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One's a Crowd: Gendered Language in Ursula Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*

Kayla B Stephenson

EN490: The Text, The Critic, & The World

Dr Eaton

Issues of gender are often pervasive in science fiction due to the genre's ability to completely disregard social norms as we know them. In this freeing space, "for nearly 200 years, writers have used speculative fiction consciously and collectively to dramatize the political issues most central to women" (Latham 537). Science fiction has always been a genre of exploration, not only of our universe, but of issues much closer to home. One such science fiction author is Ursula le Guin, whose works are known for her attempts to "reconceptualize gender" (Rashley 25). Le Guin's texts may have evolved to reflect her changing attitudes towards gender as she aged, but *The Left Hand of Darkness* is one of her first forays into social arguments of gender and sexuality (Rashley). The following work will consider the deconstruction of Le Guin's novel at the linguistic level. In order to consider any issues of gender or queer theory, it is essential to discuss the language that constructs it all. While the two secondary theories will be a large focus of the ethics of the novel and its implications within the science fiction genre as a whole, the majority of the novel's analysis will rely primarily on the influence and theoretic foundation of deconstruction theorists such as Derrida's concept of *différance* and Foucault's foundational sexual behavior. This work will explore *The Left Hand of Darkness* through its use of pronouns, gender coding, queer theory, consent issues, the complete disregard for the novel's point of view, and the culmination of all of these points into a text whose intent is entirely separate from its language. The failure of androgyny exists not in the narrative or story, but in its linguistic telling.

Ursula Le Guin's use of the gender binary showcases a new theory of "the other" in science fiction. A deconstructionist reading of *The Left Hand of Darkness* reveals the text through the reader's point of view, one entirely separate from an expected character

of an unknown world and society: a reader who will have only ever understood ultimately binary gender social norms and their implications. As such, the reader will be entirely incapable of comprehending a homogenous society without displacing the ideas of our own gender markers unto the concepts of another. This work sets out to prove the failure of Le Guin's fictional state of androgyny due to the language's failure to uphold her intent. The deconstruction of this novel is based on that idea, of the separation of structural word and authorial intent: to understand a concept without having the correct diction in order to describe it. In this aspect, the novel's attempt at the inconceivable linguistics of androgyny fails.

The novel cannot be read as it was intended, because the text is birthed from a binary gender society and its language implications, not those singular ideas of a utopia through gender elimination being presented in the narrative. Whereas previous works utilized extreme singular gender utopias, Le Guin provides a single gender that is neither all-male nor all-female and allows for side-by-side examination of gender essentialism. I will unpack the idea of the text's androgyny as a utopian combination of genders to the actuality of its upholding of the male as the default gender. Through the text's pronoun usage, selective implementation of gender stereotypes and purposeful protagonist voice, the text will be revealed as disingenuous in its intent. The very distinct and complex construction of androgyny in the text creates its own singular gender, but this single gender is based on the seeming combination of the binary gender we recognize as our own. It is not something new, but a new combination of the familiar.

More distinctly, the text creates a representation of the male as the default with the only representation of the female in line with typical, often negative, feminine

qualities. The concept of compulsory heterosexuality aligns with expectations of reproduction for furthering the race and the narrative's representation of reproduction again does not present something new, but reinforces the same binary expectations. Most importantly, the narrative's use of pronouns again underlines the male as the default. This default is seen especially through the novel's point of view from the lens of a reader representation. The novel's protagonist comes from the same societal expectations as the reader, despite the difference in time or changes over the decades.

The very language that presents an androgynous society in this novel falsifies its own conceptualization. Instead, the text highlights that we can only displace our knowledge of gender ideals onto an unknown other in attempt to make sense of it as readers from a binary gender community. Genly Ai, the protagonist of the novel, creates the stand in for the reader's assumptions in the actual narrative of the text. There is a linking of expectations and similar societal implications due to his character being what is called a Terran: or a human being who hails from Earth. While not perhaps Earth as we know it, the same ideals we may embody subconsciously are mirrored in the narrator Genly's voice and attitudes. Thus, we may reflect that as our reading and his experience come from the same societal ideas of gender, it is not only how we read the text but the language by which the text is composed that are mirrored. This is not an argument of reader reaction but simply that the protagonist comes from the same expectations of society that we, as the audience, do.

## Gender and The Genre

In order to discuss the language, however, we must also consider the concepts it is representing both in regards to the genre's influence and that of the narrative encapsulating gender conversations. Particularly in the 1960's, when the novel was being constructed, androgyny saw a rise in popularity. This narrative was new but the concept of gender and single sex societies were not (Latham). Like queer texts, the concept was a diversely written upon subject, but not a subject touched upon in science fiction. Due largely to this previously discussed straight male domination of science fiction, the genre remained largely asexual prior to the 1960's (Latham 395). There was no intertextuality between the concepts of specific queer texts and science fiction narratives. Le Guin's work was a breakthrough conceptualization of a non-normative social other and its exploration in a very normative genre of the time.

Science fiction is a genre of many common tropes and themes, allowing for the estrangement of the known world into one of any conceivable possibility, separate from any idea of intended meaning (Latahm 537). One of the most common tropes is the idea of the utopian state. In regards to gender experimentation, utopias often employ the upholding of single or no gender societies. While not a feminist concept, the utopia is often utilized by feminist writers to comment on the idealization of single gender societies. Not all feminist writers embrace science fiction, but it is more a matter of overlapping focuses in which many of the feminist ideals utilize the science fiction genre and are able to construct a space of feminist exploration within (Attebery 131). Feminist authors often have to explore the idea of having their own power in the theoretical, because they cannot achieve it completely in their own world. Unlike feminist works looking for equality through the fictional, male authors do not feel the need to question

the gender division and its subservient nature, for “why should men want to exclude the very people who make their lives easier?” (Attebery 124).

