Always Coming Home Study Guide

Always Coming Home by Ursula K. Le Guin

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Contents

Introduction

Always Coming Home, the Kafka Award-winning novel published in 1985, marks a departure for one of the world's foremost science fiction and fantasy authors. Often criticized for having too many male protagonists in her novels, Ursula K. Le Guin answers with two particularly strong women in this complex and difficult novel. . Like many of her other novels, *Always Coming Home* deals with the duality of everything (life, sex, love, faith, fear), the individual's need to belong, and the interconnection of life with the universe. Le Guin uses the strong female characters Stone Telling and Pandora to explore a culture that is different, yet very familiar, to modern American society. The novel does not have one single story line, but is made of a collection of stones, poems, maps, dictionaries, charts, and songs held together by the three parts of Stone Telling's narrative and Pandora's footnotes and journal entries Critics raved over the beauty of the poetry and the innovative narrative style, but did voice concern over the novel's difficulty.

Long heralded as America's J. R. R. Tolkien, Le Guin has produced *Always Coming Home,* which is most often compared to Tolkien's *Silmarillion* - a difficult, but brilliant anthropological exploration of Middle Earth. In her novel, Le Guin envisions a post-apocalyptic world, but one created by natural events and human evolution, not nuclear war. The Kesh live in a future time in what used to be Northern California. Their culture is technologically nonexistent, but socially and personally advanced far beyond twentieth-century American culture. The Valley of the Kesh is a world in which Le Guin can argue for sexual equality, spiritual renewal, environmental awareness, and Utopian ideology. By casting this novel as the work of an objective scientist, she can also explore the thin line between science fact and science fiction.

Author Biography

Born in 1929, Ursula K. Le Guin has always enjoyed reading, especially poetry and fiction dealing with other times and places. Her parents were both professionals, her father an anthropology professor and her mother a children's literature author, and they both encouraged her literary aspirations. She says that she was lucky to be born in 1929 instead of 1939 because of J. R. R. Tolkien's influence. In her introduction to her critical exploration of science fiction. *The Language of the Night: Essays on Fantasy and Science Fiction,* Le Guin muses, "what would have happened if I had ... first read Tolkien in my teens, instead of my twenties. That achievement might have overwhelmed me." Tolkien's influence is most evident in *Always Coming Home* in its portrayal of a future possibility as an already established fact and presenting all aspects of this future culture in a scientific, textbook format. She began submitting stories for publication at age eleven and although she was not published that early, the real rejection slip from a real magazine only drove her desire for publication and fame.

Le Guin, in numerous interviews, never claims to be a science fiction/fantasy writer, but simply a novelist whose publishers market her work as science fiction/fantasy. When asked what kind of prize she would like to win, either a National Book Award or a Hugo, Le Guin said Nobel. She does not see a marked difference between writing fiction and writing science fiction. Both her academic training, including graduate work in French and Italian Medieval literature, and her desire to be a "name," have helped Le Guin carve out a unique position for herself in the second half of the twentieth century. She is one of the first women to reach national and academic acclaim in the genre of science fiction/fantasy. Beginning with her early "fairy tales in space suits" in the 1950s, Le Guin has produced over eighty novels and collections of short stories, storming the walls of both traditional science fiction readership and "serious" literary scholarship in an attempt to bring her version of feminist Utopian ideology to a wider audience. Her success has inspired and encouraged the careers of other women science fiction writers like Amber Zimmer Bradley, Anne Macaffery, and Sheri Tepper.

Plot Summary

Part I

After a two-page introduction on the idea of future archeology, Le Guin launches into the single narrative thread of *Always Coming Home* - the life story of the Kesh woman known as Stone Telling. Her first name is North Owl and she begins by introducing the major influences in her life. These influences are her mother. Willow, her grandmother, Valiant, and her father, the Condorman, Kills. Stone Telling's story begins like most; she describes her home and how her family fits into the Keshian culture. Valiant is a weaver, yet the family has no sheep for wool, so Stone Telling's family is poor. She relates her earliest memories of her grandmother weaving and how cold the water is in the winter. The narrative continues in the same vein, discussing Stone Telling's childhood, which was normal for a Kesh child, yet did not make her feel a part of the community

The main part of the first narrative concerns the family's trip to Kastohana. Valiant wanted to take the therapeutic waters there and visit relatives. While there, Stone Telling sees Condor men for the first time. The importance for both Stone Telling and her mother, Willow, is overwhelming. The Condor men are not part of the Kesh, they are, as Valiant says, of no House. Yet they hold an irresistible fascination for both Stone Telling and Willow. Willow regains some of her lost self-esteem as she talks to the men, mentioning the name of her husband. Stone Telling feels excitement because these men are the same as her father, a father she has never met. Her spirit quest does not quiet her fears about the Valley and she and her family return home more agitated and upset than before.

Kills (also known as Abhao) arrives during one of the Kesh's public religious ceremonies. His arrival is marked by disbelief and discord among the Kesh. War is not an honorable activity for the Kesh; they think it is a foolish, youthful pastime. Yet the Condor men are warriors, obviously on the war path Many of Stone Telling's neighbors comment on the spiritual sickness of adults who insist on acting like children. Stone Telling, on the other hand, is fascinated and sickened by her father's return. She is torn between the two parts of herself part of her wants to acknowledge the Condor blood in her veins, but a larger part finds it frightening and disgusting It is only after she gets to know her father that Stone Telling comes to a greater understanding of her parents.

Abhao's arrival has a dramatic effect on the household. Willow becomes a full person again, happy and industrious. Valiant remains silent in her own home, but does not like Abhao's behavior, which she considers to be laziness Abhao refuses to work for he feels that would be beneath him He has returned to the Valley after nine years to see the girl he had seduced, believing that she would have gotten on with her life. He is pleased and surprised that Willow has waited for him and does not understand her anger at his impending departure a few months later. Willow insists that she will not wait for him again; he must either choose to be with her or to be a warrior. He cannot be both.

Abhao chooses to obey his war orders, and Willow divorces him by putting his clothes outside the door. He storms about, and asks Stone Telling to wait for him. The first part of Stone Telling's narrative ends as her father marches away and her mother returns to her childhood name.

Part II

The second part of the narrative is filled with the grief of growing up and the heartbreak of lost love. Stone Telling is nine when her father left the Valley and she begins to search for a purpose in her life. At the same time, a new movement begins to grow in the Valley. The Warrior and Lamb Lodges gather members and train them in the ways of war. These lodges, spoken of as cults by most of the Kesh, differ from the rest of Keshian society in that they value killing and secrecy. The Kesh reject war and keep no secrets from each other.

Three people very close to Stone Telling become involved with the warriors. After her father leaves, her mother, now Towhee, joins the Lamb Lodge for warrior women, and Stone Telling's grandfather, part of the Warrior Lodge, moves back in. Valiant had never divorced him and now, feeling abandoned by her daughter, she has no choice but to take him back since she needs help around the house. The third is Stone Telling's first love, Spear. She has been very close to him and his sister, Cricket, for years and she "entered womanhood with that lion on" her mind. She feels she can never forgive the Warrior Lodge for taking Spear away from her and it is this feeling of abandonment that makes her decide to go with her father to the City of the Condor.

Five years after he left the Valley, Abhao returns. Stone Telling has fought with her grandmother and upon fleeing the house, she meets Abhao on the path outside their village. Their reunion is less than joyful since he does not recognize her, but she is determined to leave the Valley where she feels unwanted and unloved Abhao agrees to take her with him and tries to teach her the ways of the Condor on their journey back to Sai. His language, terminology, and customs are foreign to Stone Telling, and she does not understand them. Her illiteracy is furthered by the fact that reading and writing are forbidden to Condor women. As their journey continues, Stone Telling finds a Condor feather and decides to keep her discovery a secret (she later learns that she could be put to death for touching the feather). She also becomes disgusted and disturbed by her father's casual attitude toward death and killing. She silently says *heyas* for the animals that the men kill on the journey.

Once they arrive in Sai, the City of the Condor, life becomes even more unbearable. She is not allowed to ride her horse or even walk; she must travel in a wagon like an invalid. The attitude of the other Condor women reflect that of the men. Stone Telling is considered an animal because her mother was an outsider, or hontik. She is given a certain amount of rank when Abhao presents her to the Condor and he acknowledges her existence. However, Stone Telling is shrouded in a literal and metaphorical veil. She must remain covered and out of sight during the rest of her days as a Condor woman.

She cannot even go above ground. This part of the novel ends as Stone Telling contemplates her current existence.

Part III

The third part of Stone Telling's narrative is the most horrifying for the reader. Here, she relates the illness that nearly kills her and the Condor remedy - marriage. Stone Telling's illness is more restlessness because she is not allowed outside, she cannot read, she cannot learn new arts, and, since she is a Condor's daughter, she cannot spin, weave, or create anything. The doctors recommend that she marry. Thus, Stone Telling becomes the "pretty" wife of an important Condor, Retforok Dayat. She is a sex object, nothing more. She gets pregnant twice, but aborts the first one because her husband raped her. The second pregnancy comes as a relief from the boredom of her life. Her daughter, Ek-wekwe, not only brings meaning back to Stone Telling's life, but also convinces her to leave the Condors and return to the Valley. She finally is able to get her father to help her and she, her daughter, and servant, Esiryu, leave the City of the Condor.

Upon her return to the Valley, Stone Telling finds that much has changed. Her grandmother, Valiant, is dead and her mother has lost her mind. The Warrior and Lamb lodges have been disbanded and the unrepentant ones have been exiled from the Valley. Stone Telling becomes Woman Coming Home and learns to relish her life in the Valley. She also realizes that she does belong here with the Kesh and that she always did. Stone Telling does not marry again, but she does take in a gifted healer named Alder. She and Alder raise Ekwekwe, who becomes Shining, and enjoy happiness with their granddaughters. Thus, Stone Telling's narrative comes full circle: she is respected, accepted, and beloved.

Part IV: The Back of the Book

Interspersed between Stone Telling's narrative and the last 150 pages of the novel are what Le Guin calls the artifacts of the Kesh. These songs, jokes, short stories, glossaries, recipes, and editorial comments make up the bulk of the novel and yet do not directly tie into the narrative. They reinforce and explain elements of Stone Telling's narrative, allowing for a greater understanding of the story.

Characters

Abhao

Abhao is Stone Telling's father. He is a mighty Condor warrior, a general of great fame and ability. Unlike other Condor men, Abhao only marries Willow, not a Condor woman, and Stone Telling is his only child. This is a source of humiliation for him since his only child is not a son to carry on his family name or status However, he seems to love his daughter and encourages her riding ability and intellect when they are both living in the Valley. He is happy when she promises to wait for him and delighted when she agrees to return to the Condor City with him.

