

The Left Hand of Darkness Study Guide

The Left Hand of Darkness by Ursula K. Le Guin

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Introduction

The basic principle of *The Left Hand of Darkness* is one that started in Ursula K. Le Guin's first novel in 1966 and runs through several of her early works: that of the interplanetary expansion started by the first race of humanity on the planet Hain and expanded across the universe, forming the League of All Worlds, eventually expanding to the eightythree-world collective called the Ekumen. This novel takes place in the year 4870 and concerns an envoy, Genly Ai, who is on a planet called Winter ("Gethen" in the language of its own people) to convince the citizens to join the Ekumen. Winter is, as its name indicates, a planet that is always cold, and its citizens are neither female nor male: they only have gender identities or sexual urges once a month. These conditions have affected the ways that civilizations on Winter have developed, with the most obvious effect being that there has never been a war on the planet. There are, however, arcane rules of politics and diplomacy that the envoy must learn in order to survive. His fortune changes quickly, according to what political faction is in power at the time in the country he is residing in: in one country, for instance, the Prime Minister arranges an audience with the king for him, but the next day the Prime Minister is exiled for treason; in another he has trouble determining which factions among the thirty-three Heads of Districts support him and which want to use him to gain political power. The struggle of Genly Ai as he tries to understand the ways of these people and survive on this hostile planet gives Le Guin the chance to explore what life would be like without the dualities, such as summer and winter or male and female, that form our way of thinking: the book's title comes from a Gethen poem, which begins, "Light is *The Left Hand of Darkness* □ " This book received the most prestigious awards given to science fiction writing: a Hugo Award in 1969 and a Nebula Award in 1970.



Plot Summary

In Karhide: Chapters 1-5

Genly Ai, a somewhat naive young black man from Terra, or Earth, is an envoy from the Ekumen, an organization of more than eighty worlds, representing 3,000 countries, spanning one hundred light years from border to border, whose purpose is to develop commerce, communications and, possibly, mystical unity. Ai's mission is to convince the country of Karhide on the distant planet called Gethen to join the Ekumen. His story of that mission consists mainly of his own observations with interpolated chapters of Karhide tales and myths, Ekumen data, sayings from Orgoreyn (Karhide's neighbor), and excerpts from the diary of Therem Harth rem ir Estraven, prime minister of Karhide to mad King Argaven XV.

The planet Gethen is called Winter by the Ekumen because it is in the grip of an Ice Age. Ai is constantly challenged by the unrelenting cold, by the Karhide custom of *shifgrethor*, and by the androgynous nature of all the people who populate Winter. In Ai's dealings with Estraven, he fails to understand *shifgrethor*, a method of saving face by avoiding confrontation. When Estraven is exiled, thanks to his rival Tibe who convinces the King that Estraven is a traitor, Ai fails to understand the reason. He has an interview with the King and discovers that Estraven had been in favor of the Ekumen, although Ai thought he'd been against it. Through future miscommunications and clarifying explanations concerning Estraven, Ai eventually understands *shifgrethor*.

Estraven's androgynous nature further obscures him to Ai. Although all of Winter's androgynes are referred to as "he," the fact is they are neither "he" nor "she" until they enter *kemmer*, a state of estrus lasting a few days a month, analogous to a woman's cycle. Then, depending on the chemistry between partners, one will develop as a male, the other as a female. The same person can be a child-bearing mother to some children and a father to others. No wonder Ai is confused. However, the people of Winter are confused by Ai and can't believe everyone in the Ekumen is either a male, like Ai, or a female. Ai is considered a pervert, a creature always in *kemmer*. The androgynous biology, which eliminates sexual issues of male dominance and female dependency due to child bearing and rearing, is the underpinning for the culture and politics on Winter, a planet that has no word for war and no experience of it. Yet, despite this, the two countries of Karhide and Orgoreyn seem to be on the brink of war over disputed territory. This gives Ai's peaceful purpose and patient approach elements of tension and timeliness.

In Orgoreyn: Chapters 6-14

Estraven is exiled as a traitor for putting the planet's good over the country's good by wanting to give the disputed territory to neighboring Orgoreyn. He has only a limited time to leave Karhide under pain of death. He must race to the Orgoreyn border where



he ends up losing his identification and being exploited as a factory worker. Finally he is discovered by some Commensals, politicians of high status somewhat like senators, and introduced into the socialist politics of Orgoreyn. Ai also travels to Orgoreyn. Since the King has rejected his proposal to join the Ekumen, he thinks perhaps the neighboring country will be interested. Orgoreyn is considerably different from Karhide, a bureaucracy compared to a monarchy; Orgoreyn's Yomesh religion denies the dark yet is an offspring of Karhide's Handdara which espouses both light and dark for "[I]ight is *The Left Hand of Darkness* "; Orgoreyn's people are supposedly more progressive and yet they live under a corrupt political system with the darkness of secret police and concentration camp prisons and, on the whole, have less humane values than the people of Karhide. Although Estraven tries to warn Ai of the shifting politics here, again Ai doesn't understand. He ends up being betrayed by a politician with ties to the secret police and is taken away in a truck with other unfortunates to Kundershaden Prison. All are naked, freezing, and hungry. To make matters worse, the technology here isn't even up to present-day standards in the United States, although the point of this is that Winter's people have respected the ecology with each advance. Still, the truck moves slowly, lengthening the torture. Once imprisoned, Ai has little to look forward to until he is rescued through the daring of Estraven. Unfortunately, the road back to Karhide is over the Gobrin Ice.

The Gobrin Ice and Back to Karhide: Chapters 15-20

Ai and Estraven battle the snow and ice, glacier and crevasse, wind and night. Through cooperation, for Ai is physically superior to Estraven while Estraven has superior survival skills, the two become closer. Ai realizes that while Estraven is a forced exile, he himself has chosen to exile himself from his family, friends, and, in fact, several generations by being a space traveler. Ai is 127 earth years old, but because of timejumping is not quite 30.

Ai teaches Estraven telepathy, or mindspeak. Estraven hears Ai's voice as that of his dead brother Arek to whom he swore *kemmering*. Although incest between siblings is not taboo, they are forbidden to swear allegiance for life. Ai begins to understand Estraven better. When Estraven goes into *kemmer*, although both avoid a sexual relationship, Ai sees the full womanly side of Estraven and finally understands his friend as a complete person, and, by extension, understands the androgynous people of Gethen.

When the two return to Karhide, the exiled Estraven is discovered, and as he skis to the Orgoreyn border, he skis straight into the guards who shoot him, a seeming suicide. This too is a Karhide taboo. Estraven dies in Ai's arms asking Ai to clear his name. Ai is successful in convincing the King to join the Ekumen, but when the crew from the spaceship alight, Ai is repulsed by their overt sexuality. In the final chapter he visits Estraven's family who are distraught because Estraven is still considered a traitor. Ai had not cleared his name as he promised, because he didn't want to jeopardize his mission, Gethen's entry into the Ekumen, a mission for which Estraven gave his life. However, Estraven's son Sorve by his dead brother shows the same kind of curiosity as

his father, the kind which characterizes human progress: he asks Ai to tell him about other worlds and other lives he has seen.



Chapter 1, A Parade in Erhenrang

Chapter 1, A Parade in Erhenrang Summary

"Left Hand of Darkness" opens with a report from Genly Ai, First Mobile, who is stationed on the planet Winter, which is called 'Gethen' by the natives. It begins on the 44th diurnal of the year 1491 in Erhenrang, the capital of the nation of Karhide. Genly Ai participates in a parade to celebrate the completion of the Arch of River Gate, which completes the New Road and River Port of Erhenrang, an operation that took five years and will ostensibly define the reign of King Argaven XV.

As part of the ceremony, the king mortars the joints of the Arch's keystone with a pinkish cement. Genly learns from Therem Harth rem ir Estraven, the Prime Minister or "King's Ear" and one of the most important men in the country, that the mortar is made of ground bones mixed with blood. In the old days, masons used human bones and blood, but they use the blood of animals now, Estraven tells him.

For the first time, Genly is hot on Winter, as he is dressed in layers of clothing for the occasion. The rain has stopped, and the sun has come out. Genly is bored, as the significance of the occasion is lost on him. The king's cousin, Pemmer Harge rem ir Tibe, pushes his way through to Estraven, and it is clear that there is animosity between the two. The rain begins again, and the king finishes and descends the gangplank. Half an hour later, it is snowing.

Estraven invites Genly to supper that evening, and though he surprised, Genly accepts. Genly then leaves and walks amongs the crowd toward his lodgings. A few blocks away, he becomes aware of Tibe walking alongside him. They speak for a while, and it is clear that Genly does not trust Tibe. Tibe spots his car and begs his leave, saying that he's due at the King's House. After having dinner at his "island," the word used to describe the apartment-boardinghouse buildings that house much of the urban population, Genly goes to supper at the Palace. Karhidiers eat four meals a day: breakfast, lunch, dinner and supper.

Inside the Palace, which is a sort of walled city, Genly goes to Estraven's house. They drink hot beer by the fire after supper, and Estraven tells Genly that he can no longer act on his behalf with the king. Genly has come to rely on Estraven, and he is angry because he doesn't understand why Estraven suddenly is withdrawing his support. Genly is to have an audience with the king the following day, and his mission is bring about an alliance between Gethen and the Ekumen of Known Worlds, a league of about 83 planets. The gongs in Remny Tower strike Sixth Hour, which is midnight, and Genly uses it as an excuse to take his leave.



Chapter 1, A Parade in Erhenrang Analysis

The themes in LeGuin's "The Left Hand of Darkness" are numerous and varied, the most obvious of which is sexual ambiguity and how it affects everything on the planet from general society to the non-existence of war. Ironically, even though the inhabitants of Gethen are androgynous, when an Earth man views them, their lack of sexual identity, or the duality of it, largely defines how he relates to them. In other words, even in the absence of gender, gender defines Genly's relationship with the Gethenians. Journey and discovery, central themes in science fiction, are present throughout the book, as are themes of love, religion, spirituality, betrayal and fear of the unknown. Love and betrayal are the two most evident themes and recur throughout "The Left Hand of Darkness."

In the opening passage of the book, Genly admits to not being sure whose story this really is, and to that end LeGuin has used multiple points of view and voices to tell the story. Each chapter is told either by Genly, Estraven or an omniscient narrator, the latter usually relating a Gethenian myth or tale.

Though Genly often speaks of the large amount of time he has spent in Karhide, which is a year at this point, Genly's demonstrates his ignorance in this first chapter. Firstly, when Tibe comes to speak with Estraven Genly feels that it has nothing to do with him when in actuality it has everything to do with him, his mission and his safety. Secondly, Genly reveals that he does not trust Estraven, who is possibly the one person he can trust and the only person on Gethen who believes Genly. Their having dinner together, and the subsequent discussion further indicates how little Genly realizes what is happening around him, and it foreshadows the integral role the relationship between these Genly and Estraven will play in the novel. Estraven tries to impress upon Genly, in the best way he can while maintaining the shifgrethor (pride, saving of face) of them both, that Genly is in grave danger.

Weather is important both metaphorically and literally in the book. The perpetually cold, freezing world of Gethen is the embodiment of isolation, a feeling Genly often expresses because he is the lone human on an alien planet. Similarly, the cold weather is integral in shaping the people and society of Gethen.



Chapter 2, The Place Inside the Blizzard

Chapter 2, The Place Inside the Blizzard Summary

An old Karhidish tale tells of how, about 200 years ago in the Hearth of Shath, two brothers vowed kemmering to each other. Incest is permitted, but not between full brothers to keep kemmer after childbirth and the Lord of Shath commands them to break their vow of lifelong kemmering. One of the two then commits suicide, and the people of the Hearth rise up against the remaining brother, blaming him for the other's suicide and driving him out of the Domain. Before leaving, he lays a curse upon the Hearth and is pursued, but he outruns his would-be murderers to the Pering Ice, which is contiguous with the Gobrin Ice of Orgoreyn. For two days he walks on the ice without food or shelter.

On the second night the brother lies down, on he wakes up on the third morning to find his hands and feet frostbitten. He crawls on his knees and elbows, and eventually the sun comes out and the snow stops falling and he can use his limbs again. The brother is suddenly in a field of snowgrass and grove of white trees.

Getheren takes off his gloves. His hands are white like the snow, but they are no longer frostbitten. A naked, all-white man comes to him. It is Hode, his brother and kemmering, who tells Getheren that he has is inside the blizzard where people who commit suicide dwell. Getheren is frightened and refuses to stay, saying that it is Hode who broke their vow. Hode moves quickly to Getheren and grasps him by the left hand, but Getheren breaks free and runs away to the south. The snow suddenly begins again, and once again Getheren only can crawl. On the ninth day since arriving on the Ice, the people of Orhoch Hearth find Getheren. He is starving and snow blind, but he has not other damage other than his left hand, which is frozen and has to be amputated.

When Getheren is well, he leaves Orhoch for the southern lands, traveling under the name Ennoch. When he is an old man, Getheren meets a traveler from his own country and asks how Shath Domain fares. The traveler replies that nothing prospers there anymore and that all the people are ill. Getheren then reveals his identity and tells the man to tell them that Getheren takes back his name and shadow. A few days later Getheren dies. The traveler takes Getheren's words back to Shath, and from then on everything prospers.

Chapter 2, The Place Inside the Blizzard Analysis

"The Left Hand of Darkness" is comprised of several such chapters of myths and legends. This chapter illustrates the importance of kemmering on Gethen and love. It is a forbidden love, and one that ends in tragedy. It also speaks of the Pering and Gobrin Ice, the great vastness that plays an important role in the lives of Estraven and Genly, two central characters.



Chapter 3, The Mad King

Chapter 3, The Mad King Summary

Despite feeling that everything has suddenly gone wrong, the next day Genly Ai meets with the king. As the First Mobile, Genly is the sole representative of the Ekumen, as they believe that given time, one voice speaking truth is a greater force than fleets and armies. In the anteroom prior to meeting the king, Genly hears on the radio a proclamation that Estraven is to be stripped of all his titles and exiled from the kingdom for committing treason.

Genly tries to convince the king that he is an envoy from another planet. Genly tells of how, about 40 years earlier, a team of Investigators came to the planet to observe it and its people. Genly opens a case that contains his ansible communicator and various pictures. The king is incredulous when he sees the picture of a female from Cime, and he deems the Ekumen a society of perverts. Gethenians are asexual, taking on either sex only during the mating cycle, known as *kemmer*.

Genly uses the communicator to demonstrate that he is neither a trickster nor a charlatan. He asks the king if he has a message to send to the Prime World, Hain. A journey from Gethen to Hain takes 67 years, but communication is instantaneous. At the king's behest, Genly types out his question, "What makes a man a traitor?" The response: "I do not know what makes a man a traitor. No man considers himself a traitor; this makes it hard to find out." The king, however, is not convinced, and he asks Genly to leave.

As Genly walks away through the palace he realizes that he has failed, but he is more concerned with what Estraven's part in all of this has been. Genly is inundated by questions, and he thinks of going to Karhide's rival, the nation Orgoreyn. Once he is there, however, he realizes it is unlikely he can return to Karhide. He decides to first go East to the Fastnesses to gather information.

Chapter 3, The Mad King Analysis

The tone here is one of despondence and disbelief. Estraven's sudden about face confuses Genly, and when, just before his audience with the king, Genly learns of Estraven's fate, he is flabbergasted. Themes of fear and betrayal are also present. The king feels betrayed by Estraven, as does Genly, and the king and Genly fear each other for different reasons. After meeting with the king, Genly feels his mission has so far been a failure, and he is not sure what to do next. Although Genly misunderstands the reasoning behind it, he does at last realize that Estraven had been urging him to get away from Karhide.