Utopias are a state of theoretical perfection of society. What better opportunity to showcase a world other than our own patriarchal male-dominated society than a world where the male does not even exist? Or where the woman is the only gender, and thus, the most powerful by default? Le Guin’s novel is in fact neither, being a single gender society without ascribing to the idea of the binary gender. The very concept of a permanent gender does not exist amongst the people of Winter. While I have mentioned that the narrator of the text is Earth born, almost every other character is born on the planet of Winter. The novel creates a vivid society for them including social rule, reproductive processes, and interpersonal conflicts. The narrative focuses largely on the journey between the two lands of Karhide and Orgoreyn as it is the physical action of the novel, but the focus of this essay is more towards the subtext of the constructed society and its aforementioned social expectations. An exploration of the possibilities of society without the constraints of a binary gender dividing everything from personal relations to politics; the novel attempts to construct a world without constraints.

The classification of *The Left Hand of Darkness* as a utopian novel rather than simply a gender experiment comes from the way the narrative’s society is introduced. In the seventh chapter of the novel, the narrative describes the sexual processes of the people of Winter in great depth. More importantly, it also has numerous points up for the reader to “consider” what this sexual process means for the society’s social implications. For example, it discusses the lack of division in the society in a number of ways, heavily implying the gender aspect as the one to have divided them in other societies. The text is

meant to present an alternative to the inequality of our binary gender society. It presents ideals of the impossibility of rape or sexual violence, the equality of the childbearing burden, no “myth of Oedipus on Winter” or any other of Earth’s traditional sexual deviances (Le Guin 85). The text is constructed as a utopia of gender: that every burden associated with sex or gender is instead shared equally. Yet, the text describes this as none of the people of Winter being “quite so free as a free male anywhere else” (86). However, the addition of the female to the male, or even simply the possibility of conception being equal, is a burden upon the freedom of the individual. For how can a person be truly free if they are weighed down by the implied burdens of the female gender?

While the conversation of issues of gender separation begins with the gender divide in authorship and continues into the use of utopias in the genre, the narrative’s representation of gender in its characters and plot is the most crucial. In Brian Attebury’s *Decoding Gender in Science Fiction* compendium in which he creates an overview of gender representation in science fiction as a whole, he describes this previously discussed gender divide in that within a science fiction novel, “anyone or anything *not* explicitly portrayed as performing a female sexual function is a ‘he’” (Le Guin 53). In looking at this panoramic view as a whole, it is not only Le Guin’s text that creates the male as the default but a common thread throughout the whole genre. The male is the norm and any other concept of gender is the “other.” Yet, Le Guin’s attempt to turn this idea of the default on its head falls short of its goal. The novel is simply another text that upholds the male as the default due to the linguistic flaws of the narrative, rather than any intent of the story. In its attempt to create a single gender, it only creates a male-based gender still



in power with few occasions to showcase the female equality. The people of Winter are not androgynous, but a male default that occasionally showcases essentialist characteristics of the female gender. Even its occasional representation of the female aspects is saturated in negative connotations, the most adverse characteristics of the gender included. The novel attempts androgyny, but only succeeds in a baby steps attempt toward what a more centralized and equal gender binary might look like if birth-sex assignment was not as heavy an influence as it is in our own society.

### Gendered Characteristics

Pronouns create the language's gendered differentiations in the most obvious distinctions. Genly recognizes the pronouns he misgenders the people of Winter as: "subconsciously 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 my own" (Le Guin 22). In order to even talk about the people he lives amongst, Genly must force them into categories in which he knows they will not fit. The gendered descriptions in the actual narrative, however, are much different. They are also more deeply rooted in the subtext, as there is not the same awareness by Genly of these mistakes as they occur. The pronouns are diction clarified by Genly and conscious of the mistakes he is making, while the descriptors are more indicative of the actual author's narration and subconscious or conscious implications through gendered language.

The gendered language showcases the treatment of the text again in favor of the male. Language associated with the masculine terms ends up defining a sense of superiority. The dominance is established from the start in the description of Kemmer's

development in which each individual will settle on a “hormonal dominance” (Le Guin 82). Very few of the masculine descriptors are used negatively and they are never used as an association to evoke distrust in an individual the way the feminine descriptors do. War is the only concept that is defined solely by masculine terms, but even then it is not done negatively, only with the same connotations of power (Le Guin 93). The characters themselves may be described as “handsome,” with a tankard and a lack of emotive sympathy (Le Guin 115). They are “virtuous” in their smiles, or “tall, husky and dark” as they enter into their sexual phase or even the phallic imagery of being “very erect” in their stance (Le Guin 125 & 24). The negativity towards a masculine description comes from failing to uphold those connotations of power: a politician being “something less than an integral man” or the King’s pregnancy making him “less kingly, less manly” (Le Guin 36). Even Genly’s conflict with Estraven during the journey back to Karhide is complicated most of all by his “manliness, or virility” and his pride (Le Guin 182). It is a complication, but one that is presented as inherent, not subject to unwanted change. Despite Estraven’s amazement at Genly’s strength, Genly continues to be “galled by his patronizing,” his wounded pride not stemming from any verbal disagreement but Estraven’s physical appearance. Genly is not angry that the other is showcasing masculine attributes, but that his outshining of Genly’s traits emasculates him. Estraven is a “head shorter” and “built more like a woman than a man, more fat than muscle,” (Le Guin 181). Genly’s defining factor that Estraven can never understand is his “masculine self-respect” and his being “locked in [his] virility” as he continues to define Estraven solely by womanly terms in disagreements only (Le Guin 182 & 178). Estraven’s characteristics are masculine until Genly begins to be angered by him, where the traits

turn to feminine, unwanted descriptors. Even the use of “virility” as a term with power connotations rather than male or masculine sex descriptor continues the implications of strength. Genly asserts himself in a superior position to Estraven for fear of emasculation, not only due to his physical appearance, but the idea that should he cry; Estraven would not be “as strong as [Genly] was, and it would not be fair, it might make him cry too” (Le Guin 220). Masculine traits are aligned with power subjugation, woven within fears of emasculation alongside female-oriented characters and characteristics.