Back with his own people, Abhao tries to turn his daughter into a Condor woman. This means she cannot go outside, ride horses, speak until spoken to, or control her life He presents her to The Condor, who acknowledges her existence, which gives Stone Telling the status of being her father's daughter. Abhao puts all of his faith, trust, and obedience in The Condor even though he knows that The Condor's plans for conquest are unrealistic and fatal to his people. He sells his daughter into a loveless marriage and continues in his blind devotion and obedience to his leader. However, Abhao is redeemed when he defies all of his training, culture, and faith, allowing Stone Telling to escape Sai and return to the Kesh. Abhao never sees his daughter again.

Alder

Alder is Stone Telling's second husband□who is Keshian□although they never officially marry. They enjoy each other's company and he helps her realize that she does belong in the Valley with the Kesh. He also tells her that if she finds a man she likes better, he will go. However, she does not find a man she likes better than Alder. He becomes Stone Listening because he listens to his wife's visions, stones, and memories.

Ashes

See Willow

Ayatyu

See Stone Telling

The City of Mind

The City of Mind, known as The City, is the name given to the robotic computer system by the Kesh The City is really a huge database, controlled by its own subroutines, which

records everything about human existence on the planet. The database is open to anyone; in fact, there are terminals in all the major towns of the Valley and beyond. Some cultures, like the Condor People, restrict the information, but those decisions are made by the cultures themselves, not by The City The City does not consider whether the information is good or bad, because all experience is knowledge It also does not judge what people do with the provided information as good or bad, because that is not The City's function. The City only exists as a record of human events. The City encourages all people to contribute their life stories and events to its database, which will continue even after Earth's destruction□through its satellite network and backup systems scattered throughout the solar system The City's network of terminals is also used for communication among different cultural groups involved in trade and commerce. Within the individual societies, the terminal network is used rarely and typically only for emergencies.

Condor People

The people of the Condor are a formerly nomadic, monotheistic, warrior society living outside the Valley of the Kesh, who call them the Houseless Ones. They call themselves Dayao, the One-People. They believe that only they are truly people; everyone else is subhuman. They like to believe that they control the entire region, but the people living around them keep them contained. The society of the Condor people has three tiers. At the highest level are The Condor and his sons; the second tier is composed of the Condor's male relatives and their sons; and the third is composed of the Condor warriors and their sons. Women are not considered fully human by the Condor People, although daughters of Condor warriors are on a higher social level than other women.

Unlike the Kesh, people of the Condor live in one city, Sai, on a devastated plain of volcanic rock. They believe in the total domination of nature, the superiority of males, and the segregation and oppression of females. Information is strictly limited to the eyes and ears of the Condor, who rules arbitrarily and absolutely. Their religious beliefs are a mirror of their society. Their deity is the One God who is represented by the condor bird and demands absolute obedience and fear. In an age in which technology is useless, the Condor people waste vast amounts of food and fuel to create an armored tank and fighter-type balloon planes. Both these experiments with conventional weaponry fail just as the Condor city is failing due to starvation and disease. Le Guin uses the Condor people as a continual comparison to the Kesh, highlighting the vitality, openness, and success of the Keshian society with the dying, suffocating, and ultimately doomed culture of the Condor people.

Danaryu

See Ekwekwe

Dayao

See Condor People

Retforok Dayat

Retforok Dayat is Stone Telling's first husband. He is a Condor man of the second tier and highly involved in the political machinations surrounding the Condor. He took Stone Telling as his "pretty wife," or a wife whose only function was sex. Condor wives are expected to continually produce babies, especially boys, but "pretty wives" are not expected to have any children, but only to satisfy their husbands' sexual desires. Retforok Dayat ceases to be a problem for Stone Telling once she convinces her father to help her escape. Dayat does not go after Stone Telling since the only child she bore him was a daughter and girls do not matter to the Condor men.

Editor

See Pandora

Ekwekwe

Ekwekwe, which means Watching Quail, is Stone Telling's daughter. Her Condor name, Danaryu, means One Given to Woman; in many ways she saved her mother's life. Ekwekwe is the child that Stone Telling wanted in order to relieve the boredom of her life as a Condor woman. However, as Ekwekwe grew, Stone Telling could not stand the idea of her daughter becoming just another Condor woman; this becomes the major reason Stone Telling attempts her escape. Ekwekwe is raised, loved, and accepted as a child of the Kesh and no one seems bothered by her mixed ancestry. Le Guin uses Ekwekwe to suggest that cultures are not necessarily bound together by common ethnic traits.

Esiryu

Esiryu is the hontik, or non-Condor, slave woman given to Stone Telling when she goes to live with her father in Sai. It is Esiryu who teaches Stone Telling the ways of the Condor culture, especially how women are supposed to behave. She also chooses to leave Sai with Stone Telling and Ekwekwe. When the women return to the Valley, Esiryu is so frightened of living a new way that she becomes Stone Telling's "shadow." Eventually this becomes her name as well. Even though she is frightened and repulsed by many of the Kesh's customs, she learns to enjoy and embrace life and eventually marries Stone Telling's cousin, Spear.

Houseless Ones

See Condor People

Kesh

Always Coming Home tells the story of the Kesh from an anthropological point of view Their lives, customs, habits, literature, and culture make up most of Le Guin's novel. The Kesh are a society that works on lines of female descent with property, responsibilities, and more, passing from mother to daughter to her daughter and so on. Their religious beliefs include a female deity in the form of Coyote and the living interconnection of all things including animals, rocks, raindrops, and humans. For the Kesh, all living and nonliving things are people, just different kinds of people. The Kesh are divided into nine different "houses," which teach the trades or arts specific to individual houses. While the Kesh are willing to teach any trade to any single person, generally people learn the trades specific to their own houses.

Every Keshian town works the same way. There are five Houses of the Earth (Obsidian, Blue Clay, Serpentine, Yellow Adobe, and Red Adobe), which deal with physical or real things: farming, writing, carpentry, metal work, and tool making. The remaining four houses are Houses of the Sky (Rain, Cloud, Wind, and Air), which deal with spiritual or unnatural things: funeral ceremonies, windmills, and electricity The Kesh have little use for technology, although they have access to the sum of human knowledge stored in "The City" and generally live their lives in harmony with nature. The Kesh do not believe in obtaining material possessions, whether it be food, goods, or services. Their concept of wealth is someone who gives unselfishly Their culture seems, in many ways, at odds with late twentieth-century American culture and can be described as primitive, but the Kesh would consider a consumer culture to be the primitive one.

Sexual relations among the Kesh are considered a natural function and are not reserved for marriage, nor is homosexuality banned. Marriage does exist, called "going inland," but men become members of their wives' households with the children belonging to the women and their houses. Divorce is socially acceptable and when a couple divorces, the man returns to his mother's household. People of the Kesh generally have three names: a childhood "given" name usually coming from birds, an adult "self-chosen" name usually coming from some life experience, and the name of the "third" period, or old age, usually describes how the person lived out her or his life. When a Kesh dies, all three names are burned by her or his relatives at the Dancing of World following his or her death. The Kesh seem to have many cultural aspects in common with Native Americans, which becomes even more obvious when one listens to the recording of Keshian music and poetry that accompanies the novel.

Kills

See Abhao

North Owl

See Stone Telling

One Given to Woman

See Ekwekwe

One-People

See Condor People

Pandora

The only other major, consistent character in *Always Coming Home* is the Editor, who reveals her name as Pandora in journal entries scattered throughout the novel She is a "future" archaeologist, who, through an undefined method of time travel, visits the world of the Kesh and describes their culture for her time period. The Editor expresses problems with understanding the Kesh, particularly in terms of their relationship to nature, their religion, and their social and sexual customs. Her inability to explain thoroughly these aspects of Keshian culture makes the novel difficult to read. She is constantly using footnotes and endnotes to explain how difficult the act of translation and cultural identification is without really adding to the narrative flow

Pandora filters everything for the reader; she chooses what parts of the Kesh she relates and what she leaves unexplained. She is the most difficult character in the novel because she is walking a fine line between scientist and fiction writer. Pandora is not Le Guin, but is the character that Le Gum uses to explore the difficulty and the hypocrisy within the idea of scientific objectivity. Pandora is a product of her culture and so reads the Kesh and the Condor People through the lens of late twentieth-century technology, social relationships, and environmental relationships. Ultimately, she controls the image of the Kesh, so readers only see the Kesh as Pandora presents them.

Shadow

See Esiryu

Shining

See Ekwekwe

Stone Listening

See Alder

Stone Telling

Stone Telling is the only single character whose life becomes a major part of the narrative in *Always Coming Home* She is the daughter of a Blue Clay woman and a Condor man and spent much of her early life feeling like a half-person since her father was not of the Kesh. Her story, told in three parts, holds the narrative of the Kesh together and gives a voice and a face to the "cold" scientific facts presented in the rest of the novel.

Home and family are not always comfortable places for Stone Telling and she dreams of a different kind of life. She feels unwanted and unaccepted in her community and toes to discover why by going on spiritual journeys, fasts, and physical pilgrimages. Stone Telling is overjoyed when her father returns to the Valley and stays with her family while training his troops for an attack on the Kesh's neighbors. Although Stone Telling does not say so, it seems that the Condor men do not bother the Kesh because her father is married to her mother. When her father leaves again, her mother tells him not to come back and puts his things on the porch, thus divorcing him. This scene ends the first part of Stone Telling's story.

Stone Telling's search for a place to belong leads her to leave the Valley, taking the name Ay-atyu, and accompanying her father to the city of the Condor. There she comes face-to-face with the sexism and destructive nature of the Condor people. She is given status as the daughter of a Condor warrior, but her movements, her intellect, and her will are restricted. She lives the life of a Condor woman, including an arranged marriage. Only after the birth of her daughter does Stone Telling realize how awful her life has become and how much she misses and belongs in the Valley of the Kesh. She convinces her father to betray all of his beliefs and allow her and her daughter to escape. Stone Telling returns to the Kesh to find her grandmother physically dead and her mother spiritually dead. She spends the rest of her life coming to terms with what it means to "come home."

Towhee

See Willow

Valiant

Valiant is Stone Telling's grandmother and the matriarch of the family. She accepts Stone Telling as a whole person, even though Stone Telling does not believe that she does. Valiant tries to teach Stone Telling the ways of the Kesh, especially after her

daughter Willow's divorce, but Stone Telling cannot make a connection with her grandmother. Valiant, who divorced her own husband, remarries her first husband because she feels abandoned by her family and needs someone to care for her in her old age. She dies while Stone Telling is living among the Condor people.

