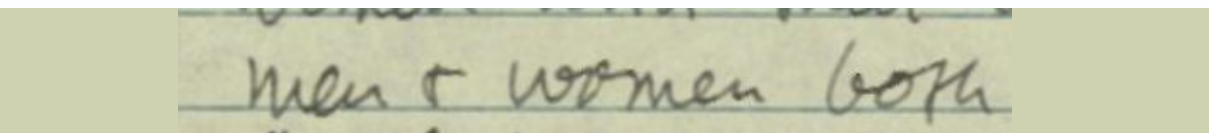
Handwritten rough draft of *The Left Hand of Darkness* Chapter One

The Left Hand of Darkness, published in 1969 to great critical acclaim and winner of both the Hugo and Nebula awards for science fiction, is the story of Genly Ai, a emissary from an alien government to the planet Gethen. Gethen is notable because: it is nearly inhospitably cold year-round (“Winter” is the Terran name for the planet), the nations on the planet have never had a war, and the inhabitants are all androgynous and without cultural gender roles.

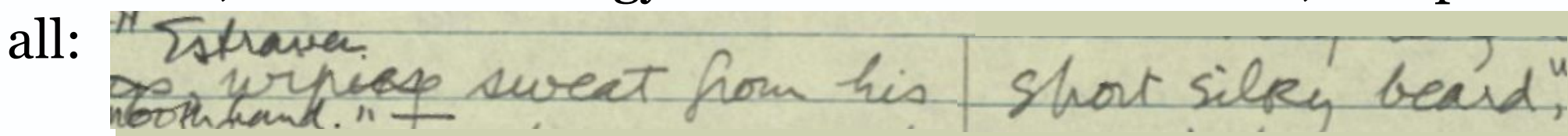
This rough draft draft (written circa 1967, 2 years before the book was published) clearly describes the cold of the city; just like in the published book she discusses how as soon as the clouds close over the sun, the snow begins:



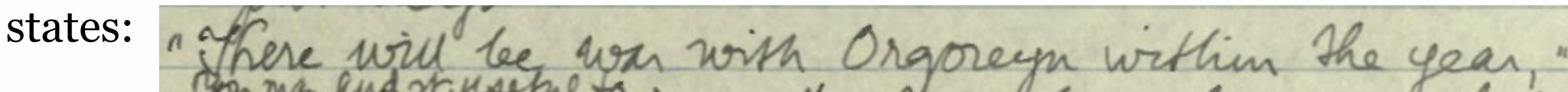
But two important aspects of this story are missing. Specifically, there are lines that reference women as well as men:
This makes it clear that the Gethenians are not genderless.



Estraven, the main androgynous character in the book, is explicitly male here, beard and all:



He is the one who reveals the second large change from the published novel when he states:

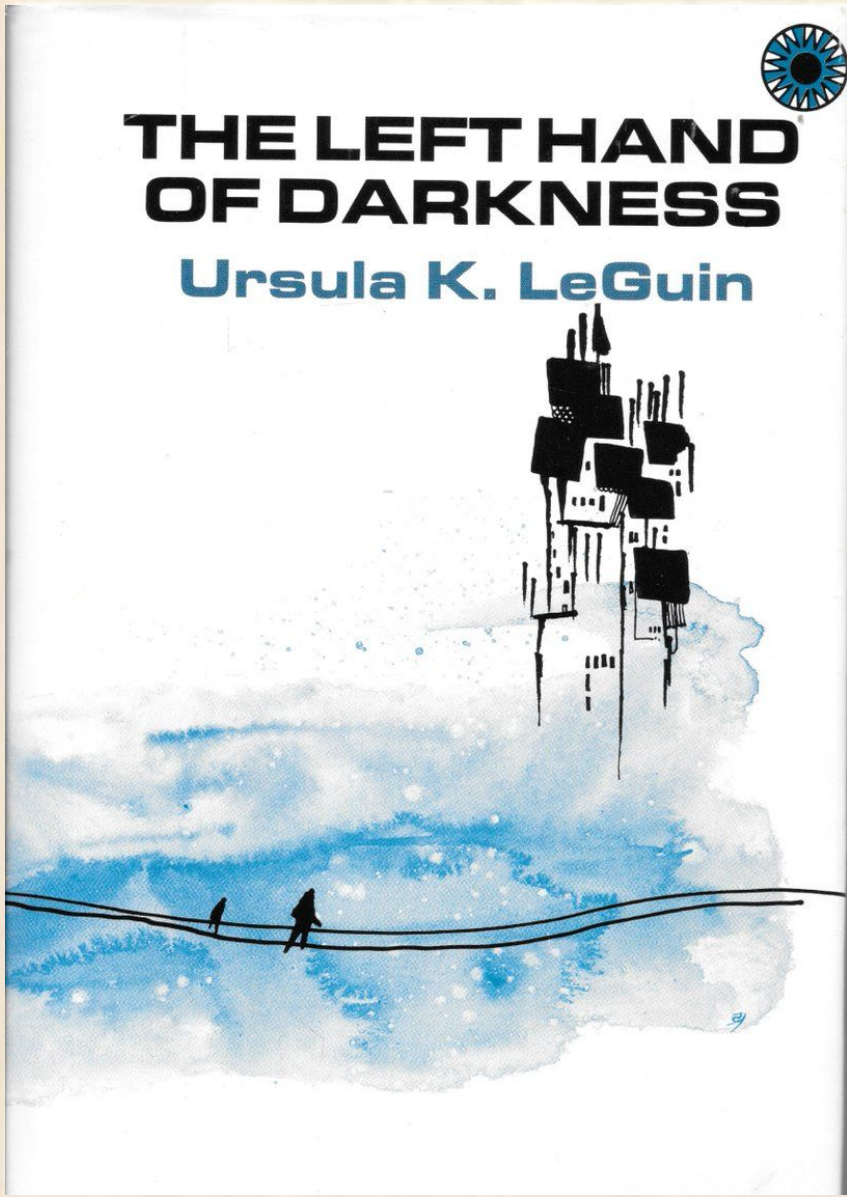


In the completed book, the Gethenians don’t so much as have a word for war; the fact that they seem about to fall into one due to rising nationalism is the largest tension in the book, and raises many relevant questions about what it means to love one’s country, and the traps you can fall into by doing so.

This draft supports Le Guin’s claim that what precipitated *Left Hand* was “a vision, a scene of these two people pulling something in a great snowy wilderness” (15 Freedman). This is notable because Le Guin’s philosophical revisions of *Left Hand* did not stop with publication; a decade after publication she realized her use of masculine pronouns “shaped, directed and controlled” her understanding of *Left Hand* in ways she hadn’t understood at the time. While this is clearly the case, the fact that she began her story with male characters that she later decided would be androgynous also potentially impacted her writing choices, and so could still be analyzed further to better understand the meaning and impact of *Left Hand*.

Further reading:

- LA Review of Books: Writing Nameless Things- An Interview with Ursula K. Le Guin
- “Is Gender Necessary Redux” in *Dancing at the Edge of the World* by Ursula K. Le Guin
- “Coming of Age in Karhide” in *The Birthday of the World* by Ursula K. Le Guin
- The short story “Sur” by Ursula K. Le Guin (in collection *The Compass Rose*)