In contrast, the language of the feminine contains much more consistent negative connotation. So much of the feminine descriptors are intended to be negative: they “laugh shrilly like an angry woman pretending to be amused,” are as “sullen as an old she-otter,” and do not have pleasing voices but “husky, resonant” ones (Le Guin 37, 40, 226). They can occasionally be positive, but only in the sense that a character is attributing a distasteful male action, an action that can only be described in feminine terms such as being “graceful as a girl” (Le Guin 57). An action cannot be “house-wifey or scientific,” it must be one or the other and one much more acceptable than the first (Le Guin 200). Feminine descriptions are not just positive towards essential female traits, but also the unwanted feminine traits in characters “stolid, slovenly, heavy and...effeminate – not in the sense of delicacy, etc., but in just the opposite sense: a gross, bland fleshiness, a bovinity” (Le Guin 149). Descriptions can even be split, as one body encompassing two gendered descriptions is inconceivable to a binary mindset: a child described as a boy because while he “had a girl’s quick delicacy in his looks and movements...no girl could keep so grim a silence as he did” (Le Guin 244). Not only can they not coexist despite being of the same personality, he is referred to as male because a single male descriptor

takes precedence and power over the female. Every negative descriptor of a character immediately aligns their descriptions with the feminine. The refusal of “the abstract, the ideal, a submissiveness to the given,” is not only displeasing, it is a “feminine” attitude (Le Guin 176). Genly assumes a character who is “so feminine in looks and manner” must have had a number of children, when he was actually the mother of none and father of four (Le Guin 50). A country is even only defined with a female pronoun when it begins to fall apart under the population’s disrespect for its pregnant king (Le Guin 92).

The fourth phase of the sexual cycle is likened to the “menstrual cycle” and Estraven fears “all strains will increase” as though entering kemmer functions much like PMS (Le Guin 83 & 191). Feminine actions are even what separate characters, a feminine action of bearing a child isolating an incestuous relationship that was accepted up until that point (Le Guin 30). The story of this incestuous couple aligns the female, or the one who “bore the child,” with the more emotional, drastic figure; they are the first to react and procures “poison, [committing] suicide” (Le Guin 30). The other, or the implied “father,” is the one who shoulders onward through life in his strength. Even beyond the gendered language and actions, Genly’s dialogue reveals a negative imbalance towards the female gender and sex. His nightmares and hallucinations are “all sexually charged and grotesquely violent, a red-and-black seething of erotic rage” in which he imagines “gaping pits with ragged lips, vaginas, wounds, hellmouths” indicting this yonic imagery alongside fear and violence (Le Guin 64).

It is not only implications but through clear text when Genly, in his discussions of females from home with Estraven, replies that he “doesn’t know” when asked if their women are mentally inferior (Le Guin 195). It is not only about the imagery, but the

indecisive and unscientific answers Genly gives about women when the rest of the data presented about the people of Winter is clearly presented as concrete. Estraven asks him if “they differ much from your sex in mind behavior” and if they are “like a different species” to which Genly replies: “No. Yes. No, of course not, not really. .. It is extremely hard to separate the innate differences from the learned ones,” (Le Guin 194-5). This distinction is important because while the sex and gender (or lack of it) for the people of Winter are scientifically defined, that is not as true for the Terran people. Yet, despite this knowing distinction, Genly still goes on to be unsure about women’s mental inferiority and his displacement from the female gender while at the same time commenting that Estraven and Genly “share one sex” (Le Guin 195). Again, the text attempts to be distinct and define a separation: to be clear about issues. Yet, the language it then continues with, be it ingrained and unconscious or a conscious undermining, does not have the intended effect of creating the image of women as anything other than an other. Not only is there no scientific credibility to their mental equality clearly stated, but the yonic imagery is associated with fear and violence. The female descriptors are used as singularly feminine, and never preferable to the male. Descriptors, characteristics, and even direct dialogue all seek to dissociate the female from the default, more desirable masculine.

Here we are seeing the divide of the “other” by the male and female characteristics being presented in the individuals. The concept of the “other” is a term relevant to a number of cross-theoretical applications. It is a succinct definition of a person by their separation, commonly by gender. In order to understand this term we must also understand that to have an “other” we must have a “norm.” “The other” encompasses the differentiations of a figure from an accepted norm in which the labeled

deviation is very clearly not. In this case, the other is anything that is beyond the norm of a binary gender society, thus the people of Winter are an other in their biological single gender. Comparatively, the novel's protagonist, a Terran, has biologically one gender and is considered "the norm" not only by the novel's point of view, but also by the reader's identification with that biological concept personally. Yet, even within the idea of the binary gender society the breakdown continues further in that the male is the default norm and the woman becomes the "other." The people of Winter are constantly seen as an "other" due to their very nature of being non-human. Yet, beyond that they can be further disassociated from the norm by their association with male attitudes as a norm and female behaviors at times. Therefore, an alien person of Winter can be isolated by their biology alone, but doubly so when they begin to exhibit female characteristics. They do this completely unaware of how this behavior is further separating them due to concepts their society has no understanding of due to the point of view of the novel, all the while still being completely separate from "Terran" expectations. The notable implication then is how these others are presented, wanted or not, by the novel's protagonist and his own "norm." His language, how the others are described positively and negatively, and what these descriptors say about our own understanding of the gender binary and reactions to such.

Taking these negative connotations even further, despite the lack of female pronouns there is no shortage of feminine descriptors. However, the feminine descriptors occur not only to imply negativity and inferiority, but are used largely to indicate manipulation and distrust. Genly is annoyed by Harge ir Tibe's "sense of effeminate intrigue," and damns another politician's "effeminate deviousness (Le Guin 18 & 24).