Watching Quail

See Ekwekwe

Willow

Willow is Stone Telling's mother. She defied her people and traditions by marrying a Condor *manconn*□a man of no House. Most of her neighbors do not believe that she and Stone Telling's father were actually married until he returns to the Valley when Stone Telling is eleven years old. She took the name, Willow, when he left her the first time, because, according to Keshian tradition, the willow tree weeps for a love lost. When Abhao returns, she is delighted and is able to sneer at her neighbors who said her child had no father. However, when he refuses to stay in the Valley with Willow, she "puts his clothes on the porch," which is a Keshian divorce, and returns to her childhood name, Towhee. She then joins the Lamb Society, a cult of women warriors that was disbanded by the Kesh in the face of an unrealized invasion threat by the Condor people. Stone Telling returns to the Valley as a young woman to find her mother a faded shadow of her former self. Willow has lost everything: her husband, her child, her social function, and her mother. She goes insane and Stone Telling renames her Ashes. Although Willow does not recognize either her daughter or the religious rituals of the Kesh, Stone Telling gives her a formal Keshian funeral and burns all three names at the Dance of the World following her mother's death.

Woman Coming Home

See Stone Telling

Themes

Sexual Equality

Gender equality has always been an important theme in Le Guin's fiction. She says, in *The Language of the Night: Essays on Fantasy and Science Fiction,* that she writes this kind of fiction because it allows her to explore how society would be without sexism and gender discrimination. The Kesh are essentially a non-discriminatory people. A person's worth is not based on power or social relationships, but on how much he or she contributes to all major areas of society. The Condor society is diametrically opposite of the Kesh. Their society is based on male descent/relationship to the One Condor. This culture segregates women, keeping them ignorant and underground Le Guin sets up these two societies, presenting the Kesh first, so that the shock and horror of the Condor society is more striking The cultural criticism becomes more biting as Le Guin continually makes comparisons between the Condors and modern American society. The Kesh, with their open and equal attitudes toward sex and gender issues, are a thriving people. The Condors eventually destroy themselves, their sexist discriminatory culture collapsing under its own weight.

Spiritual Renewal

One of the major themes in *Always Coming Home* is that of renewal or regeneration, especially on the spiritual level. The world of the Kesh revolves around what they call "the hinge" of life. This is the point where the physical and the spiritual intersect, causing all people to examine who and what they are. The idea of spiritual growth and renewal is the common thread that holds not only Stone Telling's narrative together, but also the other narratives, short stories, poems, and songs of the Kesh Stone Telling's mother, Willow, and her grandmother, Valiant, both have so many problems finding meaning in their own lives that neither can spare any time to help Stone Telling with her life dilemmas. Willow's life falls apart because she cannot, as Lillian Heldreth suggests in *Mythlore,* accept or overcome the divide between what she wants (her warrior husband) and what her culture demands (that he give up being a warrior). She returns to her childhood name and eventually reverts to being a child. Willow cannot cope with losing everything that makes up her identity because she has no idea who she really is. Her husband, Abhao, is much the same. He cannot escape the bounds of his culture When he takes Stone Telling with him to the Condor, he refuses to allow her to be free to become the person whom she would like to be Abhao realizes that the Condor's desire for war and domination will destroy the Condors, but he cannot change the way things are He tells Stone Telling that she made her choice to come to Sai and so she must remain until her death. However, because of his love for his daughter and granddaughter, Abhao does eventually help them escape the Condor, thus showing that he has grown beyond the rigid man he was at the beginning of the novel.

Environmental Awareness

One of the major differences between the Kesh and the Condors is their relationship with nature. All life is sacred for the Kesh and all living things are considered different kinds of "people " Le Guin goes to extremes to explain how the Kesh live as a part of the Creation, their religion and festivals are celebrations of Coyote's creation and participation in the life process. This attitude makes the Kesh profoundly aware of the environment. They have rejected the destructive technology that modern American society thrives on and work in harmony with nature. They kill only for necessity, asking forgiveness of the animals they kill and sing *"heyas,"* or hymns, as a part of the butchering ritual. Hunting is not an adult sport for the Kesh; it is something only children do, an activity put aside with maturity. Their agriculture, architecture, and even apparel are all focused on making as small an impact on the earth as possible. The Kesh believe that they are part of creation and must work within it, not against it.

The Condors, on the other hand, believe that they are directed by their god to dominate and use nature for their benefit. The One, the Condors' god, made creation, but is not part of it, and so does not care for it. Neither do the Condors; they see everyone and everything, save for Condor men, as animals or dirt (hontik). The lack of connection to the natural environment of the Condors is evident in the location of their city. Sai is built on an ancient lava plain where everything looks like death and nothing ever grows. This location is in perfect contrast to the Na Valley of the Kesh, which, even with toxic waste dumps and radiation poisoning, is green, alive, and inviting. The Condors do not care about scarring the land and are angered when the Kesh refuse to allow them to build a permanent bridge over the river. Nor do they give thanks or ask forgiveness from the animals they slaughter for food, horrifying a fifteen-year-old Stone Telling as she travels with her father. At Sai, the Condor sacrifices the health and well being of his city for the glory of polluting war machines that consume all the available food, causing the city to starve to death.

Utopian Ideology

Le Guin's use of Utopian ideology differs from most of her contemporaries in the way she starts and sustains her Utopia. Generally speaking, Utopias grow out of some cataclysmic event, such as nuclear war, social collapse, or widespread religious persecution Utopias are then sustained by the dedicated work of all citizens who are equally determined to see the Utopia succeed However, Le Guin does not create or sustain the Utopian society of the Kesh in these ways. In their society, the people do not seem to care about their origins. They believe that they have always existed with no founders, first presidents, or list of creators of the Kesh culture. Revolting against both political and literary tradition, Le Guin insists that her Utopia is the only rational evolutionary path if humanity is to survive. This view of Utopia as an evolutionary end rather than a reaction to catastrophe makes *Always Coming Home* unique in modern science fiction.

The other part of Le Guin's unique approach to Utopian ideology is the way she defines and sustains the Utopia of the Kesh. There is no central government in the Na Valley; there is no local government in the individual cities either. The peace and stability of the culture are sustained by the desire of each individual to become the best she or he can be. This forms Le Guin's definition of anarchy, which J. R. Wytenbroek suggests she believes is the only form of government possible in a real Utopia. He also says that Le Guin goes to great lengths to distinguish between armed chaos (terrorism) and the lack of an authority/government (anarchy). The idea of a perfect society without law, dogma, or technology puts *Always Coming Home* in a position to challenge the conventions of the very genre it claims to represent.

Scientific Objectivity

The structure of *Always Coming Home* lends itself more toward nonfiction than fiction. There is no real story line, action, or suspense, but rather a collection of artifacts presented to the reader as anthropological evidence. Le Guin is aware of and makes her readers equally aware of the problem of scientific objectivity. She introduces us to the Kesh first and so we see everyone else in the Na Valley and outside it through comparisons to the Kesh. We do not like the Condors because the Kesh do not like the Condors. Because each reader cannot meet the Kesh for him-or herself, Le Guin exposes the hypocrisy of scientific objectivity. No scientist, no matter how hard he or she tries, can ever break out of the bounds of his or her culture. Scientific objectivity cannot exist because every scientist must select the facts he or she is going to present. Reality, as Le Guin writes it, is always subject to interpretation.

Style

Point of View

Since *Always Coming Home* does not follow a traditional novel format, the point of view shifts continually. Both Pandora and Stone Telling's parts are told in first person, but these two sections make up less than half of the novel. Le Guin uses the framework of a scientific text to explore how a culture makes meaning, both for itself and for other cultures around it. Praised by some as lyrical and inventive, Le Guin's shifting between different "artifacts" makes following a single story, such as Stone Telling's narrative, difficult and, at times, frustrating. However, the inter-mixture of poems, songs, short narratives, religious ceremonies, and news bulletins help make sense of what Stone Telling says and what she leaves out The nonfiction aspects of this novel also help make it seem more plausible and real, lending a depth to otherwise shallow characters.

Names as Metaphor

The names in Le Gum's novel ate descriptive because they not only name the characters, but they also describe the characters' personalities or circumstances in life. Pandora, for example, is the scientist who puts the entire collection of artifacts from the Kesh society together. However, Pandora was also the name of the first woman, according to Greek legend, who released all the evil in the world. The name, Pandora, also means "gift" Pandora, the editor in *Always Coming Home,* is keenly aware of the historical significance of her name. The names of both the Kesh and Condor characters are metaphoric as well. Pandora admits near the end of the novel that she has been using the English "meanings" of the Keshian and Condorian names rather than their real spellings Le Gum does this for two reasons: one, she wants her readers to connect with her characters; and two, she wants her characters' names to reflect what her characters do.

If Pandora had used the Keshian and Condorian spellings for the names of the characters in this novel, the reader's level of identification would have been quite low, as would their attachment to the characters. Thus, Stone Telling is known as North Owl as a child or Woman Coming Home when she returns to the Valley. Willow becomes Ashes after her breakdown, and Stone Telling's warrior father is Kills. Readers can identify and pronounce these names, which lends to the credibility of these people. They do not have popular names, but they are recognizable and do reflect the characters' functions in the novel. For example, Abhao is called Kills because he is a warrior. Stone Telling becomes Woman Coming Home when she returns to the Kesh society, and Willow takes the name Ashes because she has become a burned-out remnant of who she used to be. Likewise, Stone Telling's friend becomes Shadow because she lives as if she were Stone Telling's shadow.

Symbolism

Symbolism plays a large part in *Always Coming Home* Everything in the daily life of the Kesh is symbolic of the way they react toward their surroundings. From the way they build then: homes to the way they farm, learn trades, and handle commerce reflects their belief in the interconnection of all living things This allows Le Guin to express her ideas about progress, the future, and contemporary culture's fascination with technology and science. The Kesh have no leaders, no history that makes sense to Pandora, and no innovation These qualities are not what science fiction usually attributes to an advanced culture. Le Guin makes very clear in her treatment of the Kesh and the technology-crazed Condors that this clash of progress with technology is the most serious problem facing human development and growth By using every standard by which progress is measured in contemporary society as a symbol of decline, decay, and death, Le Guin attacks contemporary American culture on both practical and spiritual grounds.

Narrative Structure

The narrative structure of *Always Coming Home* is considered both interesting and difficult. The novel begins with two notes from the editor explaining that this work is different from anything else She defines future archeology and suggests that there is more than one way to read this, or any, novel. Often compared to J. R. R. Tolkien's *Silmarillion,* C. S. Lewis's *Lion of Judeah in Never Never Land,* and Gene Rodenberry's *Starfleet Academy,* Le Guin's novel uses a narrative structure that questions both her craft as a fiction writer and the craft of nonfiction writing. Stone Telling's coming-of-age narrative is broken into three sections, separated by collections of poems, shorter narratives, religious ceremonies, and news bulletins from the Exchange. All of these artifacts contribute to the fiction of "nonfiction" for the novel, but it makes for difficult reading and a sense of discontinuity. The second part of the novel, called "The Back of the Book," contains all the explanatory text necessary to thoroughly understand the first section Le Guin is again playing with methods of reading because readers should read 'The Back of the Book" (as she subtly suggests) before reading the front.