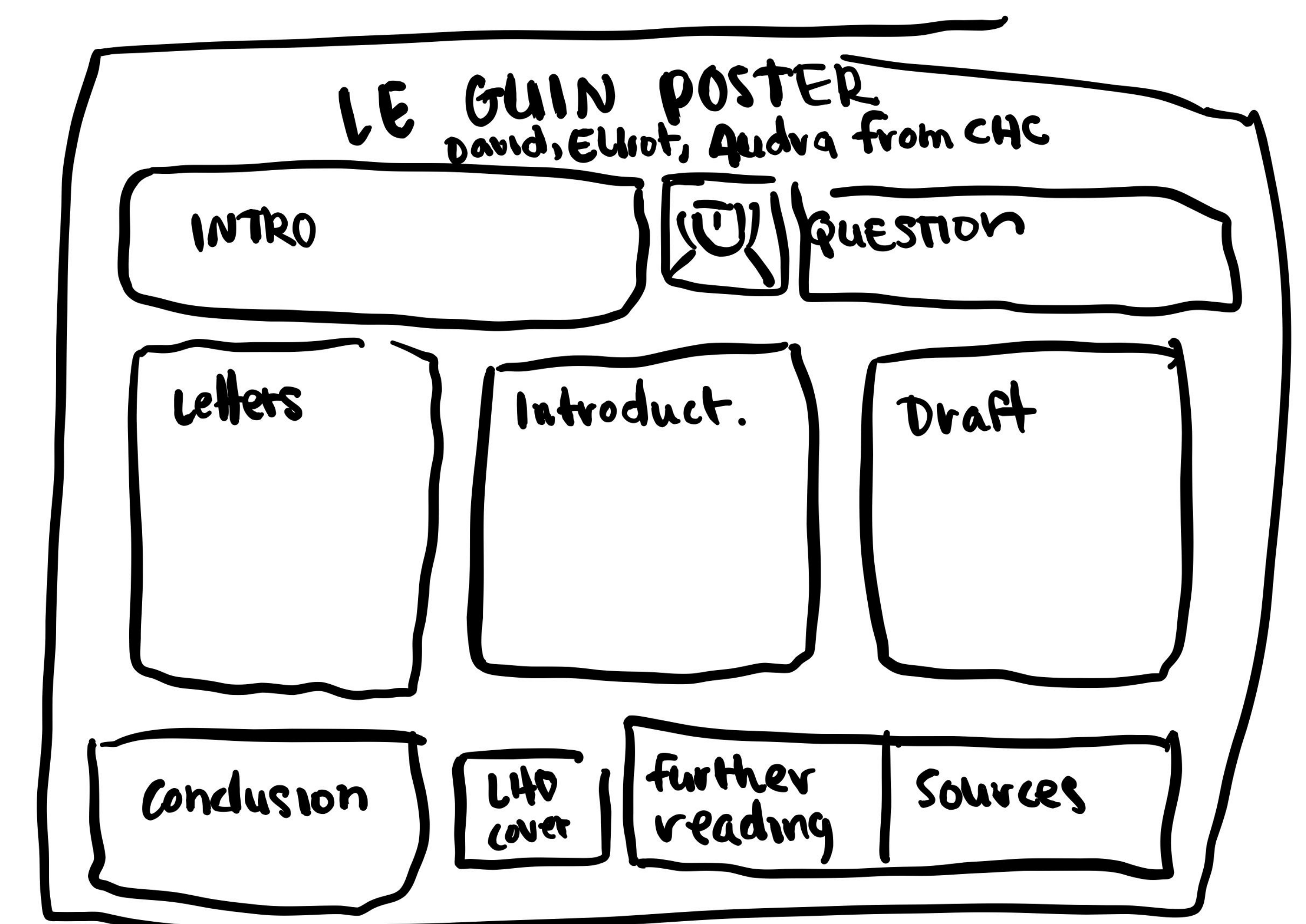


References:

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- Photo of Ursula K. Le Guin by Marian Wood Kolisch

Things we need

- Snappy title
- Introduction (outlining who Le Guin is, and what *Left Hand* is)
- Explanation of our research question, how it changed, goals
- BODY PARAGRAPHS
 - Left Hand draft
 - Letter
 - Left Hand introduction
 - Get thoughtful about how we're ordering them (chronologically? Thematically?)
 - Each image should have a caption; be a lil smaller bc space is at a premium
- Conclusion: what we learned, and what we want to research further
- Further reading
- Citations



For inspiration, look @ poster already posted.