The characters do not even perform actions or speak, but can not simply embody intrigue or deviousness without it being effeminate. Even violence done unto characters such as suicide and poison are the worst of all crimes, coded as womanly cowardice; even murder is a “lighter shade on the house.” An attempted manipulation of Estraven by a politician is a complete failure because Estraven is a powerful contrast to the cooing and muttering woman in kemmer, who is counting on “his beauty and his sexual insistence” where Estraven is able to deny him with only his “detestation,” either not sexually affected at all by a female, or presenting as a male constantly (Le Guin 133). Yet, in the beginning, before the trust develops between Estraven and Genly, Genly sees the other as “womanly, all charm and tact and lack of substance, specious and adroit” (Le Guin 22). He wonders if it is the “soft supple femininity” that he “disliked and distrusted in him” and how it was impossible to think of Estraven as a woman due to his looks, but thinking of him as a man became a kind of “falseness, of imposture” (Le Guin 22). Even as the character Genly will eventually come to trust above all, Estraven’s actions are coded in femininity, and that femininity coded in negativity.

Taking both the male and female descriptors into account as they are, it is no wonder that the few instances of non-gendered language descriptions lack much of the life of the previous descriptors. They have no connotations to rely on and fall flat without the emotional assumption of the gender stereotypes used to describe and imply otherwise. Physical descriptions relied on ideas like being “as tall as many women of [Genly’s] race” or having a “kind and handsome face” (Le Guin 113 & 237). Technically genderless, but still implying or used in comparison. Even descriptions like “one of the most beautiful human faces I ever saw, seemed hard and delicate as carved stone,”

contains delicate rather than powerful and beautiful rather than handsome (Le Guin 66).

All of these words have gender implications due to their typical use within a binary gender society. Even without clear distinctions, the descriptions continue to evoke gendered imagery. Without them, however, descriptions begin to rely only on very vague descriptions of size or weight. A character has a “fat, flat face” or one of “all delicacy and bone,” he is an “extraordinarily handsome human being, by any standards as either sex” or simply had “small feet and hands, rather broad hips and a deep chest, the breasts scarcely more developed than in a male of my race,” (Le Guin 77, 120). Many even still rely on the same gendered comparisons! They have no emotive connotations at all as though without the gendered language, no ethos can exist.

## Motherhood

Like the concept of the “other,” gender essentialism plays a key role in defining the divide of binary gender between its expectations by the reader and presentation of the narrative. Gender essentialism is the subscription to the belief that not only does society create inherent expectations of gender, but also that the divide between gender and sex is closer than we tend to think (*Undoing Gender*). It is the idea that there is an innate, essential difference between the binary two genders whose traits are inherent at birth. While these ideas are essential in examining the societal implications of how we perceive gender and its reflection in our language, this work will ascribe largely to Judith Butler’s theories of gender divisions at the sex/gender and birth/societal level. In order to conceive the idea that there may be a society that is both genderless and sexless we must distinguish that difference. For the people of Winter have no sex beyond Kemmer and



thus no societal expectations of gender that came about because of that sex. For Terrans whose biological sex is permanent, and thus create mirroring social ideas of gender, the idea of having neither biological sex or social gender expectations permanently is incomprehensible. Due to these influences of societal structures, Genly Ai is constantly imposing his expectations of gender-specific attitudes unto the traits that manifest amongst the people of Winter. So in discussing those characteristics singled out by Genly through his observations, we must consider the ideas of gender essentialism and stereotypes and how he implements them in his language. Even Genly himself asks “what is the first question we ask about a newborn baby?” (Le Guin 86). Boy or girl?

Yet, while sex is not permanent as it is for humans, the people of Winter still reproduce the same way those in a binary sexual society do. It is only how this reproduction manifests in terms of gender assignment and how it is acknowledged by the society that is different. The aliens may not have birth-assigned or permanent sex assignments, but they do assume the biological roles of male and female for reproduction. The idea of “compulsory sexuality” is important in terms of reproduction expectations and the contradiction of gender conformity to sex versus its cultural constructions (Butler 26). The questions of this sex/gender divide is key in the understanding of our binary gender expectations we immediately impose upon the knowing of gender through their subsequent pronouns. In the same way that sex immediately implies gender expectations, the ability to carry a child to term implies certain attitudes. The language of this female role in the novel is showcased not only by how Genly learns about the reproductive capabilities of the society, but also in one of the most important turning points of the text: the pregnancy of the King. How it is revealed and later discussed by the text evokes a

great deal of gender essentialism and the expectation of the woman and her role in childbearing. With reproduction one of the most distinguishing factors in determining sex, it is no wonder that the novel's discussion of reproduction has some of the clearest linguistically based stereotyping.

The correlation of women and motherhood is one of the strongest gender associations, yet in *The Left Hand of Darkness* Le Guin creates a space where the mother is always a woman, but a woman is not always a mother. Kathy Rudy describes this phenomenon as the idea that "women's bodies are not the only places babies can grow," yet the conception still happens during a time of biological female association (Le Guin 26). Conception can happen only once a month when two individuals on the planet Winter enter an essential reproductive cycle in which they are assigned a gender. This process is called Kemmer, and while the gender assignment is randomized it is always a man and a woman within a pair. While there are preventative measures against conception, this is the only time in which the people have the genital requirements in which to reproduce. Because of this, if the female assigned half of the partnership becomes pregnant during this time, they are forced to remain with the outward female appearance until birth, while the male immediately reverts to the default androgynous state upon completion of Kemmer. Anyone within the society can get be assigned as the woman and become pregnant, but it is still only women who can reproduce.