Genly comes across as impetuous and quick to panic and jump to conclusions. He is young and naïve. This chapter also introduces the androgynous nature of the

Gethenians, an important fact that bears on almost everything in the book, from Genly's interactions with the Gethenians to their own social advancement.



Chapter 4, The Nineteenth Day

Chapter 4, The Nineteenth Day Summary

An East Karhidish story:

Lord Berosty rem ir Ipe comes to Thangering Fastness to request a Foretelling. He asks the Weaver Odren what day he will die. After the gathering, Odren tells Lord Berosty that he will die on Odstreth, the nineteenth day of any month. Lord Berosty wants to know in what month and in how many years he will die, so he runs into the circle and grabs the Weaver by the throat. The Weaver does not answer, so Lord Berosty returns to Charuthe, the third Domain of his family.

Lord Berosty shuts himself in the Hearth-Tower and stays there for ten months, not coming out for anything. Herbor of the Geganner clan is his kemmering by love and vow and sets off to Thangering Fastness to seek a Foretelling. Herbor has nothing of value to give, so he offers his life. Odren replies that his life is of no value to them, but he relents when Herbor falls to his knees and pleads and says that the question is not for him, but for Ashe Berosty.

Odren says they will ask no price, but that there is always a price. The asker pays what he has to pay. Herbor asks how long Ashe Berosty rem ir Ipe will live, hoping that the answer will placate Berosty and set Berosty's mind at ease. Odren replies, "Longer than Herbor of Geganner!"

Herbor returns to Charuthe and tells Berosty the answer. Berosty is enraged that Herbor asked *how long* instead of *when*, and he raises a great table of red stone and strikes Herbor, crushing his skull. Berosty then goes mad and is kept under lock and key. A month later he hangs himself on Odstreth, the nineteenth day of the month of Thern.

Chapter 4, The Nineteenth Day Analysis

As is the case with the first Gethenian myth, this one revolves around the themes of love and betrayal. Herbor, who acts out of love, is betrayed and killed by Berosty because Berosty does not get the answer he wants. This chapter, among other things, is a commentary on obsession. A corollary can be drawn between Berosty's obsession with his death and in so doing does not *live* and Genly's obsession with his mission and in doing so can't see what is actually happening around him.



Chapter 5, The Domestication of Hunch

Chapter 5, The Domestication of Hunch Summary

Genly sets off from the New Port as a passenger on a truck-like landboats on the first day of the first month of summer. He has been helped by landlady, and he has sold another of his rubies, which are prized in Gethen as on Earth, to sustain him during his time on the planet. The going is slow, a steady 25 miles per hour, and after four days of travel, staying in inns for the first part of the journey, and later, sleeping in the cab, they arrive in Rer, 1,100 miles from Karhide.

Genly stays the night in an overpriced inn and then sets out for Otherhord, an ancient Fastness not far from Rer. At noon, he reaches a forest inhabited by the Handdarata, having come to find the Foretellers and find out exactly what they do. As Genly makes his way along the path he realizes that an entire village is scattered about in the forest. He comes across Goss, a young Indweller who takes Genly to Faxe, the Weaver. Genly remains in Otherhord for a time and assists in the communal work of field labor, gardening, woodcutting and maintenance.

Goss tells Gently that Genly's question to the Foretellers can concern anything and be phrased as he likes. But Goss warns that if the question is unanswerable it will be refused. Goss then tells Genly about the Lord of Shorth who, a few thousand years before, had forced the Foretellers to answer the question, "What is the meaning of life?" After six days and nights, the Celibates were catatonic, the Zanies dead and the Pervert clubbed the Lord of Shorth to death.

Though Genly is still skeptical, he pays two rubies and on Onnetherhad, the 18th of the month, he is allowed to enter the circle and ask his question before the nine. Genly asks whether Gethen will be a member of the Ekumen of Known Worlds within five years. After the ceremony, during which Genly feels as if he might go mad, he is given his answer, "Yes."

Later, while Genly is strolling under the hemmen-trees on the slopes above the Fastness, he asks Faxe if he will participate in mind-speech, something that Genly knows how to do. Faxe declines.

Chapter 5, The Domestication of Hunch Analysis

Genly finds the Foretellers spoken of in the previous chapter. It is the first "journey within a journey" that he takes on Gethen. Genly's impatience with the speed of the land-boats illustrates an intrinsic part of his character. He is impatient with the slow progress of his mission, and he thinks that the Ekumen is prepared to wait hundreds of years for Gethen to join the Ekumen. On a personal level, perhaps because of his own pride at wanting to be the one to get it done, Genly wants things to move more swiftly. He does, however, find some joy in the slow-paced lifestyle on Otherhord.



In Genly's rush to complete his mission, he is blind to what is happening around him. He maintains a distance and does not relate to anyone on a personal level. If Genly continues in this manner, it is clear that his mission is doomed.

Themes of mysticism, spirituality and religion are present here, and although the reader does not yet know the veracity of the prophecy, the answer of "yes" bodes well for Genly's mission. It foreshadows a change in his fortunes and that change on Gethen will come about in Genly's lifetime. Through all of the exposition about spirituality it is made clear to Genly that Faxe tells him that there really is only one question that can be answered, which is that every living being eventually will die. Faxe also says that the uncertainty of life makes life possible.



Chapter 6, One Way in to Orgoreyn

Chapter 6, One Way in to Orgoreyn Summary

Estraven speaks of his exile. The cook wakes him and tells him that a runner from the King's House has arrived. On learning the news of his exile, Estraven acts quickly and writes to his old kemmering, Ashe, explaining how he might go about getting the profit from certain valuable things to keep for their sons' use. If anyone is caught helping or dealing with Estraven, that person will be sent to jail or stripped of all possessions and status so as not to endanger any of his friends. Estraven sets off west through the city as quickly as possible.

Estraven cannot use conveyances, for anyone aiding his passage would also be liable to punishment, so he sets out on foot with as much food as the cook could set out for him that morning. At dusk on the third day, he comes to Kuseben. At the gate, he sees Ashe, his kemmering of seven years with whom he has two sons. Ashe had gone to Orgny Fastness three years before and is now a Celibate of the Foretellers.

Estraven ignores Ashe and continues toward the wharves. Ashe tries to speak to Estraven and give him a small packet. Estraven shouts at Ashe to protect him, but it hurts Ashe emotionally and Estraven continues on. At the harbor it becomes apparent that Tibe has sent hirelings to stall Estraven. If Estraven remains within the realm after three days, he will be killed. His options limited, Estraven steals a rowboat and is making his way out of the harbor when he is struck by a sonic gun, causing him to feel weak, drained and have trouble breathing. Estraven sees two figures on the pier and knows that they will come out into the harbor to finish him off. He tries to row further out into the Gulf but cannot, and he is eventually picked up by a harbor patrol ship. The captain of the ship refuses to listen to anyone's orders but the king's, so against the radio commands of Tibe's men and because it is not yet Sixth Hour, the captain takes Estraven across the Gulf of Charisune and drops him ashore at Shelt Port in Orgoreyn.

Estraven collapses somewhere in the streets of Shelt and awakes in hospital. Here, an Inspector wants to know Estraven's name and see his papers, but Estraven doesn't have his papers, belongings, coat, shoes or cash because he was mugged while he lay unconscious in the street. A physician standing nearby hears his name, Therem Harth, as Estraven would not use his land-name, and ensures that he is allowed to stay in the hospital for five days, after which he is granted permanent residence pending his registry as a digit in the Township of Mishnory.

Estraven works his way to Mishnory as a landboat loader, and he finds work in the ice-houses packing fish in the Markets of South Mishnory. The new Alien Registry Law, however, invalidates his registration, and he loses his job. For the next two weeks Estraven survives on the money his old work mates lend him and fish they steal for him. He is eventually re-registered.



One day Commensal Yegey visits Estraven at the washhouse of Estraven's lodging and tells Estraven to come with him. Estraven is made Yegey's "secretary" and is re-registered as a dependent. On the rainy evening of the last day of summer Estraven meets with Yegey and Obsle, Commensal of the Sekeve District. They speak of the dire trouble that faces both Karhide and Orgoreyn now that Tibe is Prime Minister. They also discuss Genly Ai, and both men seem far more receptive to the idea that Genly is an envoy from another world. Genly Ai, they reveal, has requested permission to enter the Commensality.

Chapter 6, One Way in to Orgoreyn Analysis

For the first time in the book, events unfold through the eyes of Estraven. The tone, as one would expect of a different narrator, changes too. Love and betrayal are frequently occurring themes in the novel, and here, as in the Gethenian myths, is another incident of forbidden love. It is clear that Estraven still has feelings for Ashe, but he cannot associate with him because that would breach the terms of his exile and condemn Ashe to imprisonment. The theme of fear, too, recurs in this chapter, as Estraven learns that Tibe truly means to be rid of him once and for all.

Estraven reveals himself a shrewd, canny man. Even stripped of all his power, he convinces those in Orgoreyn whom he distrusts the least to allow Genly into Orgoreyn. In other words, he still has a part to play in all of this. Estraven is no traitor, but he has no loyalty to Karhide or Orgoreyn because his loyalty lies with the whole planet. Estraven sees the bigger picture. Estraven even says at one point that his gift is forethought.

Through Estraven's telling of events, we see that he is still very much on Genly's side, although earlier events, such as the king telling Genly that Estraven recently has been advising him against Genly, alluded to the contrary. Estraven paves the way for Genly to get into Orgoreyn.



Chapter 7, The Question of Sex

Chapter 7, The Question of Sex Summary

The field notes of one of the first Investigators, Ong Tot Oppong, describe the androgyny of Gethenians. Their sexual cycle averages between 26 and 28 days. For 21 to 22 days the individual is sexually inactive, or in *somer*. But by the 23rd day the individual enters *kemmer*, where the sexual impulse is strong. Only when the subject finds a partner do the hormonal secretions establish one as the male or female, and the genitals change accordingly. This is not set in stone, however. A Gethenian may father several children and be the mother to others. If the partner adopting the female role is impregnated, hormonal secretion continues for the 8.4-month gestation period.

Ong notes that the custom of vowing kemmering is like a monogamous marriage. The First Mobile, she remarks, must be very self-assured for his or her pride will suffer on this planet. On Winter, they will be judged as a human being and not as male or female, which Ong says is an appalling experience.

Chapter 7, The Question of Sex Analysis

For the first time the reader is given a clear picture of Gethenian physiology. Ong Tot Oppong's notes allow LeGuin to comment on how Gethenians' asexuality affects them that would not be possible through the other voices in the text. The information is presented as fact, not opinion, unless otherwise stated to be so by Ong Tot Oppong. This offers insight into the Gethenians largely uncolored by prejudice. The tone is dry and factual as expected in a report or study. Interestingly, Genly's "story" is actually a report as well, but his tone and style differ markedly. Through this we can see how Genly's naiveté colors his judgement and affects how he deals with events.

Oppong's comments foreshadow Genly's own shortcomings. It is Genly's pride, among other things, that brings about much of the trouble he finds on Gethen.



Chapter 8, Another Way into Orgoreyn

Chapter 8, Another Way into Orgoreyn Summary

Genly Ai spends the summer more as an Investigator than a Mobile, traveling from town to town and between Domains in the land of Karhide, watching and listening. During the month of Kus, Genly lives on the Eastern Coast in a Clan Hearth called Gorinhering. While here, Genly hears a Palace Bulletin over the radio announcing that the king is pregnant. They king already had seven heirs, but none were born from his body. To prevent being stuck in Old Karhide for the rest of the year, Genly must return to the West Fall before the passes of the Kargav are closed. Early in Gor, the first month of autumn, Genly arrives back in Erhenrang, only to find it uncomfortable and unsafe. Argaven had already left for his summer palace and Tibe is in charge in his absence. Contrary to typical Karhidish custom, Tibe speaks on the radio a lot, giving speeches and trying to incite public sentiment. Genly thinks that Tibe is trying to start a war with Orgoreyn.

Genly sends a note to Tibe about the question he had asked and the answer he'd from the Foretellers, but Tibe does not reply. Genly then goes to the Orgota Embassy to request permission to enter Orgoreyn. While waiting for permission, Genly notices how the number of Palace Guards and city police on the street seem to multiply. One evening, Ashe arrives at Genly's Island apartment. Ashe has come to ask Genly to take the money he had salvaged from Estraven's fortune to Estraven, and Genly.

Genly sets off two days later from Karhide on foot because his permission to enter Orgoreyn came sooner than expected. After a week of walking, staying at inns or lodging as a guest (he, like all travelers, is welcomed wherever he goes) on farms where he works sometimes in the fields to repay his hosts, Genly arrives at a bridge on the river Ey. This bridge is the border between the two nations. On the Orgota side, Genly's passport is retained, ostensibly to be returned the next day while he is put up at the Commensal Transient-House for the evening.

Genly falls asleep after supper, but he is soon awakened by explosions and fire. A foray from Passerer, which is on the Karhide side of the border, has attacked Siuwensin. Genly runs into an open field and soon after finds a road and other refugees. He joins them, but without a passport, he, along with the others who are without identification papers, are segregated at a communal farm-center. The next morning his identity is confirmed and by mid-afternoon is on his way to Mishnory in a little car provided him. He reaches Mishnory on the morning of the third day after leaving the center and meets with Commissioner Shusgis

Shusgis, who is a wealthy man, lets Genly stay in one of the apartments in his house, which is an entire island housing servants, clerks and advisers. Genly's room is furnished with an electric heater, a fireplace and numerous furs. Shusgis asks Genly if he is comfortable, something that no one in Karhide has ever asked. Shusgis tells Genly



that people are anxious to meet him, and that evening he is to have supper with Vanake Slose. Genly dines with Commensals and other notables and during the meal notices Estraven. They do not speak much, but Genly feels that it is Estraven, not the others, who have brought him Orgoreyn.

Chapter 8, Another Way into Orgoreyn Analysis

Genly's naiveté is once again demonstrated as he makes his way to Mishnory. Having arrived in Orgoreyn, he is immediately impressed by the seemingly more advanced nature of the people and country. Here, the veneer that LeGuin refers to in this chapter is displayed. Orgoreyn "looks" far more advanced and civilized than Karhide on the surface, but it leaves a lot to be desired underneath as far as personal freedoms are concerned. Genly even says, "I felt as if I had come out of a dark age, and wished I had not wasted two years in Karhide." He does show some personal evolution and insight, however, when at the end of the chapter he says that he cannot help but feel that it is Estraven who has orchestrated his coming to Orgoreyn. Although Genly has grown weary of Karhide, during his travels through the countryside he learns to appreciate and respect the people of Karhide.

Humor, although dotted throughout the text, is displayed categorically here when it is said that the king is pregnant. Although acceptable and normal in Gethenian society, the idea of king being pregnant is so absurd that it's funny to humans. Genly's relenting and taking the money to Estraven is significant because this money later helps Estraven help Genly.



Chapter 9, Estraven the Traitor

Chapter 9, Estraven the Traitor Summary

Another East Karhidish tale:

Long ago, there was a blood feud between the Domain of Stock and the Domain of Estre in Kerm Land over land. While skiing across Icefoot Lake, the heir of the Lord of Estre slides onto rotten ice and falls into the lake. Using a ski, he pulls himself free, but the air is cold and night coming on. The heir has no hope of reaching Estre eight miles, so he sets off toward the village of Ebos. However, he loses his way in a fog. He comes upon a house, and the person there helps Estraven out of his clothes, which are almost frozen over with ice, and puts him between furs, warming his body with his own.