Visually, design something like

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Introduction

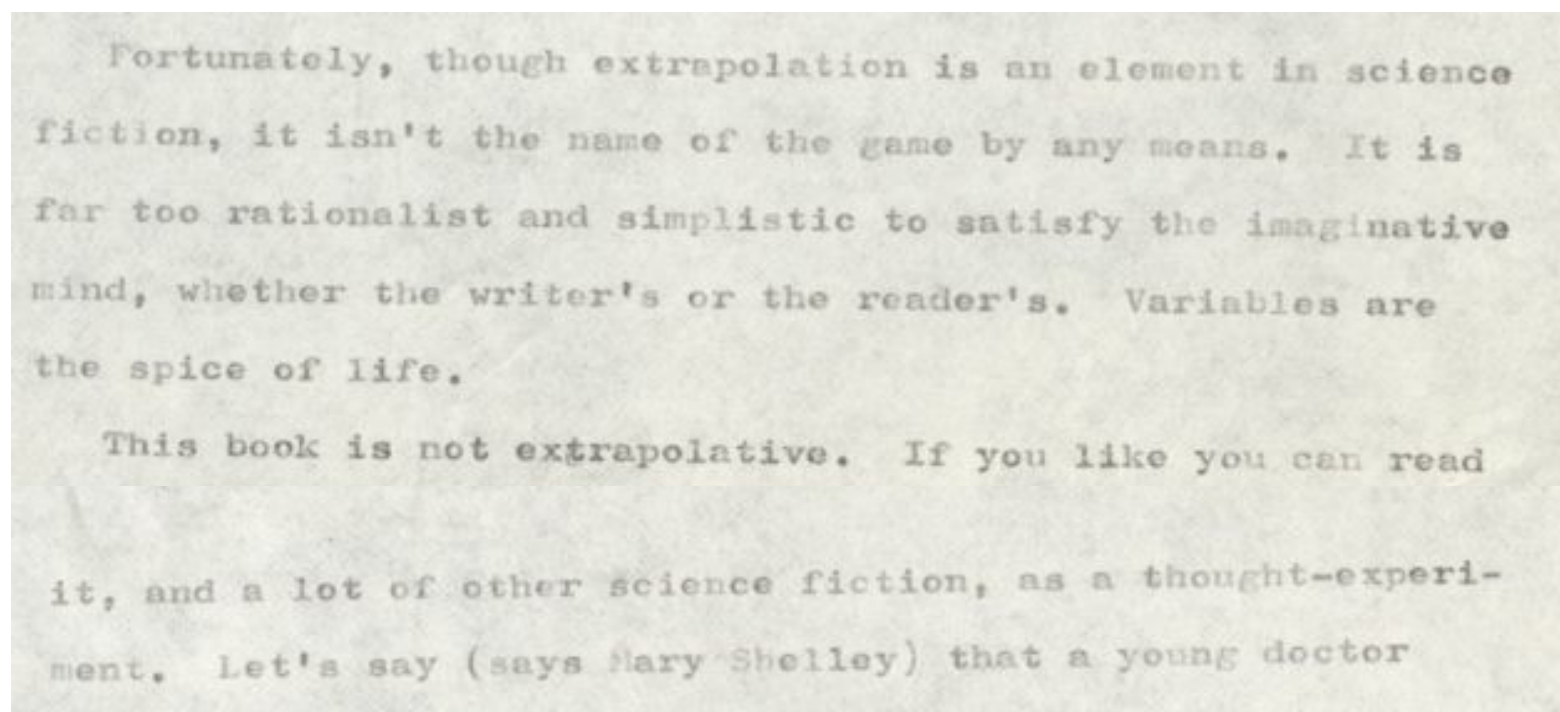
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Research Question:

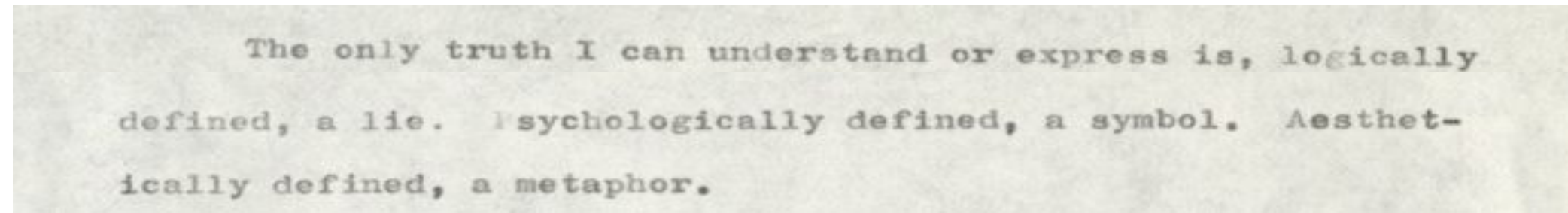
While initially our question was to examine Le Guin’s writings about science and philosophy as well as her engagement with literary scholarship to consider how her personal beliefs and interests **shaped the direction of her creative writing**, the limited access that we had to the archives meant that we had to answer these questions with the three documents that we had. What follows is our analysis of three of the items in the Le Guin archives, and how they can bring insight into the way Le Guin’s both implicit and explicit beliefs shaped the direction of her creative writing, and how those beliefs changed over time.

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In this draft of the introduction to *Left Hand*, Le Guin describes that science fiction, and her novels, should be seen as a “thought experiment”

- Le Guin believed science fiction is, in part, explorative, however this should not be the main focus when writing *The Left Hand of Darkness*
- This is what shaped the the world Le Guin was attempting to create in *The Left Hand of Darkness*
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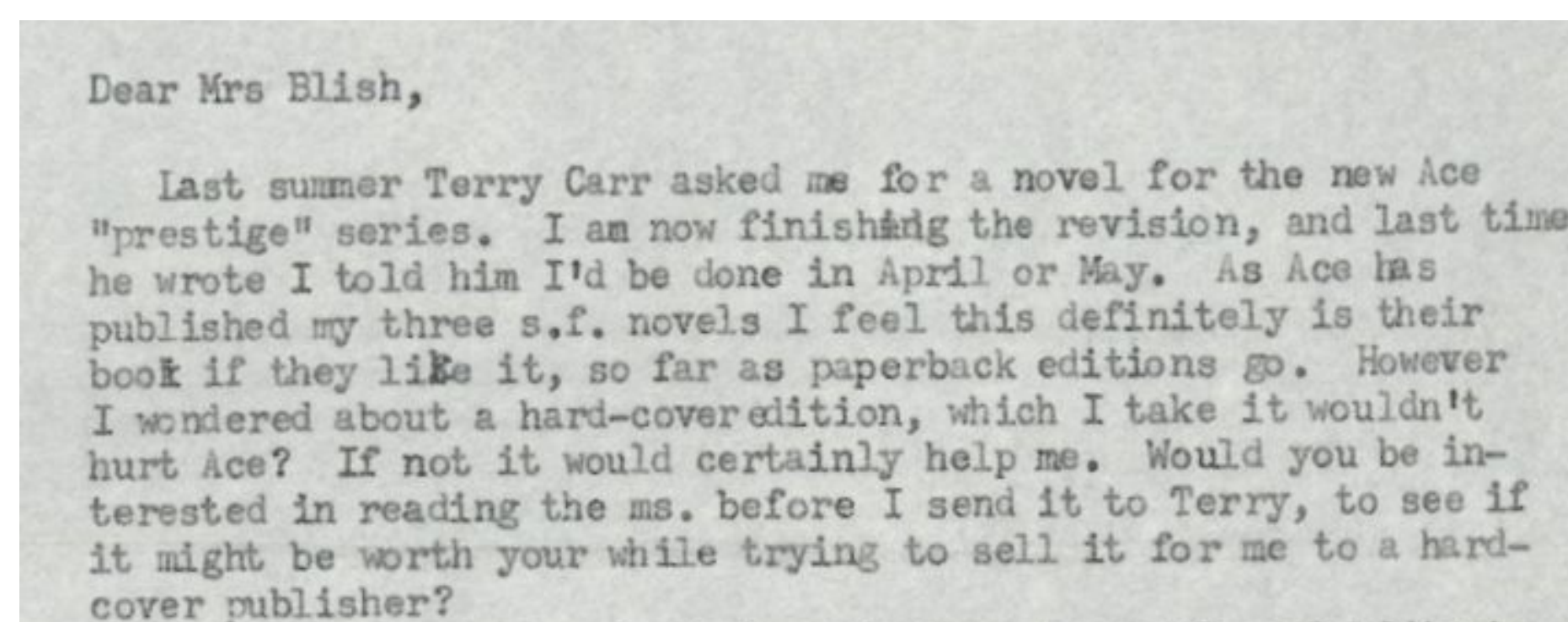


