Ambiguous Understandings

Critical Interpretations of Utopia in Le Guin’s The Left Hand of Darkness and The Dispossessed 1969 – 2011

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Abstract

This thesis seeks to understand attitudes towards utopia in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, by studying the patterns of response to Ursula Le Guin’s two utopian novels *The Left Hand of Darkness* and *The Dispossessed* from 1969 to 2011. It constructs a meta-analysis of critical, as well as popular, responses and analyses of these novels during the period of study. The diverse readings provide insight into patterns of reception and response, and reveal a consistent philosophy of partnership within Le Guin’s two texts.

Chapter One provides an overview of Le Guin’s reception by various communities, and the reception of the two core novels. This chapter will establish that Le Guin and her novels have broad appeal which is not restricted by reader type or the period of reading.

Chapter Two is a critical literature review of scholarship on utopia and utopianism throughout the period of study. The chapter seeks to understand how these concepts have evolved, and locate the two novels within this utopian tradition.

Chapter Three addresses the engagement with gender and sexuality in both novels, and how readers have discussed these themes as utopian, because of the social construction of gender and sex roles in most readings of both novels.

Chapter Four engages with the presentation of political systems, ideology, and ecology by Le Guin in *The Left Hand of Darkness* and *The Dispossessed*. It suggests that these issues are perceived by readers as hinging on utopian notions of freedom.

The conclusion I present is that Le Guin is a utopianist, trying to educate her readers through her fiction. She successfully encourages readers to reflect on their own world and situation by creating utopian novels, but the themes readers identify in the novels are in general consistent over time. What differs is the importance assigned to these themes in creating utopian change.
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Introduction

An answerable question

“To learn which questions are unanswerable, and not to answer them: this skill is most needful in times of stress and darkness.”


This thesis will examine what insights can be gained into the utopian imagination of the Anglosphere through studying reactions to two utopian science fiction novels by Ursula K. Le Guin – *The Left Hand of Darkness*, first published in 1969, and *The Dispossessed*, first published in 1974. The primary source material for these reactions is letters to science fiction and fantasy magazines, reviews published in magazines and newspapers, and academic analyses as recorded in books and journal articles. The methodology employed is a meta-analysis of these sources, to consolidate the reactions from 1969 until 2011 and to trace common experiences of readers throughout the period of study. The core original contribution of this thesis will be use of this meta-analysis to argue that Le Guin presents a utopian philosophy of partnership, which is reflected in readers’ receptions, and that this philosophy reflects a utopian desire to challenge the status quo.

Le Guin’s skill at mobilising social, political, and anthropological theories in her fiction has been noted by many academics.¹ This thesis is particularly interested in understanding the effectiveness of *The Left Hand of Darkness* and *The Dispossessed* at translating complex theoretical ideas into utopian desire within the minds of readers. For this analysis, special mention must be made of Tarya Malkki’s conference paper

from the 1991 International Conference for the Fantastic in the Arts. Malkki’s paper argued that the presentation of marriage in both novels is a metaphor for commentary on the idea of union between human beings on multiple levels. Malkki’s idea helped to illuminate the common thread between readings of The Left Hand of Darkness and The Dispossessed – each reading systematically reflects a facet of human partnerships, as reimagined by Le Guin. Where Malkki based her argument on textual analysis of the novels and focused on sexuality, this thesis expands Malkki’s initial idea by looking at a wide range of reactions to the texts. Readers emphasise many different themes, but all relate to a vision of more equitable social relations. This thesis uses these reader reactions as primary source material to argue that Le Guin educates readers in utopian desire, which is informed by a philosophy of partnership. The philosophy of partnership is an approach to life which advocates acceptance and equality between people of all genders and sexualities, harmonious political organisation predicated on freedom and respect, and congruence between the treatment of humans and the treatment of the environment.

Giving non-academic sources such as letters and reviews in magazines like Galaxy, Locus, The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction, Analog, and Extrapolation equal weight with academic examinations may seem an unusual choice. The writers of these sources, however, are generally extremely well informed. George Turner’s article “On writing about science fiction” presents excellent arguments for taking letters and reviews seriously. He stated that “the review is the beginning – small and inconsequential, but still useful – of discussion and ultimately of informed criticism,” and he particularly praised the work of P. Schuyler Miller, whose reviews of both

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novels feature in this thesis. Turner argued that fan commentary discusses issues “knowledgeably and sometimes with insight.” He acknowledged that some reviews and fan letters concentrate too closely on one aspect of the book, or that some fans industriously set out to prove that a book is bad in order to make a name for themselves. The work of professional critics and academics is emphasised in this thesis in order to moderate the effects of these fan biases. This thesis, building on the arguments presented by Turner, gives weight to the letters and reviews published in fanzines and science fiction magazines for their ability to give access to non-academic commentary about the reception of the core texts. The inclusion of these kinds of non-academic sources is also an attempt to democratise the analysis, and to reduce the potential for an ‘echo chamber’ of professionals reinforcing each other’s views.

There are many domains this thesis will not attempt to address. In particular, there is minimal engagement with online sources such as blogs, forums, and internet communities or fandoms. While these sources could potentially give more voice to people reading purely from the perspective of ‘fans’, and further democratise the range of readings presented here, online sources also present unique challenges. Unlike sources held in archives, fan reactions on the internet have no curator. Curation can bury fringe voices, so the lack of intervention in what is available on the internet is an advantage to researchers. Online sources include views which have already been expressed, are ill-informed or ill-thought out, or are the result of in-tutorial university discussions and shared for assessment purposes, mixed with potential original insights. The sheer volume of information is beyond the scope of research viable for a Master’s thesis. In addition, a meta-analysis of fanzine, magazine, and academic responses to The

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Left Hand of Darkness and The Dispossessed has not been completed prior to this thesis and thus presented sufficient scope for a Master’s degree.

This thesis also does not attempt to answer questions about Le Guin’s motivation or aims regarding the philosophy of partnership, nor about the impacts reading the novels may have had on the actions or mentality of readers. These questions are unanswerable from the materials used in this historical analysis. In order to enhance understanding of the development of these themes over time, the footnote references include the date of publication.

Having outlined the unanswerable questions, the question I will now proceed to answer is: how do The Left Hand of Darkness and The Dispossessed educate utopian desire in readers? This question will be answered by demonstrating the broad range of readers engaging with Le Guin’s work, examining theories of utopianism and utopian novels in the twentieth century and understanding theories of how utopian novels inspire utopian dreaming. The thesis will then explore two themes which extend across multiple reader reflections: the intersection of gender, sexuality, and feminism, and manifestations of political systems and demonstrate how readings around these themes reflect a consistent philosophy of partnership.
Chapter One

Le Guin’s Legacy

This chapter seeks to justify this thesis’ focus on Ursula Kroeber Le Guin and her works by establishing that Le Guin wrote novels that engaged with a particularly interesting historical moment and that readers - contemporary to the time of writing and since - have engaged with two works in particular: *The Left Hand of Darkness* and *The Dispossessed*. By engaging with reactions included in fanzines, fan letters, science fiction magazine reviews, mainstream sources, and academic analyses, this chapter will establish that there is a broad audience which interacts with Le Guin’s ideas and concepts. Members of this audience read the novels through their own prisms of perception to create meaning, and by understanding these individual meanings, the thesis as a whole seeks to understand how reactions to utopian novels reflect our times’ concerns and desires for social change.

First, I will outline Le Guin’s biography and explore her reflections on her identity as an author. Given Le Guin’s active engagement with fans and readers throughout her career, Le Guin’s opinions form an important context for understanding how readers’ reactions to her novels were framed. It will become clear that though much of the material this thesis draws on to understand Le Guin has been gained from science fiction communities and publications, pigeonholing her as just a writer of science fiction would result in an artificially constrained analysis.

Le Guin was born in 1929 to Alfred L. Kroeber and Theodora Kroeber. She grew up in Berkeley, California where her father was a professor of Anthropology and her mother a writer, in a home filled with “intelligent and accomplished visitors from all walks of
life.”¹ She is well educated, as evidenced by her completion of a Master of Arts in French Renaissance and Medieval Romance Literature at Colombia University in 1952.² Le Guin married Charles Le Guin in 1953, together raising three children³ and seven cats.⁴ Since the 1960s she has been an active participant in the literary community through teaching writing techniques and skills in the United States, United Kingdom, and Australia in university, college, and workshop contexts.⁵ Her enthusiasm for and success at teaching won her praise.⁶ Whilst teaching, Le Guin continued to write and publish, releasing twenty novels, ten short story collections, six volumes of poetry, thirteen books for children, four collections of essays, as well as criticism, screenplays, and sound recordings.⁷ Since a ‘golden period’ between 1966 and 1976, in which she published her most successful and best known novels, including *A Wizard of Earthsea* (1968), *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), and *The Dispossessed* (1974), she has been considered one of the great writers of science fiction. Her work is not only prolific, but also highly regarded and frequently awarded – between 1968 and 2012 she has won five Hugo Awards, six Nebula Awards, and 11 Locus Awards.⁸

Le Guin has described herself in very different ways over time, and her identity as a writer has evolved and grown over her 50 years as an author. In the mid-1960s Le Guin “deliberately turned to science fiction after years of rejection letters because she knew

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¹ Donna R. White, *Dancing with Dragons: Ursula K. Le Guin and the critics*, Rochester, Camden House, 1999, p.3. White’s work focuses on Le Guin’s dialogue with her critics, and on how her interactions with critical work have influenced her fiction – this thesis does not duplicate her work, as this research focuses on the reception and interpretation of Le Guin’s ideas by a wide range of readers, and not on Le Guin’s responses to these readings.


⁵ According to Le Guin, ‘Ursula K. Le Guin: Biographical Data (2006)’. this included Clarion West, Portland State University, Reading University (England), First Australian Workshop in Speculative Fiction, and Stanford University.


there was a market for readily classifiable works,“⁹ although she didn’t believe that she was really writing science fiction at the time, calling her early work “fairy tales decked out in space suits.”¹⁰ She has particularly emphasised that she is a ‘Western’ writer; a term she used to attempt to break down the idea that literature produced in the Anglosphere is the ‘norm’ and everything else is the ‘Other’. She writes from the perspective of a person who was born, raised, and has spent most of her life in the developed Western world,¹¹ and therefore is a Western writer. Le Guin has recently highlighted that she is an American novelist, and that this is more important than a genre-based identity.¹² Reflecting on her career, she claimed that her goal had been “to subvert as much as possible without hurting anybody’s feelings,”¹³ which reflects her profound concern with the world around her and her sensitivity to the experience of individuals in society. Despite this concern, she is opposed to being classified as an allegorical writer, and stated in 1973 that

> I hate allegories. A is ‘really’ B, and a hawk is ‘really’ a handsaw – bah. Humbug. Any creation, primary or secondary, with any vitality, can ‘really’ be a dozen mutually exclusive things at once, before breakfast.¹⁴

Le Guin has consistently been most interested in the “conscience of the scientist; also the conscience of the artist… people who play with fire,”¹⁵ and this concern is reflected in the protagonists of her works – in *The Left Hand of Darkness* an emissary named Genly Ai, sent to Gethen to bring its inhabitants into an interplanetary coalition called the Ekumen and, in *The Dispossessed*, Shevek a physicist who leaves his home on an

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anarchist moon colony for a capitalist society on the planet his home orbits, seeking greater academic freedom. By “dropping some poor hapless soul into a different world, a different culture,” Le Guin engages the reader in a fundamental learning process, replicating the universal experience of childhood and exploring the world for the first time to learn the rules. Le Guin’s narrative techniques are best understood as experiential, empathetic, and reflective, rather than allegorical. These are not techniques which are unique to science fiction writing, though Le Guin has used them to great effect in her science fiction novels as well as in her other work.

Le Guin’s ongoing development as a writer resulted in a patchwork public identity. She moved in and out the mantle of ‘science fiction writer’ for some time. In 1967, Ace Books was so confident that Le Guin was both recognisable and popular enough as a science fiction author to publish City of Illusions as a solo paperback. As Le Guin became increasingly recognisable, publishers invested in additional advertising for her work in science fiction magazines and fanzines. A half page advertisement for The Dispossessed appeared in the November 1973 issue of Algol as part of an extract focused on her new book, from her interview with Jonathan Ward (which would be printed in the 1975 Summer issue of Algol), directly next to a quarter page illustrated advertisement for The Lathe of Heaven. Despite this, an interview conducted in 1978 concluded that Le Guin “does not think of herself as a science fiction writer. Her writing came from the inside; all the classifications were simply for the market, for the publisher who needed labels to sell the works.” In contrast to this pragmatic statement, in 1981 Le Guin noted that

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17 Le Guin, "Ursula K. Le Guin: Return to Earthsea", 2001 (September), p.84.
18 White, Dancing with Dragons, 1999, p.45. Her previous two paperbacks had been published as Ace Doubles – back to back and upside down with another author’s novel on the flipside.
People keep predicting that I will bolt science fiction and fling myself madly into the Mainstream. I don’t know why. The limits, and the great spaces of fantasy and science fiction are precisely what my imagination needs. Outer space, and the Inner Lands, are still, and always will be, my country.  

But by 1984, her commitment to outer space began to wane and she said that space was a metaphor for me... until it ended quite abruptly after The Dispossessed. I had a loss of faith. I simply – I can’t explain it. I guess I don’t want to explain it. I don’t seem to be able to do outer space anymore.

In 1988, whilst being interviewed for Locus, Le Guin strongly identified as a science fiction writer in response to a challenge by her colleague, Norman Spinrad.

Spinrad was reviewing books for Isaac Asimov’s Science Fiction Magazine in 1986 and in his review of Always Coming Home (1985) derided Le Guin “as a ‘token nigger’ of the literary establishment, a ‘noble granola-eating natural woman,’ and a ‘hectoring guru.’” Using the interview with Locus to respond, Le Guin stated

Am I really a science fiction writer? Yeahh! I really am! I wrote to Asimov’s magazine where Norman Spinrad made these weird accusations, and to [Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America]. All you can do when people say untrue things about you is say it ain’t so.

Gary K. Wolfe suggested in 1994 that Le Guin gave A Fisherman of the Inland Sea the subtitle ‘Science Fiction Stories’ in a deliberate attempt to “to coopt the inevitable mainstream reviews that will claim this stuff isn’t SF at all” and who might instead label her as postmodern. Le Guin is a science fiction author, but, as her breadth of work became more diverse and authorial identity became more and more complex, she sought

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24 Quoted by White, Dancing with Dragons, 1999, p.4
to have this complexity acknowledged and to exercise greater control over the conversation about categorisation.

The resulting patchwork identity means that Le Guin has characterised herself as a novelist, poet, and short story writer who writes across different genres including “realism, science fiction, fantasy, children’s literature,” but was not beholden to any of these categories. The list of publications on her website includes headings for novels, story collections, poetry, translation, books for children, chapbooks, and edited anthologies and her texts such as *Always Coming Home* (1985), *Buffalo Gals* (1987), and *Unlocking the Air and Other Stories* (1996) defy genre boundaries and constraints. While Le Guin began her career as a science fiction writer, she never stagnated into writing one type of story. As she changed, or her life changed, her writing continued to change. It is clear from her reflective work that Le Guin loves writing as a career, and, as she wrote in *The Lathe of Heaven*, “love doesn't just sit there, like a stone, it has to be made, like bread; remade all the time, made new.” Her love of writing is precisely what kept her innovating and experimenting with style and form. In addition, given her move away from writing using classic science fiction tropes and outer space after *The Dispossessed*, her insistence at being counted as a science fiction author might be best understood in the context of the struggle female authors experienced during the 1960s and 1970s (when Le Guin first began writing) to even be acknowledged by core science fiction authorities. Given that Le Guin had contributed to breaking the silence on women’s contributions to the genre, it was likely very personal when her place within science fiction was questioned, thus leading to her vigorous defences in 1981 and 1988. But Le Guin has framed herself as much more than ‘just’ a science fiction author in the

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public eye – she is an American novelist, a Western writer, and complex writer who engages with many different genres.

As Le Guin’s oeuvre is vast and spread across many fields, Le Guin’s own critical and reflective work is an extremely valuable source. She may well be the only critic who is familiar with the entire range of her work. Le Guin engages enthusiastically with criticism of her work, and has changed her position on issues because of critique.  

Donna White suggested “that awareness, coupled with a sharp intellect that can disengage itself from the role of author, makes Le Guin herself the most astute of her critics,” and so throughout this thesis, Le Guin’s self-critique will be treated seriously, despite the bias or blind spots which always accompany self-reflection.

Having explored Le Guin’s complexity as an author, it is important to note that she attempts to explicitly frame how she is read by asserting particular identities during interviews or in her own essays. To understand if Le Guin’s self-narrative permeated through to readers’ experience, I have reviewed the ways in which fans and scholars have categorised Le Guin.

There are two interesting silences in Le Guin’s various identities outlined above – as a feminist author and as a utopian author. Sylvia Kelso has argued that the feminist and the utopianist are two of the three faces readers traverse, across all of Le Guin’s work, yet these have not been strongly held identities for the author herself. Le Guin had disagreements for much of the 1970s with Joanna Russ, a key author of feminist science fiction. Edward James noted that “Le Guin’s commitment to feminism was belated,”

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31 White, Dancing with Dragons, 1999, p.3.
32 White, Dancing with Dragons, 1999, p.3.
34 For further justification of Russ’ standing and credentials, see Merrick, The Secret Feminist Cabal, 2009, p.55.
the reasons for and impact of which will be explored in depth in Chapter Three. Le Guin’s relationship with other feminist writers has certainly been difficult, but this is less the consequence of a lack of commitment to feminism than it is the product of a lack of commitment to their feminism. As will be further discussed in Chapter Two, while Le Guin wrote *The Dispossessed* as a utopian novel, she is not committed to a particular utopian political ideology. Rather, her personal utopian philosophy of partnership is communicated to readers of her work and this is especially manifest in reader responses to *The Left Hand of Darkness* and *The Dispossessed*. Though they have been less important to Le Guin’s personal authorial identity, the two elements of feminism and utopianism in Le Guin’s work have emerged from my research as especially important to readers.

Some readers have tried to completely divorce Le Guin from science fiction and fantasy genre. Redefinitions have described Le Guin as anything other than a science fiction or fantasy author – as a feminist writer, a postmodern storyteller, and a social novelist. Redefinitions can be understood as an attempt by well-meaning reviewers to make Le Guin’s work more accessible to a broader base of readers who might be reluctant to engage with texts identified as science fiction, fantasy, or children’s literature. The decision to simultaneously release the *Harry Potter* books with ‘child’ and ‘adult’ covers demonstrated that there was a long-standing reluctance on the part of the mainstream to participate in or be associated with the fantasy and science fiction subculture, but that there was an appetite for the stories in those genres once they became socially acceptable adult reading material. Even though she has resisted definitions

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imposed on her from outside the genre as strongly as she has those from within, Le
Guin is a well-respected author beyond science fiction and fantasy communities.

Her work has been the focus of entire sessions at the annual Modern Language
Association conferences and at the meetings of its regional branches... A new Le Guin
book will be reviewed in the New York Times Book Review and by the Times Literary
Supplement, and the notices tend to be written by authors whose renown rivals Le
Guin’s own. She herself often writes reviews for the New York Times and the
Washington Post, and she graciously fends off continual invitations to give
commencement addresses, write introductions, edit anthologies, teach university
classes, and appear at conferences. 38

While these reviews and engagements may have motivated accusations like those made
by Spinrad, Le Guin viewed these activities not as fleeing the genres, but as breaking
down the ghetto mentality in science fiction and fantasy. She advised doing more to
reach out to the mainstream so that more people should understand the worth of science
fiction. 39 Modern academics reflecting on Le Guin’s impact have noted that she was
particularly effective at using her stories to bring her ideas into “mainstream intellectual
discourse,” 40 demonstrating that she followed through on her own calls to action. This
advocacy was not as unpopular in the science fiction community as Spinrad’s reaction
might imply. A letter in Vector from author Christopher D. Evans reflected agreement
with her sentiment that science fiction should emerge from the ghetto, and praised her
accessible and informal style when communicating this message. 41 Other letters in the
same issue described her speech as excellent 42 and her ideas as real, haunting, and
inspirational. 43

40 Lewis Call, "Postmodern Anarchism in the Novels of Ursula K. Le Guin", SubStance, vol. 36, no. 2,
2007, p.87.
43 Brian Griffin, "Letters", Vector 72, vol. 2, no. 4, 1976 (February), p.41. Essayist and reviewer of
science fiction.
As well as opening science fiction and fantasy to mainstream critics, Le Guin supported serious academic examination of science fiction and fantasy novels. Le Guin’s occasional insistence that she really was a science fiction writer was not a barrier to her being read and taken seriously in the mainstream and by academia, just as attempts by reviewers to remove her from the science fiction genre did not deter her from writing science fiction stories. Le Guin’s ability to navigate these attempts to confine her and her work to a single definition or genre helped to open up science fiction and fantasy, as well as proving that genre definition is no barrier to popularity for a work which captures a reader’s attention and imagination.

Beyond reviewers attempting to make Le Guin more accessible to a broad audience by papering over her identity as a science fiction writer, there is a wealth of source material documenting responses to Le Guin’s texts. As this thesis seeks to demonstrate, Le Guin’s writing captured something of the Zeitgeist for readers and inspired a wide range of people to think differently about their society. I include in this analysis fan letters, reviews from science fiction magazines, academic studies, and reactions from non-science fiction specific sources. These include reactions contemporary with the two focus novels for this thesis, to demonstrate that their popularity and power is not just the product of hindsight.

Before dealing with the positive reactions to Le Guin as an author, let us review some of the criticisms. Le Guin was not universally adored by readers and reviewers. John Clute claimed in one review that “Le Guin does not have a particularly bright eye” and Joanna Russ, who was unrestrained in her critical review of The Dispossessed, marvelled that Le Guin “conscientiously insists” on writing about things she knows nothing about, including “slums, the poor, mass strikes, police riots, politics,

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44 White, Dancing with Dragons, 1999, p.44.
economies, revolutionary undergrounds, society ladies, or aristocrats.”

Russ went on in that review to describe Le Guin as an author with “a romantic radicalism, a radicalism without teeth.”

Dave Langford once wrote to *Vector* to describe her 1975 AussieCon speech as “vaguely annoying, maybe a bit pretentious.”

In 1977 Michael Bishop described her writing as “sloppily romantic and her lyricism a function of sentimentality.”

The aforementioned Spinrad affair focused more on Le Guin’s identity as an author rather than her style and technique as a writer and will not be further discussed here. It worth noting that many of these negative reviews were from the 1970s, and that Le Guin learned enough from the critiques of others and her own self-reflection to improve her writing and narrative structures – so much so, that by “the end of the 1970s no reputable critic could write about twentieth-century developments in science fiction without at least mentioning Le Guin.”

