“A SHADOW ON SNOW”: GENDER, SEX, AND SEXUALITY IN URSULA K. LE GUIN’S *THE LEFT HAND OF DARKNESS*

by

Gryffin Robin Winkler

Honors Thesis

Appalachian State University

Submitted to the Department of English
and The Honors College
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Bachelor of Arts

May 2021

Approved by:

_____
Dr. Michael Wilson, Thesis Director

_____
Dr. Conrad Ostwalt, Second Reader

_____
Dr. Başak Çandar, Third Reader

_____
Dr. Jennifer Wilson, Departmental Honors Director

_____
Dr. Jefford Vahlbusch, Dean, The Honors College

Abstract

This thesis examines the way gender, sex, and sexuality are portrayed in Ursula K. Le Guin's 1969 novel, *The Left Hand of Darkness*, as well as her two short stories that take place on the same planet, "Coming of Age In Karhide" and "Winter's King". All center around the planet Gethen, inhabited by humans without gender who remain sex-less except for a short period every month. The novel is narrated by Genly, a human from Earth sent to explore and reach out to the Gethens. Genly has an obvious aversion to the Gethen's ambisexuality, inaccurately referring to all the Gethens as "he" and as "men." I analyze Genly's problematic language and viewpoints, and his journey to acceptance and understanding. It takes Genly most of the novel to self-reflect and realize that the Gethens are neither men nor women. Taking a broader view, I also look at Gethen society and its relation to gender, as well as how the Gethens Other those who are different. I argue that Le Guin is making a point against gendered divisions; not only separating the feminine and masculine is something that causes harm, but also putting a judgement on femininity in favor of masculinity. *The Left Hand of Darkness* makes a case for unity, cooperation, and equality.

Science fiction has often been used as a space to explore gender and sex in different worlds and societies. Science fiction can feature stories about societies of only women, free from sexism (such as Joanna Russ's *The Female Man* or Nicola Griffith's *Ammonite*), cultures where women are the ones in power (C.J. Cherryh's the *Chanur Saga*) utopian worlds where gender does not define one's place in society, or a place where gender does not even exist. Le Guin, a lifelong feminist, wrote *The Left Hand of Darkness* in 1969, a novel where she in her words: "eliminated gender, to find out what was left. Whatever was left would be, presumably, simply human. It would define the area that is shared by men and women alike" (*Dancing at the Edge of the World* 10).

In *Left Hand* she sends Genly, a male chauvinist from Earth, to Gethen: a world without gender. The Gethens experience kemmer for a short period once a month, where they become either male or female for a short period of time, and then revert back to a neuter, sexless state. Genly is on a mission to convince the nations of Gethen to join the Ekumen, a multi-planetary group that shares and collects human knowledge. The Ekumen is not a colonizing force. At first, one person from the Ekumen is sent to establish contact and trust. Nations only join the Ekumen if they choose to. As Genly journeys through Gethen, he continues to resist thinking outside of his prejudices and preconceptions concerning the Gethens. Eventually, by the end of his journey, he learns to think beyond his preconceptions and view the Gethens as they really are: neither men nor women.

At the start of the novel Genly cements himself into thinking of the Gethens as *men*: "Wiping sweat from his dark forehead the man—*man* I must say, having said *he* and *his*" (*Left Hand* 5). The "man" Genly is speaking of is Estraven, a Gethen and the prime minister to the King of Karhide, one of the two biggest nations on Gethen. Whenever Estraven, being viewed

and described as a man, acts in any way feminine, Genly, as a narrator, points it out, often with a negative connotation. The word effeminate, a word meant particularly for men, is used twice to describe Estraven and his actions (8, 14). Genly's view and descriptions of Estraven do not just reveal Genly's attitudes towards femininity, but also towards the Gethen ambisexuality. For most of the novel, Genly does not view Estraven as his equal. Genly gives Estraven his mistrust, finding him impossible to read and understand, all the while Estraven is doing everything in his power to aid Genly. Genly's refusal to try and understand Estraven, to understand somebody he puts in the place of the Other, leads him into trouble again and again. At the start of the novel, Estraven has carefully tried to make sure Genly's meeting with the King comes at an opportune time without putting Genly in danger. Genly misunderstands Estraven's good intentions and views Estraven with suspicion:

> Estraven's performance had been womanly, all charm and tact and lack of substance, specious and adroit. Was it in fact perhaps this 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 own 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)

Genly is aware of his own perceptions. He struggles to fit Estraven into a single category as Estraven is neither a woman nor a man. His inability to categorize Estraven leads to frustration and suspicion. In his pondering, Genly finds it impossible to think of Estraven as a woman but thinking of him as a man feels "false." Estraven cannot be a woman due to his "powerful presence," but he cannot be a "true" man solely because, to Genly, he is not masculine enough to

be convincing. Later in the novel when both Genly and Estraven are in the nation of Orgoreyn, Karhide's rival, Estraven comes to Genly to offer advice. Estraven, once again attempting to aid Genly, is met with misunderstanding. This leads Genly to eventually being taken away and put in an Orgoreyn prison camp, as he is seen as a threat to the government.

During their time on the Gobrin Ice, traveling from Orgoreyn back to Karhide, Estraven's attention to detail and carefulness helps both Genly and Estraven survive their trek. Genly genders Estraven's careful actions as "house-wifely" (242) and feels frustration: "I resented my companion's methodical, tyrannical insistence that we do everything and do it correctly and thoroughly. I hated him at such times, with a hatred that rose straight up out of the death that lay within my spirit. I hated the harsh, intricate, obstinate demands that he made on me in the name of life" (246). His attitude comes from not seeing Estraven as an equal, as somebody who might be able to give him the help that he needs. When Estraven tries to aid Genly when he is ill, Genly feels frustration at Estraven's aid: "I was galled by his patronizing. He was a head shorter than I, and built more like a woman than a man, more fat than muscle; when he hauled together I had to shorten my pace to his, hold in my strength so as not to out-pull him: a stallion in harness with a mule" (219). Estraven's height or build is not relevant in terms of taking care of Genly, but it is relevant in terms of hurting Genly's masculinity and pride. For Genly, not only is he showing weakness in front of another person, but he is showing weakness in front of somebody who is more feminine than he is. In a rare moment of self-awareness, Genly realizes that "[Estraven] had not meant to patronize […] He, after all, had no standards of manliness, of virility, to complicate his pride. On the other hand, if he could lower all his standards of shifgrethor, as I realized he had done with me, perhaps I could dispense with the more competitive elements of my masculine self-respect, which he certainly understood as little as I understood shifgrethor"

(219). Estraven makes sacrifices for Genly, which Genly, caught up in his own mind, does not realize until much later. It is not until Genly desperately needs help, and is aware of needing help, that he takes a moment to self-reflect and realize he needs to make sacrifices for the sake of Estraven as well. He takes a moment to see things through Estraven's eyes, and to realize Estraven is coming from a place without concepts of masculinity and femininity.

Genly causes his own confusion by choosing masculine language to describe the Gethens. His thinking so puts the Gethens into categories they do not have. Genly's choice of viewing and describing the Gethens as if they were men creates the illusion that they are all men. Genly places masculinity as the default, with any leaning towards the feminine being a deviation. In any patriarchal society, men are viewed as the default and masculinity is superior to femininity. Genly clearly subscribes to masculinity and maleness as the default, leading to him viewing the Gethens all as men. Serano describes the kind of society Genly comes from: "in a world where femininity is so regularly dismissed, perhaps no form of gendered expression is considered more artificial and more suspect than male and transgender expressions of femininity" (5). Since in many human societies male is considered the "default," and above femininity, then any man, or somebody who is perceived by others as a "man," who is feminine or who lacks masculinity is questioned and critiqued (Serano 46-47). Whenever the Gethens look or act feminine Genly often, but not always, reacts or describes it negatively. Since he views and describes them as men, then any masculine performance would merely be "natural". His attitudes are not only misogynistic, but also strictly adhere to stereotypical binary gender expression: masculinity is only for men, femininity is only for women. This gender essentialism does not make room for masculine women or feminine men, or rejects them as anomalies (Serano 96-97).