Despite the text's attempts to separate the idea of motherhood from the concept of the female gender, much of the language continues to enforce this association, conscious or not. Children's mothers are separated from the distinction of "flesh-born," not mothered or fathered (Le Guin 70). If a person physically gave birth to that child, they are

their flesh born. If not, it is referred to as having “sired” a child as the father position, not the “parent of the flesh” with it being the mother position (Le Guin 84). The text tries to establish the separation in Genly’s reflection that “distinction between a maternal and a paternal instinct is scarcely worth marking; the paternal instinct, the wish to protect, to further, is not a sex-linked characteristic...” (Le Guin 90). Yet, the text continues to enforce traditional gendered pregnancy roles in a sex-linked way. Even in kemmer, their sexual awakening, they are described as an almost pregnancy-like glow. Genly is able to pick someone in kemmer out by “subtle physical intensification, a kind of brightness, that signalizes the first phase of Kemmer.” (Le Guin 62). Yet, not long after Genly’s thoughts reflecting upon a disliked politician contradict these separations, wondering “a hard shrewd jovial politician, whose acts of kindness served his interest and whose interest was himself” could ever have been a young mother, as those characteristics described and those of a mother cannot be fathomably coinciding (Le Guin 103). Someone so harsh and cruel to him could never fulfill the seemingly needed stereotypes of the gentle, female mother.

The text even discusses pregnancy as burden on the freedom of the individual rather than a duty or privilege shared amongst society. It evokes a negative connotation rather than any concept of equality for all. It is the idea of the women’s burdens dragging down the men’s position to become closer to the women at the bottom of the totem pole. Genly describes this as “nobody here [being] quite so free as a free male anywhere else” (Le Guin 85). With this concept in mind, the example of the King’s pregnancy comes not only as a turning point for the narrative’s political machinations, but also in the response to motherhood amongst the society. Before the announcement of his pregnancy,

discussion of reproduction had always been in a detached, clinical fashion due to Genly's journalistic and didactic relation of how the society works. With the King, we have the first instance of a personal case of pregnancy amongst a known character. In fact, the text even makes the point of discerning the difference between a bloodline child and "an heir of the body" (Le Guin 90). The immediate reaction of the planet's occupants hearing the news is hilarity, not any sense of pride or patriotism. While not directly assigning femininity to the King due to characteristics like many other instances in the text, there already exists the implied association between mother and pregnancy. There is a direct contrast to the sudden derision for their King once the pregnancy is public knowledge. The pregnancy has undermined his authority where before there was respect and fear for him: he becomes the "paranoid, pregnant King" from then on (Le Guin 100). They mock him where there was once patriotic respect and continue on to "get obscene about it" (Le Guin 90). Here Genly is separated from politics and amongst the more common people, a more visceral reaction without political restraint and maneuvering that permeates central Karhide.

So when the news comes out that the child has died as the King is losing hold on his power in the political sphere, he is seen not only incompetent in his job but in the gender he exhibits at the time: a woman. Again, once the pregnancy had begun he was no longer genderless but biologically female until the birth takes place. That his loss of power coincides with the pregnancy says more about our own societal stereotypes of women being unable to balance job and home. Yet, the reaction to this child's death is the most divisive of all. The news comes out amidst a busy tavern, where the people are split amongst celebration and mourning at the news. Each half is described with a single

figure, the celebrating character described as “the handsome man” who shouts out a mocking toast about the death. The figure more sympathetic is described as a “fat old man” whose “leggings bunched up around his thighs like skirts” who does not shout or argue but more quietly empathizes with the loss (Le Guin 115). The two fall figures divide not only reactions but again into the gender binary in which the more abrasive and unfeeling characters are coded as men, and the more paternal and sympathetic as women. In the final scene with the King, Genly describes him as looking “like a woman who has lost her baby, like a man who has lost his son.” (Le Guin 239). Despite the narrative attempts to separate women and pregnancy, here again we see that the King cannot be a man who lost his baby, but must separate gender from pregnancy. The King’s pregnancy reveals much of the unintended stereotyping and coding of gender that feeds into our language and concepts of how we react not only to women and their children, but pregnancy in general. Like the King’s pregnancy coinciding with the turn of the people against him, womanly characteristics in the text are most often coded as distrustful, unwanted, and manipulative.

### Queer Theory and Sexuality

It is not only our perception of the individual character that is affected by this influential coding in the diction of the text, however. Genly’s relationship with Estraven beyond either of their characterizations is influenced once again by the confines of reproductive compulsory heterosexuality. Yet, the male as the dominant default is not the only concept overlaid, perhaps inadvertently, upon this new society. Compulsory heterosexuality is a phrase generally used in terms of reproductive issues, particularly

against the idea of homosexual relationships. Yet, in this sense it covers the idea that not only can this androgynous society not be described without the terms and expectations of our gender binary, but neither can they reproduce without the heterosexual expectation of one man and one woman. This manifests particularly in Genly's description of the workings of Kemmer in which the people of Winter undertake a randomized biological sex once a month. The sexual process, despite how it presents only monthly and under very particular circumstances, is presented as very similar to our own. The actual sexual process is the same and how it manifests only briefly rather than permanently is where the line is drawn.

Thus, when it comes to the concept of sexuality most pairs are only one male and one female because they are physically limited to this by their biological processes. This expectation comes into play alongside Genly's fear of the undefined gender roles amongst his relationships with Winter's people: particularly when Estraven and Genly begin to experience romantic feelings toward each other. The sexual processes of the people of Winter were established early on, but issues of compatibility with the people of Earth were never considered until the budding relationship between the two upon their journey back to Karhide. Their relationship travels from professional, betrayed, distrusting, and finally to friendship. However, this relationship does not blossom into something romantic or sexual until the gender of Estraven has been established clearly. Genly struggles with his attraction to Estraven not because he is a man or a woman, but because he is both. He accepts that he was always "afraid to see...that [Estraven] was a woman as well as a man" (Le Guin 205). With this acceptance of Estraven's complete gender as both, Genly then struggles due to the fact that his attraction to Estraven occurs

only when he views Estraven as a woman, but “knows that intercourse with him is impossible because Estraven is sometimes a man” (Rudy 32). Genly can feel halfway attracted to Estraven due to the half of him he views as a woman, but not the half he views as a man. Leading up to the point of attraction, Estraven’s descriptions had always been rooted in the negatives as female descriptors and the positives as male. Where before his divisions were rooted in positive and negative connotations as with the other characters of Winter, now his gendered assignments are allowing his attraction or denying it due to his upholding of heterosexual ideals and fears.