Historical Context

The Fiction of Scientific Progress

Always Coming Home allows Le Guin to question not only her craft, but contemporary notions of progress. Le Guin pits the Kesh, who do not use technology and are successful, against the Condors, who insist on using technology and ultimately fail. Le Guin maintains throughout this novel that technology without a connection to the universe is meaningless. The Condors fail to produce a massive killing machine because the technology-saturated culture necessary for such a machine does not exist. The Kesh succeed because they have put technology in balance with nature, making real progress.

The Fiction of Scientific Objectivity

Le Guin's novel challenges the basic concept of scientific observation. She argues that a scientist cannot write outside of her culture and, therefore, must forget claims of objectivity. We see the Kesh and the Condors not as they are, but how Pandora sees them. This is the hypocrisy that Le Guin challenges: the late twentieth century idea that science is not influenced by human behavior.

Fantasy Literature versus "Real" Literature

Science fiction and fantasy literature, along with other genres like mystery and detective fiction, is not considered "real" literature by many scholars and critics. This particularly irritates Le Guin, who always insists that she is writing fiction. In almost every interview or essay, Le Guin makes the comment that it is her publishers and marketers who label her a science fiction/fantasy writer. Le Guin is, however, one of the few science fiction writers to have breached the walls of scholarly opinion and her work is considered the best of the genre

Critical Overview

When it was first published in 1985, *Always Corning Home* was heralded as a brilliant new work by one of Amenca's favorite authors. There were the usual glowing reviews in *Newsweek* and *The New York Times Book Review* and the scholarly reviews in journals like *Mythlore* and *The Hudson Review.* All of the early reviews and articles said much the same thing: they praised the novel, but also commented on its strange narrative structure and length. Peter Prescott, writing in *Newsweek,* comments that the novel is too long and the situations cannot bear much examination but is well worth the reader's patience as an example of Le Guin's unique style *New York Times Book Review* contributor Samuel Delany calls the book "a slow, rich read," advising the reader to savor Le Guin's prose since the storyline itself is weak and not action-filled. Dick Allen, who focuses, as most early reviewers did, on the Utopian aspects of Stone Telling's narrative in *The Hudson Review,* waxes poetic about Le Guin's style and command of prose but worries that the narrative structure will intimidate readers unused to Le Guin's style and purpose.

The critical complaints over narrative technique and length soon gave over to genuine praise for a novel that is truly original in style and scope. Critics as diverse as Lillian Heldreth, Bernard Selinger, Lee Cullen Khanna, and Peter Fitting all have hailed *Always Coming Home* as a brilliant piece of work that has changed the genre of Utopian literature forever. These critics have judged the novel as Le Guin's masterpiece in terms of its antiwar stance, its innovation in narrative technique, and its impact on Utopian fiction.

The idea of war and technological progress being harmful to the human race is not new, but Le Gum reaches new heights according to Heldreth and J R. Wytenbroek. In her essay, "To Defend or to Correct: Patterns of Culture in *Always Coming Home"* Heldreth examines Le Guin's use of language as a map to understanding the miscommunications between people. These miscommunications often lead to war or violence in contemporary society, so Le Guin navigates these differences and shows how personal stubbornness and blindness lead to misery and pain. Le Guin's use of a people who reject war and yet still win, occupies the majority of Wytenbroek's essay *"Always Coming Home-* Pacifism and Anarchy in Le Guin's Latest Utopia." Here, Wytenbroek challenges contemporary readings of both Le Guin's pacifism and anarchy to suggest that she insists on both being present in a successful Utopia However, Le Guin plays with the idea of the Kesh being an Utopian society by having both Pandora and one of her informants agree that the Kesh are not Utopians. Yet everything used to describe the Na Valley is standard Utopian fare. Le Guin creates a society that refuses to fight the Condors, but will do so if necessary The warlike pacifism of the Kesh undercuts both the contemporary anti-violence campaigns in American culture and the wars that are standard science fiction narrative tools

The narrative technique of *Always Coming Home* has also become one of the most lauded aspects of the novel. While most critics find themselves focusing on Stone Telling's narrative, all of them insist on mentioning the broken structure and interjected

materials. Although one interesting fact of the novel is that it cannot be read like a normal novel, most of the critics that explore the use of narrative technique focus on the "normal" aspects of Stone Telling's narrative Critics like Carol Franko and Bernard Selinger both commended Le Guin's novel as brilliant, complicated, and original in terms of technique, but both avoid the un-narrative parts of the novel. The poems, short stones, recipes, and glossary get very little attention in the critical literature, while Stone Telling's narrative becomes the focus. The original narrative technique gets lost in the search for the familiar.

By far the most important critical aspect of Le Guin's novel has been its impact on Utopian fiction. According to both Lee Cullen Khanna and Peter Fitting, *Always Coming Home* marked a departure for both Le Guin and for feminist Utopian fiction. During the 1970s and early 1980s, feminist Utopian fiction became more and more depressing and defeatist. Novels like Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and Suzette Haden Elgin's *Native Tongue* (1984) characterized this pessimistic view of the future. Khanna and Fitting both saw Le Guin's fiction as speaking to the times. America was mired in the arms race, the Cold War, and the introduction of the home computer Video cassette recorders (VCRs), microwave ovens, and cordless phones were finding their way into the American marketplace. However, the threat of nuclear war was real, as then President Ronald Reagan called the U.S.S.R. the "evil empire" and asked Congress for the funds to out produce them in weapons of mass destruction. In this world, where every other Utopian author was writing works of failure and pessimism, Le Guin countered with *Always Coming Home,* what Fitting calls a turning point. Le Guin's novel describes a people who have rejected both war and technology and are thriving in a valley full of toxic waste and piles of radioactive garbage. Khanna and Fitting suggest, in their different essays, that Le Guin wanted to explore the possibilities of winning, of hope, of goodness within the human animal. She changed the face of Utopian fiction and gave it life again.

Although it received a warm welcome when it was first published, many critics faulted the length and narrative technique of *Always Coming Home.* This criticism, however, did not hinder other critics from examining Le Guin's novel and ranking it among the best pieces of fiction produced in the 1980s

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Rex is an instructor at The University of Detroit Mercy. In the following essay, he explores how the issues of return and renewal in Always Coming Home *work to bring a narrative cohesion to disjointed text.*

It is an integral part of our culture. Home is where we feel secure, safe - where we belong. Home is also the place where we go if we are frightened, tired, or lonely because we know that there we will always find peace and love. Ursula Le Guin's novel *Always Coming Home* works on many levels, but the most interesting one is the theme of return or coming home. Le Guin could have named her book anything, but she chose *Always Coming Home.* The idea of the return to home is the central theme to all of the discordant parts of the novel. Many critics have commented on the odd narrative style, Utopian aspects, and lack of character development, but few seem to deal with this issue. The return to "home" and spiritual renewal brings a narrative cohesion to the novel as all the various parts work together to explore humanity's need for home.

Pandora, or the Editor, plays a vital role in the novel. She is the scientist who presents the Kesh to the reader. She begins the novel by musing on the difficulty of doing "future archeology." But Pandora presents the reader with a double-edged problem. The Kesh are a people who might be going to live in Northern California several thousand years from now. All at once we become aware that the Kesh are fiction, but in order to make sense of the novel, we must accept that the Kesh are real and that Pandora has spent many months collecting the data which she presents as *Always Coming Home.* Even though she is a scientist exploring a new culture, Pandora is trapped in her own culture, viewing everything from her home. She originally has a problem locating the archaeological remains of the Kesh because she is thinking in terms of a modern American scholar. The contours of the map have to mean that a particular structure lies here, because that is how we would do it. So, a gate turns out to be a wall and Pandora initially sees the Kesh as a primitive, walled community too scared to leave home.

She realizes her mistake as she begins to explore the literature and culture of these primitive people. Pandora seems fascinated with the social structure and environmental ideology of the Kesh. The value they place on giving away to the community is particularly difficult for her to grasp. This idea, which is so alien to both the reader and the editor, forms the basis of Pandora's search for home. The Kesh believe that only when one gives away everything is one truly rich. Our society does not work that way, but neither does Pandora. She wants to know how the real people lived. She is a scientist unconcerned with the big, overall, simplified view of the Kesh. She wants the broken bowl, the little bits of daily life that will explain how the Kesh acted at home. Le Guin uses Pandora to expose the hypocrisy of scientific objectivity. Pandora cannot escape her own culture and so we see the Kesh and their neighbors, not as they really are, but as Pandora sees them. This becomes obvious when Pandora explains the Condor people and confronts her own scientific prejudices.

The Condor people are the enemy of the Kesh. They are the evil force threatening the Utopia Le Guin has created. However, they hardly seem to be worth the fuss. Their society is on the brink of collapse and all they think about is war and domination. The way Le Guin presents the Condors is directly tied to what she wants to do with Pandora and scientific objectivity. The Condors are introduced only after we have met the Kesh. We do not learn any stories, jokes, or customs of the Condors like we do the Kesh. So, of course we do not feel any connection to them. Although they are more like contemporary American culture, they lack a humanness that the Kesh possess. They dress like a buzzard bird that lives off the dead flesh of other animals. The Condors do not seem to notice the contradictions in their appearance and their attitude about themselves. Pandora, too, has problems being objective about the Condors. They are presented as a warrior society that is doomed to destruction under the weight of their hierarchical culture. But it is because we do not see them at home, being themselves, that they seem like monsters. Le Guin seems to be suggesting that our own desire for peace and prosperity masks a deeper ugliness, based on greed and the desire for destruction.

Pandora's scientific objectivity receives another blow when she tries to understand the Kesh and their lack of history. Unlike other societies, the Kesh have either always been or do not care where they came from. This attitude puzzles Pandora and she tries to unlock the idea of having no history, no beginning. She finds the Keshian creation stories unfulfilling and pushes the Archivist at Wak-wah-na for clarity. The Archivist, a fellow scientist, whom Pandora greets as family, explains that most of the books are thrown away after a few years. The loss of information horrifies Pandora, who cannot see the practicalities of the Keshian system She insists that data storage and retrieval systems could keep all of the valuable information that is now being lost. The Archivist counters that the City of the Mind already does that, and besides books are like people, mortal beings. She pushes Pandora further by questioning why Pandora insists on storing all information. What is the point? Does it create a system of power? A way to control others in the culture? Le Guin forces her readers to examine what we consider to be knowledge. Through her use of Pandora and her unfailing loyalty to her own culture, Le Guin suggests that we too use knowledge as a weapon to beat on each other. Pandora, even as she explores and explains the Kesh, is stuck in her own culture and cannot, or does not want to, see a way out. She is comfortable at home.