Genly points out deviations from masculinity for all Gethens, not just Estraven. In particular, Genly expresses judgement towards the King of Karhide through demasculinizing or feminine coded adjectives. None of them are used as compliments, such as "potbellied," "less kingly, less manly, than he looked at a distance," "his voice was thin," "he laughed shrilly like an angry woman" (31). The language used creates the effect of King Argaven as a man, but just effeminate. This false portrayal of the King as a man is disrupted by his pregnancy later in the novel, an event that surprises Genly but does not change his views of the King as a man. Genly laughs at the news of the King's pregnancy. It does not turn the King into a woman in Genly's eyes, but instead, a man imitating a woman, an action Genly finds ridiculous (*Left Hand* 99, Serano 15, 46-47).

While Genly is most often awkward or reacts with suspicion towards femininity, he is not put-off by all displays of femininity. In cases where he feels an attraction to it, he does not denote any negative connotation. Early in the novel Genly meets Faxe, a member of the Karhide religion of the Handdara. Genly comments on Faxe's feminine aspects without judgement: "He was […] slender, with a clear, open, and beautiful face (57), "soft, rather high voice" (58), "[h]is face, one of the most beautiful human faces I ever saw" (67). He is immediately drawn to Faxe the moment they meet. Genly is able to view a Handdara foretelling ritual firsthand while it occurs. Faxe, as the weaver, sits at the center of the ritual and is the focal point. Due to Genly having the ability to mindspeak, something unheard of on Gethen, Genly reaches out and has a vision of the ritual while it occurs. Despite not being in kemmer, Faxe is seen as a woman in Genly's vision, "in the center of all darkness Faxe: the Weaver: a woman, a woman dressed in light. The light was silver, the silver was armor, an armored woman with a sword" (65). The vision during the ritual is described erotically: Faxe as a woman yells "Yes!" repeatedly as she is

surrounded by a burning, bright light. Genly sees Faxe in his vision as he sees Faxe, closer to a woman than a man. Genly completely accepts Faxe's femininity. There is no judgement because he does not perceive Faxe as falsely portraying the feminine while being male. Since Faxe is viewed more as a woman than a man, if Faxe took any action or role that was more masculine, there would not be the same judgement by Genly. Because Genly views masculinity as the default, any expressions of masculinity would merely be normal (Serano 46-47). Since Faxe not only leans more towards the feminine, but is also somebody Genly finds attractive, Genly does not treat Faxe being a woman in his vision as something suspect or negative. Genly does not treat the King acting feminine the same way as Genly feels no physical attraction towards the King, he even feels somewhat repulsed.

Genly is truly forced to face his discomfort with being unable to categorize Estraven after Estraven enters kemmer. While they are both incredibly tempted to have sex with each other, *both* Genly and Estraven prevent each other from having sex or any kind of sexual contact with each other: "[Estraven] explained, stiffly and simply, that he was in kemmer and had been trying to avoid me, insofar as one of us could avoid the other. 'I must not touch you,' he said, with extreme constraint; saying that he looked away. I said, 'I understand. I agree completely'" (249). Estraven does not give any more details about why he avoids sex with Genly, but there is a mutual understanding between the two that they should avoid it As Genly puts, "For us to meet sexually would be for us to meet once more as aliens" (249). As Genly said earlier to Estraven, "In a sense, women are more alien to me than you are" (234). Genly continually proves himself to be a gender essentialist, somebody who believes "that women and men represent two mutually exclusive categories, each born with certain inherent, nonoverlapping traits" (Serano 8). He creates an artificial division between him and women by referring to women as "alien" from him.

For Genly to have sex with Estraven would force him to confront his perception of Estraven as a feminine "man," and truly realize that Estraven is neither completely male nor female. Maybe if Genly and Estraven did have sex, Genly's realization of the Gethens as neither singularly man nor woman would not happen. To actually see one in kemmer, on one side of the binary, would perhaps further indent him in his flawed thinking. Pearson argues this point, saying that Genly and Estraven's choice to abstain from sex may have been the best choice:

> if Genly has sex with an Estraven who is feminized, their coupling can only partake of populist notions of sexual encounters across the divide of genders alien to each other […] If, however, the sexual encounter takes place within the framework of Genly's tendency to masculinize everything, including Estraven, then Estraven, despite biology, remains discursively male […] both possibilities end up reifying gender: we can have only an encounter between a man and a woman or between two men. The third possibility, the encounter outside of gender, is unimaginable to Genly […] there is no way in which Genly, still locked in his assumptions about binary gender, can imagine such a thing without reifying the performance of gender by the temporarily sexed bodies of the participants. (194-195)

If Genly chose to think beyond his perceptions of gender as a binary, as well as finally think of the Gethens as people who lack the kind of gender identity that Genly is so used to, then a sex scene between Genly and Estraven would look very different. Genly would not have that difficulty in trying to gender Estraven.

The kind of gendered dualism Genly reinforces in his narration reflects the kind of dualism that is the basis of much of society and philosophy. Dualism itself works through binaries: inside/outside, human-made/natural, mind/body, man/woman, human/animal, and so

on, with one side being “good” and the other “bad”. Men, masculinity, humanity, the mind, and so on are on the “good” side of the binary while women, femininity, animals, and nature are on the “bad” side, on the side of the Other (McCance 88-89). At the core of many societies, the male, men, and masculinity are “superior,” which functions as the justification for women’s subservience to men and masculinity placed as more important over femininity. Patriarchy places both women and animals on the side of the “Other,” bringing them together under a common concern over their oppression (McCance 89). This simple dualistic thinking, towards femininity and animals, is the same kind that Genly prescribes to: beasts and women on the “bad” side of the binary, humanity and masculinity on the “good” side.

In *Left Hand,* the animal/human binary is reified through Genly’s narration. Genly uses animals in his language in a variety of ways. When trying to discern Estraven’s intent through his expression and failing to understand, Genly thinks of the inscrutability of animals: “Can one read a cat’s face, a seal’s, an otter’s? Some Gethenians, I thought, are like such animals, with deep bright eyes that do not change expression when you speak” (15). Just as the divide between human and animal is quite wide in Genly’s perception, so is the divide between Genly and the Gethens. Genly returns to using animal-related language for Estraven later in the novel, using an otter as a point of comparison. Genly referring to Estraven’s “dark, otter’s glance” (204), his movements as “otterlike” (204), and his “otter’s smile” (278) distance Estraven by adding the animal comparison. The enigmatic Gethenians are like women and animals through the eyes of Genly. Activeness and directness both fall under stereotypical “masculine traits,” while the mysterious and the inscrutable fall under the “feminine”. For Genly, animals, the feminine, and the Gethens all belong on the side of the Other.

Similarly to how Genly uses feminine centered language for actions or people he is averse to, he uses animal-centered language for the same ends. When describing the King as "sullen as an old she-otter in a cage" (35), Genly is not just overtly gendering the ambisexual King with his analogy, but also comparing him to that of a female *animal*. There are two layers of insult, and direct Othering, in the language Genly chooses to use that reflect his view of the King. However, he does make a conscious decision to *avoid* using animal-focused language when describing a female human, who like him, is not ambisexual. Speaking to the King in Karhidish, the King's own language, he refers to her with "the word that Gethenians would apply only to a person in the culminant phase of kemmer, the alternative being their word for a female animal" (35-36). When discussing Gethenian society and their lack of war, Genly says "[The Gethens] behaved like animals, in that respect; or like women. They did not behave like men, or ants" (49). The "capacity to *mobilize*" (49) is something attributed to men, something women apparently lack. Once again animals and women are placed upon one side of a binary, with men (and ants) on the other. When describing the guards surrounding the labor camp Genly is forced into, they are described with more feminine leaning words. He uses the word "bovinity" alongside "effeminate" (176) and the guards are written as very passive, not very threatening or violent. Genly's perspective of animals as the Other remains at the end of the novel when his fellow humans from the Ekumen arrive on Gethen. As he describes them, "[t]hey were like a troupe of great, strange animals, of two different species; great apes with intelligent eyes, all of them in rut, in kemmer" (296). It is humans like him, non-ambisexual, who are now placed on the side of the Other with animals, away from the side of Genly and the Gethens. Not only does he face shock at again seeing humans psychologically like him, in "kemmer" all the time, but the comparison to "great apes" increases the divide further. The animal comparison implies incivility

and “rut” implies a kind of wild and untamed animal-like sexuality that Genly is no longer used to.