In comparison, there is significant evidence of positive reactions across a wide range of sources. Examining reactions from fans, professional critics, and academics provides evidence that Le Guin was broadly accepted as a good writer, who created worlds which inspired readers – but responses to Le Guin’s desires to be understood as a Western writer or an American author are not evident.

Fanzines and letters from fans to specialist science fiction magazines demonstrate that Le Guin was a deeply respected writer in fan communities from the 1970s onwards, and that this respect and admiration is not just retrospective or the result of positive critical attention. Le Guin’s writing connected with a general audience and had a significant impact on readers. This analysis also demonstrates the exceptionally close connection

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between professional magazine editors and critics, academics, science fiction authors, and fans. There are obvious instances of professionals both acting as fans and interacting with fan sources in the capacity of a peer.

Letters from as early as 1971 describe Le Guin’s writing as “very convincing [and] realistic” and stated that Le Guin’s novels caused readers to “sit up all night reading.” In a letter published by Algol in 1974 academic Douglas Barbour argued that writers like Le Guin were using the future to comment on “present realities as well as possibilities,” and another letter offered Le Guin as an example of a writer who focused on ideas and philosophy, using departures from accepted wisdom to drive the action of the story – the letter writer commending this as opposed to other science fiction writers who focused on “ephemeral scientific fads… [or] themes of social ‘relevance’.” Readers of Le Guin responded to her style of writing and her themes extremely positively.

Fans also included Le Guin in lists of contemporary leaders of the genre such as “Delany, Sturgeon, Heinlein, Silverberg, Zelazny, Bester, Pohl, [and] Andersen [sic]…” or in lists of authors continuing the optimistic tradition of science fiction, along with Clarke, Asimov, and Norton. In a letter to Galaxy/Worlds of IF, Bozarth wrote that when he first started reading science fiction, “I didn’t have much money, but most of what I got went to science-fiction books. Arthur C. Clarke was my idol. (He

31 Cy Chauvin, "...Or so you say (Letter Column)", Amazing Science Fiction Stories, vol. 45, no. 4, 1971 (November), p.120. Chauvin is an essayist and critic.
still is, but Ursula K. Le Guin is giving him some stiff competition). Including Le Guin with these classic authors, who formed the ‘canon’ of science fiction novels, reflects the esteem with which her work was regarded.

Those who interacted with Le Guin personally or read her critical work also praised her as a writer. Andy Sawyer’s respect for the author was obvious in his response to the 1975 AussieCon speech.

Its [sic] heartening to see articles with such a high ‘common-sense’ level as that by Ursula Le Guin; she is probably the best sf writer around at the moment and I think if works published under the name sf are around when we reach the future everyone’s writing about, hers will [be].

Mike Glicksohn, co-editor of Energumen which won the 1973 Hugo for Best Fanzine, wrote to Algol and described Le Guin as a “Great Lady” of science fiction after meeting her at AussieCon. A letter from Mark Mumper in the same issue of Algol claims that the interview with Le Guin in the previous issue was the single best item in the entire magazine. Le Guin, and her writing, have been lauded by fan-readers since the early 1970s.

A tangible example of the degree to which fans appreciate Le Guin’s writing and presentation of ideas is their desire to engage with her other work after reading one of her novels. The May 1974 issue of Algol published a letter from Robin Wood which thanked the editors for the articles and stories on Le Guin and exclaimed that they were delightful and I’m now convinced I should run out and buy everything she ever wrote. I did read The Left Hand of Darkness but couldn’t quite work up the nerve to fight my

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way through the garish covers on her other books... Not only that, but *Left Hand* was so good I feared I’d be disappointed if I read more.\(^61\)

*The Dispossessed* also inspired readers to engage with other Le Guin novels. One writer to *Vector 72* said that between Le Guin’s piece in the previous issue of the magazine and having read *The Dispossessed*, he was keen to find Le Guin’s earlier works.\(^62\) These reactions are a testament to the quality of Le Guin’s writing and the interest in her ideas from fans as well as critics and academics.

Other writers have drawn inspiration from Le Guin’s worlds. David Mitchell, author of *Cloud Atlas* (2004), said in a recent interview that reading Le Guin in childhood inspired him to become a writer because he was “enthralled by the Earthsea books, he wanted to do to others what had just been done to him.”\(^63\) Junot Díaz wrote that

> I read her nonstop growing up and read her still. What makes her so extraordinary for me is that her commitment to the consequences of our actions, of our all too human frailties, is unflinching and almost without precedent for a writer of such human optimism. She never turns away from how flinty the heart of the world is. It gives her speculations a resonance, a gravity that few writers, mainstream or generic, can match.\(^64\)

Karen Joy Fowler noted that one of Le Guin’s defining features was her playfulness as a writer, which influenced Fowler’s perception of storytelling.\(^65\) Le Guin’s impact on fans has reached far beyond the 1970s, and continues to impact authors and stories today.

Studying reviews of Le Guin as a writer from 1969 onwards reveals that a majority of professional critics had a great deal of respect for Le Guin and her work. In a 1969 review of *The Left Hand of Darkness*, John Clute stated that “Ursula K. Le Guin contradicts the concept of the science fiction writer as fagged out, careless, surly, ending

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\(^{63}\) In Phillips, 'The Real and the Unreal: Ursula K. Le Guin, American Novelist'.

\(^{64}\) In Phillips, 'The Real and the Unreal: Ursula K. Le Guin, American Novelist'.

\(^{65}\) In Phillips, 'The Real and the Unreal: Ursula K. Le Guin, American Novelist'.
out the genre with a whimper." Her skill at mixing techniques and themes in order to write a psychological analysis of her characters was noted, as well as her ability to apply "real tools of analysis to a fictional world, giving the illusion of legitimate purchase." She was described as a "magnificent writer" and was lauded by James Baen in 1974 as "one of the top five living sf authors." Her writing style was described as lyrical and by March 1975 she was identified as "potentially a writer of masterpieces." Allan Danzig justified his decision to review *Wild Angels*, a volume of poetry, for *The Science Fiction Review* by explaining "it’s Ursula LeGuin, [sic] and whenever she publishes, even if it’s a cookbook, it’s an event in the SF world," a clear indication of how much respect her writing, even across genres, commanded from critics. In a 1977 review, her strengths as an author are listed as "literacy, her quiet inventiveness, her grasp of character, her superior use of sf’s and fantasy’s conventions, and, finally, her compassion." Even this small selection of reviews demonstrates the high opinion of Le Guin among professional science fiction critics and reviewers.

Academics focused on studying science fiction began to pay a great deal of attention to Le Guin, especially from the mid-1970s onwards. *Science Fiction Studies’* 1975 special issue provides ample source material for analysis of Le Guin, but as a source in itself speaks to the importance accorded to her by the community of scholars and critics. In his introduction to the volume Darko Suvin described Le Guin as

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A ‘classical’ writer, whose energy is as fierce [as that of Philip K. Dick] but strictly controlled within a taut and spare architectural system of narrative cells.\textsuperscript{75} Suvin’s praise for Le Guin’s merits as a writer was consistently repeated by other members of academia. Rafail Nudelman described her as having “artistic originality as pronounced as it is elusive.”\textsuperscript{76} David L. Porter claimed that she “articulates her political dilemmas in credible and dramatic terms, thus inviting the reader to think politically too,”\textsuperscript{77} and described her writing as “skilful, sensitive, complex, adventurous, and vivid.”\textsuperscript{78} Beyond the 1975 special issue, Le Guin continued to feature regularly in analyses published in \textit{Science Fiction Studies} and other academic journals and books. This will be reflected in the thematic analyses which follow in Chapters Three and Four, as well as the literature review of utopianism in Chapter Two.

There is thus consistent evidence that Le Guin has been a well-respected and widely read author since her career began to blossom. When she wrote, all kinds of people paid attention, and considered the message she was communicating through her fiction. Le Guin’s identity as an author has been subject to significant debate, but it is not evident that these debates had a meaningful impact on framing the experience of readers. What made readers sit up and pay attention, what captured their imagination, was the quality of writing and the profundity of ideas in her fiction.

Two books in particular generated engagement and had a lasting legacy: \textit{The Left Hand of Darkness} (1969) and \textit{The Dispossessed} (1974). As early as 1976 these two books were acknowledged as landmark works. In his review of \textit{The Wind’s Twelve Quarters}, Martin Last marvelled that

There is something awesome about tackling a collection that is essentially a retrospective of the work of an author whose two novels have burst across the speculative fiction scene like literary skyrockets – skyrockets that endure. The novels are, of course, *The Left Hand of Darkness* and *The Dispossessed.*

*The Left Hand of Darkness* imagines a world of permanent winter without gender – the inhabitants of the planet Gethen are androgynous, able to reproduce once per month when they go into *kemmer,* a period of fertility during which they manifest either male or female sexual characteristics and genitalia. The protagonist is Genly Ai (called Genry by the Gethenians), an ambassador of a loose inter-planetary alliance named the Ekumen. Genly’s mission is to bring Gethen into the Ekumen, but he is hindered by his worldview and inability to understand the subtleties of Gethenian culture. The one friend he does make is Therem Harth rem ir Estraven (Estraven), who starts the book as Prime Minister of Karhide, is exiled because of his closeness to Genly, and finishes the book by saving the ambassador’s life when he is imprisoned by a neighbouring country, Orgoreyn. During their escape from Orgoreyn, Genly and Estraven traverse a large glacier, and during that adventure, Genly finally learns to accept the androgyny of the Gethenians and Estraven as a complete person.

*The Dispossessed* introduces the reader to Shevek, a scientist living on a near-desert moon (Anarres) in a community founded on Odonian philosophy, which is anarchist in that it lacks any form of government and any personal property. Shevek is a physicist, but as he attempts to pursue his work, he realises that he is not as free from coercion as he ought to be. He travels to the home planet Urras, which the moon orbits, and through Shevek’s eyes the reader sees a capitalist world. On Urras, in the country A-Io, Shevek is able to complete his work and research, but comes to see that the social structure of A-Io has no fewer contradictions than Anarres, many more inequalities, and that he is

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less free there than he was on Anarres. He escapes Urras and returns to Anarres, resolved to reinvigorate the anarchism of the planet and break down the bureaucracy which stifled the society.

Reviewers contemporary to the publication of the two books are more critical than those reflecting on the books later, possibly because of the mythos and reputation which built around Le Guin. The earliest review Le Guin bibliographer James Collins recorded was published in the 27th January 1969 edition of Publisher’s Weekly which characterised *The Left Hand of Darkness* as “difficult reading with an over-abundance of invented language and unpronounceable names… confusing unless you are up on intergalactic politics.” Other reviews of *The Left Hand of Darkness* were less concerned with readers’ ability to understand the imagined world, and focused instead on Le Guin’s writing style and ability to communicate her vision without lecturing readers. The setting and plot were described as “both realised carefully, soberly, but perhaps a little drably too,” which Clute summarised as a “compulsive modesty of effect, there’s no real letting loose, a little of Tolkien’s self-indulgence would have done [Le Guin] some good.” In a scathing review, Alexei Panshin claimed that “as a story [*The Left Hand of Darkness*] is a flat failure” and echoed some of Clute’s concerns in claiming that the novel is deeply detail oriented. Panshin felt *The Left Hand of Darkness* was “a public story, her characters are consistently held at arm’s length, and her action is summarized rather than shown.” He concluded that the novel offers only “the faintest taste of what science fiction might be” and that what Le Guin produced was “not so much a novel

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as the theory for one.” A 1970 review simply stated that “there are some serious defects in the book,” and short story author Teresa Harned wrote to Amazing about how much better The Lathe of Heaven (1971) was than The Left Hand of Darkness.

Joanna Russ’ review of The Dispossessed has already provided some excellent evidence that Le Guin’s writing attracted criticism. Russ’ review also provides key examples of critiques of The Dispossessed which would fuel debates about the novel from that point onwards. She suggested that one major flaw in the novel was Le Guin’s inability to write with an authentic male ‘voice,’ suggesting that “she might try… abandoning male protagonists… [and] to simply leave out what doesn’t interest her.” Russ also felt that there are major inconsistencies between Le Guin’s theory for the world which she is writing, and what she actually writes - that there is an inauthenticity between the vision of the world Le Guin creates and the issues which she wants to draw attention to through writing her utopia.

Despite these critiques of the texts, the overwhelming majority of sources provide evidence that readers responded positively to Le Guin’s two novels and the ideas presented within them. The Left Hand of Darkness and The Dispossessed were considered novels of quality at the time of writing by readers, critics, and academics, and beyond the immediate context both novels have been read and admired by a wide range of people.

The earliest review from the science fiction community was written by P. Schuyler Miller in March 1969 for Analog: Science Fiction, Science Fact who found The Left Hand of Darkness dynamic and assured his readers that they would “be haunted by the
book… the thing to do then is go back and read it again. I am sure you will find something new in it every time.”

In September that year Lester del Rey noted that *The Left Hand of Darkness* was “a good adventure story, but the book is far more than that. Every element is worked out in fine detail, and then dovetailed skilfully into every other element.”

Interestingly, according to del Rey

> There was absolutely no advance publicity. Nobody discussed the book before its release and Mrs. LeGuin has partaken no provocative writing for the fem magazines. Apparently she simply wrote it and sent it in… Only the mouth-to-mouth advertising of contented readers began to bring it the attention it deserves.

This observation supports the contention of this chapter that *The Left Hand of Darkness* was a novel which captured the imagination of readers, which they enjoyed reading, and in which readers discovered interesting ideas. The appeal of *The Left Hand of Darkness* was not restricted to critics and academics; readers completed the novel and then recommended it to their friends. Del Rey concluded his review by declaring his intent to nominate the book for a Hugo award, a strong public endorsement of the work by a well-respected science fiction author and critic.

For the next four years, *The Left Hand of Darkness* continued to appear in review columns, even as Le Guin published new work. Fans writing to magazines tended to use *The Left Hand of Darkness* as a point of comparison, but there are not many letters mentioning the novel from 1969. It’s influence grew as Le Guin gained more popularity with later novels and readers sought out older works. A letter writer to *Amazing Science Fiction Stories* in 1971 noted that “‘The Lathe of Heaven’ is a superior novel, but outclassed by *The Left Hand of Darkness*. I guess it is difficult for an author to top a

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93 del Rey, "Reading Room: Book Reviews", 1969 (September), p.152.

previous work that has been hailed as a classic."\textsuperscript{95} The Left Hand of Darkness remained significant in the minds of readers, because the ideas in the novel were not just entertaining, but genuinely original and engaging. Budrys wrote in an extremely positive review that “this is a narrative so fully realized, so compellingly told, so masterfully executed that even an editor should have the wit to just show it to his readers and stand back.”\textsuperscript{96} He claimed that the novel goes beyond the scope of ordinary adventure novels, as a “compelling tale of human peril and striving”\textsuperscript{97} and Buckley felt Le Guin’s ability with the landscape was “very realistic. At times there are some very beautiful images.”\textsuperscript{98} Miller’s opinion was unchanged a year after his March 1969 review. As he reflected on the nominations from 1969 for the Nebula Award, he stated that The Left Hand of Darkness was “the most striking book in a group about the far future”\textsuperscript{99} and again in 1971, whilst noting that two of the Nebula winners had also won Hugos, Miller described The Left Hand of Darkness as extraordinary.\textsuperscript{100} Like Miller, del Rey kept returning to The Left Hand of Darkness, citing it as an example of “an unprecedentedly smooth execution of an old idea.”\textsuperscript{101} Budrys, Miller, and del Rey were not alone in their opinions.

When discussing worlds which “stick in your mind… [and] extend beyond the books that contained them,”\textsuperscript{102} Sidney Colman mentioned the world described in The Left Hand of Darkness, Winter, in the same sentence as Clement’s Mesklin and Herbert’s Dune. In discussing the Nebula winners for 1973, Miller didn’t quarrel with the choice

\textsuperscript{95} Unknown, "... Or so you say (Letter Column)", Amazing Science Fiction Stories, vol. 45, no. 3, 1971 (September), pp.118-119. At this point, Lathe had only been published as a serial in Amazing Stories, not as a stand-alone novel.
\textsuperscript{96} Budrys, "Galaxy Bookshelf", 1970 (February), p.144.
\textsuperscript{97} Budrys, "Galaxy Bookshelf", 1970 (February), p.145.
\textsuperscript{98} Buckley, "Fantasy Review", 1970 (June), p.31.
\textsuperscript{101} Lester del Rey, "Reading Room: Book Reviews", Worlds of IF: Science Fiction, vol. 21, no. 9, 1973 (February), p.162.
of Rendezvous with Rama for Best Novel, but pointed out that “it isn’t in a class with books like ‘Dune’ or ‘Left Hand of Darkness.’” A 1977 review of The Left Hand of Darkness by Michael Bishop classified it as both a “landmark work” and “a classic.” In 1994 Edward Bryant tried to work out what aspect of the books engendered such respect – he also described The Left Hand of Darkness as “a modern classic” – and suggested that the novel’s

enduring strength [is] as an example of what science fiction does best: dropping its readers into a humanely constructed alternative culture that is not our own, yet convincingly and effectively speaks to us. By engaging head and brain, it makes us both think and feel. Strongly.

Well-respected science fiction critics, who read huge numbers of books each month for their review columns, kept returning to The Left Hand of Darkness even after reviewing the novel, demonstrating the strength of the novel and how salient it became within the community. Beyond the 1970s, The Left Hand of Darkness continued to fascinate readers and encourage them to think about their world in a new way.

From June 1974 onwards reviews, articles, and letters concerning The Dispossessed were published, with scattered continuing references to The Left Hand of Darkness. Collins suggested that The Dispossessed was more extensively reviewed because Le Guin had a more significant reputation, but also because explicitly grappling with utopia attracted more attention. The positive reviews of the novel praised Le Guin’s style and theme. Sturgeon, in his review for Galaxy, called The Dispossessed “a beautifully written, beautifully composed book. Further, it performs one of sf’s prime functions which is to create another kind of social system to see how it would work. Or if it would

work.” A letter seeking suggestions of science fiction or speculative fiction short stories for a “college textbook for training vocational counsellors and therapists at the master’s and doctoral level,” published in the September 1974 issue of *Galaxy*, drew an immediate published response from the editor James Baen recommending *The Dispossessed* – “I can think of nothing more appropriate” – which indicates how quickly the novel had been recognised as engaging effectively with complex ideas, as it was published in May of that same year.

With similar admiration, Malcolm Edwards called *The Dispossessed* “an endlessly absorbing novel, which deserves to be read and re-read with great care… a good, strong, human story, filled with believable and well-rounded characters.” He argued that it was “one of the most carefully developed and apparently self-consistent alternative societies we have seen in science fiction,” and commended Le Guin for her prose. Edwards noted that sometimes Le Guin moved from narrative to debate but this “is endlessly quotable: my copy bristles with markers which I inserted at particularly telling points.” Even Russ, with her profound doubts about aspects of *The Dispossessed*, conceded “there are parts of masterpiece in *Dispossessed*,” and that she was so concerned about some aspects of the novel because “it has earned the right to be judged by the very highest standards.” George Turner wrote in 1975 that his “reaction on first reading *The Dispossessed* was ‘Yes! This is a novel of quality!’” Despite the criticism levelled at *The Dispossessed* at the time of its release, most contemporary

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110 James Borden, "Directions (Letter Column)", *Galaxy*, vol. 35, no. 9, 1974 (September), p.172.
reviewers were excited and impressed by the novel and Le Guin’s engagement with the concept of utopia.

The book’s nomination for and subsequent success with awards generated further discussion and attention in science fiction magazines during 1976, as critics described why the book had been so successful. Spider Robinson guessed that *The Dispossessed* is “one of those unique books that should satisfy just about everybody. In fact, it seems to have done that very thing.”\(^\text{118}\) A review in *Vector 72* claimed that “there is almost no limit to the good things that one could say about *The Dispossessed*… it is a magnificent book, certainly Le Guin’s best so far… [and] has an excellent narrative.”\(^\text{119}\) In his assessment of potential Hugo winners for the 1975 ballot, Richard E. Geis noted *The Dispossessed* as “a low-key, ‘mature’ story… it deals with character, compelling details, the rich and the poor… [it] has more inherent status as ‘quality’ sf.”\(^\text{120}\) In his superlative-laden review, Richard Lupoff struggled to say *enough* good things about *The Dispossessed*, and claimed “I simply do not know how to praise this adequately, you can either skip to the next item, or read my necessarily inadequate praise below.”\(^\text{121}\)

He was dazzled by the modest brilliance of this book tears in my eyes brought there by the beautiful, perfect touch of the book’s simple final paragraph, speechless… it is one of the best novels I have ever read – regardless of category. It will surely receive the honor of being banned in the Soviet Union. It will surely receive literary prizes… it is not a book of the year, it is a book of all the years. As a work of science fiction it is the full flower, the final justification of the existence of our field.\(^\text{122}\)

Lupoff claimed he didn’t think the book was perfect, but that in writing it, Le Guin “aimed higher than any of her competitors, and so even while failing of perfection, she

\(^{122}\) Lupoff, "Lupoff's Book Week", 1976 (Winter), p.32.
achieves more than any of them.”123 Geis, reflecting on The Dispossessed winning the Hugo for Best Novel and being the only text to win its category with an outright majority in the first ballot, stated that “it’s a fine novel and can stand up to any novel written in the so-called mainstream.”124 The Dispossessed was successful in winning awards because it was both well written and because it explored ideas which intrigued readers.

The ideas within The Dispossessed have continued to fascinate readers, long after its original release date. Contemplating changes in the twenty years since the publication of The Dispossessed, Sawyer recalled that “certainly when it was first published it was reviewed in Anarchist journals, and politicians on the radical wing of the Labour party… were citing it as a major influence.”125 He believed The Dispossessed “is one of science fiction’s classics… it may well be one of the century’s classics of any mode of literature.”126 Carol Ann Kerry-Green in a retrospective review for Vector remarked that The Dispossessed “remains a powerful book over twenty years since it was originally published.”127 Later readers and reviewers increasingly focused on the ideas contained within the novels, rather than praising Le Guin’s skill as a writer.

Beyond critical and fan reactions, academic attention in articles and books reflects the significance of both novels. Scholars paid serious attention to Le Guin’s engagement with philosophy, history, and anthropology, as well as her techniques in expressing these ideas.