So it is not an issue of sexual incompatibility that divides them, as the sexual process of the people of Winter is similar to our own, although theoretically sterile (Le Guin 205). Kemmer reveals the essential defaults of their genders when confronted personally with sexually charged confrontations towards their gender: both Estraven and Genly are consistently established as male defaults. Genly’s own biological sex and gender identification is established as male and never disputed. Even when confronted with another person on Winter in Kemmer, she presents as female and is drawn to Genly’s essential maleness. She was “in kemmer, and had been drawn to” Genly (Le Guin 145). Even Estraven is confronted with a woman in kemmer, a politician seeking to use sex to seduce him. Both Estraven and the politician are in kemmer, but Estraven is never described as developing into a gender, only the politician who “was going very rapidly into full phase as a woman” (Le Guin 133). The fact that it is just a given that Estraven would be the male in the relationship aligns him very concretely with the male gender, even when he is not in Kemmer. Both of them are confronted with kemmer individuals, and clearly establish themselves as male. So when Estraven is defined

consistently as male, and Genly is biologically and sexually identifying as male, their relationship boils down to one between two men. Estraven takes Genly's gender into account, as the binary gender system is just as strange to Estraven as the androgyny of his is to Genly. Estraven's fear stems from the "trouble" that Genly is "in his curious fashion, also in kemmer: always in kemmer" (Le Guin 193). Both of them identify as male through the narrative, and fear each other's established gender(s).

Though Genly never explicitly uses any homophobic language or aside statements to indicate his own personal feelings towards sexuality, the narrative continually compares the "Perverts" of their society to those who identify as homosexual in binary gender societies. Genly explains the social reception of these Perverts (or people of Winter who have artificially induced themselves to consistently stay one gender) as: "they are not excluded from society, but they are tolerated with some disdain, as homosexuals are in many bisexual societies" (Le Guin 62). Compounding the essential default genders of male for both characters with the lack of attraction until Genly recognizes Estraven as a woman and the previously established fear and distrust of the women gender, their relationship takes on the implications more of a homosexual relationship comparable to our own society's. They both seemingly identify as male, their coupling cannot produce children, and they both fear each other's gender as a factor for not consummating. Genly and Estraven's sexual incompatibility stems not from the biological, but the fear of traditional, non-heterosexual relationships.

Estraven and Genly's relationship is full of identity struggles that come along with their underlying biological, sexual tension. However, while they never physically consummate their relationship and no other physical consummation scenes occur



essentially on-scene in the text, the discussion of consent is another key factor in the gendered language of the text. Rather, issues of violence and consent are played out in other manners to mirror the imbalance of consent often seen in bi-gendered societies. Due to the perceived power imbalance both politically and physically, the male gender is often seen as at the top or preferable. Issues of consent must take into account this power imbalance, and often the tragedy is that they are not respected by the figure with the greater power. The diction and reflection of this power imbalance in the gender allocation in kemmer as well as Genly's mind speech mirrors this very precarious imbalance.

## Consent

The description of kemmer and its random gender allocation is consistently described as something forced upon them. The process is not hidden, but the discussion of it is always explained as having "no choice in the matter" despite that many have a "preferred sexuality" (Le Guin 83). Why would any character on Winter have a preferred sexuality if they are regarded as equals? One of the most key scenes to the issue of kemmer is first moment we see a Pervert and the way they respond to a character in kemmer:

The Pervert of the group, after that first long strange stare at me, paid no heed to anyone but the one next to him, the Kemmerer, whose increasingly active sexuality would be further roused and finally stimulated into full, female sexual capacity by the insistent, exaggerated maleness of the Pervert. The Pervert kept talking softly, leaning towards the Kemmerer, who answered little and seemed to recoil. None of the others had spoken

for a long time now, there was no sound but the whisper, whisper of the Pervert's voice. Faxe was steadily watching one of the Zanies. The Pervert laid his hand quickly and softly on the kemmerer's hand. The Kemmerer avoided the touch hastily, with fear or disgust, and looked across at Faxe as if for help. Faxe did not move. The Kemmerer kept his place, and kept still when the Pervert touched him again. One of the Zanies lifted up his face and laughed a long false crooning laugh, 'Ah-ah-ah-ah...' (Le Guin 63)

The Pervert is a character locked into one gender, and it is telling that he has chosen a male form continually, forcing the Kemmerer into a female form and taking advantage of their uncontrollable biological functions. The Kemmerer is continuously described as recoiling, fear, and disgust. Yet, the figure with no power in the situation does not physically speak up and receives no help from the only character who could put a stop to the other's actions. Sexual power cannot be forced if based solely on their biological urges, but here we see the effect of meddling with the unknown and randomization of their gender creating a power imbalance out of impossibility. The imbalance is further mirrored in the language of the planet's violence. War is described as a "purely masculine displacement" or a "vast rape" of their world (Le Guin 87). This aside further cements the power imbalance of the male as the violent power, and contrast of "the femininity that is raped" (Le Guin 87). Despite the narrative urgings that both genders remain equal, the story continues to describe violence, war, and power within masculine terms and that which violence is done unto within feminine terms.