The Gethens aren’t immune to using animals as an Other, either. The Handdara foretelling ceremony that Genly attends consists of a ritual composed of many members, including a celibate Foreteller in kemmer and a “pervert,” somebody “with permanent hormonal imbalance toward the male or the female” (63). The male Pervert is utilized to force one of the Foretellers into female kemmer during the foretelling ritual. When Goss, of the Handdara, is describing the Pervert, he uses “the pronoun that designates a male animal, not the pronoun for a human being in the masculine role of kemmer. He looked a little embarrassed. Karhiders discuss sexual matters freely, and talk about kemmer with both reverence and gusto, but they are reticent about discussing perversions [...] [Perverts] are not excluded from society, but they are tolerated with some disdain” (63). The term for an animal is used by Goss to display his reticence about referring to the Pervert with any human terms. It also connects those with Perversion to animals in a common struggle through Othering, such as how in the West women and animals are often connected through oppression. The Pervert in this scene, as well as other Gethens with perversion, is treated and seen as the Other.

The Gethen humans are the only ambisexual species living on the planet; all other non-human animals are non-ambisexual (232), meaning the human/animal divide on Gethen is incredibly wide. It is not clear whether any animals on Gethen lived there naturally or came with whatever humans arrived on the planet long ago, but whichever the case there is a sizable gap between non-human animals and the humans on Gethen. As Genly describes to Estraven,

> “Your race is appallingly alone in its world. No other mammalian species. No other ambisexual species. No animal intelligent enough even to domesticate as

> pets. It must color your thinking, this uniqueness […] it's extraordinary that you arrived at any concept of evolution, faced with that unbridgeable gap between yourselves and the lower animals. But philosophically, emotionally: to be so solitary, in so hostile a world: it must affect your entire outlook." (232)

This distance of the Gethens from other non-human animals makes Goss's comparison of the Pervert to an animal all the more notable as it is clearly a large act of Othering. The Pervert is Othered just because his physiology is different from the norm.

The kemmerer and the Pervert do not have sex with each other during the ceremony; instead the Pervert is denied any kind of intimacy while he prods, whispers, and moves close to the kemmerer: "The Pervert kept talking softly, leaning towards the kemmerer, who answered little and seemed to recoil […] 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" (63-64). Genly, having the ability to mindspeak, is able to see and experience the ritual firsthand. He experiences unrepentant and unfulfilled sexual desire during the Foretelling ritual: "a stew of wild images and notions, abrupt visions and sensations all sexually charged and grotesquely violent, a red-and-black seething of erotic rage. I was surrounded by great gaping pits with ragged lips, vaginas, wounds, hellmouths" (65). Sex, sexuality, and erotic desire are utilized in the ceremony, creating an altered state in each participant. Sex is still denied after the ceremony: "The kemmerer lay with his head on Faxe's knees, breathing in gasps, still trembling […] The Pervert was off by himself in a corner, sullen and dejected" (66).

Beyond the Handdara ritual, sexual tension and unreleased sexual desire come up throughout the novel in different forms. The scene where the Pervert is trying to touch and get close to the kemmerer is the reverse of when Genly is being transported in Orgoreyn with the

Gethen in kemmer beside him. In the ritual the male Pervert is trying to gain the attention of the female kemmerer and is refused and faced with disgust, while Genly, a male pervert by Gethen standards, faces the interest of the female kemmerer, and refuses any sexual advances. Estraven also experiences an attempt at seduction by an Orgota politician, Gaum. Guam induces kemmer in himself, through the use of artificial hormones, and meets Estraven on the street, and attempts to seduce him for political reasons. Guam takes advantage of kemmer by artificially inducing it, guaranteeing that his kemmer will coincide with Estraven's kemmer, knowing it will be difficult for Estraven to refuse sex while in kemmer. Unfortunately for Guam's intentions, Estraven rejects his advances due to his "detestation" of Guam and his underhanded scheming (154).

The one time in the novel that both parties are interested and desire sex with each other is when Estraven and Genly are alone traveling across the Gobrin Ice Sheet to Karhide from Orgoreyn. They both hold themselves back, refusing each other's sexual desires. Genly fears that any sexual contact will impede any progress he has made in connecting with Estraven. "For us to meet sexually would be for us to meet once more as aliens. We had touched, in the only way we could touch" (249). In this scene the sexual tension gives rise to a closer, but still platonic, relationship between the two. With Genly and the kemmerer, and Guam and Estraven, the sexual advances drive them further apart, but the mutual desire between Genly and Estraven works to bring them closer. It is the only scene in the book where denial of sex brings two people closer together. It is not just Genly who withholds sex, Estraven as well makes every attempt to not indulge in his desire for sex (249). Genly still might have a lingering complex about Estraven's ambisexuality, and maybe even Estraven has trouble with Genly's alien physiology. Genly fears that engaging in sex will drive them apart again:

> For it seemed to me, and I think to him, that it was from that sexual tension between us, admitted now and understood, but not assuaged, that the great and sudden assurance of friendship between us rose: a friendship so much needed by us both in our exile, and already so well proved in the days and nights of our bitter journey, that it might as well be called, now as later, love. (249)

The sexual desire comes from the trust and respect they both have built between each other. Trust and respect had to be built in order for both of them to make it through the inhospitable Gobrin Ice together. Estraven and Genly, while quite different from each other, had to rely on the other's strengths to be able to both survive: "But it was from the difference between us, not from the affinities and likenesses, but from the difference, that that love came: and it was itself the bridge, the only bridge, across what divided us" (249). These differences are what allowed them to make it through, together. Both of them, Genly in particular, had to put aside their pride and rely on the other person.

Left Hand is concerned with oppositions and artificial binaries. Masculinity and femininity do not have to be at odds with one another, as Genly learns at the end of the novel that he can accept Estraven as both feminine and masculine, and female and male. Both Karhide and Orgoreyn, two nations at odds with one another, reflect two sides: masculinity and femininity. Karhide is described by Estraven as "'*not a nation but a family quarrel*'" (6). Karhide is a nation stitched together from many different "Domains, Hearths, and Tribelets" (6) all ruled by one king, Argaven. There is also a parliament and a prime minister, Estraven, but while the King is the figurehead of Karhide, most of the subjects he rules lack much attachment to the nation as a concept. Genly describes the difficulties of Karhide:

> The seeming nation, unified for centuries, was a stew of uncoordinated principalities, towns, villages, "pseudo-feudal tribal economic units," a sprawl and splatter of vigorous, competent, quarrelsome individualities over which a grid of authority was insecurely and lightly laid. Nothing, I thought, could ever unite Karhide as a nation. Total diffusion of rapid communication devices, which is supposed to bring about nationalism almost inevitably, had not done so. (99)

Karhide is aligned towards the feminine because it is compared to a family, many different members brought together by a common relationship. Karhide leans more anarchic while Orgoreyn leads more towards totalitarianism. Karhide is thus closer to what Le Guin sees as more feminine aspects: "To me the 'female principle' is, or at least historically has been, basically anarchic. It values order without constraint, rule by custom not by force" (*Dancing at the Edge* 11). She explains that the "family" is a unit without coercion or rule by force, which is why women have traditionally been those in charge of the family. The family as a feminine domain connects Karhide to the feminine even more, as Karhide is a "family quarrel".

Orgoreyn, compared to Karhide, leans more towards the masculine. Le Guin defines the male principle as one "who enforces order, who constructs power structures, who makes, enforces, and breaks laws" (11). While Karhide's central government is fairly weak, Orgoreyn is much stronger. Orgoreyn relies heavily on bureaucracy, Genly's papers and documents are routinely checked everywhere he goes in Orgoreyn. There are strict rules about proper identification, Estraven is even threatened with being sent to a prison camp when he enters Orgoreyn without proper papers (*Left Hand* 79). Law and order is enforced with an iron fist in Orgoreyn. Those who break these laws or people who are seen as political enemies, as Genly learns firsthand, are sent to forced labor camps as punishment. Genly does not technically break

any laws while in Orgoreyn but is seen as a threat to the ruling party of the government, so he is stowed away to a labor camp. That isn't to say Karhide does not have a legal system, but Orgoreyn is stricter and defined concerning exercising authority and power. Karhide's government also exerts its power in violent ways, such as through assassinations, but Orgoreyn is more methodical and organized in stowing away political enemies.