Estraven tells the man that he is Arek of Estre. The man replies that he is Therem of Stok. They are sworn enemies, but they swear kemmering to each other. They spend that night and the following day and night in the hut. The next morning a party arrives from Stok, and knowing Estraven by sight, one of the men stabs him in the throat and chest. Stokven tells the men to take Estraven's body to Estre for burial, but they leave it in the forest for wild beasts to eat.

Back at Stok, Therem asks the men if they did as they were told, and they say yes. Therem, however, says they are lying because they would never have come back from Estre alive. He has them banished. Soon after, Therem leaves, saying that he wishes to spend a year in the Rotherer Fastness.

Some time later, a man arrives in Estre, gives the warder at Estre Gate a bundle saying that this is Therem, the son's son of Estre, and leaves before anyone can think to hold him. The Lord of Estre, seeing his lost son Arek in the child, orders the child to be reared as a son of the hearth. Years later, when Therem is named heir of Estre, his kemmering sons try to ambush him while he is out hunting pesthry. He shoots two of his attackers and kills a third with a knife, and he is badly wounded.

Therem finds his way to a little hut off Icefoot Lake and collapses there in his own blood. The owner of the house cleans him and tends his wounds, and when Therem awakes introduces himself as Therem of Stok. The wounded man replies that he is Therem of Estre. They vow peace between their two houses, and in the morning Stokven is gone and a party from Ebos village arrives to take Estraven home to Estre. Within a year of his death, Estraven ends the old feud and gives half the disputed land to the Domain of Stok. For this, he is called Estraven the Traitor.

Chapter 9, Estraven the Traitor Analysis

Although the names are familiar, the people involved in this myth are most likely ancestors of Estraven, if they even existed at all. The myth takes place before the time



of King Argaven I. Argaven XV is the current ruler of Karhide. This is yet another myth that deals with love and betrayal in similar, yet different forms. Thorem of Stok is betrayed by his men who do not carry out their orders, and Thorem of Estre is betrayed by his brothers who try to kill him.

The love in this fable however, is different from the others in that it ultimately brings about peace, not death or suffering. In a way the fable, which is well known to the people of Karhide, foreshadows Estraven's own disgrace at being branded a traitor.



Chapter 10, Conversations in Mishnory

Chapter 10, Conversations in Mishnory Summary

The next day, Thorem Harth (Estraven), visits Genly at his apartment. Genly feels that Estraven's presence in Orgoreyn is a complication and an embarrassment, and he is hoping to discourage Estraven from future visits. But Estraven stays only long enough for Genly to give him the small packet of money that Ashe gave him, and to, in thanks, offer Genly some advice. He tells Genly that although he has been welcomed in Orgoreyn as he was not in Karhide, he is still a tool and will be used to his own detriment if he is not careful.

In the afternoon Genly has lunch with Commensals Obsle and Yegey, along with other important people of the Thirty-Three. There, they learn that King Argaven's child was born that morning but died within the hour. After lunch, and in stark contrast to Karhide, Genly is asked numerous questions. He hands around the pictures he had brought with. He explains what the Ekumen is and why it wants Gethen to be a part of the alliance and facilitate trade in not only goods, but in technologies, ideas, philosophies, art and medicine. They ask about Genly's ship, which Genly tells them is still in Karhide and most likely in pieces. Upon further questioning, Genly reveals that he can return by having a NAFAL ship sent to pick him up, although it would take 17 years to arrive, or by radioing the Star Ship in orbit around the planet, which would only take days.

After dinner they talk, and Slose wants to make a religion out of Genly, Gaum see him as a sham, but others such as Yegey and Obsle want to communicate with the Stables and bring the ship to Orgota ground because of the prestige it would bring the nation and themselves. On the way home, Genly asks Shusgis what the Sarf, of whom Gaum is ostensibly an open agent, is. Shusgis replies that it is bureau that looks out for false registries, forgeries, unauthorized travel – *trash*, in other words, what the nickname "Sarf" means. In short, Gaum is a member of the secret police that works in the shadows, "running" the country. Genly can't help but feel that despite everything that has happened since arriving in Orgoreyn that is seems to help his mission, something is not quite right. He feels uneasy.

Chapter 10, Conversations in Mishnory Analysis

Genly mentions that although Estraven's disgrace and exile are at least partially his fault, he will not take any responsibility nor feel any guilt for them. This differs markedly from Estraven, who later comes to Genly's aid in part because he feels responsible for Genly's fate, even though it may not be his fault. Genly's act of washing his hands of Estraven is a form of betrayal, although it is not a conscious one. Genly is too naïve at this point to realize what is going on around him, and he does not understand Estraven's motives, or anyone else's for that matter. Despite Estraven's warnings, Genly remains oblivious to the present threat.



Further proof of Genly's naiveté is that Genly, feeling more at ease in Orgoreyn, reveals one important fact that has not in Karhide: he has a ship in orbit around Gethen's sun that can land, relatively speaking, in a moment's notice. Genly's trust in the Commensals is misplaced, and later they will betray him.

Despite the warm welcome and the fact that most of the Commensals seem to believe or want to believe his story, Genly feels that something is amiss. The imagery of rain blurring the city and Genly's comment that Shusgis is somewhat vague around the corners returns once more to the idea of façade and veneer. It is an important concept in the book, and one that Genly fails to understand until it is too late.

The tone, although initially hopeful, changes, and by the end of the chapter Genly is left feeling unsure and despondent once more.



Chapter 11, Soliloquies in Mishnory

Chapter 11, Soliloquies in Mishnory Summary

After receiving Ashe's money, Estraven no longer lives as a dependent, but as a "unit," once more able to support himself. He has been angry at the way Genly had given him the money and deliberately insulted him, yet Estraven feels that Genly accepted his advice despite the manner in which it was given. Estraven thinks this means that Genly must have misunderstood half and not understood the rest of what he had told him that night at his home in the Palace. Estraven keeps out of Genly's way because that is clearly what Genly wants.

Estraven, in keeping with the law that each "unit" have employment, works until noon each day in a plastics factory, where he runs a machine that heatbonds plastics together to form little boxes. That evening Estraven writes a long letter to his son, but he cannot mail it because that would break the laws of his exile and condemn his son.

Estraven is concerned by the censoring in Orgoreyn of all information pertaining to Genly Ai. He is not mentioned on the radio, and none of the news released about him in Erhenrang ever reach the Orgoreyn public because the Sarf censored it. Despite the fact that Shusgis and the others take Genly about openly about the city, no one in the general populace knows of his existence, which, Estraven believes, can neither aid Genly's cause nor protect his life. Estraven thinks that although in Orgoreyn they pretend not to fear Genly as King Argaven had, they fear one another. One night, Gaum attempts to seduce Estraven. After an "accidental" meeting on the street, he invites Estraven to a nearby alehouse. Estraven detests Gaum and refuses his advances.

One afternoon Genly is allowed to speak in the Hall of the Thirty-Three. No audience or broadcast is allowed, but Obsle plays his own tape of the proceedings for Estraven. Genly's speech is often interrupted by comments and laughter from the audience. Some time later, Genly hands over the transmitting device to the Thirty-Three, but Estraven can already sense the change and fear in Obsle and believes that if Obsle calls off the reception for the Envoy, things will be really bad. Obsle does call it off, and Estraven decides to meet Genly in the street in secret. Estraven advises Genly to contact his ship so that the people aboard can lend credence to Genly's claims or to bring them down at once. Estraven tells Genly that he is running a great risk being alone. Estraven feels that the current predicament is his fault and that he has done nothing right.

Chapter 11, Soliloquies in Mishnory Analysis

Switching again to Estraven's narration, which, as in some other chapters, is written in the form of a diary Estraven keeps, it is made clear that Estraven realizes only now that Genly has understood little of what Estraven has been saying to him and doing on his behalf since his arrival on Gethen. Estraven also takes up the old habits he learned in

the Rotherer Fastness, namely starving himself. This act foreshadows their trek across the Gobrain Ice because it is a skill that will serve him well at that time.

Isolation, an underlying theme in the book that is linked to cold and suffering, is shown here in Estraven. The nights freeze now, he says, and though he will never be able to send it, he writes a long letter to his son. Throughout the chapter, Estraven's uneasiness grows. He is wary that the Commensals are hiding Genly, as the people know nothing of the Envoy, and he wonders if Genly realizes what is going on and how false they all are.

Through Estraven's eyes, we do see that Genly has evolved somewhat. Genly seems to be better at his job of Envoy than he was before, taking the abuse and criticisms leveled at him during his speech in stride. That is one of the useful features of LeGuin's use of both Estraven and Genly as narrators. Through each man we see different views of the other than they would give of themselves. The tone is becoming increasingly urgent and sinister. It is clear that not all is at it appears to be in Orgoreyn. Something is going to happen.



Chapter 12, On Time and Darkness

Chapter 12, On Time and Darkness Summary

This short passage, from the sayings of Tuhulme, the High Priest composed in North Orgoreyn about 900 years ago, refers to Orgota religion, Yomesh, which speaks about Meshe, their god, as being the Center of Time.

Chapter 12, On Time and Darkness Analysis

Yomesh, in stark contrast to the Karhidish religion Handdara, speaks of the world and everything in it as one-sided. He says there can only be good and no evil. There is no room for the duality, as the Handdara advocate.



Chapter 13, Down on the Farm

Chapter 13, Down on the Farm Summary

Alarmed by Estraven's sudden reappearance and feeling ill at ease, Genly tries without success to contact Obsle, Yegey or Slose. He has dinner with Shusgis, but he skips supper and retires to bed early. Later, after midnight, Genly is awakened by strangers, told that he is under arrest and taken to Kundershaden Prison. There, he is injected with a drug and interrogated. After four or five days, though he is not sure because he was heavily drugged for most of the time, Genly regains consciousness while being transported along with 26 others in a caravan-truck.

A man next to Genly dies during the transport because he was kicked or beaten in the abdomen. Genly allows the man to rest his head on his knees, where the man dies hemorrhaging from anus and mouth. The journey lasts three or four days from the time Genly awakes. The group barely talks during the journey, and they huddle together only during the night to stay warm. On the third day, while the truck has been stopped for some hours, an Orgota in kemmer starts talking to Genly. When the light shines through the window slit into the truck, Genly can see that the Orgota has become a woman and is drawn to him. Genly stands up and goes to the window slit. During the journey they are given a jug of water once a day and no food. By the end of the journey a second person, who did not get water for two days, dies.

When the group arrives at their destination, the Pulefen Commensality Third Voluntary Farm and Resettlement Agency, they are cleaned and given clothes. Then all the prisoners, new and old, are divided into squads of twelve. Genly's group works at the saw mill and has to carry stacked, sawn boards from the mill to a storage shed. At night, they sleep in a fully lit dormitory inside sleeping bags on five-foot long shelves. Genly is taller than most Gethenians and doesn't fit properly in the bag or on the shelf. The prisoners, Genly notes, are all drugged to keep them out of kemmer, as a prisoner in kemmer would likely be disruptive.

Every fifth day the political prisoners, of which Genly is one, are drugged and questioned. After handful of such interrogations, Genly becomes ill, and each successive session worsens his condition. After one examination he becomes is extremely ill and left in the dormitory with one other prisoner, who is dying. The prisoner's name is Asra, and though they have little in common, Genly and Asra talk. Asra tells Genly about his younger days on a Commensal farm in the Kunderer Valley, and sometimes Genly asks him for a tale or myth, for the Gethenians have many. One time, at Asra's request, Genly tells him a "tale" of how people on a world far away came to Genly's world and taught them how to travel between planets He tells Asra that people on his planet are in kemmer all the time. A night or two after that, Asra dies.



Chapter 13, Down on the Farm Analysis

At last, the true face of Orgoreyn is shown. Contrary to the way Genly is treated upon arrival, he now is treated abjectly with no consideration to human rights of any kind. Genly is drugged and interrogated and then made to travel with a group of other prisoners in barbaric fashion. Orgoreyn may have looked more civilized on the surface, but its lack of regard for basic humanity is appalling, and this chapter is startling and powerful as a result. Genly realizes the error of his earlier misconception.

Isolation is yet again portrayed in the way each prisoner keeps to himself in the van, staying in his own little space and only huddling together at night to keep warm. Although the conditions in the van are appalling, the scene is made all the more perverse by a Gethenian in kemmer who makes a pass at Genly. Genly, having not yet accepted Gethenian physiology, is uncomfortable and moves away.

Genly develops a sort of friendship with Asra through their shared misfortune, and Asra is the one person Genly remembers at the Farm.



Chapter 14, The Escape

Chapter 14, The Escape Summary

Estraven realizes that he can no longer rely on his "friends" Obsle and Yegey, both of whom have left town and sacrificed the Envoy for their own safety, and he turns to his enemies. He blackmails Shusgis, telling him that he is an agent of the Nobles Faction in Karhide that is planning the assassination of Tibe and that he, Shusgis, has been designated Estraven's contact and needs tell him everything he knows. Shusgis believes him and tells Estraven everything he asks.

Estraven can't get word to anyone in Karhide, so he goes to the Royal Embassy where Sardon rem ir Chenewich, whom Estraven knew well at one time, agrees to send a message to Argaven telling him what had become of the Envoy. Estraven knows that he is now in peril, and he heads straight for the caravan port on the Southside and before noon leaves Mishnory as a carry-loader on a truck. Although it is risky in Orgoreyn given how often papers are inspected, Estraven forges his papers and makes his way to the coast of the Western Sea under an assumed name. It takes the caravan a half-month to reach the mouth of the River Esagel in Ethwen, where Estraven learns about the fur trade up the river. Here Estraven acquires his hunter's license and proper authorization before setting out on foot with a party of hunters led by an old man named Mavriva.

Estraven learns a great deal while traveling with the hunters before feigning illness and dropping out of the party at a town called Turuf. Estraven spends some days learning the land before storing almost everything he carried a dozen or so miles from Turuf. He then returns to the town and stocks up with provisions and equipment once again. After this, he makes his way to the Farm and gets inside using paper that he has forged identifying himself as Thener Benth, a paroled convict showing up for his two-year guard duty stint.

Once inside, Estraven steals a non-lethal gun and gets a young guard to show him around. He enters dothe, a meditative state that proffers increased strength, and just before dawn finds and gives Genly a hundredth-second shock to the brain to knock him out. Estraven carries Genly outside, telling the guard that the prisoner is dead. Estraven finds and switches off the power to the perimeter fence, pretends to have trouble hauling the body past a guard on duty so as not to arouse suspicion and makes his way out of the barracks.

Not long after clearing the fence, Estraven hears a whistle shriek and the floodlights come on. He finds the ravine where he has stashed his gear, straps Genly onto the sledge under all the equipment, changes clothes, eats quickly because in dothe Gethenians feel great hunger, and sets off north. He soon finds a pair of skiers, who question him. Estraven tells them that he is a trapper trying to catch up with Mavriva's party. He shows them his trapper's license, and they accept his story. Estraven takes a day to wind his way back, via a wide half-circle, to the place where he'd earlier hidden



the gear he had first purchased. Estraven continues on to the foothills of the Sembensyen, where he sets up a tent, eats and then feeds Genly and cares for the sores on his body before finally, drained by dothe, falls asleep.

Estraven wakes a day later, and though still weak and in recovering from dothe, he feeds Genly the broth he has made. Throughout that day Genly wakes in terror, thinking Estraven is a guard from the Farm and begging him not to interrogate him. Genly speaks in a mix of Orgota and Karhidish. Eventually Genly gets better and recognizes Estraven, who asks what they did to Genly and explains how he had escaped with him. Genly does not believe that Estraven could carry him for miles cross-country, but Estraven explains that he was brought up in Handdara and lived for two years at Rotherer Fastness, which is how he knows how to use dothe-strength.