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- More specifically, it is the job of the author to present the reader with a fictional story, so immersive, that it appears to be real, while also providing the reader with some sort of moral guidance.
- She wanted her novel to be seen more as a metaphor/ symbol that the reader can form ideas from, rather than something they aim to directly replicate.
- This is seen in the thriving society of Gethen that has been making slow and steady progress for thousands of years.
- Le Guin is not literally telling us to slow down our industries to help our environment, but it begs the question “what would our world be like if we slowed down?”
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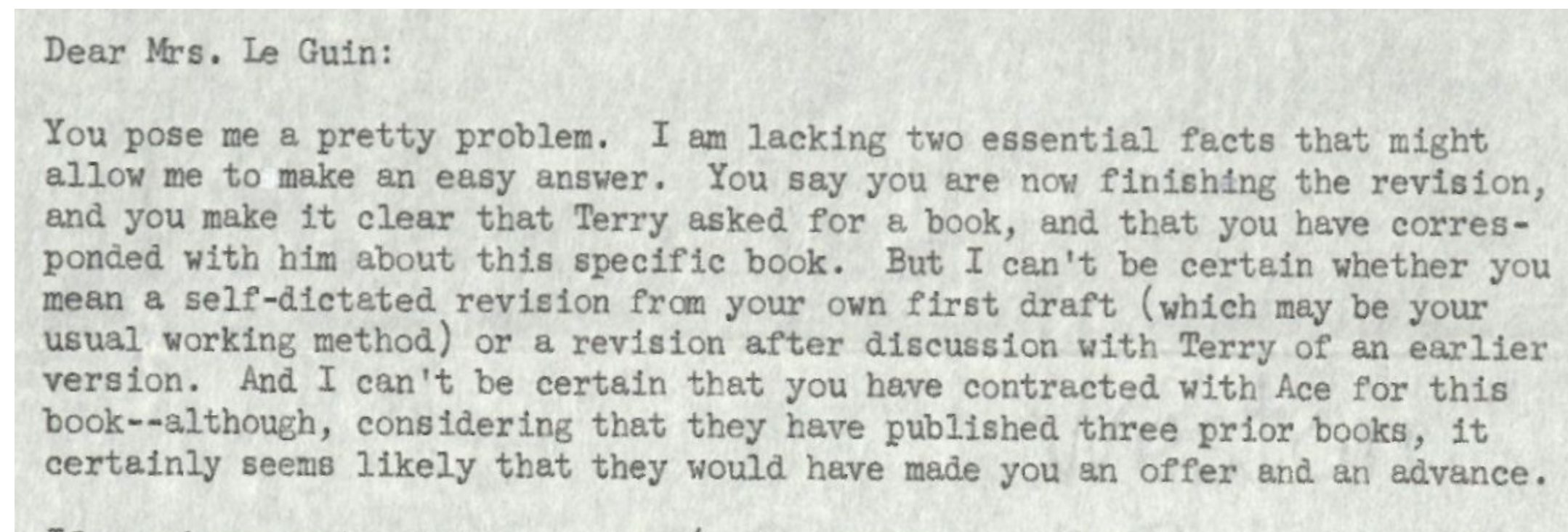
Conclusion:

Ursula Le Guin has shaped the direction of her creative writing through many ways such as her personal beliefs and interests. We have looked at introductions, letters, and drafts of her work that all have a connection in how her creative genius played a vital role in how and why she wrote the the way that she did. This not only showed in her novels but in life as we saw her beliefs carried out in activism and community involvements throughout her career. Those are some of the ways in which our viewing of Ursula Le Guin shifted from just an author, to a life role model and hero. A question we have that can further our understanding for Le Guin would be to know more of what’s in these in outside sources and Le Guin Archives that we haven't scratched the surface of yet.