This comfort level with familiar things is a common human emotion. It is also the goal in most of the non-narrative text in *Always Coming Home.* The poems, short stories, dramas, and dances involve a journey away from home and celebrate the return. As Dick Allen says, the poetry is not profound, but it does speak to the peace and desire for community. The first section deals with stories "told aloud." Their very title suggests a need for community, for home, for others. Each story tells of someone who felt outside the order. These characters did not belong in the situations they were in and the stones revolve around getting the individuals back home. This first sections deals with physical separations, followed by poems lamenting the nature of separation, and ending with a section on death customs among the Kesh. This structure follows the flow of Stone Telling's first narrative. She feels cutoff from her people, a part of them, but not fully

whole. Her mother lives in a romantic fairy tale and dies, spiritually, when Abhao, her husband, leaves for the second time.

The next grouping of Keshian literature deals with romance, sacrifice for love, and "real" histories. The romances are not romantic as our culture would define romance. Instead they deal with the harsh realities of sexuality and taboo. The stones end unhappily because the characters want something they are not culturally allowed to have. This sense of loss and foreboding continues in the histories section. These histories show the Kesh at their ugliest. The Kesh are not happy-go-lucky, empty-minded Utopians. They are real people who love, hate, fear, and desire just like us. However, the Kesh seem more able than the societies around them to handle these pressures without imploding. But even here, the constant theme is one of community, belonging, fitting in. This again matches the narrative of Stone Telling.

In the second part of her story, Stone Telling dwells on her adolescence after her parents' divorce. She focuses on describing her actions, feelings, and fears as she grows into womanhood. She falls in love, not with a Condor like her mother did, but with a Kesh warrior, a young man named Spear. He is beautiful and soon becomes forbidden to her. He is a member of the Warrior Lodge, an outcast group within Keshian society, and he cannot associate with Stone Telling, since she is not a part of his world. Much like the lovers in the preceding romances, Stone Telling feels cut off from the object of her desire and lashes out at those who try to make her conform. She fights with her grandmother, who does not care for the warriors and leaves the house in tears. Here, Stone Telling is like every single teenager throughout time - confused, in between childhood and adulthood, but belonging to neither. She wants a community, a place to belong, and a place to call home. All of this confusion and desire push Stone Telling toward leaving the Valley. If she does not belong with her mother's people then she must belong with her father's kin.

In many ways, Stone Telling's leaving the Na Valley is both the best and the worst thing that could happen to her. She discovers that she is the product of opposites. Not only are her parents opposite genders, but their belief systems, ideologies, and life concepts are totally different. Abhao desires Willow as a Condor man wants any woman, as a possession or property. Willow wants Abhao to be a Kesh man and stay with her. Stone Telling is caught between these two systems. She is intelligent and keenly aware of her surroundings, but her father makes her feel stupid because she cannot learn his language and writing, as it is forbidden to her because she is a woman. We have to stop and wonder why Abhao takes Stone Telling with him to the Condor She is female and half-animal (according to Condor theology) and will bring him nothing but shame. Yet Abhao wants to bring her to his home and make her part of his culture. He wants to show his culture that he is normal and can produce children. He wants to give his daughter a community, a place to belong, a home. Unfortunately, neither Stone Telling nor her father realize the dangers in trying to force square pegs into round holes.

The Keshian literature separating the second and final parts of Stone Telling's narrative illustrates these dangers. The dramas that immediately follow the second part of Stone Telling's story all deal with reality and deception. The first, 'The Wedding Night at

Chukulmas," tells the story of a long-dead groom who invades a real wedding looking for his long-lost bride. The live characters fear the bad luck that will come if the dead characters are not fulfilled This fear continues in the other plays as characters who do not belong in the situations with which they are confronted react in increasing desperation and irrationality. The dances and the poems following the dramas add to the growing sense of dread. The excerpt from *Dangerous People* provides a foreshadowing of how Stone Telling's life will fall apart before she can find true happiness. We know that Stone Telling's life in the Condor City of Sai is not happy and the tales of loss, madness, and hysteria that proceed in the third section prepare the reader for the devastating reality of Condor life.

The third section of her narrative shows Stone Telling coming full circle. She experiences everything that we traditionally believe makes for happiness and belonging: family, marriage, and motherhood However, Stone Telling's experiences with these factors only lead to her mental and physical collapse It is only the birth of her daughter that forces her to take action. Stone Telling escapes from Sai and returns to the Valley. She has come home. She now knows where she belongs.

All of the elements, characters, and voices in this novel are always coming home. The journey is one full of danger and risk, but the rewards make up for them Returning to a sense of community and belonging is the ultimate human goal. Le Guin suggests that this goal can only be achieved by first leaving, finding out who we are, and then finally coming home.

Source: Michael Rex, in an essay for *Novels for Students,* Gale, 2000

Critical Essay #2

In the essay below, Wytenbroek details the marked differences between the two societies portrayed in Always Coming Home *and notes how the work "adds a completely new dimension to Le Guin's study and presentation of war, as found in the rest of her science fiction."*

Ursula K. Le Guin is a pacifist, a fact she has made clear on numerous occasions, both in her writings and her political activities Throughout her writings, she has dealt with war, or armed conflict, in various ways, examining it from a different angle in each work *m* which such conflict appeared. She examined the psychology of war to a large extent in *The Word for World is Forest* (1972), especially through the character of Captain Davidson. She looked at what happened to pacifists who could or would not fight back in *The Dispossessed* (1974), while she considered what happened to pacifists who did fight back in *The Eye of the Heron* (1978).

In her latest novel, *Always Coming Home,* Le Guin examines both the psychology and anatomy of war by examining an entire culture given over to war and conquering. She examines this culture from within the society itself, but through the eyes of an outsider who, initially willingly, becomes part of the society. The outsider, Stone Telling, daughter of a woman of the pacifistic Valley people and an important warrior of the constantly warring Condor people, is initially drawn to the power and excitement of her father's world. However, soon she discovers that the power of domination is not exciting when one is the dominated, and that a life based on power and violence is an extremely limited one, even for the powerful. These insights are gained by a free mind within an oppressed and oppressive society. Thus Stone Telling presents both societies, with their faults and strengths, with a clarity of vision that neither side, separated as they are physically and ideologically, is completely capable of achieving. Consequently, Le Guin is able to present a convincing portrait of the war machine and its necessary structure and operation through the eyes of an innocent, but objective observer. This novel, therefore, adds a completely new dimension to Le Guin's study and presentation of war, as found in the rest of her science fiction.

Unlike most of Le Guin's writings in which she examines the issue of war, there is no direct conflict between the two major groups being presented. However, through their contact with one another, there is a dialectical opposition set up between them. Both societies contrast with each other almost totally. This opposition is set up in every area except one (both societies are based on the extended family), and is an effective technique of analysis. Unlike most of Le Guin's works structured along dialectical principles, however, there is no synthesis of the two societies. Not only is their opposition extreme, but the total intractability of the Condor mentality will allow for no possibilities but its own realities which the Valley people, flexible as they are, find repugnant and completely unacceptable. These feelings are evident in the people's dislike and eventual dissolution of the Warrior and Lamb lodges in the Valley, lodges concerned with the activities and attitudes of war, established during the influence of the Condor on the spiritually weak and the young. These lodges are allowed to exist for

some time until the larger body of the people, aware of the danger of such an aggressive and unbalanced mentality amongst them, ask the Warrior and Lamb lodge members to either leave the community or to dissolve their lodges. A few choose the former, going off to the City to join the Condors. Most choose the latter. Thus a negative synthesis is refused by the Valley people, while a positive synthesis remains impossible.

The opposition is set up, then, between an essentially pacifist society and a militarist society. Not only is one side pacifistic, it is also anarchic according to Le Guin's definition of anarchy, as it appears in her introduction to the story "The Day Before the Revolution" in which she established the Odonian anarchy explored to such depth in *The Dispossessed'*

Odonianism is anarchism. Not the bomb-in-the-pocket stuff, which is terrorism, whatever name it tries to dignify itself with, not the social-Darwinist economic 'libertarianism' of the far right; but anarchism, as prefigured in early Taoist thought, and expounded by Shelley and Kropotkin, Goldman and Goodman Anarchism's principal target is the authoritarian State (capitalist or socialist); its principal moral-practical theme is cooperation (solidarity, mutual aid). It is the most idealistic, and to me the most interesting, of all political theories. *{The Wind's Twelve Quarters)*

The Valley people, around whom *Home* is centered, inhabit the most fully realized anarchic state presented in Le Guin's writings to date. An anarchical society is community-based with no central government. All decisions are made by the members of the community who wish to participate in each decision-making meeting which, in the valley towns, seems to occur quite rarely. Life in the society is based on a system of freedom and mutual responsibility, each person walking his own path, yet aware of and concerned for his fellows as he does so. Thus the community is based on equality, each person being an equally important part of the whole. Each one is free to choose his own career, relationships, and the like, advice being offered when requested or when others feel it is necessary, but no control being enforced by any one person or group of people upon any other individual or group. This basic harmony and unity is maintained within the society, although the types of individual conflict which may arise whenever human beings live together is, naturally, present.

Thus the anarchical states in Le Guin's works generally create a natural, unified, free, and intrinsically peaceful way of life. The Valley people have an interesting set of ethical values, which are probably not foreign to the reader in type, but may be in application. For example, giving is central to the idea of mutual aid. Consequently, a wealthy family in the Valley is one which gives constantly into the town storehouses and to individuals. Each family gives what it can, whether it be in food stuffs grown, wool, woven cloth, pottery, or more technical skills. Lodges are established in which certain professions such as medicine are centralized, and where all learning regarding that profession takes place. Thus wealth is counted not only in goods given, but also in skills or learning used for the community. When Stone Telling returns to her hometown of Sinshan, after spending seven years in the City of the Condors, she decides it is time her family were wealthy. With the help of her daughter and a friend from the City, she builds up her sheep flock, begins a herd of goats, plants crops in the family garden plot and helps

with the orchard harvesting She also begins to weave. Within three years, she is able to give freely, and counts herself rich, but for her poverty of education in the history, poetry, and other intellectual pursuits of her people. She then begins to catch up, as much as she can, on these intellectual matters, eventually becoming the singer of one of the great poems of her people. Thus she becomes wealthy in all things, as she is able to give in every major area.