Mindspeech showcases the more verbal aspect of consent. The activity can only occur with "consent and a little practice" in order to lower an "unwitting barrier" (Le

Guin 66). With the lack of consummation between them, Genly feels that mindspeech is the “only thing [he] had to give Estraven” in order to cement the bond between the two. Yet, when he attempts to share the gift, Estraven does not respond well. Despite his trouble with it, Estraven still answers “[Genly’s] love for him” crying out in the mind speech as he dies in a final poignant moment of completion between the two (Le Guin 223). Their people pride themselves on the completed individual and Genly imagines that the intrusion of the mindspeech may be a “violation of completeness” (Le Guin 211). Yet, despite this wholeness, Genly continues to describe them as man-women, or a whole constructed of two parts. The contrast of the people of Winter’s idea of wholeness versus Genly’s perception of them as a being of two parts rather than one piece again showcases the broken foundation not only of descriptors, but of point of view.

Genly’s presentation in the text is important to note, as he is the only non-androgynous figure for most of the narrative. He creates the contrast of an actual gendered figure as compared to the others. However, the fact that his descriptions differ very little underlines the accidental gendering that takes up much of the narrative. He is referred to as “The Pervert” a not-known concept by the people of Winter due to the hormonal modification of some of their outcasts (Le Guin 154). Yet, this does not completely isolate him as he can be defined within the terms of their society, indicating that his gender has a place already within the society despite the declarations of sex being present but not gender. He is also described as if he was a person of Winter, only pregnant (Le Guin 103). He is different from the norm, but still able to be described within the terms of the society. Genly is able to hide himself, even his “sexual anomalies” he hides within “heavy clothing” (Le Guin 57). The only time that Genly is singled out is

within the prison, in which no one is defined by gender descriptions. He states that he had “for the first time on Winter a certain feeling of being a man among women, or among eunuchs” (Le Guin 149). Genly is one of the few who does not actually have physical characteristics defining his gender. Unlike the ambiguities of consent with Kemmer and mindspeech, Genly is the only character with bodily autonomy in the novel, secure in his singular gender. There is never a question of hormonal influence or forced mind speech, making his point of view not only the most prominent, but the seemingly most trustworthy without worry of undue influence from other, more powerful bodies. The strongest individual identity and the main voice of the novel grants Genly a power and security that no one else in the novel has.

### Point of View

The novel is divided largely into two points of view: Estraven’s and Genly’s. Genly’s dominates much of the novel, but Estraven’s sections are key in defining the language and intent of the narrative. In undermining the language’s attempt at androgyny, much of it could be blamed on the point of view of Genly being a Terran and conforming to bi-gender societal expectations. However, the pronoun flaws and gendered language continues even within Estraven’s sections (Le Guin 70). Genly declares that “They do not see one another as men or women. That is almost impossible to our imagination to accept” (Le Guinn 86). So it would not be difficult to blame the misgendering on the mind of Genly, but that same impossibility extends to our language. This is not a text written by a person of Winter in their language: our language has no correlation between terms that could even begin to describe the people and their gender accurately. So when

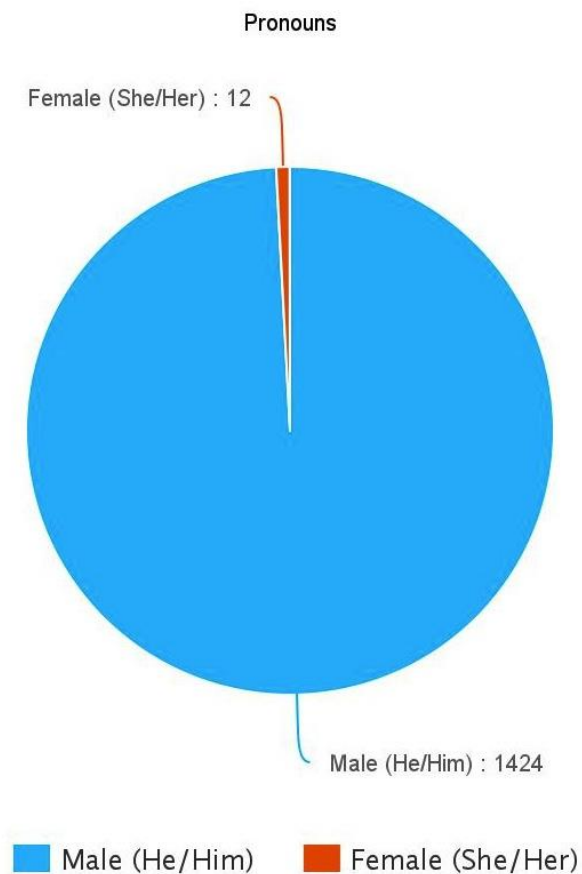
Estraven calls himself a “man” and when the physician wonder at the “men from the stars” in his lifetime, it is not them thinking of their own identities as male-aligned it is the language humans speak failing to uphold his own concepts of gender (Le Guin 167 & 243). The point of view in which the narrative is laid out does not matter, because the language used will always be the same. The text’s pronoun issues and gendered language stem from a place of linguistic failure, not narrative intent.

## Linguistics

One of the most important distinctions in regards to *différance* and the failure of the text’s language intent is its implementation of pronouns. As discussed it does not construct a new specific pronoun for the people of Winter and their singular gender, but utilizes the pronouns of a binary gender society. Genly himself, who is not of Winter but a Terran binary society, states that “the karhider I am with is not a man, but a manwoman” (Le Guin 86). Yet, every discussion of such Winter natives also discusses them with the default male pronoun from the start. The very first introduction to these gender and pronoun issues begins with the first description of a character besides the narrator. Genly describes the figure beside him as “the man” and turns to answer him (Le Guin 16). Yet, in the very middle of the sentence he reflects that he must refer to him as man, “having said he and his” (Le Guin 16). There is the cementing of the use of a default and single pronoun use from the beginning. This is all even before any description of androgyny or the lack of a gender dichotomy has even begun to be outlined or explained. Never is the female pronoun considered as default, or even a gender neutral pronoun such as “they” used. Discussions and introspective reflections such as Genly

with his concept of the “manwoman” will often attempt to remind that the natives are androgynous. However, the language used never changes.