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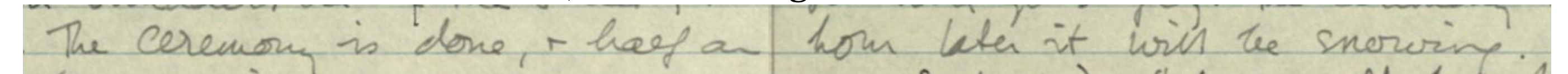
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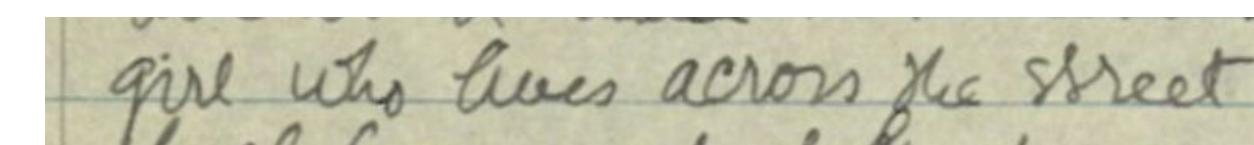
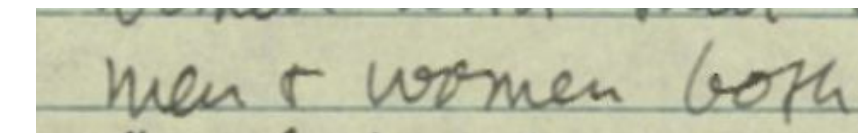
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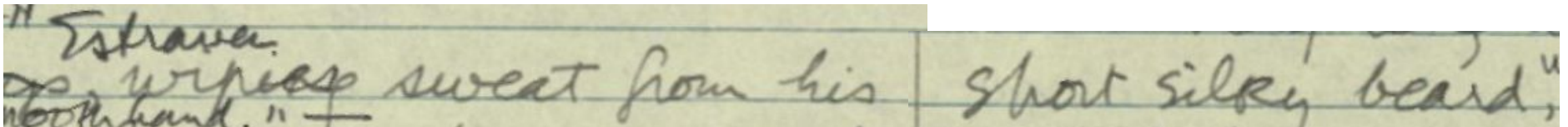
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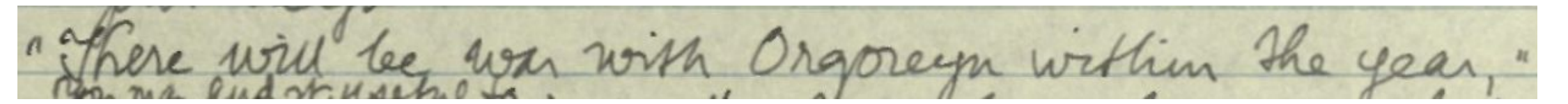
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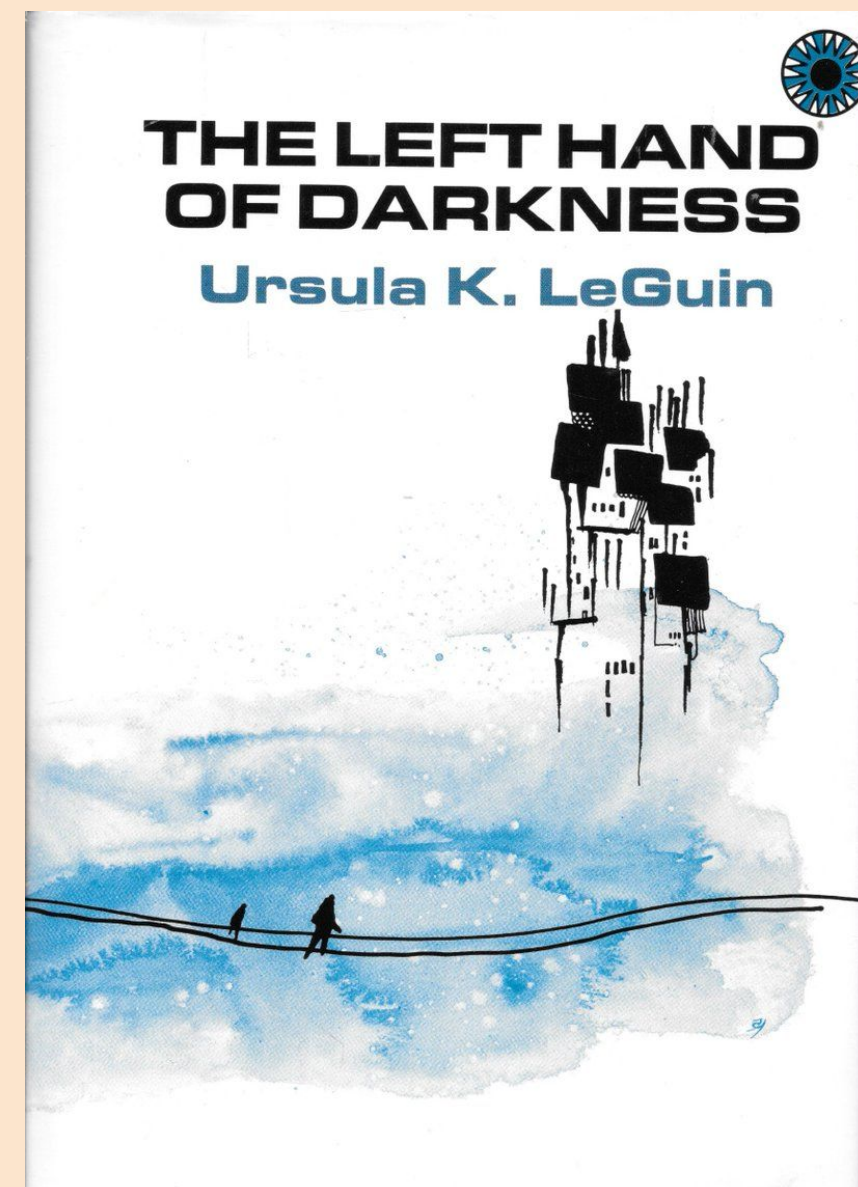