Detailed attention was paid to both novels in the Science-Fiction Studies special issue on Le Guin in November 1975. The very existence of this issue is testament to her

127 Carol Ann Kerry-Green, "First Impressions", Vector 209, 2000 (January/February), p.27.
significance, standing, and acceptance by academics. Content-wise, the articles are serious attempts to understand the deeper meaning of each novel. Nudelman believed Le Guin’s science fiction was an “attempt to communicate a higher truth persistently recurring in all of life’s ephemeral aspects,”¹²⁸ and that her genuine originality grew from a “strong, musically organised form.”¹²⁹ John Huntington characterised *The Left Hand of Darkness* as balanced in its commitment to “both of the rival imperatives [public and private].”¹³⁰ Barbour described *The Dispossessed* as “politically more complex and mature than… earlier novels.”¹³¹ Judah Bierman endorsed *The Dispossessed* as a “complex utopian tale”¹³² and “the greatest of her SF.”¹³³ He described *The Left Hand of Darkness* as “filled with intrigue and exciting action.”¹³⁴ In his concluding essay, Suvin simply stated that *The Dispossessed* is an “undoubted masterpiece.”¹³⁵ These extracted comments from early academics in the field of science fiction studies demonstrate how much of a positive impact Le Guin had through her novels, but also how complex and intriguing her imaginary worlds were for audiences – they were more than just entertainment. At the conclusion of his essay, Suvin commented that if this is Le Guin’s impact “less than a dozen years after she began publishing, what cannot we hope for, from her, in the future arising out of such a past?”¹³⁶

The *Science-Fiction Studies* issue is representative of a consistent scholarly interest in Le Guin and in *The Left Hand of Darkness* and *The Dispossessed* specifically. Joe De

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Bolt collected a series of essays into an edited book on Le Guin, which was published in 1979. This collection is a useful curated source of academic analyses of both novels from the 1970s. Barry Malzberg’s opening essay retained the very positive outlook on the two novels which had characterised most commentary throughout the 1970s. He noted that *The Dispossessed* was generally considered more successful than *The Left Hand of Darkness* and that *The Dispossessed* “could not have been done in any other way than as science fiction; it needs those devices to work and this, surely, is the definition of a ‘good’ science fiction novel.” In De Bolt’s contribution, he called *The Dispossessed* a “major and remarkable novel” and suggested that

The work itself is unique, being an extraordinarily realistic, ‘ambiguous’ utopia reflecting a rich blend of the thoughts of anarchists… *[The Dispossessed]* was Le Guin’s attempt… to ‘inject a gentle antidote’ into her generation to counteract the individualistic, social Darwinist ‘crap.’

Peter Koper speculated that “the major source of *[The Left Hand of Darkness]*’s power is the sexual tension present in contemporary Western culture,” and James Bittner drew parallels between the two works when he argued that, “like *[The Left Hand of Darkness]*, *[The Dispossessed]* overturns generic assumptions and extends the limit of the medium.” In his 1984 book, Bittner read *The Left Hand of Darkness* as “a sophisticated elaboration of the quest in *Rocannon’s World*, the search for integration and harmony… it is an interracial love story; it is a complex development of the narrative techniques.” Bittner presented *The Dispossessed* as “an anachronism. By

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the early 1970s a long series of ‘new maps of hell’ had displaced the positive utopia,” and credited Le Guin’s novel with breathing new life into the utopian mode. Scholars contemporary with the publication of the two novels, living and working in a similar context to the author’s, read the novels as a fascinating engagement with that context.

Harold Bloom’s *Ursula K. Le Guin* (1986) was the next significant edited collection of scholarly work on Le Guin. Broadly speaking, this collection is good evidence of the ongoing respect with which Le Guin’s two novels were regarded by academics. In his introduction to the volume, Bloom demonstrated that the 17 years since the publication of *The Left Hand of Darkness* had not diminished its impact on him. He characterised the 1969 novel as Le Guin’s “masterpiece,” and asserted that it is her finest work to date… conceptually and stylistically, *Left Hand* is the strongest of her dozen or so major narratives. It is a book that sustains many rereadings, partly because its enigmas are unresolvable, and partly because it has the crucial quality of representation, which is that it yields up new perspectives upon what we call reality.

Ketterer saw *The Left Hand of Darkness* as “a skilfully integrated, perhaps I should say woven, piece of work” and Douglas Barbour echoed this sentiment with the comment that “very few science fiction novels have succeeded as well as *The Left Hand of Darkness* in invoking a whole environment, a completely consistent alien world, and in making the proper extrapolation from it.” Robert Scholes was similarly laudatory about the contribution Le Guin made through the two novels, writing that *The Left Hand of Darkness* was the moment at which Le Guin demonstrated her power as a writer. The novel’s most successful aspect was its ability to focus readers on “the nature of

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opposition, which is the extreme form of otherness.” Scholes had further praise for The Dispossessed, “a rich and remarkable work of utopian fiction – one of the most satisfying fictions ever achieved in that genre.” Fredric Jameson, who wrote in-depth critiques of Le Guin’s utopianism, nevertheless argued that The Left Hand of Darkness demonstrated a unique “thematic coherence,” while Eric Rabkin celebrated The Left Hand of Darkness’ ability to teach readers through its imagined world, and Susan Wood acknowledged the ambition of the scope of The Dispossessed. Bloom’s 1984 collection suggests that the impact and influence of Le Guin’s two novels was not inextricably linked to the time of writing, but that there were qualities about both novels that continued to resonate, even in different historical contexts.

There are further indications of this ongoing resonance in later scholarship. In 1999, Donna White emphasised that The Left Hand of Darkness “stunned the science fiction critics… [it] is one of the seminal texts in science fiction, as important and influential as Mary Shelley’s Frankestein.” Lewis Call argued that The Dispossessed “contributes thoughtfully to postmodern anarchism.” Both novels still receive attention in articles, books, and conference papers to this date – the most recent article which deals at length with Le Guin was published in Science Fiction Studies in March 2014.

153 White, Dancing with Dragons, 1999, p.46.
154 Call, "Postmodern Anarchism", 2007, p.93.
155 Aaron Santesso, "Fascism and Science Fiction", Science Fiction Studies, vol. 41, no. 1, 2014.
This chapter has set out to establish that Le Guin and her two novels, *The Left Hand of Darkness* and *The Dispossessed*, are culturally and socially significant – not just for academics and not just when they were first written, but throughout the period of study and for a wide range of people. By including and respecting the contributions of fans through letters and fanzines, this chapter offers good evidence that Le Guin and these two novels were well respected and very popular. A brief overview of reviews by professional and semi-professional critics further shows that this respect and popularity was accorded to Le Guin and these two novels in particular by those who were looking for more than just entertainment. This chapter has focused on reactions from the 1970s in particular in order to prove that this admiration is not just the product of nostalgia, but was a genuine reaction to the novels when they were first read.

Le Guin created two spectacular imaginary worlds in *The Left Hand of Darkness* and *The Dispossessed*, and Chapter Two will explore how these two novels have inspired readers from a variety of backgrounds and times to examine their views about utopia and the society in which they live.
Chapter Two

The Evolution of Utopia: From Blueprints to Critical Optimism

This chapter will explore the critical and academic understanding of the functions of utopian novels. It will trace arguments from 1965 concerning the development of the utopian novel and utopian thought in the social and intellectual context of the Anglosphere. It will argue that utopian novels are the manifestation, of an individual’s utopian longing or desire. In addition, I will establish that the definition of utopian novels cannot be restricted to texts which present blueprints or proposals to create a perfect society in the real world, and that analysing *The Left Hand of Darkness* and *The Dispossessed* as utopian novels is justified as both of these novels stimulate utopian desire in readers.

Le Guin does not self-identify as a utopian novelist, but her work can be read as utopian and inspires a utopia longing in readers. In a 2008 interview Le Guin said that “even if I write utopias I’m not a utopian. I try to hope. I can’t say much more than that.” Yet, it is the attempt to hope which inspires utopian desire. Le Guin hopes for a better world, one which is underpinned by authentic human interactions – what this thesis calls her ‘philosophy of partnership’. This philosophy is grounded in a reaction against everything she sees as wrong with the world – exploitation, greed, aggression. It is a vision for a world which is accepting of differences in gender and sexuality, which respects the freedom of individuals, and which privileges symbiotic relationships between humanity and the environment. This vision may not be explicitly in Le Guin’s mind when she imagines alternative worlds, yet these are consistent foundations of worlds in all of her novels. Her resistance to being identified as ‘a utopian’ could be the result of her experience of utopianism as manifested in the pulp magazines, especially

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2 In Lafreniere, 'Ursula K. Le Guin'.

the anti-utopianism of *Astounding*. As will be evidenced later in this chapter, readers of *The Left Hand of Darkness* and *The Dispossessed* are also inspired to hope for a different world and become conscious that there could be solutions to the challenges of the modern world. This philosophy of partnership is the core of what makes Le Guin’s novels utopian and of Le Guin’s personal utopianism.

The following pages analyse the place and function of the utopian novel throughout the second half of the twentieth century. The terms utopian, eutopian, and dystopian will be used throughout. Utopia in this thesis is understood to be a time and/or place which is better than the society of the reader. Both eutopias and dystopias are commentaries on the context of the writer, the difference being that a eutopia is written to be considerably better than that context and a dystopia is written as considerably worse. These formal definitions are in line with those presented by Lyman Tower Sargent, and will be further examined below.

Academic understanding of utopianism and utopian novels has undergone significant development during the period of study. Between the end of World War Two and the growth of the countercultural movement, utopian inquiry experienced a lull, partially as result of the disillusionment after the war and partially because authors and academics were wary of endorsing such ideas in the context of the Cold War. There was a resurgence of interest in utopia evident in the mid-1960s, and these analyses used utopian novels to argue that the concept of utopia had social power. Some academics of the renewed utopian tradition grounded their analyses in the nineteenth-century utopian tradition, believing that there was a degree of continuity. Northop Frye’s 1965 article

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3 Andrew Milner and Robert Savage, "Pulped Dreams: Utopia and American Pulp Science Fiction", *Science Fiction Studies*, vol. 35, no. 1, 2008 (March), pp.39-40. Milner argues that Campbell and his authors were pragmatic and privileged the “technician manager” as hero.


“Varieties of Literary Utopia” is a good example of this approach to understanding utopian novels. He argued that utopias are a form of social myth, much like the social contract. Social contract theory finds the basis of society in the past, and utopia in the future – as the ultimate outcome of living together harmoniously. For Frye, “the utopia is a speculative myth; it is designed to contain or provide a vision for one’s social ideas.” Utopian novels for Frye keep society cohesive by presenting a vision of what that society is working towards.

Frank Manuel’s work provides another example of basing evaluations of new utopian novels on older theories and conceptualising utopianism as an idea with power over society. He argued that modern utopias take two forms: either reimagining Darwin’s theories or rehabilitating Freud’s. Lyman Tower Sargent identified the approach of both Manuel and Fry – understanding a utopia as presenting a vision of an idealised community, achievable only if social relations could be improved – with the New Left, in particular identifying the growth of awareness of sexuality and sexual issues within utopian novels as a facet of this politicisation. Their approach to understanding utopian novels was primarily focused on the novels as a product of and reaction to social theories. The position that utopian novels had a kind of unifying social power became less popular throughout the period of study, as academics began to see utopian novels primarily as a reaction to the socio-political circumstances at the time of writing, and increasingly argued that the worlds in utopian novels were more symbolic than they were visions of a society in which readers would want to live.

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7 Frye, "Varieties of Literary Utopias", 1965 (Spring), p.323.
8 Frye, "Varieties of Literary Utopias", 1965 (Spring), pp.335-337.
The counter cultural movement in America revived and reinvented utopianism and utopian novels, diverting the utopian tradition from its nineteenth-century forms.\textsuperscript{11} Utopian ideals were reimagined to oppose the ideals of high modernism, which Paschalidis identified as “authoritarian, scientistic and patriarchal.”\textsuperscript{12} These ideals were combated by visions of “political and economic decentralisation, of ecological wisdom and of racial, sexual and cultural pluralism.”\textsuperscript{13} Peter Fitting made a similar argument in 2010, highlighting the roots of the revival of utopia in the counter culture in order to discuss its modern form. He grounded the new utopian tradition in the Civil Rights Movement and the demonstrations against the War in Vietnam, and the Women’s Movement and the ‘Counter Culture’ – all of which challenged the smooth functioning of what had triumphantly been dubbed ‘people’s capitalism’. As the American consensus was torn apart the quest for alternatives had begun. This was the beginning of modern utopianism.\textsuperscript{14}

This renaissance makes utopian novels of the late 1960s and early 1970s particularly interesting, as writers from this period negotiate how to use the structure and techniques of the utopian novel - which had been interpreted as unifying and aspirational – to critique, challenge, and change their societies.

Sargent’s analysis is representative of the transition to a more critical approach to utopian scholarship and of understanding utopias as commentary on the present. He argued that utopian novels are explicitly a product of their time, and “writers’ concerns tend to follow the issues that make the newspaper headlines, such as overpopulation, the social effects of medical advances..., sexual relations, and a return to a more primitive


\textsuperscript{12} Paschalidis, "Modernity as a Project", 2000, p.43.

\textsuperscript{13} Paschalidis, "Modernity as a Project", 2000, p.43.

state.”

Darko Suvin’s article “Defining the Literary Genre of Utopia” further explained this shift, suggesting that “a definition of utopia as a literary form should retain the crucial element of an alternative location radically different in respect of socio-political conditions from the author’s historical environment.” The visions utopian novels present would rapidly become irrelevant, given evolving social conditions, if they were totally disconnected from the lives, experiences, and history of readers and instead focused on social theories. Attempts to separate novels from their cultural and historical moment result in the utopias becoming incoherent.

Kingsley Widmer expressed this idea as utopian novels “arguing with what is.” Utopian novels are best understood as products of the moment in which they are written and a commentary interacting with the historical context – attempting to influence and change the future. Authors are not writing in the abstract, shouting into a void, but are taking elements from the world around them and arguing with, for, and against these elements in an engaged and constructive way.

The late 1960s and early 1970s were particularly fertile for debate on the purpose and utility of utopian novels. The most convincing arguments explaining the purpose of utopian novels emphasised how they interacted with problems which needed to be solved in the contemporary context. Further supporting evidence for the transition away from utopian novels being grounded in social theories is reflected in Robert Scholes’ comment that Le Guin creates “a model world deliberately altered from the world we know, so as to reveal to us aspects of the ‘known’ that have escaped our notice.”

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15 Sargent, "Utopia and Dystopia in Contemporary Science Fiction", 1972 (June), p.95. Sargent presents this information as a quote in the article, but does not provide any reference.
increasing acceptance of the link between the time and place of writing and the contents of the utopian novel led scholars to resist considering utopian novels as “blueprints” for a more perfect society – instead, utopian novels were commentaries and calls to action.

Interestingly, Raymond Williams argued that the shift away from blueprints occurred even earlier than the mid-twentieth century. Basing his analysis in Miguel Abensour’s work, Williams dated the transition of utopian novels from detailed constructions of complete alternative societies to more open, self-reflective, and emblematic constructions to 1850. Andrew Milner has argued that Williams was so impressed by The Dispossessed that he revised his earlier argument that utopianism was finished by the mid-twentieth century. Williams noted in his 1978 essay that the new utopian novel is a “more open but also vaguer mode,” and that it embodies a form of “constrained reformism” in which change happens under the direction of the existing dominant group. His analysis emphasised that the expression of utopian desires through utopian novels is open to fundamental changes as society changes, and that “the utopian mode has to be read, always, within that changing context.” It is worth noting that Fitting disagreed with Abensour’s proposed chronology, noting that there are examples of utopian ‘blueprint’ novels being written throughout the 1970s. There is room for argument about the periodization of the change from utopian novels as fully realised alternative worlds to more contextual and emblematic calls for change. Regardless, the majority of twentieth century scholars agree that the qualities of the utopian novel change during the twentieth century, to become more open, more in dialogue with the contemporary moment, and less like ‘blueprints’ for the future of the society.

20 Specifically Abensour’s dissertation "Formes de l’utopie Socialiste-Communiste".
21 Raymond Williams and Andrew Milner, Tenses of Imagination : Raymond Williams on Science Fiction, Utopia and Dystopia, New York, Peter Lang, 2010, p.5.
24 Williams, "Utopia and Science Fiction", 1978 (November), p.211.
There is significant evidence and numerous arguments for rejecting the idea that utopian novels must provide a blueprint for a perfect society. Tom Moylan grounded himself in Mannheim’s ideas to argue that utopian novels are an attempt to challenge the status quo and the dominant ideology.\textsuperscript{26} It was his position that utopian novels stimulate the imagination of the reader, even though they do not show the reader an exact, prescriptive pathway to a better, alternative society. Moylan claimed that “the critical utopian text, then, can be a valuable part of the opposition to the prevailing system; the text is not important for its practical blueprints of an actual alternative society, but rather as it provides pre-conceptual images that are generated out of opposition to what is.”\textsuperscript{27} He acknowledged that utopian novels react to capitalism as the dominant ideology of the context, but argued that utopianism was not subsumed by capitalism, and instead attempts to undermine the existing system through utopian novels which highlight flaws or contradictions in the present. These novels “hold open the possibility of a different future”\textsuperscript{28} and encourage the reader to see the possibilities beyond their immediate context.

Conceiving utopianism as dynamic and not restricted to its nineteenth century forms was strengthened by Ingo Grabner and Wolfganger Reiter’s arguments that utopianism affects and is affected by context. Their article states that there is a strong positive relationship between utopia and science; for scientific innovation to exist, it must be situated in a context which is “thinking about the future evolution of the man-made system, in particular society itself.”\textsuperscript{29} There is an incentive beyond profit which can drive advances in medicine, inspire philanthropy, and motivate social change. Grabner

\textsuperscript{26} Tom Moylan, “The Locus of Hope”, 1982 (July), p.162.
\textsuperscript{27} Tom Moylan, “The Locus of Hope”, 1982 (July), p.163.
and Reiter argue that this incentive is the desire to ‘make the world a better place’ and that it develops from an inherent cultural utopianism.\textsuperscript{30} Their argument reinforces the idea that utopianism is fundamentally connected to context.

Helga Nowotny rearticulated the argument that utopian novels can no longer be expected to function as roadmaps, even though they may have done so in the past, because modern social utopias are not able to keep up with the pace of change set by technological innovation.\textsuperscript{31} The development of science and technology in the nineteenth century gave rise to a tangible concept of ‘the future’ which would be different from the present as a result of technologically-driven progress. But this future, and the changed society and social relations which it represented, remained perpetually inaccessible due to imperfect science. The distance between the imagined future and the sense of living in that future presented writers with a gap to be filled by social utopias. As faith in science and especially in the concept of ‘progress’ wanes, this distance between the present and the future is beginning to collapse.\textsuperscript{32} As a result, the future starts to be merely an extension of the present with no clear meaning or difference, with endless possibilities proliferating from scientific innovation but none any better than the other, or than the present.\textsuperscript{33} The more positive result that Nowotny perceived was that utopian elements will not simply disappear as a result of the collapse of the future into the present, but that utopias can infuse the present, resulting in increased awareness that the future is “shaped today by human actions, social relations, and our way of thinking.”\textsuperscript{34}

\textsuperscript{30} Grabner and Reiter, "Meddling with ‘Politicks’", 1984, p.238.
\textsuperscript{32} Nowotny, "Science and Utopia", 1984, p.16.
\textsuperscript{33} Nowotny, "Science and Utopia", 1984, p.16.
\textsuperscript{34} Nowotny, "Science and Utopia", 1984, p.17.
Sargent vehemently rejected the idea that utopian novels construct a perfect society, and denied that perfection had ever been a characteristic of utopian novels. In his 1994 article, “The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited”, Sargent argued that analyses of utopian novels should always begin by studying the author’s intention and not by applying theories of utopianism because utopian novels “are historical artefacts that are brought into being at particular times and places and usually by identifiable people whose reasons for doing so are in principle knowable.” He used the article to summarise the positions of three major utopian theorists from the twentieth century, and demonstrate how none of them conceptualised utopianism as the pursuit of social perfection.

Sargent described Mannheim’s position as focusing on how social groups create thought systems, either ideological or utopian. Ideology is conservative, dominant and preserves the status quo, whereas utopia is subordinate, subversive and “at the base of all serious social change.” For Polak, utopia functioned as a mirror which shows the faults of contemporary society and privileges the benefits of choice, freedom and creativity, and suggested utopia is upsetting for some because “it constantly suggests that the life we lead, the society we have, is inadequate, incomplete, sick.” Finally, in his consideration of Ernst Bloch, Sargent emphasised Bloch’s argument that utopia is a means to better understand contemporary society. Sargent dismissed Popper’s concern - that utopias are blueprints which facilitate totalitarianism - by emphasising the role that

utopia plays in presenting alternatives and using these to make readers acknowledge that “things are not quite as they should be, and to assert that improvement is possible.”

Based on the review of twentieth century utopian thought that he presents, Sargent argued that it was wrong to understand utopian novels as a blueprint for a perfect society. Instead, utopian novels are reflections of contemporary society that “show the flaws in the present by picturing a more desirable alternative.”

Similarly, Gary Westfahl emphasised that a utopian novel should not be understood as a representation of a perfect society. It is the expression of a desire to improve circumstances, without the futile attempt to eliminate all problems and contradictions within society.

In keeping with the line of argument Williams followed, Christine Nadir also based her arguments in Abensour’s work to argue that the purpose of utopian novels is not to create a perfect society or establish ‘correct’ goals for the society, but to inspire a desire for improvement. She noted that modern utopias are “open-ended self-reflexive, provisional world-making.”

In an excellent analysis of Abensour, Ruth Levitas noted that

even if the text operates effectively in terms of the education of desire, this will not automatically be read off into political action. Desire must be transformed into hope, the wish for change into the will for change and the belief that there is an agency available to execute it.

Levitas did not argue that this necessarily undermine the idea of a critical utopian novel educating desire, instead she suggested that Moylan’s approach draws together these issues usefully.

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Finally, Fitting also contributed to the set of scholarship arguing that utopian novels are linked indelibly to their context and that they should not be considered roadmaps or blueprints. The modern utopian novel, according to Fitting, attempts to demonstrate how deeply embedded capitalist structures such as alienation and domination are in Western society and that these constructs will not simply disappear even if capitalism was somehow suddenly overturned. These novels are focused on the level of individual experience and privilege an “integrative and non-exploitative attitude towards nature,” which fits with Davis’ and Sargent’s definitions of utopia. Fitting argues that the moment of the modern utopian novel has passed, and ended in the mid to late 1980s when neo-liberalism rose and the Soviet Union collapsed. He was not arguing that utopias are no longer being written, but that the moment which gave rise to the modern utopian novel, the triumphal quest for alternatives, is gone and new utopias are being written in a different tradition. He also emphasised that science fiction and utopia ought not to be considered merged, but as two separate and distinct genres, which at certain moments, interface to blend the concerns of both. His analysis neatly demonstrated that the utopian tradition continues to evolve in response to changing social conditions.

Though there is a growing consensus that utopian novels are not to be understood as blueprints for a perfect society, within the period of study there are a number of significant arguments that utopianism has lost its way and is irrelevant, or dead, or deeply problematic.

