



# The Gender Thought Experiment in Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*

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## Introduction

Ursula K. Le Guin was an Oregon author who was best known for her contributions in science and speculative fiction. While producing many works over her 60-year career as a writer, one of her most notable pieces was *The Left Hand of Darkness*. This novel explores sexuality and gender in an androgynous society through which Le Guin was attempting to address the feminist issues that existed in society. For this she won the Hugo and Nebula Awards, making her the first woman to win these awards.



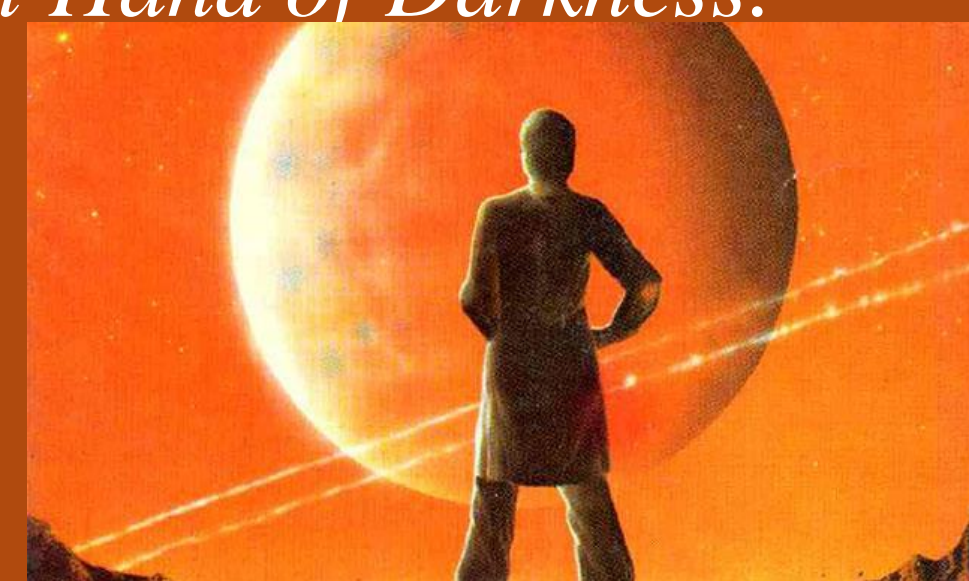
Ursula Le Guin<sup>5</sup>

## Research Question

In *The Left Hand of Darkness*, the ideas of gender and sexuality play a major role. The androgynous nature of the Gethen people is a fascinating aspect that Le Guin examines at length. The effects of the genderless nature of these people are seemingly extensive which suggests that Le Guin intended to examine the effects gender has on not only her fictional world, but in our own world. This makes one wonder what points on gender did Le Guin intend to make in *The Left Hand of Darkness*?

## Methods

The research for this project was conducted through a combination of primary sources from the University of Oregon's Special Collections Library and secondary sources from the University's databases. This research was then used along with *The Left Hand of Darkness* to better understand the use of gender in the novel. The primary sources used in the analysis of gender were the first drafts of both the introduction and chapter one of *The Left Hand of Darkness*. Additional secondary sources were also used to evaluate the uses of gender and Le Guin's intentions in *The Left Hand of Darkness*. Analyzing these sources it helped solidify our understanding of Le Guin's message about gender in *The Left Hand of Darkness*.



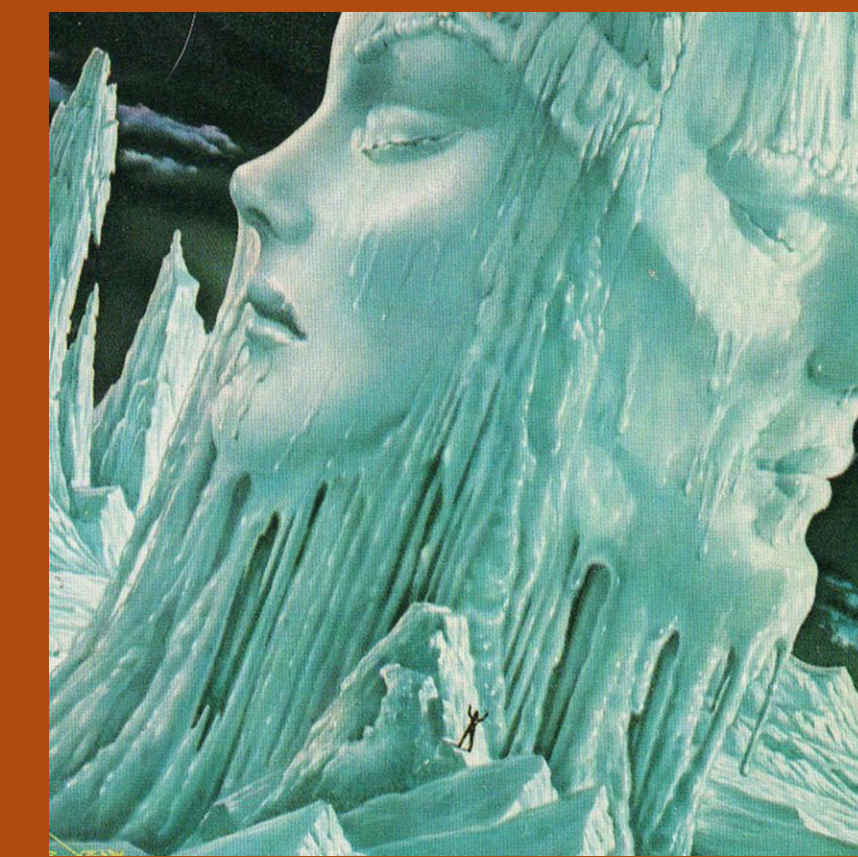
Cover art for *The Dispossessed*<sup>7</sup>