Genly says that he believes Estraven because he has to, but he doesn't understand why Estraven helped him. This makes Estraven angry, but he eventually tells Genly that it was partly his fault that Genly came to Orgoreyn and therefore partly his fault that Genly ended up at Pulefen Farm.

Estraven also explains why he distanced himself from Genly months ago. Estraven says it was for Genly's own safety, and Estraven wanted Genly to be down while Tibe was up and in power, but by chance he had gone down with Genly as well. He kept his distance from Genly in Orgoreyn so he wouldn't contaminate him with his disgrace and increase the danger to Genly. But the others sold Genly out to the Sarf to save themselves. Ironically, Estraven is the only man Genly does not trust, yet Estraven is the only one who believes that Genly is from another planet. Estraven tells Genly to teach him mind-speech and then asks him why he did all that he has done.

Chapter 14, The Escape Analysis

While it is clear that Estraven is and always has been on Genly's side, it is only in this chapter that this turns into decisive, concerted action. The extent of Estraven's faith and belief in Genly becomes apparent because Estraven is willing to risk his life to free Genly.

Estraven once again displays his courage and cunning by devising and executing a plan of considerable daring. He shows forethought by storing gear for Genly and then returning to town from the correct direction so he wouldn't appear suspicious, and he risks his own well being by staying in dothe longer than he should.

Genly's ignorance is reiterated by his inability to understand why Estraven has done all this for him. Genly even says, "You had nothing to do with my coming to Orgoreyn." In spite of everything, Genly still distrusts Estraven's motives, in part because he fails to look past the man-woman that Estraven is. It is Genly's prejudice against the Gethenians that has so far hampered his understanding of the Gethenian and ultimately his mission.



Chapter 15, To the Ice

Chapter 15, To the Ice Summary

When Genly and Estraven wake up, Genly asks Estraven where they will go. The harbors are frozen, and ships don't go far in winter so they will have to hide until spring. Returning via road would be impossible, as they would be stopped by the first Inspector. Their only option is to trek across the Gobrin, an ice sheet, and they would need a good deal of luck to survive the journey. Estraven then leaves the tent, saying that he will be back late or may be gone overnight. He asks Genly if he will be all right by himself.

Estraven does not return until nightfall of the next day. He brings back a sack of food and supplies he stole in Turuf. Estraven is not proud of having stolen, so Genly asks no more about it. On Winter, Genly thinks the only man who is more despised than a thief is one who commits suicide. Estraven spends a long time calculating, as close as he can, the rations for the trip. Genly thinks about the trip, which is roughly 800 miles. Their rations would last for, at a stretch, 78 days, and they would have to cross 12 miles a day.

The next day Estraven and Genly load and pack the sledge and spend the remainder of the day resting, storing up energy. They set off at dawn, and even having to pull the sledge, which weighs more than 300 pounds, they cover 15 miles first day. While at camp, Estraven tells Genly how he traveled a couple hundred miles across the Kerm Ice a number of years ago with his brother and four friends for no reason other than curiosity and adventure, quoting something Genly had told him when first arriving on the planet. They, Estraven says, had wanted to see Teremander, a mountain that stands up out of the ice.

Genly and Estraven set off once again just after dawn. Estraven pulls the sledge, and Genly pushes from behind. The snow begins to form a crust, and they travel 20 miles by the day's end.

Three days later, Genly and Estraven come out of Tarrenpeth forest, and on the last day Estraven stops to set up camp early so that he can set up traps to catch pesthry, oviparous fox-like herbivores. They catch six of the animals in a few hours, and Estraven cleans and cut up the beasts. The next day the rain turns the snow into mush, and they have to put the wheels on the sledge. It is hard going, as the sledge constantly sticks and tips. By the end of the day they have gone only nine miles. Genly gets diarrhea from the meat and cannot sleep.

Rain continues to fall, and Genly does the best while pulling the sledge. They stop to eat at around midday, but Genly can't eat because of his illness. They stop under an overhang of rock mid-afternoon, and Estraven tells Genly to get into the tent. Genly is annoyed at being ordered around, but Estraven explains that he doesn't know where Genly's limits lie. The next day they cover seven miles and the day after that, twelve. On



the ninth day of their journey they come out of the rain and into uninhabited territory. They are five to six thousand feet above sea level on a high plateau. Before them lies the Gobrín Glacier. They stow the wheels, put on their skis and set off.

Chapter 15, To the Ice Analysis

Estraven and Genly's trip back to Karhide is a physical and symbolic journey they must make to understand and accept one another. They must "walk a mile in another person's shoes." The two men, both of whom have experienced a sense of isolation in their own way, must now endure isolation together. They are removed from society and have no choice but to work together or die. They are, in a sense, bound together. Faced with such trials and forced to rely on one another, it is inevitable that they will grow to appreciate each other.

Estraven, who has thus far shown himself to possess laudable qualities, also demonstrates that he is capable of doing anything, in this case the detestable crime of stealing, to accomplish what he believes in. Genly, on the other hand, despite having matured over the past few months, finds it hard to let go of his prejudice and arrogance. He resents being coddled and believes himself better able to deal with the journey than Estraven, even comparing himself to a stallion and Estraven to a mule. The truth, however, is that each will need the other to survive.

The concept of patriotism is raised on multiple instances throughout the book, but here it is most succinctly expressed as Estraven says: "What is love of one's country; is it hate of one's uncountrý? Then it's not a good thing." Also of note is at this stage the two call one another "Ai" and "Harth." They are not on a first-name basis. Only Hearth-brothers and friends address each other by their first names.



Chapter 16, Between Drummer and Dremegole

Chapter 16, Between Drummer and Dremegole Summary

When Genly awakes, Estraven is writing in his journal. Estraven asks about Genly's parents. Genly says died 70 years ago, though Genly younger than 30. Genly has only been off Earth for seven years, but because of the time jumps, more than 120 years have passed since he was born.

The going has been tough of late, Estraven writes. The ground is composed of rock, pebble-dump, clay and mud. Estraven hopes to try for the glacier between two volcanoes, both capped with steam and smoke. After nearly a half-month of hauling, a light blizzard blows for two days, during which they stay inside the tent. They sleep all of the first and on the second day. Then Genly teaches Estraven how to play the game *Go*, and there are plenty of stones around to play with.

On the third day, the blizzard clears and they manage 11 miles, al though it is hard work over an all-rock surface. Estraven bruises his tendon, wrenching it as he tries to pull it out from between two boulders. Estraven notes that their food supplies have depleted quickly because they have eaten the bulky stuff mostly. Sixty pounds of the hundred or so of coarse foodstuff they had is gone. The sledge is lighter.

The following day, on the way down Mount Dremegole, Estraven and Genly try using the wheels, but less than 100 yards later a wheel gets stuck and the axle bends. They make only four miles and are still going in the wrong direction. Mount Drumner erupting, and the sleet, Estraven notes, tastes of smoke and sulphur. The next day they cross 16 miles, but they are only eight miles farther in a straight line from where they set off. All day they listen to the grumble and hiss of the volcano, and the glacier trembles and snaps beneath their feet.

Genly's face is badly frostbitten, but Estraven kneads the skin back to life and no damage is done. They cover 20 miles, but only five "true" miles, and the rim of the Gobrin is visibly nearer. Volcanic projectiles hit the ice near them several times during the day. A day later they are faced with the choice of following the glacier on a long sweep westward or climbing the ice-cliffs a mile north. The latter is a riskier proposition, but it is the one Genly favors because it saves 20 or 30 miles of hauling. Estraven marvels at Genly's frailty and susceptibility to the cold but also at his strength and courage.

One the 23rd day of their journey, Genly and Estraven at last reach the Gobrin. They have made no progress since the 18th day, battling sheer cliffs and precipices and squirming over pressure-blocks and ice-cliffs. One day the sledge is shaken free by a



great quake and pulls Estraven down five or six feet. He would have gone farther but for Genly's strength. During this time, Genly gets frustrated, exhausted and disconsolate. It seems he wants to cry, and Estraven cannot understand why Genly does not do so openly.

Estraven and Genly are visibly pleased at reaching the Gobrin, but up on the plateau's rim the going is tough. There are massive crevasses that force them more north than east, and the surface is lumpy and covered in debris. Both men slip on the treacherous ice. At one point, Estraven slips on a patch of new ice and slides 15 feet on his belly. Genly laughs and then apologizes to Estraven, saying that he thought he was the only person on Gethen who ever slipped on ice. They cover 13 miles in the day.

They cross another 13 miles the next day for a total of 254 miles since leaving their first camp. But at least 75 and as much as a hundred of those miles provide no onward gain. Estraven is in kemmer, and though he is embarrassed, he tells Genly he is ignoring him because that makes it easier to resist temptation. Estraven asks how the other sex of Genly's race differs from his, and Genly explains that sex on Earth is a singularly important factor in determining one's activities, outlooks, ethics, manners and clothing. Genly eventually he gives up trying to explain, and he says that women are more alien to him than they are to Estraven.

They cover 18 miles the following day, the going easier and lighter than it has been in a long time.

Chapter 16, Between Drummer and Dremegole Analysis

The journey is slowly changing Estraven and Genly, bringing them closer. This chapter is a series of Estraven's diary entries, and Estraven notes that Genly seems more patient with him and that either the drugs are out of his system or they are learning to pull together.

Throughout this chapter, Estraven speaks of Genly in a very positive manner, admiring his courage and saying that if it were enough he'd stand the cold like a snow-worm. Estraven knows that Genly is stronger than he, but he also is aware of Genly's impatience and easily dispirited demeanor. Estraven does not understand why Genly can't cry openly.

The awkward situation of Estraven being in kemmer is important because Genly does not laugh as Estraven expects. Instead, Genly shows a kindness and gentleness that Estraven has not previously seen in him. Also of importance is Estraven's question of how women are different from men. Genly cannot answer him. It is almost as though women are as alien to Genly as Estraven is.



Chapter 17, An Orgota Creation Myth

Chapter 17, An Orgota Creation Myth Summary

The origins of this Orgota myth are prehistorical and recorded in many forms:

In the beginning there was only sun and ice. Over many years the sun melted crevasses into the ice, and in these were shapes of ice. One ice-shape said, "I bleed." Another said, "I weep," and a third said, "I sweat." The first ice-shape climbed out of the crevasse and pulled out handfuls of excrement from the sun and made the hills and valleys with it. The second breathed on the ice and melted it, making the seas and rivers. The third gathered up soil and seawater and made trees, plants, herbs, grain, animals and men. The 39 men who were created did not wake, so the ice-shapes let the sun melt them. The ice-shapes melted as milk and ran into the mouths of the sleepers, and they woke.

The first to wake was Edondurath, who was so tall that when he stood up his head split the sky and snow fell. Seeing the others stirring and being afraid, he killed 36 of them with his fists. Haharath, the next to last one, ran away, but Edondurath caught him and killed him. The last one escaped while Edondurath was gone.

Back on the Gobrin Ice where the bodies lay, Edondurath built a house of the frozen bodies and waited for the last man to come back. Each day one of the corpses would ask, "Does he burn?" and the others would reply, "No." Then, one day Edondurath entered kemmer and the corpses all said, "He burns!" Hearing this, the last man entered the house and coupled with Edondurath. A piece of darkness followed each of the children born, and when Edondurath asked the other about it, he was told that because they were born in the house of flesh, death follows at their heels. They are in the middle.

In the beginning there was sun and ice, and in the end the sun will devour itself and shadow will eat light and there will be nothing but darkness and ice.

Chapter 17, An Orgota Creation Myth Analysis

This story reiterates two important concepts. The first, betrayal, is illustrated when the first brother kills all but one of his brothers. This is not the first instance of a brother killing his brothers. Earlier in the book, Therem of Estre kills his brothers in self defense. The second concept is introduced in the chapter where Genly seeks out the Foretellers, that death is the only constant in life and every child has a shadow following it.

Incest, as in the myth about the place inside the blizzard, occurs in this myth as well.



Chapter 18, On the Ice

Chapter 18, On the Ice Summary

Genly recalls the routine of their journey over the course of the past 50 days. He would wake first, and although Estraven gave him a few more ounces of food because of his size, Genly remained permanently hungry. After breakfast, which consisted of a cup of boiling hot orsh and a cube of gichy-michy expanded by hot water into a small bun of sorts, they would then pack up the bags and pans and mugs and go outside the tent. Genly could never quite believe how cold it was, and every morning it felt as though he experienced it anew. They then would collapse the tent, fold it along with the other equipment onto the sledge and fasten their skis and harnesses

Sometimes, after heavy snowfall, Genly and Estraven would have to dig out the tent and sledge. Genly wore a face mask to protect his nose and cheeks, but even so his left eye froze shut one day and Estraven had to thaw it with his breath and tongue. Around midday they would stop for lunch, cut and set ice for a protective wall if the wind was strong, eat a cube of gichy-michy and then continue on. They seldom talked while on the march. Their lips were sore and opening one's mouth, Genly says, only allowed the cold inside where it could hurt one's teeth, throat and lungs. Genly imagined the Gobrin Ice Plateau to be flat like a frozen pond, but it was in actuality more like a frozen storm-rasied ocean. At night, they would set up camp, eat, talk and go to sleep about an hour later.

Genly also recalls the night Estraven was in kemmer. Nothing occurred between them physically, but afterward Genly feels that he can now accept Estraven as a man and a woman, and their friendship grows stronger because of it. Two or three nights later, although it is an infringement of the Law of Cultural Embargo, Genly teaches Estraven how to speak mind-speech.

Genly tells Estraven to clear his mind and let it be dark. Then Genly tries for half an hour to speak to Estraven, but he cannot. It is not possible for someone to speak until they have first been spoken to the first time they mind-speak. Successive attempts in the days that followed are unsuccessful. After trying without success one night, they retire to bed, but within a minute or two Genly can feel Estraven's sleep as though it were his own. He speaks to him, and Estraven wakes up, scared and disturbed, Genly's voice sounded like that of Estraven's dead brother in his mind. It is not possible to lie in mind-speech.

Genly asks about Estraven's brother, and Estraven says that his name was Arek Harth rem ir Estraven. He was a year older than Therem but had been dead for 14 years when Therem left home. Genly asks Therem to bespeak him in turn, but he does not want to. They go to bed, but Therem calls out to Genly in mind-speech, calling him "Genry," as even mindspeaking, he is unable to say "I" properly. Genly replies at once, but Therem wants no more of it and stops.



On the 40th day and the two after it Estraven and Genly are snowed in by a blizzard. Estraven eats nothing and drinks only orsh, or sugar-water, at mealtimes, but he insists that Genly eat. Estraven has been taught how to starve since childhood. They continue on for four days in bitter cold temperatures that never get about 25 degrees. During one blizzard Genly loses sight of Estraven and shouts but cannot hear his own voice. He then calls frantically in mind-speech, and Estraven replies, telling Genly to give him a hand with setting up the tent. The blizzard lasts two days, and they have lost five days total due to blizzards.

One night in the tent Estraven tells Genly that before they left he had sent word to King Argaven about Genly's whereabouts and explains what is likely to happen as a result. Estraven says that the king will see a chance to play shifgrethor, and though Tibe will advise against it, Argaven will likely be getting sick of him by now. The king will enquire about the whereabouts of the Envoy, the Commensals will lie and when Genly shows up some weeks later, their lie will be made known and cause great embarrassment to Orgoreyn. Estraven advises that Genly should send for the Star Ship the first chance he gets.

Near the end of their journey, Estraven and Genly come to a place that is nothing but light. There is no shadow, only a whitish-gray void. And with no sky or horizon to relate to, the going is extremely tough. Genly is terrified. Eventually, they see the Esherhoth Crag.