Nadia Khouri argued that there was a difference between a utopian novel expressing a desire for a utopia and writing a genuine utopia which grappled with social and cultural

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45 Fitting, "Utopia, Dystopia and Science Fiction", 2010, pp.148-149.
46 Fitting, "Utopia, Dystopia and Science Fiction", 2010, pp.148-149.
47 Fitting, "Utopia, Dystopia and Science Fiction", 2010, pp.150.
48 Fitting, "Utopia, Dystopia and Science Fiction", 2010, p.150.
problems in order to force the reader to notice inequality and injustice. While awareness of historical iniquities may give rise to a utopian novel, the novel may fail to actually present issues as culturally constructed and therefore resolvable and combatable. For Khouri, if the novel leaves the reader feeling that the problems highlighted are entrenched, unavoidable, historical realities, the utopian novel fails in its purpose. Khouri emphasised the importance of the context of writing to the development of the imagined world in a utopia, but also added a factor for their successful execution - historical consciousness, arguing that

the utopian potential registered in an SF text is not an epiphenomenal escape of consciousness outside of history, not a mere futuristic projection, but a material force inscribed in the here and now of history, not withstanding its perplexities and frustrations. The incapability of transcending contradictions on the part of Le Guin and Jeury is therefore attributable not to the limitations of the historical moment, but to their maximum of possible consciousness.

Khouri’s point is that both Le Guin and Jeury failed to imagine a utopian world which successfully challenges the problems they had identified in their contemporary lives. They saw the problems, but did not succeed in imagining a world without them or which highlighted the crucial factors contributing to the creation and perpetuation of social wrongs. While specific arguments about whether The Left Hand of Darkness and The Dispossessed should be considered utopian novels will be considered later in this chapter, Khouri’s model of utopianism needs to be examined now. Arguing for the key role of historical consciousness in utopianism and the creation of utopian novels is a valuable addition to the field of scholarship, but demanding that utopian novels create a believable world without the problems the author has identified is too onerous a

50 Khouri, "The Dialectics of Power", 1980, p.59. Italics in original. The specific texts to which Khouri is referring are Le Guin’ The Dispossessed and Jeury’s Le Temps Incertain. She is arguing here that the inability on the part of Le Guin and Jeury to imagine real utopias is not a problem with their context, because Margret Piercy is capable of creating a genuine utopia within a similar context. The problem is within the utopian imaginations of Le Guin and Jeury.
requirement for a utopian novel. This aspiration is predicated on the belief that a utopian novel ought to provide a blueprint for the creation of a perfect society, and the scholarship reviewed above has provided ample arguments as to why this is not realistic or desirable.

Donald McQuarie argued that despite modern utopian forms, the utopian imagination was stagnant. He based his argument on an observation similar to that of Khouri, that whilst science fiction authors can create a smorgasbord of alternative worlds, they are “curiously incapable of ‘thinking’ more humane and equitarian forms of social relations.” McQuarie related this failure of the imagination to the social context for writing, and blames the lack of a socialist alternative in American political life, speculating that without a viable political alternative which would endorse such speculation, authors are alienated from their own imaginations by the imperatives of capitalism. While authors may aspire to imagine a genuine alternative paradise, they are limited by the reality of their context, the knowledge of the consequences of failed attempts at utopia and the good results of activities, products and practices which are seemingly anti-utopian. In line with my objections to Khouri, McQuarie’s desire for a utopian novel which lays out a new format for social relationships is an unreasonable expectation for the utopian novel, as they are not written to provide blueprints, but to provide inspiration and a call to action. As identified by Davis, there is a significant gap between identifying the need for improvements in society and actually implementing improvements. It is not the role of the utopian novel to propose detailed blueprints for socio-political structures, only to call attention to the problem and suggest that there are solutions.

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52 McQuarie, "Utopia and Transcendence", 1980 (Fall), pp.248-249.
In "Progress versus Utopia", Fredric Jameson reinvigorated the argument that utopian novels were incapable of thinking beyond their context, and further argued that utopianism is not just stagnant but dead. Jameson contended that viewing utopia as an engagement with the present is to imbue “the future of one moment of what is now our own past”\(^5^3\) with more significance than is necessary. Capitalism is predicated on progressing away from a distinct past and into the future; the past has been reduced to a series of glossy images which lack any sense of meaning.\(^5^4\) Utopian novels continually demonstrate the inability to imagine the future, because they create worlds by “defamiliariz[ing] and restructur[ing] our experience of our own present.”\(^5^5\) Utopian novels fail to construct convincing, full, and believable utopian alternatives, and so Jameson argued that they demonstrate “the atrophy in our time of what Marcuse has called the *utopian imagination*, the imagination of otherness and radical differences”\(^5^6\) – i.e. that utopianism itself no longer exists. The disconnection between the desire for a viable utopia and the ability to actually imagine one is refined into a consequence of the capitalist system and resultant sense of history. But it is yet again predicated on the idea that utopian novels should and do (and ever have) created a step-by-step manifesto for change to create the perfect world - that they should contain within them a crystal ball to peek into a perfect alternative world. This is the realm of political scientists and politicians, and perhaps appropriate to early nineteenth-century utopianism. But by the twentieth century, utopianism was manifesting in fiction, not politics. Twentieth century utopianism was developed from a very different mentality, as much from a desire to entertain as to educate. Gérard Klein expressed this idea beautifully:

The possibility of hope, the idea of change itself, resides in the experience, the subjectivity of the other. The point is not, of course, in copying the other’s solution, but

\(^{5^3}\) Fredric Jameson, "Progress versus Utopia: Or, Can We Imagine the Future?", *Science Fiction Studies*, vol. 9, no. 2, 1982 (July), pp.150-151.
\(^{5^4}\) Jameson, "Progress versus Utopía", 1982 (July), pp.149-150.
in reacting to it with one’s own individual and social subjectivity… it becomes absurd to condemn a society or to propose an eternal model, even one conceived as evolving.\textsuperscript{57}

Later work by Jameson re-engaged with the role of utopian novels, eventually concluding that utopias “express our relationship to a genuinely political future better than any current program of action.”\textsuperscript{58} His conclusion is based not on the belief that utopian novels present the reader with a world that ought to be replicated and copied, or expresses a political ideal, but that the worlds presented in utopian novels make the readers aware of the limits of their own society\textsuperscript{59} – and therefore forces those readers to examine what needs to change in their society. Readers must ask themselves ‘how would we need to change the status quo in order to change our world?’, or as Jameson expresses it, “how to articulate the Utopian break in such a way that it is transformed in to a practical-political transition.”\textsuperscript{60} Jameson transitioned from focusing on how a utopian deficit is symptomatic of how denizens of the modern capitalist system cannot imagine a radically different future, to how utopian novels create a space for readers to imagine a radical break away from their present circumstances.

Khour, McQuarie and Jameson are examples of a branch of utopian scholarship which focused on the problems with implementing the utopian impulse. They criticise modern utopian novels because they believe manifestations of utopianism should articulate how to address and overcome the problems of the world. But Fitting, Sargent and Moylan argue that utopian novels are the way in which utopianism – the desire for a better world – is spread. Implementation of this desire comes through political action, not fictional worlds. Fears of stagnation, raised by McQuarie and Jameson in particular, are


overcome because utopianism is constantly evolving by being applied to new problems, merging with some disciplines or traditions and influencing others. Searching for a continuous, unchanging form of utopianism which resembles earlier manifestations is futile, as utopian thought continues to evolve beyond the times and places in which it manifests, influenced by what has come before and what is happening in the present.\textsuperscript{61}

The shift away from expecting perfection or perfected societies in utopian novels was necessary, because the idea of perfection creates immediate problems – readers were deeply sceptical of any imagined society which presented itself as the ideal. In his essay reflecting on the problems inherent within utopias, John W. Campbell asked “if utopia is the perfect society, who is it perfect for?”\textsuperscript{62} Likewise, Lester del Rey noted that “Utopias always bother me, even when reasonable and necessary. I can’t quite believe in them – probably because, like most others, I have my own idea of Utopia and nobody else presents the same one.”\textsuperscript{63} Steve Jeffery noted that utopias were tricky, because when you think about a ‘perfect’ utopian society long enough “you realise they are places that most of us would go slowly up the wall out of boredom, frustration, or disaffection.”\textsuperscript{64} Klein suggests that Le Guin was one of the new utopian authors\textsuperscript{65} who helped contemporary utopian studies more broadly to come to terms with the idea that utopian worlds do not need to show a perfect society, an idea that Nadir argued is now widely accepted.\textsuperscript{66}

If we accept that seeing utopian novels as blueprints for the future of society is unacceptable, then how are utopian novels best understood? I present the following answer: in the twentieth-century utopian novels are an expression of the utopian desires

\textsuperscript{61} Grabner and Reiter, "Meddling with ‘Politicks’", 1984, p.250.
\textsuperscript{64} Steve Jeffery, "First Impressions", \textit{Vector 209}, 2000 (January/February), p.28.
\textsuperscript{65} Klein, "Le Guin’s ‘Aberrant’ Opus: Escaping the Trap of Discontent", 1986 p.88.
\textsuperscript{66} Nadir, "Utopian Studies, Environmental Literature, and the Legacy of an Idea", 2010, p.27.
of the author, meaning that they are a desire for improvement of the status quo, but not for social perfection.

This position is partially informed by Fitting’s argument that the significance of utopian novels is that they are symptomatic of “a revival of utopian thought, a willingness or desire to again envisage emancipatory alternatives,” but beyond this revival, utopian novels are the aesthetic expression of utopianism. The debate between Sargent and Ruth Levitas has also contributed to this position. Sargent expanded on Ruth Levitas’ definition of utopianism as desire, but further specified that utopianism is “social dreaming – the dreams and nightmares that concern the ways in which groups of people arrange their lives and which usually envision a radically different society than the one in which the dreamers live.” Unlike Levitas, Sargent believed utopianism existed across time and place. Levitas resisted universalising utopianism, arguing it would mean assuming a universal human nature. But Sargent’s definition of utopianism is that it is triggered by dissatisfaction with our present state of affairs, and utopianism is the desire for improvement of the status quo – a basic human experience. This desire is as universal as being hungry, and desiring food. The desire for improvement must be separated from how the desire is manifested. Moylan used an excellent image to articulate this “the utopian text can be pictured as a fabric of iconic images of an alternative society through which the thread of the discrete travelogue of the visitor is stitched.” A utopian novel is one individual’s attempt to articulate the ‘social dream’.

The primary theorist anchoring this position, however, is Krishan Kumar. In his 1993 article "The End of Socialism? The End of Utopia? The End of History?" he argued that

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72 Moylan, Demand the Impossible, 2014, p.36.
other scholars were conflating the utopian impulse with utopian fiction, and did not fully appreciate how utopian thinking and manifestations evolved over time. Thinking of utopianism in an abstract way leads to all forms of good or best societies being treated as totalitarian utopias, or the conflation of utopian fiction with utopian theory, or merging “utopian speculation and various forms of social experimentation which dub themselves or are dubbed utopian.”

Kumar urged other scholars to understand that

Utopia has performed many functions in its long history, and systematically thinking about the future of society is only one of them. The same is true of ‘the design of the perfect society’. The different forms of utopia... need to be treated with respect for those differences, and the different aims and meanings they carry.

While some utopian novels can be clearly linked to a particular philosophy or political ideology, utopianism in general ought not to be associated exclusively with or as belonging to that ideology. Kumar illustrated this point using the example of the two nineteenth-century utopias *Erewhon* and *News From Nowhere*, both of which use socialism as a starting point, but create totally different imagined societies.

Political ideologies and theories are flexible and malleable, and the application of utopianism to these political frameworks does not lead to a single uniform outcome or inevitable conclusion. Rather, utopian desire to find improvements drives the imagination to seek a better world – which might manifest as a utopian novel, political manifesto, or protest song. Kumar noted that, “even if socialism has lost its capacity to inspire utopian visions, that does not exhaust utopia,” further emphasising that utopianism itself does not equate to a political ideology or practice. Utopian novels are products of a particular time and place, and might even be closely identified with a particular ideology, but this does not mean that “utopia” as a concept has a fixed and determinate meaning.

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74 Kumar, "The End of Socialism?", 1993, p.69.
75 Kumar, "The End of Socialism?", 1993, p.72.
76 Kumar, "The End of Socialism?", 1993, p.72.
Utopianism is distinct from its manifestations, and its manifestations change over time. Utopianism can and does exist and have meaning outside of particular ideologies, and utopian visions can continue to be significant, even when the ideology which first influenced them falls out of fashion or is discredited.  

Utopianism is best understood as simply a basic human longing for improvement in society and in individual lives and, far from seeking perfection, manifestations of this longing in the form of utopian novels are attempts to communicate dissatisfaction, desire, and hope. They critique the society which inspires their production and incite change. Sargent quipped that “Man is probably not capable of establishing a perfect society, but he can certainly do better than he has... [but] there’s a good chance he’ll louse it up.” Precisely because utopian novels should not be considered road maps or blueprints to change, it is not essential that the authors themselves transcend their context or create a radically different world free of all the social problems they are pointing out. Modern utopianism, manifested in utopian novels, is beyond blueprints, and aims to inspire dissatisfaction with the world as it is. That is all. Utopian novels don’t need to find solutions; their readers do.

Utopian novels can be read in multiple ways. While privileging the role of the author’s intention in understanding utopian novels, it is crucial to acknowledge that readers may create a meaning from the text which is completely different from that which the author intended, and that these readings must also be studied and understood. The creation of utopian vision is, at its heart, a collaboration between the author and readers who believe that the vision inspires them to take action to make their world better. Fitting argued that this collusion between author and reader was a key narrative strategy of

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77 Kumar, "The End of Socialism?", 1993, p.72.
utopian novels written in the 1970s. Chapter One engaged with reader reactions to demonstrate the significance of Le Guin’s writing (and in particular the two novels this thesis focuses on) to a wide variety of people, not just academics. This chapter will use some reactions to The Left Hand of Darkness and The Dispossessed to demonstrate that I am justified in treating both as utopian novels, and that these novels stimulate utopian desire in readers, and later chapters will engage with specific themes which readers identified as significant.

Both The Left Hand of Darkness (1969) and The Dispossessed (1974) present worlds radically different to that of Le Guin and her readers. In The Left Hand of Darkness no dualities, such as female/male or winter/summer exist, and in The Dispossessed, Le Guin constructs an anarcho-syndicalist world and a capitalist one in order to shed light on the inherent contradictions of both. Are these novels utopian? The analysis will begin with Le Guin’s intention in writing each novel, as recommended by Sargent.

When writing the introduction to the 1980 Ace edition of The Left Hand of Darkness, Le Guin went to great pains to emphasise that her intention was not to write a prediction of the future. She emphasised that the novel is science fiction, and that means it “is not predictive; it is descriptive.” She notes that authors of fiction, including her, write to tell you “what they’re like, and what you’re like – what’s going on.” She explicitly states that she is writing about her context. Her intention, reflecting on the books, is to observe

in the peculiar, devious, and thought-experimental manner proper to science fiction, that if you look at us at certain odd times of day, in certain weathers, we really are

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[androgyous]... I am describing certain aspects of psychological reality in the novelist’s way, which is by inventing elaborately circumstantial lies. ⁸⁷

From this argument it is clear that Le Guin intended to explore her everyday reality, but present it in such a way that the reader could examine their world in a new way. While this fits with the definition of what constitutes a utopian novel explored above, Le Guin did not consider The Left Hand of Darkness a utopia, because “it poses no practicable alternative to contemporary society since it is based on an imaginary, radical change in human anatomy.” ⁸⁸ Across her secondary writing, Le Guin makes it clear that she is interested in using the techniques of science fiction and fantasy to make her readers think about their world in a new way, and question their unconscious assumptions that the status quo is natural and unassailable. She believed that fantasy was able to “deepen your understanding of the world, and your fellow men, and your own feelings, and your destiny.” ⁸⁹ She is very explicit in arguing for the capacity of novels to influence the way readers live their lives, suggesting that

the fantasist, whether he uses ancient archetypes of myth and legend or the younger ones of science and technology may be talking as seriously as any sociologist – and a good deal more directly – about human life as it is lived, and as it might be lived, and as it ought to be lived… it is above all by the imagination that we achieve perception, and comparison, and hope. ⁹⁰

In particular, Le Guin has been clear that she set out to write a utopian novel in writing The Dispossessed. In an interview with Jonathan Ward in 1975 prior to the release of The Dispossessed, she noted that she normally keeps her social activism separate from her writing, “except, perhaps, for this last book… in which being utopian, I am trying to

state something which I think desirable.”\footnote{Jonathan Ward, "Interview with Ursula K. Le Guin", \textit{Algol: A Magazine about Science Fiction}, vol. 12, no. 2, 1975 (Summer), p.9.}

She specified that this would be “a world with a lot less government, and a decentralised world, a world without authoritarianism.”\footnote{Ward, "Interview with Ursula K. Le Guin", 1975 (Summer), p.9.}

In her later essay “Science Fiction and Mrs Brown”, first published in 1976, Le Guin reflected that \textit{The Dispossessed} produced “a utopia, of sorts; it is didactic, therefore satirical, and idealistic.”\footnote{Ursula K. Le Guin, "Science Fiction and Mrs Brown", in James Gunn and Matthew Candelaria (eds), \textit{Speculations on Speculation: Theories of Science Fiction}, Toronto, The Scarecrow Press, 2005, 1976, p.129.}

In her later essay “Science Fiction and Mrs Brown”, first published in 1976, Le Guin reflected that \textit{The Dispossessed} produced “a utopia, of sorts; it is didactic, therefore satirical, and idealistic.”\footnote{Suvin, "Defining the Literary Genre of Utopia", 1973 (Fall), p.124. Emphasis removed.}

How is Le Guin’s utopian desire manifested in her two novels? Should \textit{The Left Hand of Darkness} and \textit{The Dispossessed} be considered utopian novels or, despite Le Guin’s utopianism, do the novels fail to meet the expectations of academics studying the features of utopian novels? Sargent’s belief that utopian novels reflect the headlines of the time is embraced in these novels, as they reflect concerns about gender, sexual relations and political systems which were being popularised by the counter-cultural movement. Suvin’s key condition that a utopian novel must have “an alternative location radically different in respect of socio-political conditions from the author’s historical environment”\footnote{Judah Bierman, "Ambiguity in Utopia: 'The Dispossessed'", \textit{Science Fiction Studies}, vol. 2, no. 3, 1975 (November), p.249.} is also fulfilled, as the worlds imagined by Le Guin are pure fantasy, drastically different from the time and place from which she was writing. In a 1975 essay Judah Bierman stated that Le Guin’s “utopian tale \textit{The Dispossessed} does not merely propose another blueprint for an anarchist commune in the skies”\footnote{Judah Bierman, "Ambiguity in Utopia: 'The Dispossessed'", \textit{Science Fiction Studies}, vol. 2, no. 3, 1975 (November), p.249.} which neatly identifies the novel as utopian and reinforces the point utopian novels of the time were no longer being read as blueprints. Raymond Williams explicitly identified \textit{The Dispossessed} as an indication of a return to utopian thinking, after the disappointments of the 1960s. He highlighted elements of Le Guin’s utopian philosophy of partnership when he claimed that the novel “has the marks of its period: the wary questioning of the
utopian impulse itself, even within its basic influence; the uneasy consciousness that superficies of utopia – affluence and abundance – can be achieved, at least for many, by non-utopian and even anti-utopian means.”

McQuarie suggested that *The Dispossessed* was one exception to his characterisation of utopias as stagnant. He identified three new forms of utopia, found throughout science fiction, and argued that the new forms play a different role to that of the traditional nineteenth-century utopias. He gave Le Guin’s work as an example of the romantic or feudal utopia, which rejects contemporary society and escapes into a pre-industrial pastoral age. This mode of utopian thought is deeply pessimistic about the effects of uncontrolled scientific innovation and represents a re-emergence of the socialist ideals present in earlier utopian work.

Fitting claimed that *The Left Hand of Darkness* “return[s] to social speculation in which the imagination of alternate societies allows the author to examine social and political structures of her own world.” Both of Le Guin’s novels, for Fitting, were important for their representations of the failings of the society in which they are produced.

Moylan described *The Dispossessed* as a “touchstone work that… re-kindled debates about utopian literature and thought as well as cast a fresh, utopian, light on the problems and contradictions of US and world politics in the 1970s.”

Kumar praised *The Dispossessed* as providing a link between mainstream and feminist utopias and for rehabilitating the literary genre of utopia. Westfahl argued that understanding a society as a utopia depends on the context in which it is placed; sometimes Anarres is a utopia, at other times it is anti-utopian.

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97 An unusual reading, from the perspective of historians familiar with the social and historical conditions of feudalism.
98 McQuarie, "Utopia and Transcendence", 1980 (Fall), p.246.
100 Fitting, "Ideology and Utopia", 1980, p.158.
102 Kumar, “The End of Socialism?”, 1993, p.76.
The two texts are consistent with the key features of utopian novels given by a number of major academics, but others have argued against accepting *The Left Hand of Darkness* and *The Dispossessed* as utopian novels. Jameson devoted the bulk of his 1975 article “World-Reduction in Le Guin” to analysing *The Left Hand of Darkness* and trying to pinpoint what makes the novel so fascinating and how it successfully combines so many techniques. Jameson focused on how Le Guin constructed a world “free of the multiple determinisms (economic, political, social) of history itself… free to do whatever it wants with its interpersonal relationships.”

He presented *The Left Hand of Darkness* as reimagining the world without capitalism, and that this ‘simplification’ makes it tempting to read *The Left Hand of Darkness* as a utopia. He stated that it is not “a genuinely utopian work” but that it is “a proving ground for the techniques that are not consciously employed in the construction of utopia until [*The Dispossessed]*.”

Interestingly, later in the article Jameson notes that some of the appeal of *The Left Hand of Darkness* derives from the way in which it presents a “utopian ‘rest’… some ultimate ‘no-place’ of a collectivity untormented by sex or history, by cultural superfluities or an object-world irrelevant to human life.” While Jameson is not satisfied that *The Left Hand of Darkness* conforms to his definition of a utopian novel, he does concede that for some readers, the reduced world of Gethen would represent an improvement in the world and could thus be a utopian novel. Carter F. Hanson argued against accepting Jameson’s critiques that Le Guin creates an anti-utopian closed historical system in *The Dispossessed* by noting how important the role of cultural memory is in grounding the imaginary world in history.