Strictly defining these particular aspects as "masculine" or "feminine," however, does rely on stereotypes of traditional masculine and feminine traits and roles. Le Guin, writing about gender and *Left Hand*, wrote about "*the two polarities we perceive through our cultural conditioning as male and female*" (*Dancing at the Edge* 12). The mention of "cultural conditioning" is important; "masculine" and "feminine" are not inherent traits respective to people who are male and people who are female. If all women were inherently feminine and all men inherently masculine, there would not be masculine women, feminine men, and people who are neither entirely one or the other like there (Serano 96-97). Gendering the different traits of Karhide and Orgoreyn would have no meaning to the Gethens. They would recognize that the two countries are different and possess some opposing characteristics, but "feminine" and "masculine" would mean nothing to them, the same as how Genly's gendering of the Gethens has no meaning to them.

Orgoreyn leaning towards the masculine is reflected in its culture. Orgoreyn mythology and religion focuses on the center, while Karhide mythology and religion have more emphasis on the wholeness of two halves, or the wholeness of two different forces. The Orgota religion of Yomeshta is more closely aligned to the traditionally patriarchal Christianity, with Meshe as the figure of enlightenment. Meshe was a foreteller on the Handdara, the weaver of the ritual when the Lord of Shorth asked "what is the meaning of life?" (*Left Hand* 60). No answer was

achieved. Some Foretellers died, some went catatonic, but Meshe found enlightenment, eventually founding his own religion. Even this event was in the center of his life, he was 30 years old when he achieved enlightenment and lived 30 years afterwards. Meshe was from then on out able to see into both the future and the past, he "is the Center of Time" (161). When a poor farmer asks for help, he sees treasure buried 10,000 years before, but also sees a murder happening over the treasure 10,000 years from that point (161). The focus on the center also focuses on the singular, at the end a passage from a Yomesh text there is the line "[o]ne center, one seeing, one law, one light" (163). The Yomeshta believe "'that a man's singularity is his divinity'" (232). The feminine domain of the family is one of self-sacrifice and selflessness, leaving the masculine in place of focusing on the self. Also like Christianity, the Yomeshta have a concept of Hell for those who've sinned (120). The Yomeshta center light, and Meshe, over darkness and other religions. Alongside this there is a moral judgement against anything outside of the Yomeshta religion.

The descriptions and passages from the Yomeshta contrast with the more feminine aligned Handdara. While the Yomeshta is more clearly defined, like the Orgoreyn, the Handdara are more passive, less defined, inaction over action. Like Karhide, the Handdara are loosely organized and have little focus on exerting power. Along with leaning more passive, the Handdara are physically out of the way from organized society. The Yomeshta have official holidays and temples in Orgoreyn, but the Handdara live outside of organized society. The religion does not command followers or worship, like how the Yomeshta do. Like the feminine yin, the Handdara are dedicated to inaction, along with ignorance. Instead of seeking out and acquiring knowledge, an active thing to do, the Handdara rely on passivity: "Ignorant, in the Handdara sense: to ignore the abstraction, to hold fast to the thing. There was in this attitude

something feminine, a refusal of the abstract, the ideal, a submissiveness to the given" (212-213). However, the Handdara aren't completely feminine coded. The religion focuses on unity, such as how light and darkness function together. The Yomeshta disparage the Handdara, referring to them as "those that call upon the darkness" (163). Light is important to the Yomeshta, as Meshe saw no darkness, only light when he achieved his religious awakening (163). During the foretelling ceremony, both darkness and light are utilized to reach an answer. Genly experiences darkness, and then light through Faxe. The Handdara represents a path that involves both darkness and light, feminine and masculine, and how both together function to create a whole. *Left Hand*'s emphasis on the Handdara, in contrast to the masculine leaning Yomeshta, show a clear inclination towards the ideas and philosophy of the Handdara. The Handdara focus on unity and polarity over the disunity and focus on the center over the whole. It is through unity, darkness and light together, that Genly and Estraven make it out alive, and through crossing over divisions that the nations of Gethen join the Ekumen.

When Genly finally realizes Estraven can fit neither into the category of man or woman, and accepts that, he becomes capable of giving Estraven his friendship and trust. Estraven's indirectness and association with darkness also lead to distrust from Genly. The feminine yin is associated with darkness and the shadow. Estraven is continually put in the place of shadows, of indirectness, "Dark, in dark clothing, still and shadowy […] the specter at the feast" (120). Genly sees Estraven as inscrutable without attempting to understand Estraven from his point of view. Estraven, from the start, has given Genly his trust and sincerity, while Genly has not: "'I am the only man in all Gethen that has trusted you entirely, and I am the only man in Gethen that you have refused to trust'" (199). After finally giving his trust to Estraven, Genly also realizes the usefulness of Estraven's darkness. Across the ice, the shadows are useful, allowing them to see

dangers and cracks in the snow and ice. When Genly realizes and understands the *yin* and *yang* in Estraven, he refers to him as a "'shadow on snow'" (267).

Le Guin discusses the harm of division in terms of the binary of male over female. She describes the problem that plagues human culture (on Earth) as this division: "Our curse is alienation, the separation of yang from yin [*and the moralization of yang as good, of yin as bad*]. Instead of a search for balance and integration, there is a struggle for dominance. Divisions are insisted upon, interdependence is denied" (*Dancing At the Edge* 16). The curse of Orgoreyn and Karhide is that they are divided, a division that leads only to misery. The King of Karhide undergoes constant stress and paranoia thinking of his enemies in Orgoreyn, and in Karhide, and the politicians in Orgoreyn worry about Karhide and rival Orgoreyn factions. To Le Guin, not only has the separation of male and female led to misery, but also the Othering of the female and placing the male as superior (11-12). To Karhide, Orgoreyn is the Other, and vice versa. As Estraven says at the start of the novel concerning patriotism, "'No, I don't mean love, when I say patriotism. I mean fear. The fear of the other. And its expressions are political, not poetical: hate, rivalry, aggression. It grows in us, that fear. It grows in us year by year'" (*Left Hand* 18). The divisions also tie into the major religions of each nation, a Yomeshta book decries the Handdara, "[The Handdara] are made fools of and spat out from the mouth of Meshe" (163). While the Gethens do not have male and female to divide themselves, they still find ways through religion, and patriotism, to form an Other; the Gethens still practice tribalism. That is not to say that tribalism has to occur or is inherent in humanity, the Ekumen itself is an example of an anarchist group without borders, a group which seeks connection over division and separation.

The religion of Handdara, found more often on Karhide, is a religion built on polarity, much like Taoism. It goes against the kind of division and Othering that Genly often thinks of, as the Handdara focus on the unity between two opposing forces. Estraven explains:

> "in the Handdara… there's no theory, no dogma. … Maybe they are less aware of the gap between men and beasts, being more occupied with the likenesses, the links, the whole of which living things are a part." Tormer's Lay had been all day in my mind, and I said the words, "*Light is the left hand of darkness / and darkness the right hand of light. / Two are one, life and death, lying / together like lovers in kemmer, / like hands joined together, / like the end and the way."* (233)

The Handdara is a notable antithesis of Genly's viewpoints and philosophy, wholeness and unity instead of Othering. Animals and humans as one and the feminine and masculine as one. The use of the word *polarity* over dualism is an important distinction:

> The concept of polarity is based on the principle that the positive and the negative are different aspects of the same system: an electric current or a magnet will have a positive as well as a negative pole. In the novel, the sexual character of Gethenians and their consequent thinking and culture is not what is usually understood as dualism. It is truly a polarity in the sense that it is not an opposition or conflict —it foregrounds an intrinsic balance, a built-in equilibrium. (Pérez 3-4)

Taoism, a lifelong interest and passion of Le Guin's, displays polarity through *yin* and *yang*, two opposite forces that cannot exist without the other (Pérez 4). Genly himself brings up the symbol of yin and yang when alone with Estraven, drawing it in Estraven's notebook. He connects yin and yang to Tormer's Lay, the basis of Handdara philosophy: "'It is yin and yang. *Light is the*

left hand of darkness...how did it go? Light, dark. Fear, courage. Cold, warmth. Female, male. It is yourself, Therem. Both and one. A shadow on snow'" (*Left Hand* 267). Genly is able to finally work out that male and female, masculinity and femininity, do not have to be mutually exclusive, opposing forces. They can exist together, both equal, both giving the other meaning. The Gethens themselves, their biological sex being a polarity rather than duality, represent a "profound challenge to the type of binary thinking that has so thoroughly dominated the modern West […] The Gethenians, then, are Le Guin's answer to the Cartesian philosophy and its descendants [...] [The Gethenians] occupy no fixed subject position [...] And this identity clearly represents a major threat to the fixed gender concepts that characterize our patriarchal culture" (Call 94).