## Processing

As a writer in the 1950s and 60s, Le Guin faced a society and career path dominated by males, which pushed her to open the science fiction community to modern feminism. "I'm merely observing, in the peculiar, devious, and thought-experimental manner proper to science fiction, that if you look at us at certain odd times of day in certain weathers, we already are." (IV). This quote can be found both within the first edited and final drafts of the novel *The Left Hand of Darkness*, which clearly demonstrates that even in the early process of Le Guin's writing, her intentions when writing about androgyny were to spark conversation among readers about society and gender. Being an "outsider," Le Guin was able to sculpt gender ideas in an alien race to mirror her own "alien" experiences.

I am describing.

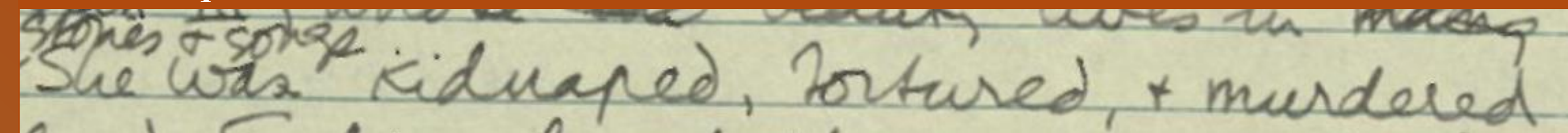
Introduction of the Left Hand of Darkness<sup>2</sup>



Mirroring Gender: The Left Hand of Darkness<sup>8</sup>

## Seeking Answers

Ursula Le Guin's intentions with her story can be understood through a variety of sources. In the initial handwritten draft of chapter one of the story, Genly is told a story of a beautiful queen of Winter,<sup>4</sup>



This story is not in the final draft of the story, but it is clear that the idea of sexuality, gender and sexual violence was at the forefront of Le Guin's mind when writing. This is echoed in an essay Le Guin wrote after the publication of the novel titled "Is Gender Necessary? Redux." In it she writes that she wants to begin exploring the<sup>3</sup>

meaning of sexuality and the meaning of gender, in my life and in our society. Much had

However, simply because Le Guin was interested in exploring the topic does not mean that she held all the answers. Rather, she sought for her story to inspire her readers to consider the same questions she had, in order to hopefully find answers as a collective. She writes that she saw her story as a:<sup>3</sup>

using it. It was a heuristic device, a thought-experiment.

In the end, Le Guin did not intend to answer any grand questions about gender. Rather she sought to inspire others to seek the answers to the questions that she had. She sees her role as an author as someone who said:<sup>2</sup>

the rain, the sunlight, look! Open your eyes; listen, listen. That is what the novelists say. But they don't tell you

## Conclusions

As a female writer in the 1950s and 60s, Ursula K Le Guin ventured into the sci-fi genre knowing well that it was dominated by men. Despite this, by using her own experience as a woman to create a world in which gender doesn't exist, Le Guin transformed the genre, bending it to create conversation about the roles we conform to in society. In the early versions of her unpublished pieces of *The Left Hand of Darkness*, it is evident that the theme of gender was just as encompassing as the finalized version of the novel that was published. However, the intention of Le Guin when writing an androgynous society was not to make a grand statement about the society she lived in, but rather to provoke intellectual thought and discussion about the implications of a genderless society, and the roles we conform to in our own current reality. Furthermore, through writing this novel Le Guin was able to explore and develop her own ideas about sexuality and gender while giving both women and LGBTQ alike voices around the world.

Additional Reading:

- "Is Gender Necessary? Redux" By Ursula K Le Guin
- "The Fantastic Ursula K Le Guin" The New Yorker
- "Worlds of Ursula K Le Guin" PBS



Artwork for The New Yorker<sup>6</sup>

## References

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