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Nadia Khouri presents the strongest objections to considering these texts successful utopian novels. Khouri argued that *The Dispossessed* does not manifest “an authentic utopian dimension, but only as an utopian desire which is incapable of actualizing itself as such.”\(^{109}\) Her justification for this view hinged on her perception that Le Guin backs herself into a corner in the narrative; forced to choose between endorsing either the social and economic system of Mao’s China (Khouri’s literal interpretation of Anarres) or the imperialism of the United States of America (Urras), the narrative presents no third alternative.\(^{110}\) Rather than make this choice, or imagine an alternative, Le Guin reduces the “political crisis into a crisis of consciousness” for Shevek and in so doing, misdirects the attention of the reader away from the real problems the utopia is supposed to be highlighting in both systems.\(^{111}\) She claimed that Le Guin desires a utopia, but by using Shevek’s superior morality to transcend the tension between Maoism and Imperialism, Le Guin’s novel neither sufficiently highlights inherent flaws in the two options, nor does it present an alternative.\(^{112}\) The crux of Khouri’s analysis is her assumption that Anarres and Urras are merely placeholders for contemporary political systems. Given the level of research Le Guin completed to prepare for writing *The Dispossessed*, Khouri’s assumption seems too reductionist and simplistic. While both novels reflect the concerns of the time, they do so in subtle and creative ways – such as examining gender politics using androgynes. Le Guin is too sophisticated and complex a writer for Khouri’s assumption to hold true, as well as being deeply dismissive of allegorical writing.\(^{113}\)

\(^{113}\) As previously cited in Chapter One: “I hate allegories. A is ‘really’ B, and a hawk is ‘really’ a handsaw – bah. Humbug. Any creation, primary or secondary, with any vitality, can ‘really’ be a dozen mutually exclusive things at once, before breakfast.” Ursula K. Le Guin, "Dreams Must Explain Themselves", *Algol: A Magazine about Science Fiction*, vol. 21, 1973 (November), p.12.
At the time of writing, the lengthiest analysis focusing on both texts is by Peter Fitting, from 2010. He discussed *The Left Hand of Darkness* as a novel which introduced utopian possibilities to science fiction, but was not itself utopian. He contextualised the novel within the debate between feminists who saw a woman’s choices as being determined either by her biological sex or by her contextual historical and cultural gender.\textsuperscript{114} The world Le Guin imagined has neither gender nor sex, and Fitting argues that this is “not an alternative or one meant to be seen as better than our own,”\textsuperscript{115} merely different. But this difference opens up the possibility to imagine better worlds. *The Dispossessed*, Fitting maintains, is a utopia, one which both illuminates the failings of its contemporary world and of the utopian dream, but the protagonist Shevek’s resolve to improve his world is used to strengthen the reader’s resolve.\textsuperscript{116}

Fitting’s characterisation of the world of *The Left Hand of Darkness* as not better but only different is too dismissive. Certainly the novel cannot be seen as providing a literal alternative, but this world can certainly be read as better. A world without rape, where childbearing, rearing, cooking and cleaning are all equally shared, where there is no entrenched disadvantage for half the population – these characteristics constitute a better world, a utopian vision indeed. It is only the impossibility of the setting, an entirely ‘mono’ world, that justifies Fitting’s analysis, and that is not a good reason for denying it the category of utopia. After all, it is not possible to access the literal world of *Erewhon*, or *News from Nowhere*, yet there is no contention from Fitting that these are not utopias. *The Left Hand of Darkness* by no means presents a perfect utopia; the world has problems with underhanded internal politics and violent international politics, but this contributes to its role as a critical utopia for 1969. It is not a perfect world, but it is better. Perhaps to some readers, this novel presented only a different world. But to

\textsuperscript{114} Fitting, "Utopia, Dystopia and Science Fiction", 2010, p.143.
\textsuperscript{115} Fitting, "Utopia, Dystopia and Science Fiction", 2010, p.144.
\textsuperscript{116} Fitting, "Utopia, Dystopia and Science Fiction", 2010, p.145.
another reader, this world can quite reasonably read as better – as is reflected in the reader reactions documented in Chapter One. Fitting’s reservations about The Left Hand of Darkness reflect Westfahl’s assertion that seeing a utopia depends on where you are standing.

Returning to the definitions which form the basis for discussion of utopian novels in the thesis, do The Left Hand of Darkness and The Dispossessed conform to Sargent’s definition, and what kind of utopia could they best be categorised as? Beginning with the simple definition of utopia as “a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space,” both novels can clearly be read as utopias. Considering the definitions for eutopia and dystopia, and the discussion above, it seems that classifying either novel as eutopian or dystopia would be problematic as both readings could be valid depending on the perspective of the reader. Whilst one reader might consider Anarres hellish, another might see it as paradise. Given that the author’s intention was explicitly to write a utopia, it seems unreasonable to try to force the novels into the mould of eutopia or dystopia. Utopian satire and anti-utopia are unsatisfactory categories as well, because rather than constructing a criticism of society and utopias and pointing out only flaws, Le Guin is constructs a nuanced critique, which certainly does highlight the flaws in her contemporary world and ‘utopia’, but also endorses certain social movements, such as feminism, and suggests that the contemporary world is not irredeemably flawed, but needs improvement. Both novels are excellent examples of a “good place with problems,” and therefore should be categorised under the term, coined by Moylan and endorsed by Fitting and Sargent, of critical utopia. The ‘critical utopia’ category is also reinforced by the way in which readers have responded to The Left Hand of Darkness’ and The Dispossessed’s underlying utopian philosophy of partnership – they believe that the novels are

commenting on the real world and, as a result of reading that commentary, they imagine how society could be different.

What conclusions can be drawn from this study of utopian scholarship and the place of *The Left Hand of Darkness* and *The Dispossessed* within this literary and scholarly tradition? Ideas of what a utopian novel and utopianism are have evolved significantly over time. In modern scholarship, there is no place for notions of utopia as a perfect society, or as a blueprint or map to the ideal. What has persisted in scholarship from 1965 to 2010 is the belief that a utopia reflects, and is reflecting on, its society. While there are problems of coherence within the body of scholarship, at the very least the majority of students of utopia agree that this is its primary function. A significant factor in revitalising the utopian literary genre was the desire, manifested in the counter cultural movement, for an alternative to capitalism and the culture of individualism which had developed along with it. Le Guin’s work has continually been understood within the frame of this tradition, and her two novels reflect the society which created them, critique it and attempt to spur the reader to make improvements in their lives and worlds. Ideas such as cooperation, mutual respect and community are manifested and endorsed in both books, in opposition to contemporary cultural values. Criticisms that Le Guin’s work demonstrates an emerging utopian mentality, rather than writing an actual utopia, result from relatively narrow standards for what constitute a utopia. *The Left Hand of Darkness* and *The Dispossessed* are critical utopias, which have maintained their relevance for scholarship in the forty-two years since they were published. As late as 2010, scholars continue to discuss these novels and their implications on and for the utopian genre.
Chapter Three

“Love Between Individuals”: Reading Gender, Sexuality, and Feminism in Le Guin

Gender, sexuality, and feminism are important themes in *The Left Hand of Darkness* and *The Dispossessed*. Le Guin’s techniques and plot devices addressing these themes in both books are controversial, interpreted by different readers as wildly successful or as deeply problematic failures. Examining reactions to the two books reveals a pattern of dialogue between the texts, readers, and author around the presentation of ‘partnership.’ In particular, partnerships in both texts are read as attempts to reimagine relationships between men and women. This chapter will review the manifestation of feminist ideas in literature generally, science fiction specifically, and explore Le Guin’s at times strained relationship with feminism. Using that context, reviews and analyses will be assessed and will demonstrate how ideas about gender, sexuality, and feminism re-occur in readings of *The Left Hand of Darkness* and *The Dispossessed* and reflect the utopian desire of the audience being influenced by their readings of the texts.

Feminism in literature encompasses much more than just a focus on political rights for women. It is broadly concerned with equality, while also interrogating notions of womanhood and femininity, as well as engaging with presentations of sex and sexuality to subvert hegemonic ideas of masculinity. Feminism in literature seeks “to understand the social and psychic mechanisms that construct and perpetuate gender inequality and then to change them.”¹ Pam Morris identified two fundamental principles that feminism is based upon:

(1) That gender difference is the foundation of a structural inequality between women and men, by which women suffer systematic social injustice, and

(2) That the inequality between the sexes is not the result of biological necessity but is produced by the cultural construction of gender differences. ²

More than just recognising these inequalities and injustices, feminists seek to transform the status quo to create a more just and fair world – “not so much for equality between men and women as for a transcendence or transformation of the over-rigid definition of gender as difference.”³ Feminist literature also recognises human sexuality as “amorphous and complex”, and that it cannot be contained within rigid, polarised categories.⁴ Morris also noted that

Feminists are interested in literature as an influential cultural practice embodied in powerful institutions. They are concerned to discover how literature as a cultural practice may be involved in producing the meanings and values that lock women into inequality, rather than simply reflecting the already existing reality of women’s lives in literary texts.⁵

Literary feminism focuses on highlighting inequality and social problems, not just on reflecting the world as it is. Feminist literature is not restricted to a single sub-genre, but can and does permeate multiple genres and types of literature – including science fiction and utopia.

Science fiction has been identified as a particularly effective medium for feminist literary expression, because it focuses on estranging readers from their reality and demands that they accept unfamiliar worlds. Writers of science fiction are able to “free themselves from the limitations of realistic plots and characterization”⁶ and this opens up realms of possibilities. Veronica Hollinger believed that

sf articulates and explores [feminist theoretical models] through its narrative experiments... The resulting stories are not just simply programmatic ‘mirrors’ of particular theoretical arguments, of course, but rather they incorporate those arguments

³ Morris, Literature and Feminism, 1993, p.5.
⁶ Morris, Literature and Feminism, 1993, pp.77-78.
into the lives and actions of imagined human subjects in imaginary worlds, subjecting them to detailed fictional examination.  

Science fiction is particularly useful for feminist expression because it works to subvert and defamiliarise situations of inequality which are otherwise taken for granted within society. Science fiction novels can force readers to see the dominant paradigm, to recognise the ‘Other’ who might otherwise be hidden or stifled, and that normalcy (and therefore power relations) is defined by creation of this ‘other.’ As a result, “feminist sf is not simply sf about women, it is sf written in the interests of women,” though what is considered to be ‘in the interests of women’ differs from author to author. Imagined worlds react against whatever the author perceived women lacked in that historical moment and “the positive values stressed in the stories can reveal to us what, in the author’s eyes, is wrong with our own society.” Utopian fiction generally, as outlined in Chapter Two, is the result of dissatisfaction with the present, but “feminist utopian fiction in particular [addresses] how patriarchal problems are solved, or at least improved.” It is precisely during this period when Le Guin wrote The Left Hand of Darkness and The Dispossessed that the feminist science fiction movement detailed above coalesced. Le Guin had a tense relationship with some feminist critics, and was criticised for not being as radical, progressive, or disruptive as some critics wished. In particular, her use of pronouns in The Left Hand of Darkness was a sore point for feminists reading the work.

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Women writers from the mid- to late 1970s started to make conscious and unapologetic attempts to explicitly address feminist concerns within science fiction. This is a crucial context for understanding reactions to Le Guin’s novels, as there were a number of female writers challenging the male-dominated genre forcefully through their fiction and critical writing. Science fiction reviewers of the time struggled to understand this development as a new flourishing of feminism within the genre, and rarely discussed female writers and their texts in comparison to each other. In this context, Le Guin, as well as being an excellent writer, may have been a more comfortable female writer for male readers to engage with than more confrontational women writers, such as Joanna Russ. Indeed, it is clear that Russ’ work elicited strong resistance from many male readers, and the fierce arguments played out in the letter columns of fanzines are in stark contrast to the generally positive commentary on Le Guin.

As noted in Chapter One, Le Guin’s connection with feminism and contemporary feminists was at times strained. Though she was always a feminist, she was writing during the development of second wave feminism, which she resisted committing to for a long time. Though her relationship with the second wave developed significantly over her career, during the 1960s and 1970s Le Guin was most comfortable with the first wave feminist principles of Woolf and Pankhurst.

In 1976, in response to negative reviews of The Left Hand of Darkness by feminist critics, Le Guin stated that

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it seems to be men, more often than women, who thus complete my work for me: I think because men are often more willing to identify as they read with poor, confused, defensive Genly, the Earthman, and therefore to participate in his painful and gradual discovery of love.\textsuperscript{18}

By the time she revised this essay in 1987, Le Guin had reversed this position in response to further reading and discussions with feminists, arguing

I now see it thus: men were inclined to be satisfied with the book, which allowed them a safe trip into androgyny and back, from a conventionally male viewpoint. But many women wanted it to go further, to dare more, to explore androgyny from a woman’s point of view as well as a man’s. In fact, it does so, in that it was written by a woman. But this is admittedly directed only in the chapter ‘The Question of Sex,’ the only voice of a woman in the book. I think women were justified in asking more courage of me and a more rigorous thinking-through of implications.\textsuperscript{19}

It is only later in her career that Le Guin accepts more radical, culturally and linguistically focused forms of feminism. She would eventually characterise her mindset when writing \textit{The Left Hand of Darkness} and \textit{The Dispossessed}, as being caught up in an internalised patriarchal mentality. Her disassociation from feminists in science fiction was not because she did not take feminism seriously (she was part of the National Organisation for Women and the National Abortion Rights Action League)\textsuperscript{20} but because

her change was evolutionary and for a long time she was not aware she needed to change: ‘I was free – born free, lived free. And that personal freedom allowed me to ignore the degree to which my writing was controlled and constrained by judgements and assumptions I thought were my own, but which were the internalized ideology of a male supremacist society.’\textsuperscript{21}

Le Guin, having been born and raised in a progressive family, had limited experience of the ways in which social constructions of gender could limit women and girls. This does

\textsuperscript{18} Le Guin, "Is Gender Necessary? (Redux)", 1989, pp.15-16.
\textsuperscript{19} Le Guin, "Is Gender Necessary? (Redux)", 1989, pp.15-16.
not mean that Le Guin did not write feminist texts, or that she was not influenced by feminism, but when she was writing *The Left Hand of Darkness* and *The Dispossessed* the principles of second-wave feminism were not at the forefront of her mind or her agenda.

Despite Le Guin’s conflicted personal relationship with the feminist movement, her work has been interpreted as incorporating “many of the positions of contemporary feminism.”

Warren G. Rochelle argued that “*Left Hand*, while not intentionally feminist, as are later works, does wrestle with one of the key tenants of feminist thought: the social construction of gender” and Call claimed that Le Guin constructs an “anarchy of gender” through her imagined worlds. But whilst these male academics were confident that Le Guin’s work incorporates a feminist perspective – note that these readings were not contemporaneous with the publication of the texts - others are not so sure. Analysing the wide range of responses to Le Guin’s work for this thesis has revealed a noticeable disconnection during the 1960s and 1970s between the ways in which the dominant male critics and academics received the two focus texts, and the ways in which emerging critical, especially female, voices discussed their experience of these works.

Every individual who reads a book will have a different reaction to it; however there is a clear gap reflected in the source material, especially during the 1970s, between the experience of men and women when reading Le Guin’s novels or her discussions of the position of women in science fiction. These reactions are undoubtedly linked to social changes across the Anglosphere at the time, as the feminist movement agitated for increasing change in the position of women. An excellent example of this disconnect

between male and female readers are the following two letters, printed in the same issue of *Vector*, after Le Guin’s AussieCon speech was run in the previous issue. Mrs A. Oldham agreed with Le Guin that “women are rather scarce in sf… after her full-time job there’s the other full-time job – Home. Writing and other hobbies have to wait for spare time.”25 By contrast, John Welsh argued “what does the sex of the author of a good book matter? It’s irrelevant. And nowadays no-one’s stopping them [women] writing. If you can do it, go ahead.”26 These letters, neither of which was in response to the other, touch on the tensions which were created as women became more assertive within the science fiction community and the wider community. Women had been present as readers and fans for a long time – James Baen believed that about 20 percent of *Worlds of IF* readers were female in 197427 – but they had been largely absent from the leading roles, either as critics or authors, and there was an almost total absence of believable female characters in the bulk of earlier sf with which female readers could identify; Ursula K. Le Guin has admitted that she initially found it very difficult to depict complex female characters in her sf, because of the absence of literary role models.28

Le Guin’s agent estimated that only one in every 30 science fiction writers was female in 1975.29 Whilst in 1980 Moylan read Le Guin as incorporating feminism in her work, other readers identified a version of the friction between feminism and science fiction occurring on a personal level for Le Guin. Her work was read as reflecting a struggle to understand what gender and sexuality meant to her, because “something was going on in the subconscious, for Le Guin and many other women, which needed to be made

28 Edward James, *Science Fiction in the Twentieth Century*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1994, p.183. Cites The Language of the Night essay collection by Le Guin, but it is not clear which essay he was citing – most likely “Science Fiction and Mrs Brown”.
conscious.”

Perhaps because of this grappling to understand the changes wrought by feminism, Cummins claimed that Le Guin “regards herself as a feminist and regards [The Left Hand of Darkness] as her addition to the new women’s movement of the 1960s.” This may well be true by 1990, but there is ample evidence that it took a long time for Le Guin to come to this position and that at the time of writing Le Guin was not endeavouring to contribute to the women’s movement.

Alternative explanations for Le Guin’s friction with the second-wave feminists during the 1970s have been proposed by academics. Given how politically charged women’s writing became, especially within science fiction, it is possible that Le Guin rejected the ‘angry’ feminist narrative around her and employed an alternative theory of social change. By writing novels which were accessible to male and female readers, which were less violent and divisive in their presentation of gender than other novels, which emphasised interdependence between all people, and which advocated reconciliation between men and women,

Le Guin can be read as providing a ‘third way’ of engaging with feminism in literature, distinct from those already prominent in her contemporary context. Others argued that Le Guin was firmly entrenched in extant feminist approaches and that she seems to have thought like a separatist when she was in the Hainish world. That is, if equality for the sexes were to exist, she would have to create a world and a biological structure for the condition (as she did in Left Hand); if a social system not in the dominance-submission mode were to exist, she would have to create a world for the founders to flee to (as she did in The Dispossessed). The idea of significant social and

31 Elizabeth Cummins, Understanding Ursula K. Le Guin, Colombia, University of South Carolina Press, 1990, p.78.
political changes occurring in an already-existing society, on its home soil, is present in the major Hainish novels, but only as an event which is yet to come.\(^{33}\)

This interpretation is based on Le Guin’s favourite narrative device – “dropping some poor hapless soul into a different world, a different culture where they don’t know what the rules are.”\(^{34}\) Her protagonist can’t figure out a society which is in the midst of changing, which is why her imagined worlds are either already radically transformed or are on the cusp of transformation. This feature is not indicative of a belief in separatist feminism as much as it is a symptom of Le Guin’s preference for using de facto anthropologists as heroes, and using their learning process to educate the reader. The idea that Le Guin provided a ‘third way’ of manifesting feminism in literature has appeal, but primarily as a retrospective analysis and assessment of Le Guin’s impact. It is difficult to believe that this was a conscious aim of the work, given her comments in the 1976 version of “Is Gender Necessary” that men complete her work for her and that women are less likely to participate in Genly’s discovery of love.\(^{35}\)

Le Guin’s relationship with feminism is also closely tied to the philosophy of partnership in her work. Attempting to create an inclusive new way of communicating feminist principles is in line with the deep respect for individual freedoms evident in her philosophy of partnership. Her resistance to second-wave feminism and preference for first-wave feminism at the time is emblematic of how her utopianism and feminism align. The feminist elements of Le Guin’s philosophy of partnership will be discussed in further detail below.

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\(^{35}\) Le Guin, "Is Gender Necessary? (Redux)", 1989, pp.15-16.
The novums\textsuperscript{36} Le Guin used to explore the themes of gender, sexuality, and feminism – an androgynous alien (Estraven), a ‘normal’ human male left alone on an alien planet (Genly), and two worlds without gender roles - were lauded by numerous academics, who found these ideas new and challenging. Budrys believed that “what this world [\textit{The Left Hand of Darkness}] has to teach its only heterosexual human, galactic ambassador Genly Ai, is what it also teaches us. I can’t imagine anyone reading it and not learning profoundly from it.”\textsuperscript{37} Scholes argued that \textit{The Left Hand of Darkness}’ value came from the fact that “for us to see what it is to be human, as opposed to merely male or female, we need a non-human shadow, a world other than our own,”\textsuperscript{38} and that the world of Gethen provided this for the reader. Ketterer praised Le Guin for successfully imagining a world in which the dualism which defined contemporary society dissolved,\textsuperscript{39} and argued that \textit{The Dispossessed} created a philosophical apocalypse

By presenting a radically different image of man, by pointing to the existence of a previously unsuspected outside manipulator, and thirdly, as a consequence, by radically altering man’s vision of human reality.\textsuperscript{40}

Bloom praised the characterisation of Estraven as the principal aesthetic strength of the novel,\textsuperscript{41} and Bittner claimed that the most striking element of the whole novel was the presentation of androgyny and ambisexuality.\textsuperscript{42} Reading from a much later and quite specific perspective, Elizabeth Leane argued that the novel draws from the history of Western narratives about exploring, sleighing, and conquering the Antarctic and adds

\textsuperscript{36} For further explanation of novums, see Darko Suvin, \textit{Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre}, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1979.
\textsuperscript{40} Ketterer, "Ursula K. Le Guin's Archetypal 'Winter-Journey'", 1986, p.15.
much through speculating on “what these stories might look like if their protagonists were not assumed to be white, male, and unambiguously heterosexual.”43 Peter Hyde thought that The Left Hand of Darkness presented a world where “sexual differentiation has been virtually abolished and in an eminently practical way which gives lie to innumerable male chauvinistic arguments.”44 In The Dispossessed, Anarres was also described as “a feminist utopia, as Anarresti society is based on full equality and mutual solidarity and cooperation.”45 Note once again, however, that all but one of these unambiguously positive reactions to the presentation of gender were written by male academics and critics writing close to the time of publication.

Alternative interpretations dispute these claims that Le Guin has unambiguously succeeded in creating cognitive estrangement,46 and argue instead that her ideas were incomplete or unsuccessful at addressing gender and sexuality. Responses to The Left Hand of Darkness include Kathryn Buckley’s argument that Le Guin failed to adequately exploit the consequences of her ambisexual idea, and that the author missed an opportunity to

examine precisely how much sex influences our actions, how much the role each of us is cast in birth – either male or female – influences us and how much the competitive element between the sexes is detrimental to civilised ambitions. Aside from stating that sexual competition and frustration are removed, that no section of the community has to be tied down to child-bearing and raising, we get no clear idea of the effects this would have.47

In discussing the success of creating believable androgynous characters, Wendy Pearson criticised Le Guin’s characterisation of Estraven, believing that to read Estraven as “androgynous, much less as someone capable of an entire range of sexual behaviours,

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46 For more on cognitive estrangement see the seminal work by Suvin, Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre, 1979, p.7.
requires a deliberate act of will”\textsuperscript{48} and that when Estraven does go into \textit{kemmer} on the glacier, because of this failure of characterisation the casual reader is more likely to read him simply as “a rather effeminate male in heat.”\textsuperscript{49} Stanislaw Lem was deeply dissatisfied with the Gethenians’ lack of mental anguish regarding their fluctuating sexual state.\textsuperscript{50}

Joanna Russ argued that \textit{The Dispossessed} was a deeply problematic text and she identified significant disconnections between what Le Guin \textit{attempted} to present and what she actually wrote. She noted that while Anarres was without formally constructed and enforced gender roles, Le Guin fails to write characters in a range of genders across a range of occupations. While there are female administrators, the only female physicist mentioned is senile, and the majority of conversations recounted occur between men.\textsuperscript{51} Russ argued that Le Guin’s presentation of sexuality is confused. While Le Guin tells the reader that adolescents and adults may copulate as they like, with no taboos around homosexual contact or promiscuity, this is undermined by a scene where a young Shevek and other boys stay together in order to avoid girls. Russ claimed that the audience is positioned to read an older male character who continues to be sexually active as creepy and the only homosexual character in the novel is almost asexual.\textsuperscript{52}

Readers are told that ‘motherhood’ as Anglo-Saxon readers would recognise it does not exist on Anarres and children are raised in communal establishments. But Russ observes traditional motherhood when Shevek notices his mother’s absence and his mother


\textsuperscript{49} Pearson, "The Queer as Traitor, the Traitor as Queer", 1998, p.82.