For Estraven, the Ekumen and the arrival of Genly represent an end to the divisions and patriotism that is growing inside both Karhide and Orgoreyn. Estraven explains that the Ekumen, to him, is a source of hope: "'and you [the Ekumen], who come from a world that outgrew nations centuries ago, who hardly know what I'm talking about, who show us the new road'" (*Left Hand* 18). Joining the Ekumen, to Estraven, represents a way to escape the Othering and the binary between Karhide and Orgoreyn. Estraven is incredibly frustrated by the utilization of patriotism as a tool to stroke fear in the populace. Genly, at the start of the novel, lacks understanding about Estraven's wishes and views him with suspicion and contempt, seeing Estraven as without any loyalties (18). As Genly eventually realizes, Estraven does have ties and loyalties but those are to the greater whole, humanity over mere nations (293). By the end of the novel, Genly has outgrown his binary thinking of gender, as Karhide and Orgoreyn have outgrown their binary system of opposition against the Other. Genly and Estraven finally achieve an understanding of each other in a neutral space, not in masculine Orgoreyn or feminine

Karhide, but on the un-gendered Gobrin Ice Sheet they journey across (Marcellino 206-207). When on the ice sheet, the novel makes a case for "interdependency between sexes [...] Instead of engaging solely in criticism of one gender, or theorizing countercolonization to deal with gender conflict, Le Guin articulates a model of gender harmony through mutual support and dialogue" (207).

Gethen has allowed Genly to expand beyond his thinking of gender and sex as a basic binary, as Genly has shown Gethen the interests of humankind as a species, that are beyond patriotism and fear of the Other. That is not to say that the theme of the novel is that humanity should completely abolish male and female, masculinity and femininity, but rather it is about the function of both together, all equal while supporting the other, and those outside of it. Gethens have found a way to interweave both in their society, without displacing one over the other. Through Genly and Estraven's trek across the ice, it is both of them working together that allows the journey to happen successfully. Genly's strength alongside Estraven's planning and fastidiousness keep both of them alive throughout the journey. While Genly does arbitrarily place himself in the more masculine role, while gendering Estraven more feminine, these gendered traits not necessarily being inherent to male and female, their roles balance each other: Genly pushing, Estraven pulling back. Not only that, but they also need the darkness, along with light, to make the journey. They do not just need the sun, they need the shadows as well. Without shadows neither of them can clearly see cracks or fissures in the ice that might lead to danger. After falling into a hidden crevasse in the ice, Estraven says, "'It's queer that daylight's not enough. We need the shadows, in order to walk'" (*Left Hand* 267). By the end, neither nation has "won" over the other. Karhide and Orgoreyn still both exist, and continue to exist past joining the Ekumen, just as men and women continue to exist in the Ekumen.

While *Left Hand* theorizes a world where sex is engaged in freely without judgement or shame, it still ends up placing heterosexuality as the norm. The Ekumenical investigator, the first of the Ekumen to visit Gethen for the purpose of research, theorizes that the Gethen's ambisexuality was part of an experiment when the planet was first inhabited by humans long ago. She mentions that two people in kemmer becoming the same sex is quite rare: "If there are exceptions, resulting in kemmer-partners of the same sex, they are so rare as to be ignored" (90). This assumption could be inaccurate, but nowhere else in the novel is contrary evidence given. If the Gethens were, purposely, genetically modified for ambisexuality, then heteronormativity would have been purposely enforced through their biology. Gethen, as a planet with a harsh climate and few natural resources, is a difficult place for humans to make a living. The unique cycle of kemmer, with a male kemmerer enabling female kemmer in the other person and vice versa, is a method of guaranteeing the minimum requirement of reproductive sex. In *Left Hand*, any scene relating to sex is heterosexually coded, nothing outside of that is displayed in the novel. In the Handdara ceremony, the male Pervert is used to initiate female kemmer in the kemmerer. When Guam is attempting to seduce Estraven, Guam is "going very rapidly into full phase as a woman" (154), with Estraven presumably entering kemmer as male. When Genly and the Orgota in kemmer are together, Genly is obviously male and the Orgota is entering kemmer as female. While Genly was never explicit about whether Estraven entered kemmer as female or not, it can be assumed that Estraven was in kemmer as female based off of Genly's pondering of whether a Gethen/non-Gethen could produce children is what leads him to describe the scene: "I expect it will turn out that sexual intercourse is possible between Gethenian double-sexed and Hainishnorm one-sexed human beings, though such intercourse will inevitably be sterile. It remains to be proven; Estraven and I proved nothing" (247-248). Even other relationships or sex

that happens outside of the narrative are reproductive: Estraven and his brother having a child together, the King's pregnancy (although the impregnator is never named), and Genly's "landlady" having only sired biological children.

While there are no explicitly "gay" sex scenes in *Left Hand*, the short story "Coming of Age In Karhide," written in the 90s by Le Guin, features sex between two Gethens in kemmer of the same sex. The short story expands the possibilities of the Gethen's sex lives beyond what is shown in *Left Hand*. The narrator Sov is in kemmer as female and feels no shame or reticence about sex with another person in kemmer as female when in the kemmerhouse. It is a significant scene that offers proof that, while the Gethen ambisexuality and kemmer cycle is heteronormative, non-heterosexual sex can, and does, still occur. The sex between Sov and the other person in female kemmer is treated quite naturally. Neither individual is treated as doing something strange or taboo. Le Guin, writing in 1987, herself expressed regret about writing the Gethens as so heterosexual: "*It is a naively pragmatic view of sex that insists that sexual partners must be of opposite sex! In any kemmerhouse homosexual practice would, of course, be possible and acceptable and welcomed—but I never thought to explore this option; and the omission, alas, implies that sexuality is heterosexuality. I regret this very much"* (*Dancing at the Edge* 14). The small scene in "Coming of Age" was clearly Le Guin's way of rectifying her omission of non-heterosexual sex in *Left Hand*.

The process of controlling kemmer is particular to different cultures and regions across Gethen. While using hormones to achieve a preferred kemmer sex may be common in Orgoreyn, some regions of Karhide have different attitudes towards it. In the Handdara, for example, kemmer suppressing drugs are frowned upon (154). The Foretellers of the Handdara remain celibate during their periods of kemmer, with one being in kemmer during the Foretelling ritual.

Kemmer isn't suppressed through hormones, the Handdara Foretellers still go through kemmer, but do not act on it. However, the first phase of kemmer, for the kemmerer, seems almost overwhelming if not sated: "the sexual impulse is tremendously strong in this phase, controlling the entire personality, subjecting all other drives to its imperative" (90). The Foretellers must utilize great self-control to maintain celibacy. Both the kemmerer and the Pervert's sexual energy is utilized during the ritual, although never consummated.