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References:

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Photo of Ursula K. Le Guin by Marian Wood Kolisch



- Personal/group introductions (names and majors)
- Discussion of your initial research questions after reading the novels -ELLIOT
- Discussion of how your research questions changed reviewing the digital mini-archive and realizing both its limitations and potentials-ELLIOT
- Discussion of your group's research methods and outcomes/tentative conclusions (abt how beliefs do things)- audra
- Discussion of your poster design-david (Ursula Le Guin wrote an essay defending the concept of the color beige/ We sectioned our work into 3 vertical groupings that explains and analysing our specific) sources
- Final thoughts and/or discussion of your plans for using this research and/or doing additional independent research as you look ahead to reading *Demon Box* or *The Unreal and the Real* and developing final research essays-David (using UO Data Data base/ When the Special archives reopen, there are Le Guin papers that will give us more access to further our research and it will allow us to put the documents weve already looked at into more historical context)
- Brief thank you to Professor Rust, and Linda Long and the Special Collections staff -audra

Initial question: Elliot Turner, Audra McNamee, and David Cynkin are curious to examine Le Guin's writings about science and philosophy as well as her engagement with literary scholarship to consider how her personal beliefs and interests **shaped the direction of her creative writing.**

New question: How can the items in the Le Guin archive we have access to bring insight into how Le Guin's beliefs shaped the direction of her creative writing, as well as illuminate the way her beliefs and, correspondingly, her writing changed over time?