\textsuperscript{50} Stanislaw Lem, "Lost Opportunities", \textit{SF Commentary 24}, 1971 (November), cited in Donna R. White, \textit{Dancing with Dragons: Ursula K. Le Guin and the critics}, Rochester, Camden House, 1999, p.47. The original document has proved difficult to find, though the Australian Science Fiction Foundation is currently assisting to find the original document.

\textsuperscript{51} Joanna Russ, "Books", \textit{The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction}, vol. 48, no. 3, 1975 (March), p.42. This reading depends on ignoring Mitis, the female senior physicist from Chapter Two of \textit{The Dispossessed}, who is the reason Shevek goes to work with Sabul.

\textsuperscript{52} Russ, "Books", 1975 (March), p.42.
appears to feel guilty – perhaps because this experience is contrasted with many children who remain with their female parent (at minimum), which is equally bizarre given the social mores Le Guin is attempting to present. Russ criticised Le Guin’s presentation of capitalism on Urras, and noted that “women’s fashions haven’t changed in a century and a half – haven’t loti capitalists invented planned obsolescence?” Russ was dissatisfied with almost all aspects of The Dispossessed’s capitalist society:

A-Io is not even American; it’s literary-European (a copy of a copy) which leads the author to some awful inconsistencies; a capitalism that neither expands uncontrollably nor experiences drastic depressions, women with the social position of the 1840s but with contraception and a stale population (hence few children), ultra-modern technology plus an Edwardian (at the latest) social structure. Even the scenery evaporates… technically polished but unreal.

Russ’ critique is one of the most hard-hitting and comprehensive, which was to be expected, given her role as a critic but also as a strong feminist author in science fiction. It is a reading which is deeply sceptical of the success of The Dispossessed in educating utopian desire within readers, and of the coherence of Le Guin’s utopian philosophy of partnership. In contrast to Le Guin, Russ did not hesitate to make men in science fiction feel uncomfortable. Russ’ review highlights how differently The Dispossessed was read from a radical female perspective, especially when contrasted with the praise and admiration of the other major contemporary critics.

Further criticisms of Le Guin’s presentation of gender in The Dispossessed include George Turner’s complaint – in stark contrast to Russ – that Le Guin’s private beliefs were intruding into the narrative, especially that “some overstressed women’s-libbery seems uncomfortable in the setting; the points made about female equivalence in

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Anarres say all that needs to be said, and the underlining of their situation on Urras is [redundant].”

There is a correlation between female critics being deeply dissatisfied regarding gender and sexuality in both novels, and male critics being very challenged about gender and sexuality and impressed at Le Guin’s work. I believe that the reason behind this correlation, which is by no means strict, is quite complex. The responses of the major female critics reflect the fact that they were reading and explicitly looking for engagement with these themes, and to have utopian visions presented that would challenge both feminist and non-feminist readers.

It is possible that some males reading the book were willing to accept Le Guin’s presentation of gender and sexuality at face value, and that they focused on other issues and themes in the novel. But examining the response of these male critics is fascinating, and undermines this simplistic idea. Budrys’ response (cited above), that he couldn’t “imagine anyone reading it and not learning profoundly from it,” is a powerful and clear articulation of the impact the book had on him. In her reflections on the book later in her career, Le Guin devalued this reaction to some extent when she claimed that male readers merely enjoyed a “safe trip into androgyny and back.” Budrys’ response, and the other positive reactions to the novel noted above, are clear evidence of Le Guin’s utopian project succeeding. Warren G. Rochelle, reflecting on Le Guin’s impact on him personally, said that the love between Shevek and Bedap was “liberating.” Le Guin created a utopian novel to express her own personal utopianism, and there were readers

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who were inspired and who learned from reading that utopian novel to re-evaluate the
status quo and dream of how society might need to change.

The gap reflected in the reactions is primarily a gap between the expectations and
desires of readers. Second-wave feminists in science fiction at the time wanted to see a
functioning world reflecting their principles, but Le Guin was not committed to the
second-wave approach at that time. Other readers wanted good science fiction, and Le
Guin created that, but in addition she incorporated a feminist utopian vision which
clearly surprised some readers. The impression that women were dissatisfied with the
text is also the product of the unequal voice women had in producing criticism of the
time. Source material is biased towards feminists like Russ, who demanded to be heard
in a way that other women in science fiction had not. These feminists carved out a place
for themselves in the male-dominated space of science fiction criticism. Male reviewers
reflected a broader range of ideologies and political standpoints. It is unsurprising that
Russ picked up the flaws in Le Guin’s work from a feminist perspective and that the
men did not – she was reading from a very different ideological expectation. But it is
frustrating that responses to the text from other women who, like Le Guin at the time,
were more reluctant to embrace radical feminist ideology are much less prevalent. But it
is possible that a woman reading *The Left Hand of Darkness*, less versed in theory than
Buckley or Russ, might have had the same profound learning experience as Budrys.

So far, it is clear that reading either novel in the context of feminist literature is
complex. Le Guin’s later commitment to feminism colours her reflection on the two
texts, and major female reviewers contemporary to the publication dates are reading
with a very particular interest. Other critics are by no means impartial, they have their
own biases, but their experience is one of learning from a utopian novel, not necessarily
from a feminist novel. Given that learning is taking place, further analysis will attempt
to ascertain what exactly readers identify that they learn from Le Guin’s texts.
Across readings of the novel is a strong identification by readers with utopian ideas about ‘partnership’. When asked to comment on what she thought the major theme of her entire body of work is, Le Guin immediately replied ‘marriage’.\textsuperscript{60} Earlier, she had also commented that the major themes of *The Left Hand of Darkness* are ‘betrayal and fidelity’ and ‘sex/gender’.\textsuperscript{61} Tarya Malkki argued that Le Guin’s idea of marriage can be read much more broadly than the usual sense of a formal union between two people and that

‘union’ in general, union between human beings… is an accurate description of much of Le Guin’s work. When Le Guin writes a marriage between a husband and wife, in this union of genders she sees a paradigm for other unions on both different and larger scales: unions between friends and brothers, unions between members of a community, unions between entire races.\textsuperscript{62}

All of Le Guin’s interactions between people inform the construction of her greater theme, not only those between people involved in formal romantic relationships. This focus on partnership and cooperation between people of all genders and sexualities may have further alienated the radical second-wave feminist readers who advocated separatism from Le Guin’s imaginary worlds.

This focus on ideas of partnership and the impact of partnerships on individuals is noted by other readers, in varying guises. The purpose of a partnership is not to bring together the same capacities, because a person has no need of what they already possess. A partnership occurs when two people or communities combine to achieve something that they could not otherwise do without each other’s cooperation.\textsuperscript{63} A healthy partnership is equal, and not coercive or dominating. When Lester del Rey reviewed *The Left Hand of Darkness*, he noted that...

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*Darkness* in 1969, elements of partnership are noted in his discussion of love in the novel. He stated that the book contains an “examination of love that is not related to sexuality or romance. This is a love between individuals, that can disregard maleness or femaleness.”

Del Rey reaffirmed his reading in 1974 in a rebuttal of Ketterer, who del Rey argued “never goes into the love between Genly Ai and Estraven, though that is the underlying – and extremely significant – theme of the book… it is a love between human and human.” Partnership is reflected in the symbols readers highlight; for example Barbour emphasised the importance of the yin-yang symbol in the novel, as it marks when “Ai finally comes to love and accept Estraven as a whole person.”

The core of *The Left Hand of Darkness* for many readers is concepts such as “likeness and unlikeness, native and alien, male and female,” which cannot exist one without the other. Karen Sinclair’s reading links del Rey’s focus on the love between Estraven and Genly Ai with the central position of contrasting differences. She believed that the core message of the novel is that Ai finally accepts “the fact that the bond that unites them is one of differences, not one of likenesses.”

The common thread between these reactions, which span the ten years after *The Left Hand of Darkness* was first published, is that each focuses on partnership, either explicitly discussing Genly and Estraven’s partnership or how symbols and imagery in the novel contrast with each other but are necessary to the existence of the other. If you have never seen light, you cannot fully understand dark and if you’ve never met an alien, you cannot understand what it is to be native.

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Other readers have privileged ideas or images which do not necessarily conform with my contention that notions of partnership are central to the utopian desire communicated by the novels. Le Guin has said of *The Dispossessed* that the “heart of the novel is a person”69 and Bittner described *The Left Hand of Darkness* as “a story about death and coming of age.”70 Both reactions could reasonably be focused on individualism, rather than partnership. It should be noted how difficult it would be to write a novel about only one person. It is usual for a novel to have a primary character and, in both cases, for Le Guin, this is a protagonist with whom the reader is supposed to identify. But while *The Dispossessed* centres on a person, and *The Left Hand of Darkness* adopts some conventions of a *bildungsroman* in order to tell the story, none of the changes which the primary character undergoes could have occurred in isolation and the narrative of each novel progresses through the evolving partnerships between the primary character and the people surrounding him – reciprocal partnerships with one character giving to another and the other accepting, or two working together to achieve a goal. Without these relationships, the characters would not learn, nor would they grow, and neither protagonist would survive to the end. Seemingly individualistic readings still fit the idea of partnership proposed.

Le Guin communicates a utopian ‘philosophy of partnership’ through her two novels, which becomes most evident through analyses of the presentation of gender and sexuality in *The Left Hand of Darkness* and *The Dispossessed*. This philosophy breaks down gender or biological essentialism and advocates equality, honesty, and acceptance as a basis of all types of partnership. The philosophy of partnership is the utopian idea

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Le Guin communicates through both novels, not an idea which would create a perfect society, but offers a vision of a better, more humane, set of social relations.

Le Guin’s education of utopian desire through the philosophy of partnership is identified and reacted to by readers clearly across four areas: work, friendship, marriage, and sex. Work in both imaginary worlds is shared between people without regard to physical manifestations of sex. On Gethen, gender does not exist so any discrimination is impossible and *The Left Hand of Darkness* demonstrates Gethenians involved in a range of work tasks, from government to dock work. On Anarres, work assignments are distributed by an agency of central computers called Divlab and accepted or rejected by the individual.\(^7\) These imagined work situations reflect a philosophy of partnership which does not give regard to the sex of the individual, only to the abilities of each person. Using Shevek as her mouthpiece, Le Guin argued for non-discriminatory work relationships. In *The Dispossessed*, Dr Kimoe states that women are physically weaker than men and therefore not able to do the same work, to which Shevek replies that this is irrelevant given the mechanisation of work and that, regardless, women are tougher and have greater endurance than men. He privately marvels that Kimoe needs to dismiss half the human race as inferior in order to respect himself.\(^8\) To exclude women from particular occupations based on their sex is to deny the society the benefits of a partnership which strengthens all by capitalising complementary skills, and this section of the novel is the most didactic of the four areas reflecting partnership.

Le Guin’s philosophy of partnership is also reflected in the way friendship is presented in each novel. Friendship is one aspect of human interaction which Le Guin took care to show as an evolving process, so that readers are able to develop a nuanced

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understanding of the philosophy underpinning these interactions. Over the course of the events of *The Left Hand of Darkness* the reader sees the transition of Genly Ai and Estraven’s relationship from that of uneasy acquaintances to unconsummated love. Shevek’s relationship and friendship with colleagues often frames his actions and is the means by which he learns about the society in which he participates. The kind of partnership formed between friends reflected in Le Guin’s novels is one which fully acknowledges and accepts the differences between each other – including gender differences. Multiple readers have detected this message in both *The Left Hand of Darkness* and *The Dispossessed*, and their responses reflect the impact of Le Guin’s utopianism on individual readers.

Malkki’s reading particularly emphasises the friendship between Genly and Estraven, and she argued that “friendship, through non-sexual relationship, may be no less meaningful than its romantic counterpart, marriage. One of the most beautiful friendships in all of literature is found in *The Left Hand of Darkness*.” The friendship between Genly and Estraven

*only* becomes possible when the differences must be faced by Genly, when Estraven goes into kemmer as a female. Genly can no longer consider his relationship with Estraven ‘male camaraderie,’ or even neutrality. Sexual tension arises between them, and it is this that brings their friendship to flower: a friendship arisen from the very depth of differences between the two.

Other analyses support this idea. Cummins claimed that the partnership which finally results between Genly and Estraven is a “relationship based on human characteristics, not gender roles. It recognizes the equality of both people and depends on the

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73 Ellen Peel, "Reading piebald patterns in Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*", in Helen Merrick and Tess Williams (eds), *Women of Other Worlds: excursions through science fiction and feminism*, Nedlands, University of Western Australia Press, 1999, p.38.


cooperation and nurturing of both.” She emphasised that, even without a sexual element, this friendship provides as much opportunity for joy, intimacy, and vulnerability as a romantic relationship. These analyses put non-sexual friendship at the centre of The Left Hand of Darkness and this demonstrates how significant this friendship was to some readers, to the point that it was central to understanding the novel.

Some readers were more critical of how Le Guin constructed Genly and Estraven’s friendship. Naomi Jacobs believed that the “consistent use of the male pronoun to refer to Ai’s intimate friendship with Estraven largely removes sexual possibilities from their friendship.” Genly is not homosexual, and there is no hint of sexual contact between two Gethenians who kemmer to the same gender on Gethen in The Left Hand of Darkness, though it occurs in the short story “Coming of Age in Karhide” (New Legends, 1995). Jacobs acknowledged the importance of the close friendship between the two characters, just as Malkki and Cummins do, but she did not see that there was any sexual tension for Genly and Estraven to overcome. As this acknowledgement of sexual tension is an acceptance of an androgynous being as both androgynous and as a potential sexual partner, it is crucial to creating a foundation for a genuine partnership between equals, because Genly ceases to deny the existence of one of Estraven’s essential qualities. Without the reader experiencing this process by proxy through Genly, the aspect of full and unconditional acceptance is missing from Jacobs’ perception of Le Guin’s philosophy of partnership.

Jacobs’ reading places much emphasis on the lack of homosexuality on Gethen, and presentation of sexuality will be addressed later in this chapter. Even accepting this

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76 Cummins, Understanding Ursula K. Le Guin, 1990, p.84.
77 Cummins, Understanding Ursula K. Le Guin, 1990, p.84.
criticism, Jacobs glosses over the opportunity for heterosexual contact between Genly and Estraven as they cross the ice. This is precisely the moment Malkki identifies as the crux of Genly and Estraven’s partnership – the point at which they recognise each other as strange – at which they finally realise and accept each other as whole people, and must completely depend on each other for their survival. This trust between two people who are strange is very significant in Malkki’s reading because she draws parallels between Genly and Estraven’s experience and the experience of men and women in the real world. Le Guin’s construction of Genly and Estraven’s friendship drew attention to the difference between a friend and a lover, and the impact of respecting that difference, even when sexual tension is at play. As a result of reading the friendship-partnership, Malkki considered how

in our society, it is often difficult for a male and female to be friends; our own built-in and socially ingrained sexuality comes into play, and society as a whole questions such relationships.79

Though, on the surface, Le Guin presents sexual tension, this relationship can be read as a commentary on the relationship between men and women. The utopian desire Le Guin inspired in Malkki is to imagine how relations between men and women might be improved, if readers could acknowledge members of the opposite gender as whole people with differences and the potential for sexual attraction. Diminishing or avoiding these truths results in friendships which are less authentic and is an obstacle to building a genuine partnership.

Friendships with acknowledged but unrequited sexual tension are not privileged as an ideal or virtuous form of relationship in Le Guin’s work. In The Dispossessed Shevek’s friend Bedap is attracted to him and they spend one week together as lovers. This does not necessarily resolve Bedap’s attraction nor does it transform their relationship from

friends to lovers irreversibly, but their partnership is strengthened and reaffirmed by the freedom to express and fulfil these desires without lying to each other.

Genly, in contrast to Shevek, is not even able to acknowledge his sexual attraction to Estraven until the androgyne *kemmers* as female, because the heterosexual Genly has cast Estraven as a man. Genly is trapped in an internalised gender system, and “has preconceptions about how men ought to behave and how Prime Ministers ought to discuss affairs of state. Because Estraven does not follow either pattern, Ai concludes that Estraven is dishonest”\(^8^0\) when it is actually Genly who is being dishonest with himself. Genly’s mindset is aligned more with the assumptions about gender and sexuality with which readers are familiar, and his story is more effective than Shevek’s at educating readers in Le Guin’s utopianism. As an Odonian, Shevek is the product of a society which has already internalised the values Le Guin is educating her readers in through *the Left Hand of Darkness*. Jacob’s reading of *The Left Hand of Darkness* demonstrates that not all readers connected with this utopian desire through Genly, but this should not diminish or invalidate the reading reflected in Malkki and Cummins’ work.

There are a number of romantic relationships in both novels which can be read as marriages. Most obviously, there is Shevek and Takver in *The Dispossessed*, and Shevek’s colleague on Urras, Dr Oiie, whose marriage to Sewa Oiie is tenderly described and is the only formal example of marriage actually seen in either novel.\(^8^1\) In *The Left Hand of Darkness* a different form of marriage is evident in Estraven’s relationship with his dead brother, Arek. Marriage has been an interesting focus for this study, because earlier critiques did not consider these examples to be marriages, as there was no formal institution. Hyde noted the lack of marriage in *The Dispossessed* in his

\(^8^0\) Cummins, *Understanding Ursula K. Le Guin*, 1990, p.75.
1976 review, and Widmer was deeply critical of the relationships displayed in the same novel, finding them “thin, insufficiently developed, and tritely sentimental.”

This reading is in stark contrast to Malkki’s, who noted (in line with Le Guin’s own statements on the primary theme of her work) that Le Guin remained a believer in the “old-fashioned, monogamous union between man and woman – what we commonly know as ‘marriage’ – as an ideal state.” Malkki assessed Takver and Shevek’s relationship and noted that they have a good marriage, but not unrealistically so. They quarrel, they work hard, they live through difficult times. But their relationship holds together, holds them together, and creates an aura around them which others want to share.

What different viewpoints lead to such different readings of the same novel? For Widmer and Hyde, the commentary on marriage or romantic relationships was too superficial to merit further examination, but for Malkki, it was sufficient material for an entire conference paper. There were eight years between the publication of Widmer’s article and Malkki’s paper. Widmer is writing at the beginning of a trough in utopian scholarship, to which he alludes when opening his article with a quote from William Barrett that “the idea of utopia in all of its versions hardly inspires us anymore.”

Widmer is specifically reading utopias to search for the ways in which they exercise the social imagination and engage in constant change and reimagination. But Le Guin was not reimagining marriage, rather, she was being quite ‘old-fashioned’ and endorsing traditional monogamy as an ideal state. All three marriages are presented as epitomes of partnership, each partner giving to, taking from, and accepting the other equally. This may account for Widmer’s dismissal of relationships in The Dispossessed, because he is
seeking something radically new and different and he read the pairings as sentimental representations of the fundamental social unit he knew as marriage. It is interesting that Hyde cannot recognise these relationships as marriages, when Widmer dismisses them as being exactly that and Malkki reads them as idealised versions of a married couple. These multiple readings indicate that there is something more complex being developed in the novel.

Le Guin did something quite radical with the idea of marriage by jettisoning the formal institution, creating a situation where the only agreement which holds couples together is a *choice* each makes and a promise made privately. These partnerships create spaces of tranquillity in the lives of each person which are not paralleled elsewhere in either text. Shevek says of Oiie that at home he was less secretive, more open, reciprocating respect with his family, and a “free man.” It is this equality and acceptance which reflects again the theory of partnership the novels seek to communicate. For both Shevek and Estraven, their marriages come to pass in *spite* of their society and because both actively choose to be with the people they love – and they have come to love them through knowing and accepting them completely. If a partnership could be established by a promise made once and then taken for granted forever after, it could become a profoundly coercive institution, compromising the freedom of both individuals. The marriages in *The Left Hand of Darkness* and *The Dispossessed* communicate a utopian desire for a kind of partnership in which commitment is constantly reaffirmed, because each party is free to leave whenever they choose. This reading, however, is difficult to find articulated in primary source material of letters, reviews, and reactions. Malkki’s experience points to the reading above, but Widmer and Hyde’s readings indicate that Le Guin’s fictional marriages did not always successfully inculcate utopian desire in readers.

Finally, the presentation of sex in both novels empowers readings of partnership. The lack of a sexual episode between Genly and Estraven has been read as a “failure of nerve or imagination on Le Guin’s part.” Bishop speculated that it was an attempt to “at all costs preserve their [Genly and Estraven’s] story from the trap of sensationalism.” But there are both contextual reasons and reasons of story which explain this lack of nerve, and justify it as a strategic choice on the part of Le Guin. Presenting sex in science fiction was divisive and controversial during the 1960s. Debates about censorship of sex scenes and swear words are evident across letter columns and reviews in science fiction magazines of the time. Early reviewers reassured readers about the quality of *The Left Hand of Darkness* precisely because there was no sex scene in the novel. Miller stated that “this is, incidentally, in no sense a ‘sexsational’ book.” Del Rey made a point of emphasising that “there isn’t an overt scene of sex in the whole book that anyone could object to,” and that Le Guin is concerned with psychological elements, not “the rutting and gratification of an individual’s sexuality.”

Pearson’s contextual analysis, presented in 1998, argues that contemporary American culture, not just the literary traditions Le Guin was using, meant that a sexual consummation of the relationship between Genly and Estraven was “forbidden by more than just the romantic tradition. It has the whole weight of centuries of institutional heteronormativity against it, as well as America’s recent history of homophobia.” An overt sex scene in the context of the contemporary science fiction genre would have been problematic for Le Guin, particularly given a trend to read Estraven (rightly or wrongly) as masculine, and could have discouraged people from reading the novel.

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92 del Rey, "Reading Room: Book Reviews", 1969 (September), p.152.
94 Pearson, "The Queer as Traitor, the Traitor as Queer", 1998, p.82. She is, obviously, working from the assumption that Estraven is being read as male.
There are equally convincing reasons relating to the construction of the narrative which underpin the way that Le Guin presented sex as partnership. In *The Left Hand of Darkness*, the bond between the two protagonists is built from their differences, and to create a true and genuine partnership, the two had to fully recognise each other for what they were as whole beings. But the difference between Genly and Estraven is deeper than the physical manifestation of gender. The psychological makeup of each protagonist is profoundly different, and this is the difference in mental state which cannot be overcome by introducing a sexual aspect to their partnership. Genly’s thinking derives from a sexually motivated race; his friend/opponent [Estraven] thinking with the larger freedom (and some concomitant restrictions) of one to whom sex is a periodic facet of life, so that other matters can be considered without the continual surge of the gonads.