In a system where wealth is counted by how much one gives, and where personal possessions, position, and status mean nothing in themselves, there is little opportunity for a power structure to arise. A power structure, however, is absolutely essential for a primarily military society, as no true army can be run without a strict hierarchy of power and command. Thus the mighty Condors, the warrior-people of *Home,* live in a highly structured, hierachical society in which power, position, and possessions mean everything.

Power is, initially, appealing and exciting. Stone Telling is first drawn to power when her father, a commander of the Condor forces, lets her give instructions to his men who are building a bridge. Her own unhappy and disrupted home, her love for her father and her minor attraction to power, cause her to ask to go with him to the Condor City of Man. Once there, however, she begins to truly understand the power structure, because there she is amongst the lowest in the hierarchy: she is a woman. In the Valley, women are considered equal to the men in all things, and the family line is continued through the mother into whose house a man marries and children are born; in the City, women are considered utterly inferior to the men. They are kept within walls, usually a very negative symbol in Le Guin's works, living in women's quarters which are always on the lowest level of the underground houses. They rarely, if ever, go outside. They are not allowed to be educated in any way, and they are considered to have no souls. Their chief function is to bear children for the strength of their husbands' houses and for the glory of their god However, Condor women, daughters of the powerful elite of the City, are not considered the lowest forms of life. Male farmers or workers (*tyon)* seem to be lower still, while *hontik* are at the bottom *Hontik* seems to translate as animal or dirt, and includes all non-Condor women, all foreigners of either sex, and animals themselves. Thus the hierarchy is an extreme one, which recognizes nothing outside its ranks, and defines clearly what lies within those ranks.

Stone Telling makes it quite clear that the power-based society of the Condors is engaged in constant struggle and war Even the lower orders, such as women, desire power because of their constant humiliation and dehumanization, and will exercise it whenever possible, while the powerful within the structure seek to maintain their power. Thus the strife is based on fear, envy, hatred, and suspicion, and yet the power structure breeds a desire for power. The internal, covert, mental, and emotional conflict of this society fuels the war machine and maintains the structure of the militarist society. A society based on such conflict must go to war to keep the structure from decaying or destroying itself. Hence, towards the end of the novel, when the Condors lose their grip on the people they have subjected, they turn within and begin to destroy their own people: buzzards tearing out and devouring their own entrails, as Stone Telling describes it.

Violence is, therefore, central to this society. When the Condors go to war, the killing is excessive and gratuitous - frequently all the men and children are killed, and the women kept for the pleasure of the soldiers. Within the society itself, life is uncertain. Everyone has a place in the hierarchy, but only for the lowest is that place permanent and secure. It is a society whose members' control over each other is both implicitly and, occasionally, explicitly violent. Stone Telling describes this violence with horror:

It sounds strange when I say that disgrace could put a person in danger of his life; disgrace and shame are quite bad enough by themselves, among us in the Valley, but there, where every relationship was a battle, they were deadly Punishment was violent I have said that I was told that a hontik could be blinded for writing or reading, a woman killed for having sex, I did not see such things happen, but every day I did see or hear about violent punishments, striking children, beating slaves, locking up disobedient hontik or tyon, and later on, as I shall tell, it grew worse. It was frightening to live in this kind of continuous war The Dayao [Condors] seemed never to decide things together, never discussing and arguing and yielding and agreeing to do something before they did it Everything was done because there was a law to do it or not to do it And f something went wrong it seemed never to be the orders, but the people who obeyed them, that got blamed; and blame was usually physical punishment I learned caution daily. I learned, whether I wanted to or not, how to be a warrior Where life has been made into a battle, one has to fight

When rebellion breaks out amongst the slaves and *tyon,* Condor reprisals are immediate and harsh. The rebellion escalates, however, and, as the Condors' frustration grows, so does their desire to control and kill. Their society is a machine that, set going, cannot stop. Those who start the machine become part of the machine, until, finally, they become the machine and no longer control it. Thus, at some point in the development of the militaristic state, the war machine takes over, and human beings simply become its tolls. However, the war machine here is breaking down, collapsing under its own weight of greed and power. The society begins to destroy itself from within because of the potency of its own disease, which is overwhelming it. Le Guin is saying here that it is a society that not only promotes the most negative facets of the human personality, but that it is in a state of continuous suspicion and unrest in itself and therefore it feeds upon itself in its disease. Thus the society based on destructive traits and activities eventually destroys not only those in its immediate vicinity, but itself as well. The society that lives primarily in peace with others and within itself, like that of the Valley people, however, maintains itself and its values, and it grows and expands, within, as well as without.

Stone Telling, a daughter of the Valley people for fifteen years, with her people's ideas of freedom, responsibility, and equality, finds herself powerless in a highly stratified society, the daughter of a Condor and dirt. It is through her eyes that the reader sees the Condor people, and through her account of their society that the reader comes to see something of his own society from a fresh viewpoint, through new eyes. For Le Guin makes it quite clear in places that the Condor society is an analogy of our own militaristic western society. Indeed, at times the account almost seems an allegory. But there are many external differences between the two societies, even if the fundamental

structures are rather similar, and thus Le Guin avoids the essentially didactic nature of the allegory.

Le Guin exposes and criticizes the militaristic society in *Home* through her direct comparison between it and the pacifistic, anarchical Valley community. Early in the novel, when the child North Owl (Stone Telling's "first" name) first sees the Condor soldiers of her father, she says:

. . I was not sure that the men there were human beings. They all dressed alike and looked alike, like a herd of some kind of animal, and they did not speak any word I knew. Whenever they came near my father they would slap their forehead, or sometimes kneel down in front of him as if they were looking at his toes. I thought they were crazy men, very stupid, and that my father was the only real person among them.

The language used in this passage is important. Stone Telling's first impression of these men is that they are like animals. They dress alike and do not act or look like human beings in the Valley do. It is her first experience with the conformity necessary in a military hierarchy. Furthermore, the reference to animals has far-reaching reverberations, for it is six years later that she learns that Condors consider all non-elite Condors or farmers, "animals". Her perception in this passage is the reverse of that of the Condors; but whereas for her this observation remains *only* an observation, the Condors push their perception of non-Condors to a practical and frightening extreme In their perception of others as only animals, they are freed of any human responsibility towards them and need not treat them as anything other than the lowliest of animals.

The term "animal", applied to humans, takes on further implications when Le Guin makes it clear that for the Valley people many animals, including the herd animals like sheep and goats to which Stone Telling compares the soldiers, are considered "people", and a distinction is made between human and other people when necessary. A Valley family is frequently numbered according to all its people, so that when Stone Telling returns from the City, she says her family includes her mother and five sheep. Thus, in the holistic Valley perception of life, all creatures are an integral part of the greater whole, which is life, or being. Humans are a part of this whole, but only one part, and must share the world with all others, in harmony with them, killing out of necessity, never pleasure. This attitude is completely alien, of course, to the hierarchical and exclusivist Condors, who believe that all the world exists only for their use and profit, life in general having no intrinsic value in itself. The Condors feel that they have no relationship to the rest of the world except that of their domination over it: "The Condor people seem to have been unusually self-isolated; their form of communication with other peoples was through aggression, domination, exploitation, and enforced acculturation". Consequently, the word "hontik" suggests both "animal" and "dirt", meaning that the *hontik* are as non-human and unimportant as animals or dirt to the elite. Of course, even dirt and rocks are part of the whole as perceived by the Valley people, and both are treated as sacredly as any other part of the people's teeming, living, holy world. These fundamentally spiritual perceptions of the world indicate the deep differences between the two peoples, their perceptions of each other and their relationships with the world about them.

The other word that is significant in the passage quoted earlier is "crazy". The Valley people view the Condors as "crazy" or "sick" or men "with their heads on backwards". In Valley society, only children play at games of war and hunting. Full-grown men who are hunters are considered adolescent, refusing to don the maturity of adulthood. Most of the meat-hunting for the towns is done by male adolescents, who usually take on some respectable trade when they become men. Thus the Valley people dismiss the Condors as children playing games, albeit dangerous ones, as they do the men who, under the Condor influence, form the short-lived Warrior Lodge. However, it is principally in terms of sickness or insanity that the Valley people view the Condor: "The people of the Condor, those men who have come here from that people, are sick. Their heads are turned backwards We have let people with the plague come into our house". Le Gum herself, in a direct address to the reader, points out the difference between the Valley view of the power structure and its mate, war, and our own (which, she argues, is primarily the same as the Condors'): "To this I think the people of the Valley might have an answer, along the lines of 'Very sick people tend to die of their sickness,' or 'Destruction destroys itself.' This answer however, involves a reversal of our point of view. What we call strength it calls sickness, what we call success it calls death".

It is clear that the Valley people would have joined with other free peoples in their area to fight against the Condor if they had had to, to stop the spreading of the disease which breeds only more war and death. However, the overall desire was to cure or "quarantine", rather than to fight The natural and non-violent method is always preferred. However, if there had been no choice, they were prepared to fight. Fortunately, the Condors destroy themselves before such a battle ever engages* Le Guin has worked through the results of an armed confrontation between pacifistic peoples and trained military groups elsewhere in her writings, and obviously, she is still not completely comfortable with a such a confrontation and its seemingly inevitable result. Consequently, in *Home,* she concentrates on revealing the differences between the two groups through simple juxtaposition, thus avoiding the necessity of an armed conflict

However, fighting in general and a society based on conflict are considered essentially weak by the Valley people: "The weak follow weakness, and I was a child; I followed my father;... ", Stone Telling says early in the story Those who seek or exercise power are considered fundamentally weak because such external and imposed power is unbalanced, and does not draw from the power inherent in the harmonious participation in being, as Stone Telling says: "So I first felt the great energy of the power that originates in unbalance, ... ".

A power that does not proceed from balance cannot lead to wholeness of being, either for the individual or the society. This power, therefore, derives from "outside the world", as Stone Telling says repeatedly throughout the novel. Thus their pursuit of power places the Condor people as a group outside the world of being, wholeness, and harmony. Those who participate largely in being have their own kind of power, an internal power that seeks not to dominate but to be given in guidance, truth, or whatever is needed: " .. but Obsidian of Ounmalin stood forward to speak. She was the only person in the nine towns at that time called by the name of her House, the best-known

of all dancers of the Moon and Blood, unmarried, single-sexed, a person of great power".

Because a power structure cannot admit of true freedom, one of the major differences between the two groups is that of freedom. A society based on power must move away from freedom, to stratification, intolerance, and inflexibility. Thus Terter Abhao, Stone Telling's father, refuses to help in the family garden plot when he stays in the village, because he is not a *tyon,* he is a Condor commander. He is unable to let go his position and status, even in a place where they are meaningless He is not flexible within, nor is he flexible or free outside of himself. He leaves the Valley when he gets his orders. He has no choice. He must do what he is told, so unlike the Valley people, who come and go as they please, doing what they desire whenever they desire it, although these desires are schooled to consider, to some extent, the community and individuals around them. In the City, Stone Telling finds that the women are penned indoors like animals and have no real freedom of movement, being unable to go outside except with permission from the men. But the men, the elite, the Condors themselves, are in truth no freer And they, like the women, servants, and slaves, live in fear and distrust, never knowing from day to day where blame or disfavor might fall, ending power, position, or even life.