Chapter 18, On the Ice Analysis

Genly resumes the role of narrator in this chapter and reiterates much of what has already been revealed by Estraven. However, the manner in which it is done allows the reader to see two different sides to everything that has happened. It offers a view, rounded and whole, as seen from each side.

When Estraven is in kemmer, Genly at last accepts Estraven for who and what Estraven truly is. It is a watershed moment in their relationship, and it is from this understanding that their friendship can finally emerge. At this point, Genly teaches Estraven mind-speech, which is in itself a furthering of their relationship because it will make them unique. No other pair on the planet has successfully engaged in mind-speech.

In finally accepting Estraven, Genly's own personal growth can occur because he now can give up his male pride. Proof of this is shown in the final chapter.

The tent is an important symbol of Estraven's and Genly's journey. It is a haven from the desolate cold, the isolation and the world. All hate and anger between the two men are left outside the tent. It is the one place where they can find comfort and warmth. Another interesting symbol emerges toward the end of the chapter when Genly and Estraven find themselves inside the blizzard first spoken of in an earlier Karhidish myth. Perhaps because of their newly formed bond, they, like the lovers of that myth, are fated to find this place.



Chapter 19, Homecoming

Chapter 19, Homecoming Summary

Encouraged by the sight of the Esherhoth Crags, the first thing in seven weeks that isn't ice or snow or sky, Estraven and Genly continue onward. But the going is tougher. The ground pock-marked with crevasses and holes and light, making it hard to see. At one point, Estraven falls down a crevasse but because he is harnessed to the sledge, Genly can pull him up and out. They switch places, but Genly is petrified of falling. The going is slow, each step unsure. Eventually, Genly stands motionless and cries. The tears freeze his eyes shut. They set up camp immediately.

The next day they move northeast until eventually there are no more cracks in the ice. They are on two-thirds ration because this new route will add between 20 and 50 miles to their journey. On each of the next four days they cover 18 to 20 miles, but then a blizzard breaks and they lie in the tent for another three. They sleep mostly, eat little and tend to their bruises and inflammations. When the storm breaks, they continue onward and seem to gain strength from going. They continue until the stars come out. Estraven serves out full rations that evening, even they only have food for seven more days at full ration, saying that to make a good run, they have to eat.

The next morning, after a double breakfast, Genly and Estraven set out and arrive at the Bay of Guthen, now frozen, a day and a half later. On that day, they abandon the sledge and make up backpacks. Estraven is sorry to see the sledge go. His loyalty, Genly muses, extends to everything. They get down off the plateau and onto the sea ice on the evening of the 75th day of their journey.

Two days later Genly and Estraven use up the last grains of orsh and the last few ounces of kadik-germ. Two pounds of gichy-michy and six ounces of sugar are all that remain. They reach Karhide some days later, but their packs are empty and they have only hot water to celebrate. Two days later, they come across a Karhidish village, having meandered south and west without a map since arriving in Karhide. They arrive on the 81st day, 11 days over Estraven's proposed schedule. They traveled 840 miles with the sledge and a number more by foot.

Genly and Estraven stop at the hot-shop in the village. Inside is a group of seven or eight people, and the smell of food is everywhere. Estraven explains that they've come over the Gobrin Ice, and he asks for the hospitality of the Domain and that they look after his friend. They are taken in, fed and looked after. After a day or two, when the people get around to asking, with due regard to shifgrethor, Estraven tells the truth of why Genly and he have been on the Gobrin Ice. He never uses their names, however, for it is a crime to speak to Estraven, let alone house and feed him. This way, the people of Kurkurast can plead ignorance of his identity.



A number of days after Genly's and Estraven's arrival, they set out once more, this time as passengers in the cab of a road-packer, a vehicle used to pack down the snow to keep the roads open. That night they come to the first village south of Kurkurast and are again welcomed and fed. They set out on foot the next morning with the intention to go to Sassinoth, the closest place with a transmitter.

Over the next eight or nine days Genly and Estraven travel from Hearth to Hearth, get a lift on a power-sledge and are fed and housed each night of their journey. They come to Sassinoth but do not go into the town. Instead, they make their way to an outlying farm that Estraven had purchased for the owner some years previously when trying to obviate the dispute over the nearby Sinoth Valley. The farmer, Thessicher, helps them, although at first he is uncomfortable with their presence.

The following morning, Genly, under instructions from Estraven, skis into town and sells the Chabe stove, the only thing of value they had left because they have given much of their remaining equipment to the various hosts along the way, in town. He uses the proceeds to buy ten minutes of "private transmission" at the radio station. Genly's broadcast time is scheduled for later that afternoon, so he kills time by buying a good, cheap lunch and wandering around the town.

When the time comes, Genly signals the satellite placed into orbit before his arrival as a contingency measure for just such a situation, but it cannot relay a message back to him so he has no idea whether the message is received. It begins to snow hard, and Genly decides to spend the night in town rather than risk returning to the farmhouse. He inquires about an inn, but the people insist that he remain at the College where the radio station is located in one of the dormitories overnight.

Genly returns at dawn the next morning, and he meets Estraven along the way. Estraven hurriedly tells Genly that he must get to the border. Estraven has overheard Thessicher on his wireless set reporting Estraven to the authorities. A little way from the borderpost, they see guards, probably Tibe's men. Estraven has no choice but to make a straight dash across the border, so they wait until nightfall.

At the last moment, when it is too late to stop Estraven, Genly realizes what Estraven means to do. Estraven sets off, skiing faster than Genly, straight toward the guards. They shout for him to halt and then open fire, killing him. Genly arrives beside Estraven as is dying. Estraven screams, "Arek!" in mind-speech, and then he dies. Genly is taken to prison.

Chapter 19, Homecoming Analysis

While Estraven and Genly make their way through the desolate white void, fear, which Genly admits to for the first time, suffuses him. Genly cannot see the crevasses, and he is so afraid that he cries openly. Fear, Estraven says, is a useful thing. It speaks of the duality present in much of the book. In other words, there can be no light without darkness, no evil without good. Both of these themes are demonstrated in Estraven's



stealing to help them survive, which is evil, and accomplish Genly's mission, which is good, and the fact that light without shadow is just as dangerous as pitch blackness because they cannot see where they are walking.

Genly regards the last part of the journey, although the easiest physically, as the hardest because he knows at the end of it he and Estraven will have to part company. Like almost every other significant relationship in the book, legend or real, Estraven and Genly's relationship ends in tragedy. Whether Estraven's sacrifice is really necessary is ultimately of no consequence because he has rescued Genly and all but paved the way for his planet to enter a new era. Estraven's is the ultimate sacrifice. The only question that remains is whether Estraven's death was a suicide Did Estraven kill himself so as not to have to return once again to Orgoreyn and live his life in exile?

Genly's maturity is increasingly on display in these latter chapters. He has ended the journey a much different person than the one who started it, and though he still lacks the understanding and foresight to see what Estraven means to do, Genly has become more patient and accepting of the world around and is no longer in a rush to have everything done. This is shown by how Genly walks leisurely around town waiting for his transmission time to come.

Betrayal, in the form of Thessicher reporting Estraven to the authorities, occurs again and underscores all that has come before. Even though everything Thessicher has is because of Estraven, he is still all too ready to sell him out.



Chapter 20, A Fool's Errand

Chapter 20, A Fool's Errand Summary

Genly is taken back to Sassinoth and imprisoned. He is treated well in his "jail," a furnished room in the Tower of the Lords-Elect in Sassinoth. He does not find the room comfortable. When he sleeps, he sees himself back in the truck in Orgoreyn and the dead body laid across the door is Estraven's. At one point, Genly has a high fever and the physician who earlier tended to him watches him overnight. The physician reveals that many in Karhide never believed the accusations against Estraven.

Genly is never formally interrogated, but he is asked about the events beginning at Pulefen Farm. This news is reported freely to Karhide, but Estraven's name is never mentioned. It is understood tacitly, however, that Estraven is responsible for Genly's rescue. Genly thinks that Estraven predicted the events that his arrival in Karhide would bring about rather accurately. The Commensals' lie about Genly's death is revealed, and many Commensals in the Thirty-Three are replaced. The Sarf hang on until the day Argaven announces to the public the imminent arrival of the Star Ship. That day, Obsle's party takes over the presiding offices of the Thirty-Three. In Karhide, Tibe resigns.

Once Argaven is informed of Genly's whereabouts, he sends a request, along with a liberal expense allowance, for Genly to come to Erhenrang. He and the physician make the three day journey on powersledges. Genly is housed in the Round-Tower Dwelling of the Palace, one normally reserved for ambassadors. Genly thinks this is a good sign. To get there, though, Genly must pass the Corner Red Dwelling, and he feels a great sadness at seeing it. At the Round-Tower Dwelling, Faxe is waiting for Genly, having been elected to the council and seemingly following a similar path to Estraven's.

Speaking with Faxe, Genly realizes that by now the ship will be in planetary orbit and awaiting further communication from him. In stark contrast to the way things had gone when he first came to Karhide, everything is arranged expeditiously. Not long after, Genly has a second audience with the king. They speak briefly of the ship, which will land in Athten Fen as requested, but Argaven wonders aloud why Estraven cheated him. Genly explains that Estraven saw to it that Argaven didn't cheat himself by getting Genly out of the way when trouble arose and bringing him back when the time was right.

Nevertheless, the king is grateful to Genly. Having made the Commensals look like fools and liars has greatly increased Argaven's and Karhide's shifgrethor. The king asks Genly what the trek across the Gobrín was like. The king says that Estraven would have been a good man to pull with. Genly asks if Argaven will not revoke the Order of Exile on Estraven, but he says that he will not do that yet.

At Second Hour, the welcoming party sets out by powersledge to the landing site 30 miles northeast of Erhenrang. First off the ship is Lang Heo Hew, a woman. She does



not recognize Genly immediately. The others disembark soon after her. Genly can't help but feel strange at seeing men and women again and retires to his room as soon as they return to the palace.

At the end of that spring, Genly takes a vacation from the Embassy and heads east. His people are now authorized to use aircars and are spread out across the planet. Genly makes his way to Estre in the Kerm Land where he meets with Esvans Harth ir rem Estraven, an old man; the father of Estraven; and his older brother, Arek. Genly does not find the solace he'd expected in this place, but he gives Estraven's journals to the old man and says that he will tell him anything about their time together.

Esvans says that he would like to hear the tale of their crossing the Gobrin Ice, but the boy who Genly had first met upon entering the Hearth, Sorve, Therem's son, asks if Genly won't tell them how Therem died and of the other worlds.

Chapter 20, A Fool's Errand Analysis

Genly's maturity and growth is complete in the sense that the experience on Gethen has brought him both love and sorrow, although as a person he must still learn. For the first time Genly grieves openly. He cries, distraught at having lost Estraven, and he reveals that he was in a very bad way while being held in Sassinoth.

Throughout the book, the theme of light and darkness is pervasive. The duality of the people's sexuality, the landscape that is freezing outside and warm inside the tent, and betrayal and love. This all speaks to the title of the book and is expressed succinctly in the poem that says that light is the left hand of darkness and darkness the right hand of light.

Despite everything that has happened, Genly can't help but feel that even he has betrayed Estraven in the end. He does not refuse to have the Star Ship land before Estraven's name is cleared as he had promised to do because that would jeopardize everything they had worked for.

The ending is bitter sweet. At the conclusion of the book, Genly has accomplished his mission, the very thing that dominated his thoughts and actions for a great deal of his time on the planet. Losing Estraven, however, is not that important to him anymore. His setting out to Estre to find closure and take solace from meeting Estraven's family is one last journey he must make, of the many he has completed.



Characters

Genly Ai

Ai is the main character of the story, often called "Genry" by the Gethenians, who have trouble pronouncing the letter "I" in their language. At the start of the book, he has been on Gethen for two years, trying to become accustomed to the ways of the planet's inhabitants and to get them accustomed to the idea of him. He arrived with basic information about the language and culture because a team of investigators from the Ekumen had come before him and lived among the Gethenians without revealing their identities or their mission. Still, Ai's obstacles are many. For one thing, he knows that it will not be easy to explain to people who have never even thought of air flight that men can arrive from space. In Karhide, the king is reluctant to acknowledge him or discuss his diplomatic mission because admitting the existence of beings who have mastered travel and communications would diminish the king's importance. The new Prime Minister is bound to oppose Ai because the old Prime Minister, who is being forced out of power, supported him. Moving to another country, Orgoreyn, Ai is accepted more easily by the political leaders and believes that they will help him to accomplish his mission; it turns out, though, that their political system is more complex and subtle than Karhide's, and, while he is trying to sort out which factions are sincere about offering help and which have a hidden agenda, Ai is arrested, stripped of his clothes, drugged and sent to a work camp to die of exhaustion. He is rescued by Estraven, the deposed Prime Minister of Karhide, and he realizes that cultural differences had kept him from understanding their relationship previously: he had not understood advice when it was given because Estraven had not stated it directly, thinking that doing so would offend him. During their eighty-one day journey across the frozen land to return to Karhide, where people would cooperate with him now (if only to embarrass Orgoreyn), Ai gets to know and love Estraven and he sees how he has looked to the people of this planet. One day while Estraven is in his sexual cycle, and is being distant so that they will not become involved, Ai realizes how he had misread the situation. "And I saw then, and for good, what I had always been afraid to see, and had pretended not to see in him: that he was a woman as well as a man." He realizes that this fact has made him unable to give his trust and friendship to Estraven because of this dual personality, and that this has been his fatal flaw.

Argavan XV

In the first chapter, Estraven, trying to imply that Orgoreyn might be a better place for Ai to look for acceptance, tells him, "the Commensals of Orgoreyn are mostly sane men, if unintelligent, while the king of Karhide is not only insane but rather stupid." Chapter 3, in which Ai finally is granted an audience with Argavan after half a year's wait, is titled "The Mad King." The book is never clear, however, whether the king is mad or stupid, or if he is just working from a different set of assumptions than everyone else. In being protective of his people, he appears to Ai to be small-minded and frightened: while Ai



can see no reason for him to turn down an alliance with the Ekumen, the king sees great reason to be suspicious of the strange alien who makes promises, especially with hostilities against the neighboring country of Orgoreyn increasing and the great chance that Ai's story is just a trick to humiliate him. Added to his natural suspicions is the advice of his Prime Minister, Tibe, who recently ascended to his position precisely because he encouraged the king's fears. At the end of the story, when Argavan agrees to host a landing party of Ai's comrades, he is disappointed that Ai called them before asking permission, but other than that he seems to believe that all that has happened was according to his plan: "You've served me well," he tells Ai. Again, it is not clear whether he is delusional or cunning.

Ashe

Estraven's *Kemmering*, or spiritual partner, for seven years, Ashe bore two sons with him. Ashe left three years earlier to join a Fastness at Orgny and became celibate. Before Ai goes to Orgoreyn, Ashe gives him money to take to Estraven.

Estraven

See Therem Harth rem ir Estraven

Faxe

Faxe is the leader of the Handdarata, a religious sect living in the area known as Ariskostor Fastness. A Fastness is a religious place like a monastery, where people can retreat from the world, spending "the night or a lifetime." Faxe is the Weaver of the Foretellers of the Handdarata, which means that he is at the center of the spiritual ceremony they use to foretell what will happen in the future. He is the one to weave the power of the other participants—the Zanies, the Pervert, the Celibates, etc.—into an answer for the question asked. He is also the one to explain, later, that knowing the future is generally useless: the reason the Handdarata developed Foretelling, he says, was "to exhibit the perfect uselessness of knowing the answer to the wrong question." In the end, when Ai has called his ship to come to Gethen, Faxe shows up as a council member from the Indwellers of Handdarata Fastness, a sign that he was worried about what Tibe had been doing to the government.