In Orgoreyn the attitude towards artificially manipulating kemmer is more relaxed. There is a greater freedom in the use of hormones to choose a particular kemmer sex (91), as well as forcibly preventing kemmer through drugs. The Orgota politician Gaum, in an attempt to seduce Estraven, likely induced kemmer in himself hormonally (154). Kemmer can also be artificially blocked. When Genly is forced to work in the Orgota forced labor camps, he realizes that kemmer is prevented through drugs. Instead of utilizing kemmer for personal purposes, or controlling kemmer for ritual and religious reasons, kemmer is prevented, controlled by a larger government force. As Genly reasons:

> A prisoner in kemmer would be a disruptive element in his work-squad. If let off work, what was to be done with him?—especially if no other prisoner was in kemmer at the time, as was possible, there being only some 150 of us. To go through kemmer without a partner is pretty hard on a Gethenian; better, then, simply obviate the misery and wasted work-time, and not go through kemmer at all. So they prevented it. (176-177)

Controlling and preventing a basic human desire, sex, no doubt makes it easier to control the prisoners and to guarantee that kemmer will not prevent prisoners from performing their labor. Having the basic desire for sex condensed into a short period once a month does make it easier

for an outside entity to control kemmer, as there isn't the consistent sex drive that most non-ambisexual humans have. The Gethen's kemmer cycle is a basic and essential part of them, an aspect of their humanity and identity. When taken away, such as in the Orgota labor camps, the result is, according to Genly, "passivity" (177). The energy of the prisoners is always low, things move slowly, there is never anything on one end of an extreme. These traits cause Genly to think of himself as "a man among women, or among eunuchs" (176). Again, Genly separates himself, as a man, from the Gethens. The Gethens in this case, having had their kemmer cycles blocked, are not described as effeminate men by Genly, but women or eunuchs, implying eunuchs are no longer men after losing a part of their biology. His thought also implies that without the cycle of kemmer, the Gethens are no different from women, further showing that Genly thinks of the Gethens as men, but only when they have their kemmer cycle, when their sexuality becomes active. The prisoners who had been there longer were "as sexless as steers. They were without shame and without desire, like the angels. But it is not human to be without shame and without desire" (177). The passive, kemmerless prisoners lack shame and desire, as well as any kind of active sexual function. The passivity and lack of sexual desire or shame are all feminine-coded by Genly when he compares those around him to women, implying that only men can have an active sexuality.

Gethen does not practice Othering in terms of gender or towards one sex. However, that does not mean that they do not Other those who are different from the majority. Despite ambisexuality being the norm among the Gethens, biological "abnormalities" do happen. Bisexuality in humans, referring to the two distinct, fixed, sexes, does come with deviations; not everybody is born purely "female" with XX or purely "male" with XY chromosomes. "Female" and "male" aren't fixed categories either, those who are transgender or intersex may blur those

categories. However, intersex babies often undergo “corrective” surgeries to align them closer to female or male. Intersex people may also face discrimination from others, medical discrimination, or societal pressures to conform. The Gethens practice discrimination towards those born sexually different as well, with “perversion,” or a person being in female or male kemmer all the time, not just periodically once a month. Those born with perversion are uncommon but not rare, around 3 or 4% of the population (63). Gethen perverts “are not excluded from society, but they are tolerated with some disdain, as homosexuals are in many bisesexual societies” (63).

While there is no consistent “female” or “male” for Gethens to divide themselves between and discriminate against, many Gethens do force those with perversion into the category of “Other”. Gethen is, in many terms, a more equal society in terms of sex. Childbirth and childcare are not relegated to one group of people, and the power structures aren’t built to favor one group of people over another based on sex. However, that doesn’t mean Gethens don’t practice othering, or that biology from birth can’t lead to discrimination. Call refers to the discrimination against perversion as “heterophobia, a profound fear and distrust of fixed, binary gender distinctions” (94); he argues that the introduction of “perversion” on Gethen “performs a vital function for Le Guin’s real-world audience, by undermining certainty and challenging the very concept of the normal” (94). The exclusion of those with perversion means that Gethen is not a utopia for those of different sexes.

Genly is physiologically like a Gethen with perversion; he is biologically closer to them than the ambisexual Gethens. The notable instance of a specific character with perversion in the novel is the Pervert in the Handdara ritual. The Pervert looks at Genly when he arrives: “One of the hooded figures looked up as I came amongst them, and I saw a strange face, coarse-featured,

heavy, with insolent eyes watching me" (62). Genly refers to the look the Pervert gives him as a "long strange stare" (63). While not explicitly stated, perhaps the Pervert can tell Genly is like him. Or perhaps he views Genly as a rival for the affection of the female kemmerer, like two male animals fighting for the attention of a female. The Pervert is treated as a strange Other by Goss and the kemmerer. The way the Pervert is used for the ritual is also a reduction of his existence to his uncommon biology. His use in the ritual is for the sexual energy and frustration that is created from the denial of sex from the kemmerer.

Perverts and perversion in Gethen society are biological oddities and treated as an Other. When Goss is discussing the Pervert, he says, "'[h]e's willing to come; likes the notoriety'" (63). The Pervert, as somebody unusual, is obviously treated much like an Other due to his obvious sexual difference. Perversion can be artificial, but it is not preferable: "'Some Foretelling groups artificially arouse perversion in a normal person—injecting female or male hormones during the days before a session. It's better to have a natural one'" (63). The Handdara are focused on polarity, the joining together of two opposites. Maybe a "natural" Pervert is preferable because they represent the opposite of the ambisexual Gethens, somebody with a fixed sex with somebody with a fluid sex. Goss also separates the Pervert from "normal people," clearly delineating a separation between "normal people" ("normal" meaning ambisexual), and perverts. While useful for the foretelling ritual, the Pervert is treated more like a necessary tool than a valuable member of the group. Even the Kemmerer, another member of the ritual, acts with a great deal of disgust and disdain towards the Pervert (64). Genly sees and treats the ambisexual Gethens as the Other, and the Gethens themselves treat the unusual Perverts, people like Genly, as their Other.

The role of perverts in society is expanded upon in Le Guin's short story of a young person coming into kemmer for the first time, "Coming of Age in Karhide." Ebbeche is the Doorkeeper of the kemmerhouse, a communal place where people in kemmer gather to have sex. Ebbeche, being a pervert, is unsurprisingly treated with some disdain by others. Sov, the Gethen narrator, is warned to keep away from him by a family member. As Sov ponders, "permanent kemmer may not lead to responsibility of character; nor does being called *halfdead* and *pervert* all of your life, I imagine" ("Coming of Age" 17). While Ebbeche is treated with contempt by others, he is respectful and dedicated to this job. His treatment is only due to him having perversion. Like most groups of people rejected from mainstream society, those with perversion face the choice of conforming, through being "cured" of their perversion, or living separately from the rest of "normal" society. Perverts often either live in the Fastness with the Handdara or work in kemmerhouses, both places where they are out of view from most of society. Sov justifies it by saying "[i]t's convenient for them, and for normal people too" (17), clearly drawing a line between perverts and "normal" people. There is a single mention of a female pervert who also works and lives in the kemmerhouse, proof that not all perverts are male. The inclusion of perversion in both narratives show that Gethen may be utopian in terms of gender and sex, but not for those who are different from the norm.

In *Left Hand*, non-consensual sex is described as extremely rare or near impossible. Even if it was more common, it could not be a gendered issue without any kind of gender binary. The Ekumenical investigator clearly states that on Gethen, due to the kemmer cycle, "[t]here is no unconsenting sex, no rape. As with most mammals other than man, coitus can be performed only by mutual invitation and consent; otherwise it is not possible. Seduction certainly is possible, but it must have to be awfully well timed" (94). Attempts at seduction do happen, both to Estraven

and Genly, but there is no explicit mention of unconsenting sex in the novel. The Pervert seems to ignore the kemmerer's aversion when he tries to initiate sex, but the Pervert never tries to force himself upon the kemmerer. In "Coming of Age in Karhide," Sov's cousin Sether shares a story that indicates rape is not an impossibility on Gethen:

> You know that people in kemmer go crazy and die if there isn't anybody else in kemmer? That they'll even attack people in somer? Their own mothers? [...] Tharry told me. This truck driver up in the High Kargav went into kemmer as a male while their caravan was stuck in the snow, and he was big and strong, and he went crazy and he, he did it to his cab-mate, and his cab-mate was in somer and got hurt, really hurt, trying to fight him off. And then the driver came out of kemmer and committed suicide. (11)

The truck driver is in male kemmer at the time he tries to force himself upon his cab-mate. The anecdote reflects the common fallacy of a man having "no choice" but to rape because he could not control himself. However, kemmer desires are extremely powerful for both sexes, not just males. Estraven, the Gethen kemmerer, and Guam all enter female kemmer in *Left Hand* and struggle with not having access to a release. While the secondhand story may be exaggerated or downright false, that doesn't mean it is completely implausible. Based on the previous descriptions of the kemmer phase being extremely intense sexual urges, it is not surprising that there would be a case of somebody violently sexually assaulting somebody near them if they lack self-control; non-ambisexual humans use the "reason" of intense sexual urge as an excuse for rape. The story does negate the kind of feminist utopia that is free from rape presented in *Left Hand*. However, fortunately, this being the one mention of sexual assault or rape in all of the Gethen related stories, it does appear to be quite rare on Gethen.