Just as there is no freedom in the Condor society, there is also no participation in the decision-making process. All decisions are dictated by the One Condor, headman of the people. His advisors may suggest certain paths to take, but the ultimate decision rests with him. Furthermore, each advisor is in or out of favor with the One Condor according to the One Condor's feelings or desires at any time. Of course, no woman, *tyon,* or *hontik* ever has any input into what is decided. Le Guin sets up this situation in opposition to the Valley system, where all people have a right to participate in a meeting, and full agreement is always sought before any decision is carried through.

The idea of wealth is another part of the differences between the two groups. As mentioned earlier, wealth in the Valley is equated with the amount given. A family may feel shame if it must take more than it can give, although there seems to be no stigma attached to taking. There is, however, praise given for giving. In the Condor society, on the other hand, possessions indicate wealth. As Stone Telling traveled to the City with her father, she was amazed that the soldiers always took but never gave. Condor taking extended in every direction - they "[increased] their wealth and power by taking land, life, and service from other people". In the City, Stone Telling found that the same pattern continued. The wealthy were those who *had,* not those who *gave.* And amongst the many possessions a rich man might have, women, slaves, and children would be included. Thus a wife or a male child, like a servant or slave, *belonged* to the man. Le Guin seems to be suggesting here that possession is part of the military mentality, for it is in desiring to possess that one begins to take that which belongs to others. From an uncontrolled desire for wealth first arises theft and then, if condoned on a large scale, war.

One of the first things to be jealously possessed in a possessive society is knowledge. None but the True Condor men are allowed to learn to read. Women, *tyon,* or *hontik*

caught reading are blinded or lose a hand. Consequently, knowledge and its distribution become tools of power in the hierarchy and help ensure the maintenance of that structure, for knowledge is an important part of power. If all have knowledge, all share, to some extent, in power. Hence, education and knowledge are highly valued amongst the Valley people, and those without an adequate education in culture, spiritual knowledge, and a trade are considered poor, as Stone Telling herself is when she first returns from the City. Thus, in the Valley, all share knowledge and all share power. In the City, only a few hold power, and therefore only a few are allowed knowledge.

It is interesting that writing is considered sacred in both cultures. However, the definition of the word "sacred" varies. In the Valley society, where most natural beings and certain other things are considered sacred, and where all participate in and celebrate that sanctity, writing is learned by all. In the City culture, where only power and things of power are considered sacred, only a powerful few have access to writing. Le Guin states explicitly in the chapter "Pandora Converses with the Archivist of the Library of the Madrone Lodge at Wakwaha-Na", that there is a relationship between this withholding of information in the Condor society and that of our own world:

ARC Who controls the storage and the retrieval' To what extent is the material there for anyone who wants and needs it, and to what extent is it "there" only for those who have the information that it is there, the education to obtain that information, and the power to get that education[9] How many people in your society are literate[9] How many are computer-competent[9] How many of them have the competence to use libraries and electronic information storage systems[9] How much real information is available to ordinary, non-government, non-military, non-specialist, non-rich people[1]? What does "classified" mean[9] What do shredders shred? What does money buy[9] In a State, even a democracy, where power is hierarchic, how can you prevent the storage of information from becoming yet another source of power to the powerful - another piston in the great machine[9] ... How do you keep information yet keep it from being the property of the powerful[9]

PAN Through not having censorship. Having free public libraries. Teaching people to read. And to use computers, to plug into the sources. Press, radio, television not fundamentally dependent on government or advertisers. I don't know It keeps getting harder.

Through her juxtaposition of the two societies in *Always Coming Home,* Le Guin presents a powerful and timely anti-war statement. By her technique of examining the internal workings of the war machine through someone intelligent and thoughtful, yet largely innocent of any knowledge of power structures or war, Le Guin reveals the whole idea of the stratified power structure in a new way. For as the reader watches Stone Telling grow up, he becomes used to the Valley perception, strange though it may initially seem. Thus it may be something of a shock when the Condor are introduced and the reader recognizes many of the Condor views as ones with which he is culturally more conversant. So Le Guin acquaints us with the Valley people first, then presents the Condors through the eyes of the Valley people, which makes the Condors initially as alien to the reader as they are to Valley dwellers Thus Le Guin can effectively present

the evils of the militaristic and possessive society while the reader is still sharing Stone Telling's cultural disonentation. The emotional and intellectual effect of such a method is powerful and jolting, causing the very distance Le Guin desires the reader to have from a society all too like his own, so that he can dispassionately and objectively examine the principles and values upon which his own ideas of existence and social structures are based.

Le Guin occasionally sets up a specific correlation between the Condor society and our own, asking the reader to think about the direction of his own society, without setting up a constant one-to-one correlation that might antagonize the reader. And as always in her writings, Le Guin shows the reader what is wrong or unhealthy in his world only to suggest a way out - an alternative society, based on peace and freedom, and yet firmly grounded on possibility, requinng no fundamental changing of the human personality, only a shifting of perspective. *Always Coming Home* is a novel about challenges. It is a novel about possibilities. In a dark time, it is a novel about hope.

Source: J R Wytenbroek, *"Always Coming Home.* Pacifism and Anarchy in Le Gum's Latest Utopia," in *Extrapolation,* Winter, 1987, pp. 330-39

Critical Essay #3

Delany is an award-winning science-fiction writer and editor. In the following review, he praises Always Coming Home *as Le Guin's "most satisfying text among a set of texts that have provided much imaginative pleasure in her 23 years as an author."*

With high invention and deep intelligence, *Always Coming Home* presents, in alternating narratives, poems and expositions, Ursula K. Le Gum's most consistently lyric and luminous book in a career adorned with some of the most precise and passionate prose in the service of a major imaginative vision.

Mrs. Le Guin has created an entire ethnography of the far future in her book It's called a novel. But even to glance at it is to suspect it's more than, or other than, that the oversize trade paperback is boxed with a tape cassette of delicate songs, poems and haunting dance pieces, purportedly recorded on site. Liner notes are included. Are they by the composer, Todd Barton, or by Ursula Le Guin? It's not indicated. I would like to know, since each entry, with its song or poem, is a small story m itself. Margaret Chodos's fine line drawings portray animals, birds, sacred implements and symbols, tools, mountains and houses (but no people); and we have charts, maps, alphabets and a glossary. The book contains a short novel, "Stone Telling," spaced out in three parts, narrated by a woman called Stone Telling; and "Chapter Two" from another novel, "Dangerous People", by Wordriver Along with Marsh, Cowardly Dog and Mote, Wordriver is among the great novelists of the Kesh, the people of the Valley, the subjects of Mrs. Le Guin's pastoral vision In addition there are poems, children's stones, adult folk tales, verse dramas, recipes, essays and a host of Kesh documents. Though the word "Indian" does not appear from one end of the book to the other, the reader is likely to feel after only a few pages that much Native Amencan culture has become a part of this dark, wise, stocky people's way of life. Mrs. Le Guin has given us the imaginary companion volume of "Readings" that might accompany a formal anthropological study.

When did the Kesh live? They haven't, yet The Kesh have access to a daunting computer system. But they live 500 years or more in our future, on the northwestern coast of what's left of a United States gone low-tech and depopulated by toxic wastes and radioactive contamination. The Kesh are an attractive people. One noun serves them for both gift and wealth. To be rich and to give are, for them, one verb They do not share the West's present passion for Ongins and outcomes: their pivotal cultural concept is the hinge, the connecting principle that allows things both to hold together and to move in relation to each other. Their year is marked off by elaborate seasonal dances. Their lives and work are organized in a complicated system of Houses, Lodges, Arts, and Societies.

A minor tribal war occurs between some 30-odd young men of Sinshan, the Kesh village, and a few of the neighboring Pig People. There is a much larger and longer one between the Condor Men and the Valley people that occupies the periphery of "Stone Telling." In the end both wars are shown to share the same small-scale tribal form, for all

their real deaths, real suffering, and real shame But they are very different from the technological megawars of our century.

The emotional high point, for me, was the transcription of a Kesh play, "Chandi," a retelling of the biblical tale of Job A society in which such a tale is important cannot be a simple Utopian construct: a Job, (or a Chandi) - that most anti-utopian of myths - reminds us too strongly that as long as culture is fitted against nature, along whatever complex curve, the best of us may slip into the crack to be crushed by unhappy chance. The Chandi play is followed by a luminous meditation on a scrub-oak ridge by Mrs. Le Guin's ironic alter ego, Pandora - giver of all gifts, mother of all afflictions, guardian of hope - who, throughout the book, "worries about what she is doing," to the reader's delight and enlightenment.

Mrs. Le Guin has put some expository pieces in a 100-plus-page section called "The Back of the Book." These are among the most interesting, the most beautiful. I suggest going straight to them and reading "What They Wore," "What They Ate," and "The World Dance" before beginning the book proper. They will enhance Stone Telling's tale of her childhood considerably. (By the same token, don't read "The Train" - or you will spoil a pleasant narrative surprise earlier on.)

Grouped between the prose pieces, the 70-odd poems slow up a straight-through reading. Not particularly difficult or particularly bad. But a contemporary reader, for whom poetry is still a high art, and for whom the poet is at once on the margins of society while oriented toward the center of culture, simply finds it hard going through the Kesh's overwhelming poetic saturation. And while we understand the poems as simple surface utterances, at a deeper level, where we expect poems to be meaningful, they don't make much sense. I only wish Mrs. Le Guin had written more prose about the practice of poetry in the Valley with, say, the same energy and vividness she employed to write about the cosmogenic Dance of the World or the Saturnalian Dance of the Moon - two of the book's most spectacular set pieces.

Mrs. Le Guin is among the half-dozen most respected American writers who regularly set their narrative in the future to force a dialogue with the here and now, a dialogue generally called science fiction. She is also a much loved writer. And *Always Coming Home* is a slow, rich read, full of what one loves most in her work: a liberal Utopian vision, rendered far more complex than the term "utopian" usually allows for by a sense of human suffering. This is her most satisfying text among a set of texts that have provided much imaginative pleasure in her 23 years as an author.

Source: Samuel R. Delany, "The Kesri in Song and Story," in *The New York Times Book Review,* September 29, 1985, pp 31, 56.