Obsle

One of the thirty-three Commensals in Orgoreyn, he is cheerful, amused at seeing Estraven in his exile. He recalls the old times that they had together when Estraven was Prime Minister, but the pattern to his seemingly innocent questions implies that he is most interested in finding out information about the situation in Karhide.



Therem Harth rem ir Estraven

In the beginning of the book, Genly Ai is indebted to Estraven for having arranged an audience with the king, but he is also frustrated because he sees Estraven as being cold and aloof, and he is angry because he feels that, as Prime Minister, he should have done more to make the audience go more smoothly. What Ai does not realize at the time is that Estraven is out of favor with the government, and in fact will be sent into exile the next morning. Several of the book's chapters are written as excerpts from Estraven's diaries, so readers are able to develop a sense of what he is trying to accomplish and what he feels his limitations are, which is an understanding that Ai is incapable of. Estraven accepts his exile almost passively: he takes a menial job in Orgoreyn, and when the Commensal rescues him and he is taken to be a dependent of Commensal Yegey, he does not use the opportunity to sell out the government that banished him. Throughout the story, Estraven works diplomatically to help Ai achieve his goal, but his maneuvering is so diplomatic that Ai does not recognize its implications, and counts him as untrustworthy, if not actually a foe. When he risks his life to save Ai from the prison farm in Pulefen, there can be no doubt that his loyalty is to Ai's cause. On the trip across the ice to safety, Ai learns that Estraven, far from being a self-serving politician, is actually a spiritual man whose actions were hard to understand, in part, because he was not acting for the good of his country (as a politician should) but for the good of the whole world. It is Estraven's planning that makes it possible for them to cross back into Karhide, and even though Ai promises to have his exile called off when the treaty between planets is put into place, he still charges into armed guards, knowing that they would have orders from Tibe to kill him, after an old friend has betrayed his trust.

Thessicher

At the very end of their journey back into Karhide, when they are out of supplies, Ai and Estraven run into Thessicher. When he was Prime Minister, Estraven helped Thessicher buy his farm, so Thessicher repays him by allowing them to stay the night, even though he could be in serious trouble for harboring an exile. His kindness turns out to be treachery, though, when Estraven overhears him on the radio alerting Tibe's troops that Estraven is there.

Tibe

The cousin of King Argavan, who is made Prime Minister by having Estraven exiled. Although there has never been a war on the planet Winter, it seems that one could erupt at any moment: Tibe works to incite hostilities and border disputes between his country and Orgoreyn. At one point, Estraven points out that Tibe's political style is like that of the Orgota in its "new-style" deception and efficiency. In the end, when the king wants to take credit for the aliens landing and bringing new wonders to the world, Tibe is exiled for having opposed the idea.

Pemmer Harge Tibe

See Tibe



Themes

Growth and Development

In establishing the basic facts of life on Gethen, this novel raises the fundamental question of "nature" versus "nurture": which cultural traits are learned and passed on from generations, and which are direct results of one's immediate surroundings? Since the people on this planet have no gender distinctions, their society is less restrictive about where citizens can go and what jobs they can take; the phrase "The king is pregnant" may sound strange to Earth ears because the associations that go with the word "king" are not the same as those that go with "pregnancy," but nobody on Gethen is fazed by the announcement. What does startle them is that humans are capable of sexuality every day, instead of being on monthly cycles. The effects of having sexuality kept aside for certain occasions are, first, that when they are in their "kemmer" or their sexual cycle, they are overpowered by it, and that without its distraction throughout most days they are able to concentrate on wholeness and not differences. The spiritually enlightened Gethenians have developed the ability to band together and tell the future, although they see no real benefit in it; the advanced members of the Ekumen know how to reach out to the minds of others, a skill developed from the basic concept of differences. The other main factor influencing development on Winter is the fact that it is in an Ice Age. There are no birds, and so they have no model for air flight, and therefore no basis for space flight; much of their body energy goes toward producing heat, leaving them with somewhat underdeveloped muscles; and, as indicated by the Creation Myth in Chapter 17, in which a house made of the corpses of Edondurth's brothers provides warmth, they have learned all their lives to be more careful with resources than cultures are when waste is not a matter of life and death.

Sex Roles

When asked by his Gethenian friend how women on Earth are different from men, Genly Ai responds, "It's extremely hard to separate the innate differences from the learned ones. Even where women participate equally with men in the society, they still do all of the childbearing, and so most of the child-rearing□." After mulling over how little the differences are between men and women, yet how different their roles in society, he concludes, "In a sense, women are more alien to me than you are. With you I share one sex, anyhow□." One of the most discussed ideas in this novel is that it creates a race of people on Gethen who are not encumbered with having to live up to the expectations of gender identity, and so their characteristics develop in response to environment and situation. This makes it difficult for Genly Ai, raised on Earth, to be an effective envoy, because he has trouble determining what they are thinking. He is used to thinking of human identity as divided into two separate groups, to seeing people as either like him or unlike him, and this leads him to some bizarre and unfounded conclusions about his hosts. For example, he finds the lack of war in their history to be more of a fault than an achievement: "They lacked, it seemed, the capacity to *mobilize* . They behaved like



animals, in that respect; or like women. They did not behave like men, or ants." His inability to see them for who they really are makes him disappointed early in the book, when Estraven is not as aggressive with the king on his behalf as he thinks he could be. Because they do develop sexual identities every twenty-six days, and pregnancy can fix a Gethenian into the maternal role during the time of carrying and nursing the child, it is not accurate to say that they are asexual: they are ambisexual. Rather than having no sexes, they have experience with both roles. Because of the limitations of the English language, it is difficult for readers to get a true sense of this sexlessness, because the narrative continually describes characters as "he."

Politics

Because Genly Ai is a stranger, he does not know the cultural expectations in Karhide or Orgoreyn, but as a diplomat he is required to live among the highest levels of government and therefore experiences concentrated forms of each culture's thought patterns. In Karhide, where the government is a monarchy, people are more direct about what they think. It is the Karhide government that allows Ai to live openly as an alien from another planet, that broadcasts news about his arrival on the radio. While Ai feels that Estraven, as the Karhidian Prime Minister, was not entirely open with him, it is later learned that Estraven behaved that way out of politeness, not for personal gain: in a country so dominated by one man's will, there is not much to be gained by tricky political maneuvering. Similarly, in Orgoreyn there is much to be gained by deception: with thirty-three Commensals, the balance of power is subject to change quickly. The Orgota are friendlier with Ai, but that is because friendliness is necessary when one is surrounded by enemies, and the Commensals are in a constant state of siege from each other. When the faction that opposes Ai comes to power, he is not publicly exiled, as Estraven is from Karhide; he is dragged away naked in the night and the world is told that he has died.

Survival in Nature

Most of the last half of the book is a detailed account of the trip that Ai and Estraven make across the ice in order to reach relative safety in the country that they both left under threat. It is only in fighting the elements together that they are able to learn about each other, observing strengths and weaknesses that lead them to conclusions about the other's culture. Isolated in their tent at night, they tell stories and give opinions that they never had the chance to share when they were in society, to such an extent that the mind-speaking technique that Ai teaches has strange results: to Estraven, Ai's voice sounds just like Estraven's brother's, and when Ai hears Estraven he thinks that the voice he is hearing is his own. Relying on each other for survival, they form a bond unlike any that they could have formed when they were both playing social roles and at the same time trying to guess what social role the other was playing.



Style

Structure

The structure of this novel is a cluster of information from various sources. The main one, in terms of quantity and prominence, is the report of Genly Ai to the Stabile on Ollul, which, as he explains as the first chapter starts, is presented in the form of a first-person narrative, "because I was taught as a child on my homeworld that Truth is a matter of the imagination." Alternating with these chapters are chapters taken from the journals kept by Estraven. The journals are also written in the first person, but since they were not created for public consumption they offer a more candid impression of Estraven than Ai gives from his observations. Juxtaposing the two against each other gives a rounded view of the self/other conflict that is at the heart of the story. Also interwoven between the chapters dominated by these two characters are fragments of civilization on Gethen/Winter: ethnological reports, accounts of native myths and legends, and descriptions of religious ceremonies. These fragments allow the culture that Genly Ai encounters to speak for itself, so that readers are not forced to know it only from his limited experiences and biased perspective. The relevance of these fragments to the overall story is sometimes easy to guess—for instance, the chapter titled, "Estraven the Traitor," an ancient East Karhidish tale, clearly reflects the support that Estraven in the novel gives Ai. Others, such as the story of Meshe in Chapter 11, are less directly related to the action, and are therefore more open to the interpretation of the reader, just like ancient myths and legends in our own world are.

Point of View

The central consciousness of this novel is Genly Ai: he is the one who is strange to the ways of the people of Winter, and readers experience the planet through his eyes. Since he is from Earth, he can report his experiences in relation to how they affect a body that his reader can understand. A temperature of negative ten degrees, for instance, might be uncomfortable to a Karhidian or to the Hainish, but to Earthlings it is dangerous. This Earthly perspective makes it difficult, at first, for readers to tell the truth of the situation that is being presented. "If this is the Royal Music," he says in Chapter 1, "no wonder the kings of Karhide are all mad," little expecting that the last half of the book will be a desperate three-month race through sub-Arctic conditions to the safety of the "mad" king. In the same chapter he notes, "I don't trust Estraven, whose motives are forever obscure; I don't like him; yet I feel and respond to his authority as surely as I do the warmth of the sun." The people that he does like and trust, such as Commensals Obsle and Yegey in Orgoreyn, arrange for him to disappear from society and be sentenced to death. If this book had been written in a more objective point of view, the turns in the plot would not come as surprises to readers, and the point of how difficult it is for a person to enter into another world would be lost.



Setting

During the chapters that take place in urban settings, the extreme cold that prevails over this planet is not very relevant. Housing accommodations in Erhenrang, the capital of Karhide, and in the Orgoreyn capital of Mishnory are slightly different than Earth's, more collective in order to conserve heat, but in general social life is not much different than it would be in a cold city like Minneapolis or Buffalo. The coldness of Winter may have affected the way that civilizations on the planet developed, but it is not an important consideration until Ai is taken away to the Pulefen Commensality Third Voluntary Farm and Resettlement Community. Patterned on Siberia, the frozen province of northeast Russia where political dissidents were sent, Pulefen has an isolation that would never be possible in an area that was habitable; also, an escaped prisoner in a more reasonable climate would be hunted down and caught, rather than being left to die. It is the struggle against the brutal elements that brings Ai and Estraven to finally form a bond of trust, as they have to depend on each other's strengths and defer to each other's weaknesses. The physical details of their trek across the ice evokes a solid sense of reality that is different from that felt in the earlier chapters, which is appropriate, for the physical world is more real to the characters, too, in these chapters.



Historical Context

The Space Race

The year that *The Left Hand of Darkness* was published, 1969, was the year that the first human, Neil Armstrong, set foot on the moon. The idea had, of course, been present in science fiction for hundreds of years, in books by authors ranging from Daniel Defoe to Edgar Allan Poe. One of the most realistic early works about space travel was Jules Verne's 1865 novel *From Earth to the Moon*, which was the basis for one of the earliest silent movies made at the beginning of the twentieth century; another was H. G. Wells' *The First Men on the Moon*, published in 1901. The first real progress in space exploration came in 1957, when Americans found out with a shock that the Soviet Union, the world's other super power, had put the first artificial satellite, Sputnik I, into orbit. Later in 1957, when the Russians put a living being, a dog, into space in Sputnik 2, the race to put a man on the moon immediately became a priority with the U.S. government, which poured millions of dollars into the space program. The National Aeronautics and Space Agency, NASA, was established in 1958, and in 1959 it had started work on Project Mercury, with the goal of sending animals into space, then robot-operated flights, and finally manned flights. The first human to go into space was the Russian Yuri Gagarin, in April of 1961; the first American was Alan Shepard, the following month. In an address to Congress in May of that year, President Kennedy made a historic declaration that determined the course of the space program: "I believe that this Nation should commit itself to achieving the goal, before the decade is out, of landing a man on the moon and returning him safely to Earth," he said. At the same time that the Mercury project was being carried out, NASA began a separate project, code-named Apollo, with the intent of putting a man on the moon before the end of the 1960s. The one-man rockets of Mercury were replaced with two-man Gemini craft in 1964, but at the same time the Soviets announced that the three-man Voskhod I had been in space. In the middle 1960s the Soviets fell behind, pushing their old technology while the Americans made new advances and gained new ground.

The Feminist Movement

One of the reasons that critics took the androgyny in this novel to be such a strong feminist statement was that the Feminist Movement had not yet made much progress at the time it was published, in 1969. During the 1950s and 1960s, the American public's attention was drawn to racial inequality by the Civil Rights Movement, which was led by such dynamic leaders as Medgar Evers, Ralph Abernathy, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King Jr. During those years, hundreds of thousands of white Americans were made aware of the unequal treatment of blacks. One of the greatest achievements of the Civil Rights Movement was the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which changed the face of American society. The bill received strong unexpected support from President Lyndon Johnson, although, as a rich Texas politician, he had never seemed to be particularly zealous about the rights of minorities before. The Civil Rights



Act did not put an end to discrimination, but it made it illegal. While most people focused on the act's provisions regarding racial minorities, it also included language that prohibited discrimination in employment on the basis of sex. As the 1960s progressed, many who had been made politically aware by the struggle for racial equality shifted to other concerns. Some organized the young people on college campuses in the struggle against the Vietnam War; some went from the non-violent tactics of Dr. King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference to militant racial groups such as the Black Panthers; some focused their attention on the unequal treatment of women. In 1966, feminist leader Betty Friedan and others formed the National Organization for Women as a result of their frustration over the fact that, three years later, the sex-discrimination provisions of the Civil Rights Act were not being enforced. There were companies that would only advertise for men to fill open positions, professional organizations that would not admit women members, and open verbal and sexual harassment of females in the workplace. One of NOW's primary missions was to pass an amendment to the Constitution, the Equal Rights Amendment, that would assure fair treatment for women all across the United States—Congress approved the ERA in 1972, but it was not ratified by enough states after ten years and it expired in 1982.



Critical Overview

Since the 1960s, Ursula K. Le Guin has been respected by critics both inside and outside of the science fiction genre and by the general reading audience. She was the first female writer to build her reputation within the science fiction world, although other women, notably Doris Lessing, had crossed over into the genre before her. Philippa Maddern credited Le Guin as "the one writer who did the most" to take science fiction "away from adventure stories and the cerebral solutions of physical problems and toward the contemplation of anthropological, ethnological and psychological truths." *The Left Hand of Darkness* is the book that caught critics' attention. As thought-provoking as most reviewers found it to be, many still confined the book and its author in the narrow category of her gender even as they admitted that the importance of her work went beyond the narrow category of science fiction. Perhaps because of her pioneer status, coupled with the ambisexuality of the Gethenians in her book, critics have tended to categorize Le Guin as a feminist. As Barbara J. Bucknall pointed out in her 1981 book, however, the feminism in Le Guin's works is not the driving force: it is always secondary to her examination of politics. Keith N. Hull, writing in *Modern Fiction Studies* in 1986, made the point that *The Left Hand of Darkness* is simply too wellwritten to focus on one aspect and act as if it has no more purpose or significance than that: his long examination asserts that the book "integrates its lesson so thoroughly with Gethenian culture, biology and geography that □ the main theme is too rich to be sentimental, no matter how uplifting it may sound when abstracted." Le Guin herself does not categorize herself as a feminist, but as a theorist. In the famous Introduction to *The Left Hand of Darkness* she describes the androgyny of the characters as a "thought-experiment," not as a policy or a statement about what the world will eventually come to. "Science fiction is not predictive," she explains, "it is descriptive." It is this kind of dedication to human matters over matters of the physical world that has made her work speak to a far broader audience than her predecessors were able to capture.