The most common criticism of *The Left Hand of Darkness* is that the use of "he" and "him" for the ambisexual Gethens ruins the idea of their androgyny. Genly uses masculine titles and language for almost every Gethen he encounters. Every other instance where he uses feminine adjectives to describe a Gethen, he still continues in his use of "he" and "him". The Gethens, most of the time, are neither male nor female, but all of the Gethens, except for a few instances, are referred to with "he" and "him" and described with masculine terms. The only exception to his universal use of "he" and "him" is when he encounters a Gethen in kemmer as female. When Genly is being transported to a forced labor camp in Orgoreyn, there is a Gethen alongside him entering kemmer as female. Previously Genly had referred to this Gethen with "he" and "him," until some daylight allowed Genly to view the Gethen. "I saw a girl, a filthy, pretty, stupid, weary girl looking up into my face as she talked, smiling timidly, and looking for solace. The young Orgota was in kemmer, and had been drawn to me" (171). Even up to this point Genly is still viewing the Gethens as men by default. He also infantilizes her, and instead of calling her a "woman" he uses the word "girl" several times, along with the word "stupid." Even when it is announced that King Argaven XV is pregnant, the King stays as a King in Genly's narration and continues using "he" and "him". It may be that because of the distance between Genly and the King after the King becomes pregnant that Genly doesn't switch pronouns. Genly never visually sees the pregnant King, so it is easier for him to think of the King in masculine terms. There are no pregnant Gethenians ever featured in the novel, which would no doubt be a shock to Genly. Genly does choose to call his superintendent his "landlady" due to his "landlady's" physical appearance, not kemmer-status: "he had fat buttocks that wagged as he walked, and a soft fat face, and a prying, spying, ignoble, kindly nature" (48). The word "landlady" is contradicted as the superintendent is also described as a "voluble *man*" (47;

emphasis added) and “he” and “him” pronouns are still used. The femininity of his “landlady” even leads Genly to ask how many children his landlady had given birth to. The answer is none, his landlady has only sired children. It is another shock to Genly that his own rigid and narrow views on gender continue to not match how the Gethens behave, look, and act.

Even translated sections of the novel maintain Genly’s style of masculine as the default. The sections of the novel that are not written firsthand by Genly, such as Estraven’s journals and Gethen myths, are translated by him. When Guam is in induced kemmer attempting to seduce Estraven, “he” is kept for Guam, despite Guam having entered kemmer as female. Guam is described as “going very rapidly into full phase as a woman” and “beautiful” (154). A few paragraphs later Estraven vents his frustration at Guam and the other Orgota politicians, “Damn them, these unclean men. There is not one clean man among them” (155). Guam is only described as a woman in relation to his phase in kemmer, but outside of that particular context he is once again a “man.” Even Estraven’s journals are translated through Genly’s eyes.

However, while the use of “he” is directly inaccurate, it is a reflection of Genly’s own views about the Gethens, not an advocacy of the novel. Genly being a misogynist and thinking of masculinity as the default would at the start of his journey not consider that his portrayal of the Gethens is problematic in some way. Obviously Genly *knows* that the Gethens are ambisexual and most of the time are neither male nor female, but it takes him most of the novel to actually internalize and understand that. Genly overcomes and realizes beyond this binary and dualistic by the end, although it is underscored somewhat by his continued use of “he” and “him” for all of the Gethens. However, switching to all “she” would still be inaccurate. Genly still shows his growth through changes in language in other ways, describing the Gethens as masculine and feminine *without* judgement, or just as *people*, not men. However, the universal use of “he” still

runs the risk of furthering the idea of masculinity as the default. Le Guin, after writing *Left Hand*, expressed regret over her use of "he" for all of the Gethens (*Dancing at the Edge* 15, Afterword). She even experimented with pronouns outside of he, she, or they, but every attempt using a neo-pronoun seemed out of place (Afterword).

Considering the reader, Genly's continued "misgendering" (in terms of "he" being inaccurate as the Gethens have no concept of gender) of the Gethens forces the reader to pull back from imagining the Gethens as men. Genly is putting forth a biased view that colors how the people are seen, giving extra responsibility to the reader to resist Genly. Genly's arduous journey to understanding the Gethens can be that of the reader as well, but only for some. Le Guin acknowledges that "*Men were inclined to be satisfied with the book, which allowed them a safe trip into androgyny and back, from a conventionally male viewpoint. But many women wanted it to go further, to dare more, to explore androgyny from a woman's point of view as well as a man's*" (*Dancing at the Edge* 16). While Genly is the perfect example of a man formed from patriarchy, he represents the kind of society the reader will likely be from. Even many years past *Left Hand*'s original publication date, 1969, patriarchy, and the kind of views Genly has toward women, still exist.

In addition, overt and unnecessary gendering is still an aspect of many societies. Looking at the wider scope of the story, Genly can be seen as a patriarchal and gendered society learning not to resist anything un-gendered and grow past basic Othering and dualism through learning from those who are different. Particular and notable scenes do occur where the reader is reminded that the Gethens are not "men" but ambisexual, such as the line "the King was pregnant," Genly's "landlady," or anytime a character goes through kemmer. The First Mobile, a human woman from the Ekumen who was first non-Gethen to come to the planet, has a similar

difficulty not viewing the Gethens as men. She also uses the pronoun “he” and “his” for all of the Gethens: “But the very use of the pronoun [he] in my thoughts leads me continually to forget that the Karhider I am with is not a man, but a manwoman” (94). She experiences the same struggles Genly did throughout his journey on Gethen due to using “he” universally.

The later work, “Coming of Age in Karhide,” being narrated by a Gethen rather than an off-worlder, breaks most of the gendered language conventions that Genly had set forth in *Left Hand*. The narrator Sov addresses that they are writing in their non-native language: “I have already had some trouble trying to tell this story in a language that has no somer pronouns, only gendered pronouns” (“Coming of Age” 6). It is not clear whether either Genly or Sov are writing in English, but they are both writing in a language with gendered pronouns. While Genly decides to address almost all of the Gethens he meets as “he” and writes as if they are men, Sov uses “he” or “she” based on the person’s relationship to Sov, or their state in kemmer. Sov’s birth parent is addressed as their “mother,” whose birth parent is addressed as Sov’s “grandmother”. Both Sov’s mother and grandmother are referred to as “she” throughout the story. The language used codes both the mother and grandmother maternally and as the “womb-parent,” emphasizes the relationship they have with Sov. “Mother” is used in the story in relation to biological birth.

While the one time Genly uses “she” for a Gethen it is because she was in kemmer as female, Sov uses “she” despite Sov’s mother and grandmother not being in kemmer. Besides “mother” and “grandmother,” gendered language and pronouns are mostly avoided for those not in kemmer. Dory, Sov’s “mothersib” is gendered with “he” due to his last year of kemmers being male. Sov acknowledges this failure of language when they talk about Dory throwing a party for aging out of kemmer: “I’ll call Dory ‘he,’ although of course the point was that he would never be either he or she again” (6).

Besides Sov's mother, grandmother, and Dory, pronouns aren't used for those not in kemmer. Sether, Sov's cousin, is never gendered with pronouns in the story. Sov lives in the communal living space called a Hearth, common in Karhide. Other children of the Hearth are referred to with the gender neutral term "hearthsibs" or just "'sibs". Sov, unlike Genly, is a native Gethen. Sov has no preconceptions and prejudices concerning gender. Sov uses gendered pronouns as they understand them, but they do not have any concept of male as the "default". Le Guin uses Sov as an opportunity to explore Gethen from the perspective of an insider. There is no struggle for Sov to see the Gethens as "men" or "women", Sov is perfectly fine seeing Gethens as they are in somer—neither male nor female.