Any female pronouns are used incredibly infrequently, occurring only when referring to a person in Kemmer who has developed women’s characteristics, or the brief presence of the female human at the end of the novel. To use “he” as a default is not to create a neutral term, but to establish again the male as the default. Attempts to use “they/their” or other constructed words to solve this power binary dynamic have ultimately never gained ground. In the novel we can numerically see the evidence of the complete disregard for the female pronoun – sometimes even towards those who may “deserve it” such as people in Kemmer.



Yet, the narrative struggles the most in distinguishing the binary genders of the Terran people when it in fact has to use the language of those people to describe the non-binary gender. In order to combat this, the text will often have to describe the struggle of Genly trying to grasp for the correct terminology when talking to others about the males and females of the Terran people. When the people of Winter describe a male-locked gender identity they use a term that designates a male animal and Genly later describes a female Terran with the word that “would apply only to a person in the culminant phase of kemmer” (Le Guin 41 & 62). To describe gender to an androgynous race secondhand in the narrative is one thing, to describe it to their face, in their language, with opposite but similar linguistic limitations is another.

Key to the understanding of how this binary gender conforming language will be deconstructed is Derrida’s theory of *différance*. The continual “deferring” of meaning and signifiers not only relates to the understanding of our own language but how we might understand concepts that are unknown to our society and have no relating words or definition. To consider an unknown concept is to consider a meaning with no corresponding word. That concept can only be understood through relative words, not an exact match. It is the concept of “*sameness* which is not *identical*” (Derrida 129). To understand the implications that to use the words of a binary gender language is to not have the same implications as intended, but to *defer* a meaning to its closest ideology. Thus, to consider an unknown concept such as a single sex or gender society there can be no pronouns to use but our own, constructed in a binary sex/gender society. It is not the correct deferring of word to concept intended, but it is the only word that can be used within the confines of our language.

The text continues to only refer to the people of Winter as “he” or “him” even during times when the narrator Genly reflects on an outburst of feminine qualities or characteristics. Figure 1 demonstrates the complete disparity of gender pronouns. It should be noted that while “he” stands for many characters, the she pronoun is only ever used for a character in female-aligned kemmer, the human female Terran that arrives at the end, and an unnamed dream figure. This default usage is even noted exactly by the text in Genly’s defense of why he uses “he” as an attempt at gender neutrality. He explains that he uses it for “the same reasons as we used the masculine pronoun in referring to a transcendent god: it is less defined, less specific, than the neuter of the feminine” (Le Guin 86). Even the first concept of pronouns with Genly’s inter musings considers the male default: “—man I must say having said *he* and *his* – the man answers” (Le Guin 17). While the consistent use of the male pronoun denies the female influence upon the androgynous or “manwoman” society, so too does the language deny Genly the ability to clearly define the people of Winter as he so clearly wants. He declares that you cannot refer to the people as “it” as they are not “neuters. They are potentials, or integrals” (Le Guin 86). They are “manwoman” or “androgynous.” (Le Guin 86-88). He resorts to what he feels is the closest approximation, or *deferral*, unto the male pronoun. The male is seen as the essential dominant in the binary gender, and thus is the default for use. Even the generic uses of pronouns or descriptors default to the generic male. The Terran people are consistently “mankind,” a flaw to be said of our own language than anything to say of Genly himself (Le Guin 28). Yet, the attempts at neutrality end up undermining these linguistic flaws. Occasionally the text will refer to someone new as a



“stranger” rather than a man approaching, as it tends to do otherwise, reflecting that it can be gender neutral at times – why not all the time? (Le Guin 27).

It is these earlier themes of gender essentialism and compulsory heterosexuality that influence our discussion of how social expectations influence our use of language. Here we see the basis for much of the gender and feminist explorations of the genre: not only did the authors suffer being isolated as an “other”, so too did the writing and interpretation of their works. Their gender influences how and why they write their works, but also how they *can* write their works. Most importantly, how these ideas of gender, sex, and essentialism are constructed within our own language.

The use of the language from a binary gender society can only conceptualize, not linguistically create. Even to create a new word for the novel’s sake is to align the intent with that of the alien other -- to create an expectation that the reader will align this fictional word with other fictional phrases made up for the other’s society -- one that does not align with the society of the reader. To use a new fictional word for an androgynous society would be to equal androgyny with the unbelievable concept of aliens. Androgyny was and is not a conspiracy theory, but a real life practice and identification of many humans within a binary gender society.

Ursula Le Guin declared *The Left Hand of Darkness* an answer to her question: “If I eliminated gender, what is left?” *The Left Hand of Darkness* was meant to be an exploration of a society without gender constraints. Yet, the result still constrains to our perceptions of reproduction. It could be said that the novel includes sex, but not gender. However, that would be disregarding the gendered language of the descriptions. Even how women are presented in the 60’s science fiction texts is embodied in this novel,

turning them further into an other rather than a part of the narrative. A reflection of the failed concepts of androgyny in the text must include an acknowledgment of the text as one of Le Guin's earliest forays into gender studies – a first draft if you will. The novel can be seen as a learning venture for both Le Guin herself and how gender is portrayed in science fiction. However, the language she used in writing this novel has not changed much since the text's publishing. The novel's gendered language in particular. To be able to see the same stereotype implications, gendered assumptions, and lack of alternative for male as the default exemplifies our lack of progress in dealing with these linguistic, gendered errors in how we approach sex and gender. It is not only science fiction that struggles under these confines, but real world repercussions within gender fluidity, androgyny and transgender identities. Science fiction's ability to disassociate with our society while still commentating on our perceptions is key to numerous social issues. Perfect utopias to strive toward, horror stories of dystopias as a warning, and even not so far into the future texts of what we could or can be, science fiction allows us the freedom to speculate. "By envisioning what tomorrow might be, these novels help us reset the terms of debate for today" (Rudy 24). Ursula Le Guin's text allows us that final freedom to see the flaws in what could have been, and wonder what we could become.

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