Adaptations

The first edition of *Always Coming Home* was accompanied by an audio cassette entitled *Music and Poetry of the Kesh.* The music was composed by Todd Barton and set in a tone reminiscent of Native American songs and dances. Barton takes Le Guin's words and brings the Kesh to life. The cassette helps flesh out Pandora's textbook and makes the Kesh seem more real It is an interesting departure for fantasy literature.

Topics for Further Study

Read Merlin Stone's *When God Was a Woman* and Anne Baring and Jules Cashford' s *The Myth of the Goddess* and compare their arguments about the role of religion in the relationship of sexual equality to what Le Guin does with the Kesh and the Condor people. Investigate the idea of whether religion matters in the creation of culture

Investigate the role of technology in the development of modern culture, specifically the environmental movement of the 1980s and 1990s. How do these ideas about technology and the environment compare to the ideologies of the Kesh and the Condor people?

Is Pandora, the editor, a "good" anthropologist? Compare Le Gum's ideas about future archaeology with current theories about how anthropology and archaeology work today

How do the political ideas of the societies in *Always Coming Home* compare to modern political ideas about communism, democracy, socialism, and totalitarian governments?

Define, with examples, matriarchy and patriarchy. Do these systems satisfactorily define the Kesh and the Condor people"

Research the dances, songs, and religions of various tribal societies. How do these cultures compare to the Kesh"? How would you create a chant, choreograph a dance, or perform one of the pieces from *Always Coming Home?*

What Do I Read Next?

Sheri Tepper's *Gate to Women's Country* (1988) deals with a world that has been divided into two women and peaceful men living inside walled cities, and the warriors, banished to forts outside the city walls. It has been this way since an atomic war devastated the planet. These women must give up their sons, brothers, and lovers, yet something is just not quite right. Find out the secret that every Council in every Women's Country town knows and men must never find out.

In a novel similar to Le Guin's *Always Coming Home,* Sheri Tepper envisions a world without technology and deeply withdrawn into the Jun-gian archetypes. *A Plague of Angels* (1993) follows the adventures of Abasio and Ellel as they attempt to prevent a family of power-hungry nobles from reaching the stockpile of nuclear weapons on the moon. Unlike Le Guin, Tepper refuses to give a happy or hopeful ending.

Merlin Stone's *When God Was a Woman* (1974) explores the ancient Goddess worshipping cultures of the Middle East in order to explain how the relationships between women and men in terms of power, job opportunities, social status, and spiritual guilt changed with the introduction of male-dominated religion. Stone suggests that the current model of male-dominated culture is not natural, evolved, or normal. Her discussion of "Tales with a Point of View" is particularly useful in analyzing not only what Le Guin does in *Always Coming Home,* but other literature as well.

The *Silmarillion* by J. R. R. Tolkien was not published until four years after his death in 1973, but it was written over twenty years earlier. Like Le Guin's novel, *Silmarillion* traces the anthropological aspects of Tolkien's Middle Earth. There is no real narrative, but the book is made up of songs, legends, maps, and short narratives that lay the ground work for his more familiar works, *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings.*

Anne Baring and Jules Cashford's *The Myth of the Goddess* (1991) portrays the evolution of the female divinity. They explore how human culture in Europe and the Mediterranean celebrated and worshipped the Goddess from ancient times to the modern era and how her image became merged with the Virgin Mary The development of this mythology and the idea of Coyote in *Always Coming Home* are remarkably similar.

The Left Hand of Darkness by Ursula Le Guin astounded critics and readers alike when it was published in 1969. Here, Le Guin creates a race of people whose gender is not fixed and each individual can choose to change gender at will. The narrator of the novel is a human man who cannot handle or understand how to deal with this race. Le Gum says that her hero is a relatively stupid and shortsighted man because that descnbes most of her audience. *The Left Hand of Darkness* reinforced Le Guin's position as a major name in the world of science fiction and fantasy literature.

Plato's *Timaeus* and *Critias,* both composed in the mid-fifth century BCE, describe the rise and destruction of Atlantis. As one of the first and most influential Utopias, the story of Atlantis has held the imagination of readers and writers for centuries.

You Just Don't Understand. Men and Women in Conversation (1990) launched Debrah Tan-nen's reputation as the pop culture expert on how men and women speak together and to each other Her observations about conversation match Stone Telling's confusion about the Condor language and apply to Pandora's problems with translating the language of the Kesh

Sir Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516), like Plato's "Atlantis" dialogues and Le Guin's novel, sharply criticizes his contemporary society by creating a world in which he controls the truth *Utopia* is presented as an eyewitness account of a "perfect" world. More's satire is more depressing and less hopeful than Le Guin's idealistic novel

Further Study

James Bittner, *Approaches to the Fiction of Ursula K Le Gum,* University of Michigan Research Press, 1984,149 pp A holistic approach to the fiction of Le Gum that does not separate her science fiction from her fantasy Explores all of her major fiction to date in broad terms of visions, praise, myth, and magic.

Robert Crossley, "Pure and Applied Fantasy, or From Faene to Utopia," in *The Aesthetics of Fantasy Literature and Art,* edited by Roger Schlobm, University of Notre Dame Press, 1982, pp 176-91

Compares how fantasy has changed from absolute imagination like "Aladin's Magic Lamp" to more reality based Utopias in the fiction of William Morris, Frank Balm, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and Ursula Le Gum Crossley suggests this is a development that shows a maturity in American literature.

Charles Crow, "Homecoming in the California Visionary Romance," *Western American Literature,* May, 1989, pp. 1-19. Crow explores how descriptions of California differ in the works of John Griffith London, William Cal-lenbach, and Ursula Le Guin Suggests that the different Utopias all see California as the ideal location

Patricia Dooley, review in *Library Journal,* September,1985, p 93.

Unfavorable review of *Always Coming Home* Says the novel is typical of Le Gum's style and manner, but too long and boring for most readers

M J Hardman, "Linguistics and Science Fiction A Language and Gender Short Bibliography," *Women and Language,* Spring, 1999, pp. 47-8

A discussion of a selection of the novels used as texts in a course on language and science fiction taught by Hardman at the University of Florida Novels included works by Nalo Hopkinson, Ursula Le Guin, and Elizabeth Moon The relevance of each novel to the subject matter is included with its bibliographical citation.

Mary Catherine Harper, "Spiraling Around the Hinge-Working Solutions in *Always Coming Home"* in *Old West-New West: Centennial Essays,* edited by Barbara Howard Meldrum, University of Idaho Press, 1993, pp 241-57. Discusses and explores Le Guin's ideas of dualismm terms of time, space, and characterization

W. R. Irwin, "From Fancy to Fantasy Coleridge and Beyond," in *The Aesthetics of Fantasy Literature and Art,* edited by Roger Schlobin, University of Notre Dame Press, 1982, pp. 36-55

Discusses the change in imaginary writing from Coleridge to modern writers Suggests that Coleridge changed the meaning of "imagination" and so opened the doors to fantasy literature

Naomi Jacobs, "Beyond Stasis and Symmetry Lessing, Le Guin, and the Remodeling of Utopia," *Extrapolation,* Spring, 1988, pp 34-45

Compares the narrative techniques and Utopian ideologies in novels by Dons Lessing and Ursula Le Guin

Patricia Lmton, 'The 'Person' in Postmodern Fiction Gibson, Le Guin, and Vizenor," *Studies in American Indian Literatures,* Fall, 1993, pp 3-11

Explores how postmodern authors deal with issues of individuality, self-representation, and relationships with machinery and technology. Linton sees humanity losing a war against technology

Richard Mathews, "Completing the Circle Language, Power, and Vision," in *Fantasy: The Liberation of Imagination,* Simon & Schuster, 1997, pp. 135-151.

Examines Le Guin's trilogy (now four novels) *The Earthsea Series* in terms of language and power. Suggests that Le Gum sees the journey of the mind as important as the physical journey of reaching physical maturity

Francis Molson, "Ethical Fantasy for Children," in *The Aesthetics of Fantasy Literature and Art,* edited by Roger Schlobin, University of Notre Dame Press, 1982, pp 82-104.

Discusses the types of fantasy that contemporary culture finds acceptable for children Suggests that childrens fantasy literature must have clearly defined good and bad characters and situations, that good must win, and that children must respect cultural limits put on them

John Moore, "An Archaeology of the Future Ursula Le Gum and Anarcho-Pnmitivism," *Foundation,* Spring, 1995, pp. 32-9

Assesses Le Guin's theories of anarchy and Utopia.

Shows how her ideas compare to the theories of pnm-ltivism.

Patrick Murphy, "Voicing Another Nature," in *A Dialogue of Voices- Feminist Literary Theory andBakhtin,* edited by Karen Hohne, University of Minnesota Press, 1994, pp 59-82 Explores how various twentieth-century women writers have used nature as a literary device. Murphy then compares these ideas to the literary theories of Mikhail M Bakhtin

Joseph Olander and Martin Greenberg, eds , *Ursula K Le*

Gum, Taphnger Publishing, 1979, 239 pp

A collection of essays on Le Guin's early fiction Various methodologies, literary theories, and critical approaches are used

Richard Patteson, "Le Guin's Earthsea Trilogy The Psychology of Fantasy," in *The Scope of the Fantastic Culture, Biography, Themes, Children's Literature,* edited by Robert Collins and Howard Pearce, Greenwood Press, 1985, pp. 239-48

Explores the psychological aspects of Le Guin's Earthsea Tnlogy. Suggests that describing the interior working of the mind is Le Guin's strongest gift as a writer.

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Project Editor
David Galens

Editorial
Sara Constantakis, Elizabeth A. Cranston, Kristen A. Dorsch, Anne Marie Hacht, Madeline S. Harris, Arlene Johnson, Michelle Kazensky, Ira Mark Milne, Polly Rapp, Pam Revitzer, Mary Ruby, Kathy Sauer, Jennifer Smith, Daniel Toronto, Carol Ullmann

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Data Capture
Beverly Jendrowski

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Imaging and Multimedia
Randy Bassett, Dean Dauphinais, Robert Duncan, Leitha Etheridge-Sims, Mary Grimes, Lezlie Light, Jeffrey Matlock, Dan Newell, Dave Oblender, Christine O'Bryan, Kelly A. Quin, Luke Rademacher, Robyn V. Young

Product Design
Michelle DiMercurio, Pamela A. E. Galbreath, Michael Logusz

Manufacturing
Stacy Melson

For more information, contact
The Gale Group, Inc
27500 Drake Rd.
Farmington Hills, MI 48334-3535
Or you can visit our Internet site at
http://www.gale.com

Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Novels for Students (NfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, NfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of NfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of NfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in NfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by NfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

NfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Novels for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Novels for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Novels for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from NfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from NfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Novels for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

Editor, Novels for Students
Gale Group
27500 Drake Road
Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535