However, some language conventions are kept the same from *Left Hand.* King Argaven XVII is briefly mentioned, with the word "King" still used. In "Winter's King," a short story taking place on Gethen centering around King Argaven XVII, "she" is used for all of the Gethens instead of "he". "She" is kept for King Argaven XVII in "Coming of Age" as well. In the original version of the story, published before *The Left Hand of Darkness*, "she" was not used for all of the characters, but in all subsequent revisions and editions "she" is used. The words "King" and "Lord" are kept in the masculine form. In both stories, "she" alongside "King" is an obvious dichotomy, but it does create an interesting effect. Instead of leaning all the way towards masculine language, with "he" and "King" used alongside each other in Left Hand, "she" and "King" create a back-and-forth from feminine-coded language to masculine. It forces the reader to never remain conscious about the active gendering of the characters. King Argaven XVII, and all other Gethens, aren't just singularly feminine or masculine, female or male, they are both.

"Winter's King" maintains the same illusion that The *Left Hand of Darkness* suffers from: that the Gethens are single sex rather than ambisexual. The use of "she" for all of the

characters in “Winter’s King” creates the effect that they are all women, just as “he” in *Left Hand* creates the illusion that all of the characters were men. Again, just as in *Left Hand*, the reader must resist the gendered language of the text. While the universal use of “she” is more subversive because “he” was commonly used as a universal and a masculine gendered pronoun, it is still inaccurate for the Gethens. Le Guin wrote on the use of universal masculine or feminine language in the 1994 Afterword to *Left Hand*: “when all is made feminine, it is as untrue to Gethenian reality as when all is made masculine. In both cases, it’s too easy. ‘The queen was pregnant’ is not an interesting statement; whereas the sentence ‘The king was pregnant’ has made it into Bartlett’s. Space Aliens Invade Familiar Quotations!” She also acknowledges that, while previously she defended using “he” as a gender-neutral pronoun, its use furthers the idea that masculinity is the default.

When Genly and Estraven are alone together traversing across the ice to Karhide and Estraven enters kemmer, Genly keeps the use of “he” and “him” for Estraven. This is also at the same time Genly describes his realization of Estraven as neither singularly man nor woman, but a “woman as well as a man” (248). While one explanation could be that Estraven is entering kemmer as male, the sex of one kemmer partner is almost always based on the opposite sex of the partner (90). Estraven being in kemmer as female while Genly continues to use “he” and “him”, at the same time Genly has an epiphany about Estraven’s ambisexuality, seems to be an obvious contradiction. Genly has had no problem changing pronouns accordingly to kemmer previously when he encounters the Orgota in kemmer, although in all other cases pronouns aren’t changed for those in female kemmer. Genly seems to undermine his own realization of Estraven as neither singularly man, nor woman, by continuing using the same masculine pronouns for Estraven. It may have been easier for Genly to quickly change pronouns and gendered language

for the Orgota kemmerer because she was a stranger, but Estraven is somebody Genly has known for a long time. Estraven may just be cemented in Genly's mind as a "he". Keeping Estraven's pronouns "he" along with the sexual tension between the two gives the scene a somewhat homoerotic subtext, despite Estraven being in female kemmer. The continued use of "he" may be a way to overcome any sexual desire towards Estraven, or lingering resistance to giving up gendering Estraven. Genly may have realized he misled himself by thinking of the Gethens as men, but the continued use of "he" as a universal pronoun fails to completely prove his growth.

Genly's earlier realization of Estraven as a man, and a woman, may be the closest he can come to understanding the Gethens. Estraven, as well as the other Gethens, is not truly "a woman as well as a man" (248). This understanding is only through the lens of humans from a gendered society. Gethen being a society without gender, the terms "man" and "woman" would have no meaning in their language. They are male sometimes or female sometimes, but they have no attachment to their unfixed sex as a form of identity. A majority of the time Gethens cannot be described as either "male" nor "female," but as the first Ekumenical investigator describes: "They are not neuters. They are potentials, or integrals" (94). Genly's descriptions and thoughts about the identity of the Gethens, or any other human for that matter, will never be properly described in a language that is not from Gethen. Language is a direct reflection of the culture it comes from, and Genly is unequipped linguistically or culturally to properly describe the Gethens in terms of their sex. Much like the word *nusuth*, "no matter," that the Handdara say, a word Genly can only get an approximate translation of, the ambisexual nature of the Gethens isn't fit for any language on Earth. English, or for that matter most Romance languages, that have gendered pronouns and gender incorporated into the language fails when trying to describe

the Gethens. No matter how long Genly stays with the Gethens, he'll always be an alien among them.

After his time alone with Estraven, however, Genly does seem to have changed his perceptions of the Gethens. No longer are they effeminate men, but rather feminine and masculine together, neither wholly one or the other. He also drops his disdain for the feminine, describing a physician as a "grave, maternal young fellow," with no judgement given for the "maternal" aspect (286). The King, having lost the baby, is described as looking like "a woman who has lost her baby, like a man who has lost his son" (291). Compared to when Genly compared the King to a "she-otter" at the start of the novel, the dual gendering shows some growth on Genly's part in terms of viewing the Gethens as more than just "effeminate men." Same with the physician, "his face, a young, serious face, not a man's face and not a woman's, a human face" (296), besides the "he" pronoun, there is no overt gendering. Faxe, previously described as "beautiful," at the end of the novel is described as "handsome" (289).

Perhaps it is not Genly and Estraven's time on the ice that cements in Genly that the Gethens are neither singularly man nor woman, but once he sees single-sex humans like he is. At the end of the novel Genly calls down the other members of the Ekumen down to Gethen. Once they arrive, Genly feels like an alien among other humans that are physiologically like him. When the ship touches down and Genly sees non-Gethens for the first time in three years, he experiences an intense shock: "But they all looked strange to me, men and women, well as I knew them. Their voices sounded strange: too deep, too shrill. They were like a troupe of great, strange animals, of two different species" (296). When he sees a Gethen doctor, the doctor is a familiar and welcome sight. The once alien has now become familiar and comforting. After spending so long among the Gethens he has become much like them, but still isn't one. Genly

remains no longer quite like his fellow single-sexed humans, but still is not the same as the ambisexual Gethens he has spent so much time among. Genly now remains in the inbetween, neither one or the other, just like he describes Estraven earlier in the novel: “Both and one. A shadow on snow” (267).

Works Cited

Call, Lewis. “Postmodern Anarchism in the Novels of Ursula K. Le Guin.” *SubStance*, vol. 36, no. 2, 2007, pp. 87–105.

Le Guin, Ursula K. “Afterword to Left Hand of Darkness, Le Guin 1994.” *The Literary Link,* http://theliterarylink.com/afterword.html.

---. *Dancing at The Edge of the World*. Grove Press, 1989.

---. *The Birthday of the World and Other Stories*. 1st ed., HarperCollins, 2002.

---. *The Left Hand of Darkness.* Ace Books, 1969.

--- *The Wind’s Twelve Quarters: Short Stories*. Harper & Row, 1975.

Marcellino, William. “Shadows to Walk: Ursula Le Guin’s Transgressions in Utopia.” *Journal of American Culture (Malden, MA)*, vol. 32, no. 3, Sept. 2009, p. 203.

McCance, Dawne. *Critical Animal Studies: An Introduction*. SUNY Press, 2013.

Pearson, Wendy Gay. “Postcolonialism/s, Gender/s, Sexuality/Ies and the Legacy of The Left Hand of Darkness: Gwyneth Jones’s Aleutians Talk Back.” *Yearbook of English Studies*, vol. 37, no. 2, July 2007, p. 182.

Pérez, Martín Gregorio. “The Way of a writer: Taoism in Ursula K. Le Guin's the left hand of darkness.” *Cuadernos de Lenguas Modernas*, vol. 4, no. 4, 2003, p. 22.

Serano, Julia. *Whipping Girl*. 2nd ed., Seal Press, 2016.