Aside from disagreements about her political or social views, criticisms of the quality of Le Guin's works are very rare. When they do come up, they seem to be slightly condescending, praising her on the one hand for being a good science fiction writer while faulting her for not being a better writer in general. Weak plotting and excessive wordiness seem to be the most frequently mentioned problems. Noel Perrin, in a review of a 1982 book of Le Guin's short fiction, offered an explanation for her weaknesses that had to do with her literary rise: she appeared to still, even with the mainstream praise she had received, write like a science fiction writer of the old days. To him, this meant that she overwrote and underrevised, a practice dating back to when science fiction writers had to work hard and publish constantly just to make a living; given the economic comfort her fame produced, Perrin suggested that she could afford to be more considered and careful.

Criticism

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



Critical Essay #1

Bolan is an English instructor, playwright, essayist and fiction writer, who has published science fiction. In the following essay, she explores the problems of androgyny as it relates to the plot, pronoun usage, and the missing scene in The Left Hand of Darkness.

An Androgyne is a person possessing the traits of both sexes, a hermaphrodite—strictly speaking, a sexual aberrant. But on the planet Winter in Ursula Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*, everyone is an androgyne, fully functioning as a male at certain times, a female at others, and favoring neither sex. This intriguing notion, so brilliantly conceived by the author, has elevated the Hugo-and Nebula-winning novel to classic status. Yet, androgyny is the element most often criticized in this landmark work, androgyny as it relates to plot and the choice of pronoun. The plot might have been made whole, although the pronoun problem remains, had Le Guin fleshed out a missing scene.

World-famous science fiction writer and critic Stanislaw Lem, of Poland, and critic David Ketterer have both questioned whether androgyny in *The Left Hand of Darkness* is integral to the plot. Ketterer gives a plot summary without mentioning androgyny as a way to demonstrate this. Even Le Guin, in her earlier defense of the issue in the essay "Is Gender Necessary? Redux," claimed the most fundamental theme of the novel was betrayal and fidelity. Her whole purpose in using androgyny was to eradicate sexual tensions of male dominance and female compliance and describe how a world would evolve without them. On Winter (or Gethen), the country of Karhide contrasts with that of Orgoreyn religiously, politically, and culturally, despite their androgyny, but neither has experienced war, nor is there a word for it in their separate tongues. However, Le Guin, ever the dualist, undercuts this argument by suggesting war is coming and the only hope of stopping it is to join the Ekumen. Seemingly, not even androgyny can forestall the inevitable eruption of combat among supposedly intelligent beings. This would make androgyny a side issue and not integral to the plot.

The main issue of this novel is survival—political, cultural, physical, and psychological. Ai and Estraven have a plan to ensure Winter's peaceful survival which will favorably impact the cultures of Karhide and Orgoreyn instead of turning them against each other; Ai and Estraven have physically conquered the Gobrin Ice and resolved the psychological impediment to their friendship when Estraven dies. What remains is hope for the planet through the Ekumen, the memory of the deep friendship between a human and an androgyne, and a bright future in the person of Estraven's son who asks Ai to tell him stories of other worlds. So, Estraven could have been a man whom Ai was struggling to understand, and the ending would have been the same.

But Estraven isn't a man and yet his manliness lingers—which leads to the question of the pronoun. Why did Le Guin refer to the androgynes as "he"? Until the women's liberation movement in the 1960s, in a general statement where sex was not imperative, "he" represented "he" and "she." With consciousness raising, "he/she" and sometimes "she" began to replace the all-purpose "he." Although this came into vogue after Le Guin had written her novel in 1969, she missed an opportunity to impact English at its



root. Despite her genius for inventing words, she chose not to "mangle" the language, as she says in her original version of "Is Gender Necessary? Redux." She later regretted this choice and experimented with "she" and even invented pronouns for a screenplay of *The Left Hand of Darkness*, but the novel remains unchanged.

Feminists have long criticized Le Guin for using "he" and exacerbating this issue by her focus on the stereotypical male roles of Estraven. As prime minister of Karhide exiled under pain of death, as an exploited factory worker in Orgoreyn, as a daring rescuer of Genly Ai from prison, and as an adventurer crossing the Gobrin Ice in a deathdefying journey, Estraven evokes the masculine ideal. He's a modern-day action figure, a latter-day James Bond, an early-twentieth-century Hemingway code hero. He's never seen with a child or tidying up a hearth. And if this isn't enough, the protagonist, Genly Ai, is another "he."

Although it seems "she" would be as ineffective as "he," in fact, "she" would better describe the creature that appears to have sprung whole from Le Guin's fertile imagination. According to Le Guin, the androgyne of Gethen has a 26-to 28-day cycle, paralleling a woman's cycle. *Kemmer*, or estrus, begins on the twenty-first day, and the sexual role of male or female is determined by hormonal dominance in one partner, which determines the opposite role in the other partner. Still, an androgyne has an equal chance of becoming a mother or a father. Nevertheless, when the androgyne becomes a mother, that role is extended by pregnancy and lactation; therefore, an androgyne spends more time as a female than a male. Also, the mother's line of descent prevails. Finally, Estraven sounds close enough to the female hormone estrogen to subliminally suggest his feminine side. But even if "she" presents a better case than "he," neither pronoun describes the androgyne.

The pronoun "it" is used for inanimate objects or animate ones whose sex is not known or apparent. "It" would certainly be appropriate for an androgyne, especially the ones in *The Left Hand of Darkness* where sex is an issue for only one-fifth of their lives. Considering that sleep takes up one third of a human life, one fifth seems a short time. Yet the implication of "it" denotes a lack of personhood and suggests the androgynes are relegated to the position of beasts. "They," on the other hand, a non-specific sex pronoun, could well describe this group, but not in the singular. Le Guin explains in her essay, "Is Gender Necessary? Redux," that until the sixteenth century "they" was the singular and is still used that way colloquially. However, this choice would have been more confusing than illuminating.

Nevertheless, Estraven's uniqueness should be able to shine through. His personality and character do, but any references to sexual characteristics are supplied by Ai, whose "eye" is clouded by bias. This leads to another pronoun, the point of view pronoun in this novel, "I." Aside from the chapters supplying cultural information, most of the novel is narrated in the first person and most of the time that first person is Ai. He approaches Estraven as a man approaches a man, and whenever Estraven acts in what Ai considers a stereotypically feminine way, Ai criticizes him. This perspective characterizes Ai quite well: a man defensive of his knowledge based on human sexuality; prejudiced against the unknown but, nevertheless, knowable androgyne; and



unperceptive in general, partially due to the Karhide custom of *shifgrethor* or face saving. Possibly, too, since an androgyne also means an effeminate man, Ai's perspective is justified, although this doesn't speak well for Terra (Earth). Estraven doesn't clarify matters when he becomes narrator, but then he has no need to explain himself.

Perhaps the most disappointing section of the novel occurs when Estraven enters *kemmer* (as a female naturally). Both Ai and Estraven in their separate accounts merely mention they chose not to have a sexual relationship. Their use of the past tense means *kemmer* is over and the chance has passed. Ai further says he had a revelation of Estraven as a complete person after seeing "him" as a female. But this doesn't explain Estraven. Somehow, the core issue of single versus dual sexuality is missing. If *kemmer* is as intense as it's been described, and these two beings love each other as friends and respect each other for their similar goals, and trust each other with their lives, wouldn't the temptation to consummate their feelings be seen as the most passionate struggle of their lives? Or has Estraven's brother Arek intervened as he had in mindspeak? But then, if Estraven so closely identifies the voice of Ai with Arek, wouldn't his passion be doubled? On the other hand, maybe Ai has an extremely low sex drive. Never does he long for a woman nor explain his own sexual needs. The first woman he sees walking off the spaceship seems strange to him. But speculation aside, the real reason a more explicit scene seems necessary is that Ai tells the reader he understands Estraven through his androgyny, but that is all the reader is told. The reader is shown nothing. Despite the clever argument that this scene is left to the reader's imagination, so that the complaining reader risks being called unimaginative, wouldn't it be better if the author presented it? The author—who's made up the alien elements and who's drawn such an important conclusion from them? If this scene had been fleshed out, Ai would never again use "he" for Estraven. On the other hand, Estraven's femininity, felt by a man who's never known anything but his own masculinity, might have been so unforgettably intense that "she" would have been the perfect description of Ai's evolving understanding of androgyny. Another possibility is Ai inventing a pronoun because of his experience. "He" remains an impediment and any new ideas Le Guin might have found by facing the scene are lost forever. The scene is left out, and the reader is left on the right hand of light.

Still, many a great novel has minor flaws. The weak integration of androgyny to the plot doesn't weaken Le Guin's creative concept of androgyny; the pronoun choice doesn't take away from Le Guin's great courage in writing a feminist-rooted novel for her overwhelmingly male audience; Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* has one line devoted to the famous professor bringing his creature to life—a scene that dominates every movie on the subject—and her book has been in publication for more than one hundred years. Besides, Ursula Le Guin's masterpiece has lifted the standard in the world of science fiction and left all of literature the chill of a wintry planet, the warmth of a beautifully evolved but tragic friendship, and the taunt of an androgyne's tantalizing sex life.



Critical Essay #2

*In this excerpt, Brown maintains that *The Left Hand of Darkness* explores the past, present, and future aspects of androgyny, recognizing that individuals can only become fully human when sexual differences are transcended.*

Much of the impact of Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) results from the fact that the novel is an exploration of the concept of the dichotomous/androgynous one on three time levels: future, present, and past. First and most obviously, it is future directed, presenting a possible androgynous world on the planet Winter. Second, it is rooted in the present. As Le Guin affirms in her introduction to the Ace edition, the purpose of her science fiction is descriptive, not predictive: "I'm merely observing, in the peculiar, devious, and thought-experimental manner proper to science fiction, that if you look at us at certain odd times of the day □ we already are [androgynous]." Third, *The Left Hand of Darkness* is directed to the past. In her exploration of androgyny, Le Guin examines a subject whose origins are buried deep in our mythic past.□

The very origins of the word, lying in our past, in ancient Greece suggest a beginning definition. Androgyny is a combination of *andro* meaning male and *gyn* meaning female. It suggests by its form a blending in which human characteristics of males and females are not rigidly assigned. One might simply assert then that the androgyne is the dichotomous one, incorporating male and female psychological duality in one physical entity. There are, though, more complex ideas currently associated with the word. Androgyny is an affirmation that humanity should reject all forms of sexual polarization, emerge from the prison of gender into a world in which individual behavior can and is freely chosen.□

In practical terms, then, the theory of androgyny affirms that we should develop a mature sexuality in which an open system of all possible behavior is accepted, the temperament of the individual and the surrounding circumstances being the determining factors, rather than gender.□ The preceding interpretation of androgyny in the present is certainly part of what concerns Le Guin. However, her presentation of the androgynous beings in *The Left Hand of Darkness* also encompasses the original archetypes. These archetypes express the underlying human conviction that man had once experienced a unity that is now denied by the basic division into male and female. Any review of the creation myths reveals an astounding number of androgynous situations.□ Some of the more obvious examples are briefly referred to here. Consider that the Bible includes two versions of creation. In Genesis I, it is an androgynous God who creates both man and woman in his image. In the second version in Genesis, it is the hermaphroditic Adam who produces Eve from his side.□

Similarly, this concept of the paradoxical, split yet unified, male and female principle is found in Chinese mythology. This traditional belief is embodied in the *I Ching or Book of Changes* dated sometime between 2000 to 1300 B.C. Here the supreme ultimate generates the primary forms, the Yin and the Yang. All nature then consists of a



perpetual interplay between this primordial pair. They are Yang and Yin, heat and cold, fire and water, active and passive, masculine and feminine.□

According to the perceptions of many writers, we are, indeed, male and female. This recognition of androgyny as our ideal is buried in our mythology, in our literature, in our subconscious, and in our cells. Ursula Le Guin draws upon this past tradition of the mythic and literary androgyne and her recognition of the androgynous behavior in our present society when she writes her future-based novel, *The Left Hand of Darkness* .

Le Guin is aware how difficult her readers will find acceptance of the androgynous principle. To make explicit the need for such a non-Western interpretation of experience, she first establishes the movement from duality to unity on all levels of Genly Ai's experience, then depicts his increasing sensitivity to the peripheral ambiguities of truth that contradict the central facts.

We begin with duality into unity in terms of imagery, setting, characters, action, and philosophy. Traditionally, the right side has been associated with light representing knowledge, rationality, and the male principle; the left with darkness, ignorance, and the female principle. In *The Left Hand of Darkness* the initial description of the setting immediately establishes this light/dark, left/right polarity. The novel opens with "Rain clouds over dark towers □ a dark storm-beaten city." Yet there is one vein of slowly winding gold. This is the parade. Genly, the protagonist, sees these as contrasts, separate facets of the scene. They are, though, part of one unified vision of the world of Winter.

The wider universe is depicted in terms of light and dark. The mad Argaven, King of Karhide, mentions that the stars are bright and blinding, providing a traditional account of the universe. Continuing the description, he expands it, insisting on the surrounding void, the terror and the darkness that counterpoint the rational light of the interplanetary alliance of the Ekumen that Genly symbolizes. The glacier, the heart of Winter, is so bright on the Gobrin Ice it almost blinds Genly and his travelling companion, Estraven, the proscribed first minister of Karhide. Yet it is dark and terrible when they are caught between Drumner and Dremegale, the volcanos, spewing out black smoke and ash.

The action in the novel is often described in terms of dualities. At Arikostor Fastness, Genly specifically mentions the thin strips of light that creep across the circle. They are the counterpoints of the slats of dimness. The weaver, Faxe, a man, is seen as a woman dressed in light in the center of darkness. The foretellers are a part of a bright spider web, light against dark.

Toward the conclusion of his journey, both Genly and the reader perceive the merging pattern of dualities on these levels of setting and action. Light and dark, left and right, and, by implication, male and female become whole. Estraven quotes Torner's Lay to Genly:



Light is The Left Hand of Darkness and darkness the right hand of light. Two are one, life and death, lying together like lovers in kemmer, like hands joined together, like the end and the way.

Genly and Estraven yearn for the dark of the shadow when they are in the antarctic void of the white darkness. Without shadow, without dark, there is a surfeit of light. They cannot see ahead to avoid the threatening changes in the terrain. In total understanding, Genly draws for Estraven the Yang and the Yin, the light and the dark. "Both and one," he says; "A shadow on snow." Both are necessary. Ultimately, Genly recognizes their crossing of the ice is both success and failure: union with the Ekumen, death for Estraven. Both are necessary.

But light and dark, left and right are not the only polarities that are unified as preparatory patterns for the central sexual unification. There is political duality in the opposed states of Orgoreyn and Karhide. Karhide has a slow steady pace of change. In many ways it is disunited. While it speaks to the people's sense of humanity, fostering a sense of strong individualism and family loyalty based on the conception of the hearths, like many democracies it harbors within it the possibility of the rise of fascism and a susceptibility to demagogues.

Orgoreyn is more socialist. Burdened down by the rivalries of its Commensalities, the extensiveness of its bureaucracies, the pettiness of its inspectors, it nonetheless is ordered and unified. It conveys a sense of progress. Still, it terrifies Genly with its failure to respect the rights of the individual. These political polarities exist not only between the two states but also within each, since the individual systems are at the same time both rational and irrational.

Genly, disgusted with this ambiguity, embraces Karhide, then rejects it; accepts Orgota, then flees from it. He seeks a consistent rational pattern. There is none. This is precisely Le Guin's thesis. Ambiguous duality must exist if unification is to occur.