This consciousness is the most challenging aspect of *The Left Hand of Darkness*. While the partnership would not be possible without acknowledging and accepting the sexual tension between the two, the tension is more than just physical and so cannot be resolved through a physical act like sex.

Le Guin noted that the two races have very different experiences of sexuality, and reflected that because Gethenians “cannot have sexual intercourse unless both partners are willing… they would have less fear and guilt about sex than we tend to have.” The Gethenians have moved away from taboo to an ethical system which allows each member of the society to fulfil their needs. Genly comes from a society still caught in taboo and shame around sexuality, as evidenced by his feelings of suspicion and wariness towards Estraven throughout the book. Le Guin suggested in “Is Gender Necessary?” that this suspicion only abates once Genly finally overcomes his

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preconceptions about gender and sexuality, and he is only able to do so at the climax of the novel. It would be an illogical progression in Genly’s character to leap from misunderstanding and mistrusting Estraven to having sex with him. A sexual meeting at that point of the story and in the development of the characters would not only be insufficient to overcome the gap in their attitude and understanding of sexuality, but would also trivialise the mental and emotional processes involved in confronting and challenging culturally taught and enforced notions of ‘acceptable’ sex and love.

The philosophy of partnership Le Guin was exploring through both novels is based on interactions between people – through work, friendship, marriage, and sex. But a physical sexual interaction between Genly and Estraven is the least interesting way she could have furthered the construction of their partnership and is illogical in terms of character development, and given their wildly different cultural codings in relation to sex, such an encounter could have further alienated the protagonists from each other.

Critical literature regarding Genly’s experience grappling with his assumptions and cultural mores regarding sex does not provide conclusive evidence of utopian desire being educated, though it does show readers considering gender roles. While not part of the Anglosphere, Stanislaw Lem’s reading is interesting. He believed that the novel was psychologically unsound, because “gender changes should wreak havoc on relationships and personal identity.” The belief that regular physiological changes ought to also create psychological instability may appeal to a reader from a society which reinforces physical gender with cultural assumptions and conditioning from the moment of birth, but through the Gethenians, Le Guin was experimenting with humanity. By eliminating biological gender, she tried to find out if there were common features between men and women in core aspects such as “temperament, capacity, talent, [and] psychic

The Gethenians are not human, their culture is not human, and it certainly isn’t that of the United States during the 1960s. On Gethen, “when a Gethenian has to make love, he does make love, and everybody expects him to, and approves of it.”

She contrasted this with a frank evaluation of her cultural context in which people are not satisfied by sexual gratification without psychic involvement, and in fact, may be afraid of it, to judge by the tremendous variety of social, legal, and religious controls and sanctions exerted over it in all human societies.

Beyond sex, Lem’s reading of Le Guin’s work sheds further light on exactly the cultural preoccupation which Le Guin is attempting to highlight through imagining the Gethenians: peoples’ personalities, feelings, relationships, sexuality and mentality are all governed and affected by so much more than just their sex. Le Guin challenges biological essentialism through imagining what a person would be like if they had no gender at all. If a person was born that way, and grew up in a society which did not market toys, clothes, and books to children along strict gender lines, there is little reason why it would be psychologically distressing to be female one month and male the next. If neither gender is considered superior to the other as a result of physical strength or social influence, it would not be shameful or upsetting to be feminine rather than masculine. Lem may not have accepted this aspect of Le Guin’s utopianism, but his response demonstrates that readers did think carefully about gender’s mental manifestation.

Le Guin’s exploration of sex and partnership continued in The Dispossessed, paralleling elements of Estraven and Genly’s experience. The scene between Vea and Shevek in The Dispossessed is another example of Le Guin avoiding the protagonist’s engagement in sexual intercourse. As in The Left Hand of Darkness, underpinning the lack of

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102 Morris, Literature and Feminism, 1993, pp.1-2.
intercourse is an extreme gap in mentality towards sex and sexuality. Bucknall suggested that Vea is “an example of the type of woman who is created by Ioti ideas of female inferiority.” The reader sees this mismatch of attitude played out over 16 pages, in which Vea flirts with Shevek, while understanding herself as an object. The two eat lunch, but “Vea did not take charge of the ordering, making it clear that Shevek was in charge of her.” Later, during a walk, Shevek observes that Takver would classify Vea as a ‘body profiteer’, and that “she incarnated all the sexuality the Ioti repressed into their dreams.” Shevek says to Vea that she is dangerous because she knows “that in the eyes of men you are a thing, a thing owned, bought, and sold. And so you think only of tricking the owners, of getting revenge.” They see a play which jokes about sex, but never actually discusses sex or sexual acts. Given that he is paying for everything, Shevek begins to wonder if Vea is a prostitute – an occupation which does not exist on Anarres and is an entirely foreign concept to the Anarestiti.

That evening, Vea changes into formal wear for a party, which consists of a full length skirt and naked torso in contrast to earlier in the day when Shevek observed that her breasts were covered, as “Ioti women did not go with naked breasts in the street, reserving their nudity for its owners.” Once changed, Vea begins to question Shevek about relations between men and women on Anarres and the reader is privy to his utter confusion: “not a word about copulating had passed between them. Yet her dress, movements, tone – what were they but the most open invitation?” The whole interaction between Vea and Shevek finally climaxes when she takes him away from the party because of his drunkenness, and kisses him. He responds, believing that she is

104 Le Guin, The Dispossessed, 1975, p.179, my emphasis.
initiating sex between them - “he pulled her toward the bed, and she came, though she kept talking.” Vea’s ‘talking’ is a list of excuses about why he should ‘behave,’ offered as he continues to kiss and touch her: they have to go back to the party, she hasn’t taken her contraceptive, people will notice her disarranged clothing, she can’t trust her maid… Finally, she pushes Shevek away and his excitement at her resistance causes him to ejaculate on her dress. The reader sees Shevek’s earlier confusion repeated, as he stammers “I am – sorry – I thought you wanted –” but interestingly, Vea’s final expressed judgement on the whole episode is disgust, not at the near rape, but that she has to change her dress. The reasons for Shevek’s confusion are quite obvious from the start of their day together, as he himself identifies the primary issue: “he knew she was playing, but he knew too few rules of the game.” Unlike on Urras, on Anarres “sexually, anything goes between consenting adults or adolescents, and coyness is replaced with an open invitation to copulate.” There can be no ambiguity when rape occurs on Anarres, as each person openly expresses consent or rejection, rather than games, fashion, or excuses forming the basis for sexual relations, all of which are open to misinterpretation.

Just as she used the relationship between an alien and a human being in The Left Hand of Darkness to explore the mentality of guilt and shame about sex in the real world and to inspire utopian desire for social change in the reader, readers may have a parallel experience, in reading The Dispossessed, by observing the effect of a sex-shaming mentality on a woman and on the relationship between a man and a woman. The effect

in *The Dispossessed* is made stark by the contrast with several of Shevek’s relationships on Anarres. Early in the novel he meets a girl named Beshun, with whom he went out into the plain in the night, and there she gave him the freedom of the flesh. That was her gift, and he accepted it… [she] took him into the heart of sexuality, where there is no rancour and no ineptitude, where the two bodies striving to join each other annihilate the moment in their striving and transcend the self, and transcend time.\footnote{Le Guin, *The Dispossessed*, 1975, pp.49-50.}

The Annaresti mentality towards sexual relationships is demonstrated through this episode to be sex-positive, and open. In a scene which establishes their relationship, Takver and Shevek discuss the possibility of copulation. Initially both say they aren’t certain that they’re interested, and Takver then tries to explain that she doesn’t want to copulate with Shevek, nor anyone else.\footnote{Le Guin, *The Dispossessed*, 1975, p.153.} As they continue to talk, Takver further explains what she needs – “‘I need the bond,’ she said. ‘The real one. Body and mind and all the years of life. Nothing else. Nothing less.’”\footnote{Le Guin, *The Dispossessed*, 1975, p.154.} Only after both commit to this bond (the ‘marriage’ discussed above), do they join sexually. Their partnership is enhanced by sex – “their sexual hunger persisted as passionate delight, their desire for communion was daily renewed because it was daily fulfilled”\footnote{Le Guin, *The Dispossessed*, 1975, p.156.} – but this enhancement and harmony is the result of a partnership built on honesty and a shared psychological attitude towards sex. Suvin read the relationship between Takver and Shevek as “a mini-utopia.”\footnote{Darko Suvin, “Cognition, Freedom, and *The Dispossessed* as a Classic”, in Sylvia Kelso (ed.), *Ursula K. Le Guin*, Vashon Island, Paradoxa, 2008, p.39.}

This theme is repeated when Shevek and Bedap have sex after a long pause in their friendship

It had to be discussed, because Shevek was pretty definitely heterosexual and Bedap pretty definitely homosexual; the pleasure of it would be mostly for Bedap. Shevek was perfectly willing, however, to reconfirm the old friendship; and when he saw that the sexual element of it meant a great deal to Bedap, was, to him, a true consummation,
then he took the lead, and with considerable tenderness and obstinacy made sure that
Bedap spent the night with him again.\textsuperscript{124}

Later in the novel, Le Guin revealed that the sexual element to their relationship did not
last, but their partnership and friendship grows because of the reconfirmed trust between
the two.\textsuperscript{125} Le Guin invited her readers to acknowledge the profound good that sex \textit{can}
do for relationships and interactions between people. But she qualified this with a belief
that sex between people with profoundly different mental attitudes towards sexuality
should be avoided and is more likely to be harmful to all parties concerned. Jameson’s
appraisal that “far from eliminating sex… Gethenian biology has the result of
eliminating sexual repression”\textsuperscript{126} demonstrates that readers were able to access part of
Le Guin’s utopian philosophy of partnership through her presentation of sex. However,
as Buckley’s glib claim that “obliquely, Mrs. LeGuin [sic] seems to be saying that
without sex there would be no wars, only skirmishes, but that all life and no sex makes
dull toil”\textsuperscript{127} shows, not all readers interpreted the sexual relationships in the novels in
this way.

Le Guin’s ideas on partnership are accessed by readers across her presentation of
sexuality and gender in four key areas: work, friendship, marriage, and sex. Readings
clearly showed utopian desire being educated through her emphasis on equality of work
ability regardless of gender; the need for friendships to evolve through honesty and
acceptance of an individual as a whole and complete individual (including and
especially their gender and sexuality); freedom for individuals to commit to each other
for as long as they are willing, rather than being tied through obligations; and that
psychological aspects of identity and sexuality can be wildly different, and that these

\textsuperscript{124} Le Guin, \textit{The Dispossessed}, 1975, p.147.
\textsuperscript{125} Le Guin, \textit{The Dispossessed}, 1975, p.148.
\textsuperscript{126} Fredric Jameson, "World-Reduction in Le Guin: The Emergence of Utopian Narrative", in Harold
\textit{Science Fiction Studies} (1975), p.64.
\textsuperscript{127} Buckley, "Fantasy Review", 1970 (June), p.31.
tensions are created through culture and resolved through clear communication, not sexual contact. The importance of equality, honesty, and acceptance as a basis for partnership resonated strongly with parts of the audience, facilitating an experience which educated utopian desire. Other readers did not experience the novels in the same way, sometimes because of the personal and social contexts in which they were reading the novels. In some cases, accessing the utopian elements of each novel was impeded by choices in style or content made by Le Guin.

The use of pronouns in *The Left Hand of Darkness* was particularly controversial. Le Guin’s choice to use the masculine pronoun for her androgyynes impacted on the reader’s experience of that race. The implications for readers are demonstrated in reactions which speculate about heteronormativity and a lack of commitment to feminism. Bittner claimed that debates on the quality of the novel have all hinged on “Gethenian androgyny and ambisexuality, and whether Le Guin succeeded in creating really androgynous aliens or just thinly disguised males.”¹²⁸ Reactions to the masculine pronoun give key insights into reading *The Left Hand of Darkness* as a utopian novel with regards to gender, sexuality, and feminism.

Readings that strongly object to the use of the masculine pronoun for the androgynous Gethenians claim that this choice impels the readers to experience Gethenian characters as male. Panshin objected that the “hermaphrodites, seen only in public function, eventually seem purely male, partially because she [Le Guin] chooses to always call them ‘he’.”¹²⁹ Joanna Russ and other feminists,¹³⁰ have similar objections and found the Gethenians “wholly masculine in behaviour, dress, and speech.”¹³¹ But this reading of

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¹²⁸ Bittner, "A Survey of Le Guin Criticism", 1979, p.34.
the novel is not universal, and one key alternative reading came from Buckley, who argued that

the two first person narrators are not differentiated sufficiently; both seem *female*. In the case of the Envoy, this is quite serious and indicates that the author has not distanced herself adequately from her character.\(^{132}\)

Buckley’s reading is a neat rebuttal to any attempt to universalise the experience of the feminist critics reading Gethenians as male by virtue of the masculine pronoun. Further, Jameson suggested that reading Gethenians as sexless or male demonstrated the “limits imposed by the stereotypes of gender on their own imaginations.”\(^{133}\) Hayles’ reading demonstrated that for some, regardless of the pronoun, androgyny was a powerful technique which gave access to the philosophy of partnership and allowed readers to “see the world whole.”\(^{134}\) Reducing this reading to the context of the twentieth century may have been possible, were it not for Graham Sleight’s 2008 review. There is some evidence that later readers do not have the same difficulty with the male pronoun, reflected in a 2010 review by Sam Jordison who was “surprised to read afterwards that some had accused her [Le Guin] of using protagonists who were too ‘male’.”\(^{135}\) Clearly the problem of the male pronoun did not force all readers to experience the Gethenians, Estraven in particular, as male.

Though not a universal experience, reading the Gethenians as male is a significant and recurring criticism of the presentation of gender by Le Guin. The primary explanation of this criticism has been that reading the androgynes as male was not necessarily a product of Le Guin’s authorial decisions, but a reflection of an internalised patriarchy.

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\(^{132}\) Buckley, "Fantasy Review", 1970 (June), p.31. My emphasis.

\(^{133}\) Jameson, "World Reduction in Le Guin", 1986, p.64.


The patriarchal mindset may have been internalised by Genly himself, a result of “coming from a society where ‘he’ is the default,” which then turns him into an unreliable narrator. Alternatively, the projection of masculinity onto androgynous beings might show “as much about the audience reading it as it does Ursula Le Guin – you can’t force them to think differently.” Le Guin argued that “readers are reacting to their own culturally conditioned assumptions that a woman could not be prime minister, or pull a loaded sled across the ice and that trousers are an inherently masculine form of clothing.” The way the reader reacts to the pronoun, and interprets the author’s intention, presents insight into the experience and biases of that reader and their context. Some suggested Le Guin should have simply invented a neutral pronoun, and she responded to the idea in her essay “Is Gender Necessary?” with the assertion “I utterly refuse to mangle English by inventing a pronoun for ‘he/she.’ ‘He’ is the generic pronoun, damn it, in English.” Using masculine pronouns may also have kept the book accessible to a broad audience.

In 1976, Le Guin argued that her target audience was men who could identify with Genly, and therefore take part in his emotional and intellectual journey through the book. She feared these readers would “loathe” the book… but a male lead character, and ‘a rather stupid and slightly bigoted’ male character would be an easier entry point for those readers who might otherwise have been alienated from participating being changed by the experience. Using ‘he’ was a deliberate attempt to engage heterosexual males with a text about gender identity, and may well have been successful in educating these readers in a utopian desire to change relations between men and

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137 Jordison, 'Back to the Hugos: The Left Hand of Darkness by Ursula K. Le Guin'.  
138 Call, "Postmodern Anarchism", 2007, p.95.  
139 In White, Dancing with Dragons, 1999, pp.47-48. White is referring to a letter written by Le Guin to the editor of SF Commentary several months after Lem’s review and presumably published unfortunately she gives no citation.  
140 Le Guin, "Is Gender Necessary? (Redux)", 1989, p.15.  
141 Le Guin, "Is Gender Necessary? (Redux)", 1989, p.15.  
women, given the responses to the book outlined above. A secondary explanation, therefore, for the negative reactions by feminist critics might be that their frustration with the use of the male pronoun stemmed from their more nuanced understanding of issues around gender and sexuality. Le Guin’s target audience needed an experience which would promote empathy and serve as a ‘beginner’s course’.

When she reflected on The Left Hand of Darkness again, Le Guin argued that her attempt to find “metaphors for what our language has no words for as yet”\(^\text{143}\) was stymied by her lack of experience with feminism and the obstacles created by that very absence of words. In a 2001 interview, Le Guin noted that

feminism happened between the publication of The Left Hand of Darkness and the later books. A lot happened after 1968. And I learned a lot. I was laboriously groping for things in Left Hand that I wouldn’t have to grope for now… the process of groping is part of the book… it’s a straining towards understanding.\(^\text{144}\)

She did transpose a chapter of The Left Hand of Darkness from the male pronoun to the female pronoun for the 25\(^\text{th}\) Anniversary edition, “so people could see what an enormous difference it makes. The pronoun is going to make the readers see certain things and feel certain things.”\(^\text{145}\) While the choice of pronoun created a barrier for some readers some of the time, this could have been overcome if Le Guin had shown more of the ‘female’ components of Gethenian life\(^\text{146}\) to contrast them with occupations which dominate the novel, such as politics or manual labour, which certain readers found stereotypically masculine.

The power of language continued to be emphasised throughout feminist science fiction criticism of Le Guin’s work. Russ highlighted in her review of The Dispossessed the use

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\(^{143}\) Le Guin, "Is Gender Necessary? (Redux)", 1989, p.9.


of the term ‘brother’ for all Anarresti, regardless of gender. Le Guin devised an Anarresti word, *ammar*, which Russ believed could easily have been made genderless\(^{147}\) but this is a misreading by Russ, as Le Guin explicitly translates it to mean brother/sister.\(^{148}\) The critiques of Russ and other feminists caused “Le Guin to question her own attitudes and opinions and has resulted in a change of heart and political orientation.”\(^{149}\) This encompassed a change in attitude from 1970 when she felt the feminist movement too general, too focused on ranting, anti-male, and biased to the middle classes to stating in 1977 that she thought feminism and feminist science fiction was great, and accepted the anger and anti-male rhetoric of some feminists because “some of these things have to be said just for the sake of sheer justice.”\(^{150}\)

Though the choice to refer to the Gethenians as ‘he’ throughout *The Left Hand of Darkness* was problematic, it was the result of Le Guin’s evolving understanding of feminism and the power language has to frame experience of the reader, as well as the need of women to have their experience championed. Simone de Beauvoir argued in her introduction to *The Second Sex* (1949) that

> man represents both the positive and the neutral, as is indicated by the common use of *man* to designate human beings in general; whereas woman represents only the negative, defined by limiting criteria, without reciprocity.\(^{151}\)

Feminist readers expected Le Guin to have already embraced de Beauvoir’s idea that heterosexual masculinity defines a norm, and everything else is a defined by its difference to, perversion of, or lack of this norm – and that, through her androgynous aliens, she would attempt to subvert male hegemony. Instead, Le Guin accepted masculinity as neutral in the cause of making the work accessible to the socially

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\(^{149}\) White, *Dancing with Dragons*, 1999, p.3.
dominant group. The pronoun use does not force readers to think about the characters in a particular way, as each reading is built both from the text itself and from the reader’s experience and assumptions. The importance of other phrases in both novels should not be overlooked - the sentence “The king was pregnant”\textsuperscript{152} was extremely important to Maria Bustillos’ reading. Le Guin’s novels may have assisted in opening the general science fiction audience to feminism and to experimenting with new pronouns,\textsuperscript{153} though the discourse on gender and sexuality had been evolving within the genre for some time before Le Guin’s two novels.

Some readers found that the use of a masculine pronoun was effective in subverting the dominant heterosexual narrative. James’ history of science fiction claims that \textit{The Left Hand of Darkness} is “one of the very first serious analyses of gender to be attempted in sf.”\textsuperscript{154} James’ reading suggests that the subversion which Le Guin does engage in through her analysis of gender is the subversion of normalised heterosexuality. Bucknall believed that “homosexuality is to all intents and purposes ruled out… although there is something called perversion,”\textsuperscript{155} a pervert on Gethen being a person who is continually gendered. Pearson stated that the fact that Estraven must \textit{kemmer} as female in response to Genly’s masculine presence is evidence for Le Guin’s heteronormative worldview. A fair response to this accusation might be that it’s the only viable biological system Le Guin could create, in order to ensure that Gethenians could reproduce. The later short story “Coming of Age in Karhide” made it clear that the sexual urges of Gethenians are not restricted to heterosexual encounters.\textsuperscript{156} Pearson extrapolated from her own reading of Estraven as an effeminate male rather than an authentic female once he had

\textsuperscript{154} James, \textit{Science Fiction in the Twentieth Century}, 1994, p.185.
that sexual contact between two men would have been taboo in the contemporary context and an act restricted to sexual perverts.

Le Guin uses notions of perversion to subvert heteronormativity. Genly internalises the sexual mentality of the Gethenians, eventually seeing “non-androgynes like himself as ‘perverts,’” and thinks of “all of them in rut, in kemmer.” When ‘normal’ humans are made perverse, and the perverse made the norm for the main character, the audience is able to access a profound estrangement from their reality. Pearson’s reading reflects how even experiencing Estraven as male can result in education in utopian desire. Le Guin was experimenting to see how living on an androgynous world would affect a heterosexual human, and what she found was not sublimated homosexual desire but a sublimated androgyny – a basic humanity fundamental to all. Pearson’s reading shows that some readers may have experienced, through Genly, what it would be like to have something fundamental and natural to your identity, alienated and made ‘perverse’ because it is not part of the experience or identity of the majority.