This state of political polarity is unified by the agency of the Ekumen. Not a kingdom but a co-ordinator, it serves as a clearinghouse for trade and knowledge for the eighty-three nations within its scope. Mystical in nature, the Ekumen works slowly, seeking consensus. Estraven immediately recognizes that the Ekumen is a greater weaver than the Handdara. It has woven all aliens into one fabric that reflects both the unity and diversity of the civilized world.

This pattern of unifying dualities is clearly related to the central concern of androgyny. Without an awareness of the possibility of unifying opposites on the imaginative, physical, and political levels, we would not be as willing to alter the present sexual dichotomy we experience. According to Ursula Le Guin, at times we already perceive the androgynous possibilities within us. She suggests we are, nonetheless, unable to explore fully this unified duality. One reason for this limitation is the restrictive way the western mind interprets human experience. (A similar view is promulgated by Taoism and Zen.) This linear approach, characterizing western thought, focuses on scientifically provable facts. As a result it is narrow and exclusive. It fails to incorporate our peripheral



senses which, through intuition and mystical awareness, also contribute to knowledge [according to Alan W. Watts in his *The Way of Zen*]. Through the action in *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Le Guin suggests that by utilizing this peripheral vision we, like Genly, can learn to accept life with all its ambiguities, its paradoxes, its flow, its unknowable qualities, with all its androgyny.

At the beginning of *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Genly is limited by the western mode of thought. As a scientist observing a subject, there is a tacit assumption of superiority on his part. He admits early in the first chapter that he judges the Gethenians as aliens. His detached manner leads him mistakenly to assert that the rivalry between Tibe, the traitorous cousin of the King, and Estraven is irrelevant to his cause. He dislikes Estraven because he is obscure, not an easy subject for scientific research. Notably, Genly's poor judgment of Winter's cultures results from his desire to gather the facts and proceed to logical conclusions. He is skeptical of anything that cannot be labeled and categorized.

Only by abandoning his divisive scientific approach can Genly achieve the unification of the warring philosophical and sexual elements within him. First, however, there are many ambiguities he must accept. One of these is Shifgrethor, an ambiguous conveying of information and intent. Not lying, it is a viable mode of behavior, conveying one aspect of truth. The wheel of experience, as Estraven insists, is not factually knowable. It turns independent of human control. On the Gobrin Ice, Genly must accept this ambiguity. No one can predict his success or failure on the glacier. As well, Genly eventually perceives that opposites are not exclusive, not contradictory. Estraven is both patriot and traitor. Genly is both patriot and traitor. Loyal to his mission, he brings Winter into the Ekumen; yet he betrays Estraven by permitting the landing of the starship before forcing Argaven to recall Therem's condemnation. Life is not linear as Genly first believes. Since it is process, the Gethenian system of measuring time is not alien but rather a logical emphasis of the individual's perception as the center of meaningful experience.

Finally, Genly accepts the ambiguous flow of events that makes it an impossibility to contain truth in language. In discussing Therem's behavior with Argaven, he says, "As I spoke I did not know if what I said was true. True in part; an aspect of truth." Often it is the west that affirms that there is one truth that can be logically explicated. It is the east that perceives that truth is flowing and ebbing, inexplicably diffuse, androgynous.

Ironically, this recognition of the many facets of truth is revealed in the beginning of *The Left Hand of Darkness*. Here the enlightened Genly, now looking back with wisdom on his experiences on Winter, declares that truth is a matter of the imagination (eastern) but one can write a report on events (western) containing facts (western). However, those facts, since they are neither solid nor coherent, will glow or dull according to the speaker (eastern).

The unification of all these dualities, the acceptance of these ambiguities, prepares both Genly and the reader to accept the central thematic unity of the sexual hermaphroditism of the Gethenians. In his response to the aliens, Genly reveals what Le Guin assumes



the reader's feelings might be to these dichotomous characters. Estraven is first described as "the person on my left." Appropriately he is involved in feminine intrigue; however, he is wearing green, gold, and silver. These are colors not usually associated with both the right (the masculine) and with the left (the feminine). By page 122 Estraven is on Genly's right, all male now, but defying the traditional symbolism of right and left, he is a dark, shadowy figure. Associated with both light and dark, with left and right in a deliberately reversed symbolic order, Estraven is also an ambiguous figure. Neither Genly Ai nor the reader can interpret such a character according to traditional concepts. This world of Winter denies the established polarities of the light and dark, left and right, male and female.

Initially, the mobile responds to this confusion on the basis of his cultural conditioning. While he is repelled by the sexual duality of the Karhiders, he can neither overtly reveal his feelings to his hosts nor covertly admit his distaste to himself. His language, his responses, though, record his uneasiness. Genly first describes Estraven in these revealing terms declaring he was "Annoyed by [his] sense of effeminate intrigue." Later he calls Estraven a strange alien. He is oblivious to the fact that Estraven is the Karhider who has most attempted to befriend him. In a patronizing manner, Genly mentions that his landlady seems male on first meeting but also has "fat buttocks that wagged as he walked and a soft fat face, and a prying, spying ignoble, kindly nature. □ He was so feminine." In commenting on the lack of war on Gethen, Genly observes, "They lacked, it seemed, the capacity to mobilize. They behaved like animals, in that respect; or like women. They did not behave like men or ants." Finally, in describing Therem in their later relationship, he affirms, "There was in his attitude something feminine, a refusal of the abstract, the ideal, a submissiveness to the given which displeased me."

At the beginning of *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Genly divides these unified creatures into polarities. He perceives the Gethenians in single bodies responding as both male and female. This merging of the stereotyped roles and responses first shocks and then revolts him.

The completion of his mission, however, brings him to full understanding of the nature of all dualities. They are extremes on a continuum, separated but nonetheless joined, unified. Duality can be unity. Genly must accept this fact and find ease in it. For him the crossing on the ice is a journey to self and universal knowledge. Genly begins by sharing supplies with Estraven; moves to encompassing him with mindspeak; concludes by totally accepting Estraven's nature and, by extension, the androgyny of his own. Toward the conclusion of their journey, Genly admits,

What I was left with was, at last, acceptance of him as he was. Until then I had rejected him, refused him his own reality. He had been quite right to say that he, the only person on Gethen who trusted me, was the only Gethenian I distrusted. For he was the only one who had entirely accepted me as a human being; who had liked me personally and given me entire personal loyalty, and who therefore had demanded of me an equal degree of recognition, of acceptance. I had not been willing to give it. I had been afraid



to give it. I had not wanted to give my trust, my friendship to a man who was a woman, a woman who was a man.

By later drawing the symbol of the Yang and the Yin, light and dark, masculine and feminine, Genly makes visible his emotional and intellectual acceptance of Estraven: the two in the one.

Le Guin, however, does not conclude with Genly's recognition of the androgynous possibility. Her ending suggests that this state of unified duality is a preferable, superior state of existence. In the final chapter, Genly no longer relates to his own species nor they to him. He is alien to the Terran arrivals. Uneasy in his new perceptions, Genly calls the representatives of the Ekumen "a troupe of great, strange animals of two different species, great apes with intelligent eyes, all of them in rut, in kemmer." He is happy to return to the company of the young Gethenian physician who is described in these terms: "□ and his face, a young serious face, not a man's face and not a woman's, a human face, these were a relief to me, familiar, right."

In *The Left Hand of Darkness* Ursula Le Guin suggests we too should accept as right, as familiar, the archetypal androgyny within us. Transcending male, transcending female, we can become fully human.



Critical Essay #3

Scholes, author of Structural Fabulation, holds the premise that Le Guin forces readers to examine how sexual stereotyping affects all personal relationships and individual personalities.

Ursula K. Le Guin works in a very different manner from John Brunner. Her fiction is closer to fantasy than naturalism, but it is just as grounded in ethical concerns as Brunner's work, despite its apparent distance from present actualities. Though some would argue that her political novel, *The Dispossessed* (1974), is her best work, and others might favor her ecological romance, *The Word for World is Forest* (1972, 1976), or her young people's fantasy, *A Wizard of Earthsea* (1968), today's critical consensus is still that her best single work is *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969).

In *The Left Hand of Darkness* Le Guin moves far from our world in time and space, to give us a planet where life has evolved on different lines from our own. This world, which happens to be in a period of high glaciation, has evolved political institutions in two adjoining countries that resemble feudalism on the one hand, and bureaucracy on the other. But the most important difference between this world and our own is that its human inhabitants are different from us in their physical sexuality. All beings on the planet Gethen have both male and female sexual organs. In a periodic cycle like estrus in animals, Gethenians become sexually aroused—but only one set of sexual organs is activated at this time. These people are potentially hermaphroditic. Most of the time they are neuter, but then they may briefly become a man or a woman, and in that time beget a child or conceive one. Thus the same person may experience both fatherhood and motherhood at different times. There is no privileged sex, exempt from child-bearing and child-rearing. This difference has many ramifications in political and social structure, and in personal behavior—far too many to attempt a discussion of them here. But the major effect of Le Guin's imagining such a fictional world is to force us to examine how sexual stereotyping dominates actual human concepts of personality and influences all human relationships. "What," one of her characters from a "normal" planet asks, "is the first question we ask about a new-born baby?" What indeed? We all know the answer. The real question of course, is "Why?" Why must we know of any new person what their sex is before we can begin to relate to them? The answer to this involves our realization of how deeply our culture is coded along sexual lines, how much must be undone if a person is to be judged as a person—even in the eyes of the law, which has never kept its blindfold tight enough to ignore the sex of those who appear before it.

Ursula Le Guin has been attacked by radical feminists for not going far enough, for using male protagonists, as she does even in *The Left Hand of Darkness*, and for putting other issues, both political and environmental, ahead of feminism. In fact, it is probably wrong to think of her as a feminist. But I know of no single book likely to raise consciences about sexism more thoroughly and convincingly than this one. And that this is done gently, in a book which manages also to be a fine tale of adventure and a tender story of love and friendship, makes the achievement all the more remarkable. There are few writers in the United States who offer fiction as pleasurable and thoughtful as Ursula

Le Guin's. It is time for her to be recognized beyond the special provinces of fantasy and science fiction or feminism as simply one of our best writers.

Adaptations

An audiocassette version of *The Left Hand of Darkness*, read by the author, was released by Warner Home Audio in 1985.



Topics for Further Study

In the novel, Genly Ai draws the "yin and yang" symbol for Estraven. Study the ancient Chinese Naturalist movement that developed the philosophy of yin and yang, and explain it in a way that would help readers understand this book better.

Research the problems of extreme cold faced by Arctic expeditions, such as Admiral Robert Peary's expedition to the North Pole in 1909. Write your findings in the form of a guide for travelers.

Many people feel that an envoy from another world may have already visited Earth. Search the Internet or supermarket tabloids for stories from people who claim to know things about alien visitors. Devise a scale that will help observers test how true these stories are.

Several science fiction books have used a device like the ansible communicator that would be able to transmit messages instantly across space. Is such a thing possible? Why or why not? Discuss the scientific principles involved.



Compare and Contrast

1969: The Woodstock Music festival took place on a farm outside of Bethel, New York, drawing between 300,000 and 500,000 young people from across the country to hear three days of music from acts including Jimi Hendrix, the Who, the Grateful Dead, Janis Joplin, and the Jefferson Airplane. The event was surprisingly peaceful, given that many more people showed up than anticipated.

Today: Modern marketing techniques have tried to reproduce such a massive event, with no luck.

1969: The largest anti-war demonstration in the history of Washington, D.C., occurred on November 15th, when 250,000 people marched on the capitol. Another 200,000 protesters gathered at the same time in San Francisco.

Today: Lacking outrage at government policies, citizens tend not to band together in such large groups to protest; instead, large demonstrations are often intended to draw attention to areas in which ordinary people can make a difference in their communities. The Million Man March of 1995 is estimated to have brought between 600,000 and 850,000 black men to Washington to demonstrate a commitment to family and personal responsible behavior.

1969: Finding the Students for a Democratic Society to be too complacent, a group calling itself the Weather Underground split off to protest the war by violent means, such as bombing army recruitment offices.

Today: Anti-government terrorism is more likely to come from right-wing separatists, as shown by the bombing that killed 169 people in Oklahoma City in 1995.

1969: The gay rights movement began when police raided the Stonewall Inn, a bar in Greenwich Village, New York. The gay patrons resisted arrest, leading to a three-day riot in the street.

Today: Gay activists have made strides in securing the right of gays to gather in public, but they still struggle for rights such as employment security and the benefits enjoyed by legally married couples, such as family medical insurance and the right to adopt children.

1969: The University of California at Los Angeles, in response to a Defense Department order, developed a computer network "node" in order to decentralize information, so that it would not be vulnerable to computer attack. By 1975, over 100 universities and government research facilities had research nodes that shared computer information, and in 1985, the National Science Foundation created a network to link regional networks of academic and research sites in a new Internet.



Today: Over 180 million Americans have access to the Internet at home, at school, or on the job.



What Do I Read Next?

Three of Le Guin's novels that follow the same cycle as this one—*Rocannon's World*, *Planet of Exile*, and *City of Illusions*—have been collected into one volume by Nelson Doubleday Inc., called *Three Hainish Novels*.

Besides this novel, the book by Le Guin that is most often examined in literature and political science classes is *The Dispossessed: An Ambiguous Utopia*, published in 1974.

Orson Scott Card's classic 1985 science fiction novel *Ender's Game* also uses the ansible as a tool for interplanetary communication, but it examines the effects of travel and communication on war, not diplomacy.

One of the greatest science fiction novels is Frank Herbert's *Dune* (1965), which has led to a series of interrelated novels about a richly imagined world.

Doris Lessing is generally linked to Le Guin because they were among the first women to gain popular attention for their science fiction writing. Not all of Lessing's work is sci-fi: some is fantasy, and some is straight literary fiction. A sampling of Lessing's work can be gained from *The Doris Lessing Reader*, published in 1988.

Most of Le Guin's introductions to her novels are as thought-provoking as the introduction to *The Left Hand of Darkness*. Many of them, along with some original essays on the craft of science fiction, are collected in *The Language of the Night: Essays on Fantasy and Science Fiction*, published in 1989 by HarperCollins.



Further Study

Thomas M. Disch, *The Dreams Our Stuff Is Made Of: How Science Fiction Conquered the World*, Free Press, 1998.

The author, who has published in almost all genres and is a cult figure in science fiction, has produced an insightful, well-researched, and entertaining history.

John Griffiths, *Three Tomorrows: American, British and Soviet Science Fiction*, Barnes and Noble Books, 1980.

This exercise in comparative sociology gives readers a good sense of where notions of the unreal come from in the imaginations of authors, including Le Guin's.

N. B. Hayles, "Androgyny, Ambivalence, and Assimilation in *The Left Hand of Darkness*," in *Ursula K. Le Guin*, edited by Joseph D. Olander and Martin Harry Greenberg, Taplinger, 1979, pp. 97-115.

This essay looks in depth at the issues in its title, offering an advanced, scholarly study.

Suzanne Elizabeth Reid, *Presenting Ursula Le Guin*, Twayne, 1997.

Reid gives a clear overview of the author's career and insightful interpretations of her works.

Karen Sinclair, "Solitary Being: The Hero as Anthropologist," in *Ursula K. Le Guin: Voyager to Inner Lands and to Outer Space*, edited by Joe DeBolt, Kennikat Press, 1979, pp. 50-65.

This early exploration of Le Guin's characters draws upon parallels and themes that are not evident to the reader of just one novel.

George Edgar Slusser, *The Farthest Shores of Ursula Le Guin*, Borgo Press, 1976.

This early study of Le Guin's career, published when she had been publishing for just thirteen years, offers a good overview of the ideas addressed in the Hainish novels.



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Chloe Bolan, in an essay for *Novels for Students*, Gale, 1999.



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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

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