Ketterer read the Gethenians as “much less prone to the dualistic perception that conceivably is related to the permanent male/female split that characterizes most other forms of humanity.” This was what Le Guin was seeking – the shared humanity or the existing androgyny within each of us – and it captured the imagination of a diverse group of readers. Genly internalised the Gethenian androgyny as a result of the culture and gender shock he suffers. As his experiences enable him to break through the barriers he has erected between himself and the Gethenians, he becomes more patient,
accepting, capable of reciprocating love, less rationalist, less dependent on the certainty of his beliefs.\textsuperscript{164}

Genly's role as the primary narrator means that the readers experience this alongside Genly. The link between androgyny and subverting heteronormativity was drawn by Koper which asked “what does one do with androgynous Gethenians? How does one react to a pair of homosexuals kissing, flamboyantly, on a street corner?”\textsuperscript{165} Rather than using a sex scene to challenge ideas about homosexuality as a perversion, Le Guin attempted to make heterosexuality and cis-genderedness\textsuperscript{166} strange for the reader, and to turn the ‘normal’ qualities into a perversion. This technique is effective because “most people encounter their own personalities far more powerfully as sexual entities than as intellectual entities,”\textsuperscript{167} and Genly's identity is profoundly tested by the strangeness he encounters in his interactions with the Gethenians,\textsuperscript{168} and through him, so too the reader’s identity. The pressure exerted on this heterosexual male narrator mirrors that of the pressures others experience due to culturally and socially constructed sexual and gender roles.\textsuperscript{169} The “audience experiences… confusion, fragmentation, and alienation”\textsuperscript{170} along with Genly. The utopian desire Le Guin communicated was to learn to “celebrate more familiar types of national, racial, and especially sexual difference in our own world.”\textsuperscript{171} This reading is not difficult to find in the primary source material - Sarah LeFanu noted that while she originally criticised the novel because she thought that Ursula Le Guin didn’t go far enough in challenging the heterosexual status quo; now I see the envoy Genly Ai’s hesitations and confusions when confronted by

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\textsuperscript{164} Cummins, Understanding Ursula K. Le Guin, 1990, p.79.
\textsuperscript{166} Cis-gendered individuals are those whose physical gender matches their personal gender identity.
\textsuperscript{167} Koper, "Science and Rhetoric", 1979, p.80.
\textsuperscript{168} Bernard Selinger, Le Guin and Identity in Contemporary Fiction, Ann Arbor, UMI Research Press, 1988, p.64.
\textsuperscript{169} Koper, "Science and Rhetoric", 1979, p.80.
\textsuperscript{170} Cummins, Understanding Ursula K. Le Guin, 1990, p.78.
\textsuperscript{171} Peel, "Reading piebald patterns in Le Guin's The Left Hand of Darkness", 1999, p.32.
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men who seem to him unnervingly feminine as a prescient exploration of ideas about masculinity.\textsuperscript{172}

Through reversing the heterosexual male as the norm to become the exception or the negative, and highlighting common human traits through her androgynes, Le Guin provided the opportunity for her readers to reflect on the situation of minorities in the real world, and to change their behaviour based on that experience. In this reality, the use of the masculine pronoun served to defamiliarise and complicate heterosexual relationships, and was one way of opening up this experience for readers.

Readings responding to \textit{The Left Hand of Darkness} and \textit{The Dispossessed} around the three key themes of gender, sexuality, and feminism revealed that while the texts themselves are accepted as attempting to address gender, sexuality, and feminism, the ways these issues manifest in the texts can be problematic for some readers and do not produce a universal experience. Some readers paid attention to different aspects of Le Guin’s philosophy of partnership, some learned about the experience of minorities, and some did not have these experiences at all whilst reading either text.

Issues within both novels reflect a philosophy of partnership, which is the basis for Le Guin’s beliefs about what a ‘more perfect’ version of gender, sexuality, and feminism would be predicated on, including equality, honesty and acceptance, free commitment, active choice, and the importance of mutual acceptance of this philosophy for the partnership to function. Le Guin’s use of a masculine pronoun was controversial, but may have had positive impacts in making accessible the themes and narrative for readers unfamiliar with or unconvinced by feminism, or promoted empathy for minorities.

The Left Hand of Darkness resulted in the strongest reactions regarding gender and sexual relations, despite the radically altered relationships in The Dispossessed. This is perhaps because the reader learns in tandem with Genly, whose worldview is closer to that of the reader. Because the “deliberate variation of human sexuality can help us to see the realities of our own sexual situation more clearly, and to feel them more deeply, than any non-imaginative work of sociology or ‘realistic’ fiction can,” Genly’s experience helped others to understand that sexual desire does not have to underwrite every human interaction, activity, or social role. The very idea of inherent sex roles was being powerfully critiqued and a theory of gender interdependence and mutual cooperation was proposed through Le Guin’s philosophy of partnership in both novels.

The philosophy of partnership is reflected in readings emphasising how “sexual relations are a matter of personal choice; to attempt to create laws to restrict or regulate these relations is not only futile, but harmful.” The philosophy is also evident in readings which emphasise how cultures of The Left Hand of Darkness and The Dispossessed dispensed with the dualisms which alienate humans from each other, avoided repetitive ‘masculine’ conflicts, and embraced homosexuality, because they are societies predicated on “human solidarity.”

180 Pearson, "The Queer as Traitor, the Traitor as Queer", 1998, p.89.
The utopian desires evident in these readings are extremely diverse, though all broadly relate to the need to overcome reliance on sex and gender for social rules and roles, given that this information results in alienation from others and a denial of affinity between people.\textsuperscript{183} The reactions cannot be clearly grouped by time, context, or gender – they are highly individualised. The indicate though that, at least for some readers, both *The Left Hand of Darkness* and *The Dispossessed* successfully communicated Le Guin’s utopianism to a wide range of people and compelled these readers to reassess their society and relationships within that society.

\textsuperscript{182} Koper, "Science and Rhetoric", 1979, p.71.
Chapter Four

Power, Revolution, and Freedom: The political imagination in Le Guin’s utopias

Utopian novels have been strongly linked to calls for political change, not just to elevating the social consciousness of the reader. Le Guin’s *The Left Hand of Darkness* and *The Dispossessed* are utopian novels which use political critique, tropes of political science fiction, and expand Le Guin’s philosophy of partnership to educate utopian desire in readers. This chapter will situate the books in context, examine the politics evident in each book, and investigate readings of each text to determine the ways in which the novels were received as commenting on political aspirations.

While feminist concerns outlined in Chapter Three are deeply political, during this period in her writing Le Guin was overtly concerned with examining the political structures which create the world we live in, indeed, Le Guin creates imaginary alternative political structures in *The Dispossessed* precisely to speculate on how humanity could change itself through changing politics. Feminist concerns were examined in depth in the previous chapter, and are not the primary focus of this one. Instead, the focus will be on the political structures Le Guin imagines in order to create a utopia. The traditions of the utopian novel are discussed in depth in Chapter Two, but the overtly political nature of utopian novels is yet to be explored. There are direct links between the success of the capitalist system and the utopian imagination in the mid-twentieth century,¹ and utopian novels were used to undermine the hegemony of capitalism by presenting worlds organised around totally different principles.² Given

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that the rationale of the economic system frames the structure of the political system, critiquing economic assumptions develops a deeply political aspect within utopian novels. Twentieth century utopian novels are written in “opposition to what is,”
 imaging a situation in which humanity is “released from the multiple determinisms (economic, political, social) of history.”
 Utopian and dystopian novels depend on a connection with the real world to be politically effective,
 as it is through resistance to this reality
 that utopian novels stimulate the “most basic impulse underlying political change:”
 imagining ways to change the status quo. There are a wide array of political issues utopian novels engage with – underlying structures and assumptions of contemporary society, the manifestation of hidden social problems, and the effect of external forces (like technology and nature) on the social system – and as a result they can be powerful texts to educate utopian desire on political issues.

Within science fiction, there is also a strong political dimension which is concomitant with world creation. Science fiction, much like utopian fiction, is caught up with responding to and critiquing its present,
 to the extent that

to speak of ‘political science fiction’ is almost to commit a tautology, for I would argue that there is very little science fiction, perhaps even that there is no good science fiction at all, that is not to some degree political.

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The political nature of science fiction stems from authors’ processes of world creation, which examines the world, tweaks it, and then invites the reader to compare the real and imagined worlds. This process can open difficult or controversial subjects to free private expression and reflection, even in repressive contexts such as the Soviet Union or the McCarthy period in the United States, by defamiliarising situations which seem natural or inevitable. Not only does science fiction allow readers to expand their worldview, but it can also allow “political scientists to expand their thinking about the ways that different cultures develop different politics… such thought experiments can stretch the imagination.” Science fiction novels facilitate critical reflection by readers on their socio-political context, and when combined with an author’s utopianism can create exceptionally powerful texts.

Le Guin’s personal commitment to political activism is evidenced by her non-fiction writing. The author’s dissatisfaction with her context, and with the genre of science fiction itself, was manifested in her 1975 essay “American SF and the Other.” She accused American science fiction of presenting ‘un-American’ worlds, which endorsed “a permanent hierarchy of superiors and inferiors, with rich, ambitious, aggressive, males at the top, then a great gap, and then at the bottom the poor, the uneducated, the faceless masses, and all the women.” These worlds were regressive according to Le Guin, and labelling them ‘un-American’ was likely a quite deliberate ploy to encourage readers to reflect on how the worlds she referred to violated the ‘American Creed’. Broadly, American political values are committed to “liberty, equality, individualism,

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12 Clyde Wilcox, "Governing the Alien Nation: The Comparative Politics of Extraterrestrials", in Donald M. Hassler and Clyde Wilcox (eds), Political Science Fiction, Colombia, University of South Carolina Press, 1997, p.171.
democracy, and the rule of law under a constitution.”¹⁴ This ‘creed’, while persistent, is not a cohesive ideology, but instead “a complex and amorphous amalgam of goals and values.”¹⁵ There is cognitive dissonance between this ‘creed’ and the lived reality of some Americans. Authors of science fiction utopias in the 1970s, especially Dorothy Bryant, Marge Piercy, and Samuel Delany, drew attention to the disconnection between the ‘American Creed’ and the situation of “marginalised communities within American society.”¹⁶ The groups with whom these authors were concerned¹⁷ were at the bottom of a hierarchy and were not included in the creed of liberty and equality. In her essay, Le Guin called for other authors to stop idealising “the age of Queen Victoria, and [to start] thinking about the future,”¹⁸ especially in the presentation of women and “the cultural and the racial Other.”¹⁹ This privileging of rich, ambitious males at the expense of the Other mirrored the consequences of capitalism in the real world, and is at odds with a creed of equality and liberty. This is a useful illumination of the distinction between political science fiction and utopian novels. Both are fundamentally connected to the contemporary world, but utopian novels have a vision for positive change. This vision is not necessary to write good political science fiction, which may simply reflect the world as it is, dominated by wealthy males. Le Guin’s call to action is not just a call for greater experimentation and creativity from her peers, but also a call for greater utopianism from science fiction writers.

There is good evidence that Le Guin transferred her political activism to her fiction writing. She set out to write The Dispossessed with a focus on being political and

¹⁷ Briefly, women and African Americans.
informing her writing with political theory. In her interview with Jonathan Ward, she explained:

Actually I’m not reading science now. I’m off on another track because of my latest book *The Dispossessed*. I think it is what you’d have to call a utopia; an ambiguous utopia. It’s an anarchist novel, so I’ve been reading the anarchists and the Marxists and so on.20

In particular, Le Guin drew on the writing of Kropotkin21 and Bakunin22 to inform her construction of Anarres. Her ability to link an ethical theory of partnership with politics owes much to Kropotkin’s work.23 It is her most explicitly political work of fiction, and her clearest attempt to influence readers through her presentation of political systems.

Thus far, I have argued that both the utopian and science fiction traditions are easily mobilised to communicate political opinions and desires. Le Guin herself is deeply politically conscious, and had no qualms about using her fiction to communicate her political perspectives. The rest of this chapter will analyse reactions to *The Left Hand of Darkness* and *The Dispossessed* to understand what utopian desires are expressed by readers as a consequence of their experience with the two texts. Reader reactions will first be used to provide evidence that readers understood that Le Guin was scrutinizing the political realities of the time and place in which she was writing, which included particularly strong impressions about race and decentralisation. Then I will argue that Le Guin’s philosophy of partnership further manifests in readings focused on politics, based on responses discussing on social contracts, violence, war, economics, and freedom.

Le Guin’s work was read by contemporaries and by later commentators as a response to political inequalities. The popularity of her novels was attributed partially to her “exploration of political issues that have developed particular urgency over the last ten years… and from the experience of an alienating and technologically bloated economic system.”

The Dispossessed was read as attempting to draw on and reinvigorate the desire of 1960s radicalism to change society, even though this radicalism had failed to disrupt or overthrow the status quo. When Chan reflected on the legacy of science fiction utopias in 2006, he argued that utopian novels from the 1970s were attempts to help the reader understand that “social forces, can, through struggle, be changed.” These readings demonstrate that Le Guin, who was politically aware herself, successfully translated that awareness into her fiction.

Further evidence that The Left Hand of Darkness and The Dispossessed are read as political novels is demonstrated by readers drawing parallels between reality and the imagined worlds. Readers believed that their society was being presented in each novel, and acknowledged the way Le Guin ‘played’ with her own history or elements of society to construct Gethen and Anarres. Klein read the two worlds in The Dispossessed as Urras “much resembling America today and the other [Anarres] having several traits in common with present-day China or perhaps the Israel of the great dream.” The most common interpretation of The Dispossessed, throughout the 1970s, was that it reflected the ideological and social failings of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and the United States of America. In his review, Edwards stated that

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It is almost impossible to talk about this novel except in terms of the discussion on political and power systems that runs through its pages. This is what matters most in the book: Ms Le Guin’s crushing critique of our capitalist, ‘propertarian’ society (and, equally, of the state-dominated ‘communist’ nations). I say ‘our’ society, for it is impossible not to see the chief nations of Urras, A-Io and Thu as slightly distorted versions of the USA and USSR.  

Russ identified the worlds as follows: “Urras is a stand-in for Earth… Ben-bili is the Third World, Thu is the Soviet Union, A-Io the Western Democracies.” Urbancowicz broadly agreed through specifying Ben-bili as the novel’s Vietnam. The Left Hand of Darkness was also linked with political systems present in the contemporary world, and read as an “attempt to imagine something like a West which would never have known capitalism.” Recalling Le Guin’s distaste for allegories, I resist arguing that Le Guin intentionally wrote parallels of countries important in her context. But those texts are good evidence that both novels inspired readers to reflect on the real world and the political system in which they were living.

The presentation of race is of particular significance for some readers. Chan argued that Le Guin introduced a new sensibility into science fiction, which facilitated the expansion of both the science fiction and utopian traditions to accommodate the Other through disrupting “the signification of race.” By disconnecting racial signifiers (skin colour, language) from the racial signified (racial identities), Le Guin and other authors of utopian novels throughout the 1970s created worlds in which the default

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33 See Chapter One, p.7 of this thesis.
assumption was that all people were equal, because skin colour and other racial signifiers were no longer endowed with significant meaning. Many readers do not notice that Le Guin wove characters of colour throughout her novels and that many of her protagonists, including Genly and Estraven, are people of colour, as she does not labour descriptions of skin colour or other features. For some readers, these details were profoundly important, including Andrea Hairston who said in an interview that Le Guin’s works made her feel empowered, when “too much else denies who I am or who I could imagine myself to be.” The books allow readers to imagine a world with greater equality and fewer snap judgements made about individuals based on racial signifiers, and this may have helped to motivate readers to contribute to making change happen.

Many readers responded to Le Guin’s presentation of anarchism as a system of social organisation. Her personal interest in anarchism was noted several times in reviews and analyses, and anarchist theory has been applied to her theories of gender by later readers. Readers of *The Left Hand of Darkness* found that the androgynes subverted the notion of gender to the point that gender identity became purely individualised, and others found that Gethen was a particularly female version of anarchism, founded on consensus decision making, passivity, laissez-faire, and the pastoral aesthetic. These retrospective readings are clearly influenced by reading *The Dispossessed* and Le Guin’s later, more explicitly feminist, work. They show, however, that *The Left Hand of Darkness* can be read as educating utopian desire for a social system which respects an

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individual’s gender identity and the potential for that identity to be fluid and changeable.

Anarchism is generally read as a positive development for the freedom of individuals living with each other. Readers noted the lack of institutional oppositional categories as "class has done to class, and nation has done to nation" as a positive consequence of anarchism, as well as its "‘pure’ culture – no money, property, taxes, or government." The imagined worlds in *The Dispossessed* were more successful at dealing with politics than *The Left Hand of Darkness* from the perspective of most readers, and Anarres was received as a “nicely imagined collectivist and anarchist utopia” by multiple readers. Moylan read Anarres as “a non-authoritarian communist utopia,” Easterbrook termed it “anarcho-syndicalist,” and Davis’ opinion was that Anarres was a communist or socialist utopia. The decentralisation characteristic of anarchism was particularly appealing to some readers, who emphasised that the novel imagined “a society largely without formal government in which education and social sanctions regulate behaviour,” Readers accepted Anarres as a decentralised society and labelled it a utopia.

There were readers who remained unconvinced that Le Guin’s anarchist moon showed more desirable social and political relationships. George Turner considered *The* 

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Dispossessed with a Melbourne science fiction discussion group ‘Nova Mob’. While Turner originally felt that The Dispossessed was a successful political novel “if only because so much hinges on the detailed working of the non-authoritarian system that one has the feeling of involvement in a political argument,” the group “condemned it for political naivety.” This dissatisfaction with the political system shown in The Dispossessed still reflects some success for Le Guin, as the readers did engage in critical reflection on the political system reflected in the text. It also demonstrates that the anarchist elements of the novel were not sufficient for all readers to experience a utopian desire and to transfer that experience to change in the real world.

Le Guin communicated a particular utopian vision through her imagined political systems and power relationships, which relates strongly to the philosophy of partnership discussed in Chapter Three. Her political theory was concerned with the relationship between the individual and society, and her utopian vision reflected across readings focusing on religion, social contracts, violence, war, economics, and freedom. All of these readings coalesce around the notion that coercion of the individual by institutions should be minimised, even eliminated. Le Guin’s philosophy of partnership is highly relevant to her presentation of politics. Members of her societies need to commit to maintaining the political structure which offers them personal freedom and equality, but this commitment is a partnership constructed through a promise that each individual in the society makes to each other, not coercively imposed by institutions. Individuals must actively maintain their mutual commitment to radical freedom and respect the freedom of others.

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Two readings emphasised encountering a particular political theory while reading *The Dispossessed*. Turner’s 1975 reaction to the book highlighted Le Guin’s ‘real’ theme as “the conflict between man the individual and man the group member,” and Urbanowicz, in a 1978 essay, argued that Le Guin privileged “the idea that the personal and political growth of the individual must not only be compatible with but also complementary to each other.” These two readings both relate strongly to the philosophy of partnership which was reflected in reactions to the presentation of friendship and marriage. The ability to mediate the relationship between individual rights, and an individual’s responsibilities as a group member depended on respect for the equality of each member of the group, cooperation between all, and every individual choosing to commit to the collective. Easterbrook suggested that Le Guin’s world did not resolve this tension between the needs of the individual and their duty to the community, arguing that Anarres goes too far in privileging the needs of the group, to the point that its “heterophobia oppresses any divergence from the group consensus.”

One particularly poignant moment in *The Dispossessed* illustrates this, as Shevek tried to reconcile the contradiction whereby

> Society was not against them. It was for them; with them; it was them. But he had given up his book, and his love, and his child. How much can a man be asked to give up?

Easterbrook’s reading highlights a valid concern in balancing social rights and responsibilities. Nevertheless, it is the very problems with Anarres which educate the utopian desire of readers effectively, to ensure that the needs of the individual are not tyrannised by the needs of the majority in the same way as Shevek’s needs were subsumed.

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The Dispossessed has had the most impact in influencing readers to reconsider the ways in which people relate to each other, and to broader social structures. Reader responses particularly engaged with the impact of those structures on individuals, and the development of their political consciousness. Le Guin’s philosophy of partnership strikes a balance between the need to create a stable society and the need for individual freedom, and readers who access the philosophy of partnership through the political and social relationships in the two texts examine how their own society coerces them through institutions.

Evidence of readers’ engagement with Le Guin’s belief in a non-coercive political system is manifested in their reading of particular political ideas in the books. Religion is one core issue. In The Left Hand of Darkness, Le Guin presented the Handdara as what Barbour saw as “a religion of considerable profundity.”60 He drew connections between Handdara and Taoism, because Handdara “is a religion without institution, without priests, without hierarchy, without vows, without creed.”61 Le Guin’s presentation of religion across the two books was consistently grounded in a lack of formality, an absence of the institution. In The Dispossessed, the Urrasti doctor Kimoe can only conceive of religion as an established institution:

‘There’s no religion on Anarres.’
‘No religion? Are we stones, on Anarres?’ [said Shevek]
‘I mean established religion – churches, creeds – ‘ Kimoe flustered easily.62

Shevek tried to explain that the Modes that govern Anarresti consciousness are based on the natural capacities of the mind, and all humans have a religious capacity. He marvels that the Urrasti would believe the Anarresti “were cut off from the profoundest

61 Barbour, "Wholeness and Balance”, 1986, p.27.
relationship man has with the cosmos” and noted how restricted and bigoted Urrasti thinking was, suggesting that institutions so frame their consciousness that that they can “admit no religion outside the churches, just as [they] admit no morality outside the laws.” Due to the lack of a formal religion, the ‘religious mode’ on Anarres is presented as an attitude rather than a set of practices and rituals. Gimar, a female colleague of Shevek sings a song without understanding the lyrics or story behind it, simply because a parent had taught her, and he observes that unquestioning acceptance seems like religion. Gimar does not understand, simply replying “you and your fancy book-words.” In a contrasting episode, Bedap explains to Shevek how Anarres has stagnated and that this stagnation is reflected in education which has become ‘rigid, moralistic, authoritarian. Kids learn to parrot Odo’s words as if they were laws – the ultimate blasphemy!” Mimicry without understanding is feared by the Anarresti because it prevents critical reflection on the concepts being communicated. For Barbour, these incidents facilitate the defamiliarisation of religious attitudes and assumptions, in order to help the reader question organised religion in their own world. While Le Guin believes there must be space for religious ideas and sentiment in a society – she embraced spirituality in both imagined worlds – she argues that spirituality or other philosophical beliefs should not become sacred, as this can restrict how people think and critique those ideas, potentially even resulting in the curtailing of individual freedom. This lack of formal institution allows, in theory, for the development of multiple interpretations of Odo and other key philosophies and beliefs. Concomitant with the multivalency of beliefs is a multiplicity of moral codes and ethics.

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64 Le Guin, The Dispossessed, 1975, p.20.
65 Le Guin, The Dispossessed, 1975, p.46.
Given the emphasis on profoundly individualised morality alluded to above, readings of violence in both novels are an interesting reflection on Le Guin’s political theory. Jameson located her in a tradition of pacifism, but argued that her “works reject the institutionalization of violence rather than violence itself.” 68 Jameson’s reading was heavily influenced by a scene in which Shevek is beaten by a fellow male Anarresti for having a name too similar to the other man, and none of the other Anarresti intervenes. Le Guin’s philosophy of partnership doesn’t advocate the elimination of violence, but endorses allowing people to do whatever they wish as part of their interpersonal relationships “whether for violence, love, hate, sex, or whatever.” 69 The note in The Left Hand of Darkness explaining that Gethenians are highly competitive and “kill one another readily by the ones and twos; seldom by tens and twenties; never by hundreds or thousands,” 70 reflects a similar attitude that violence has acceptable limits. Several readings emphasise that violence in The Dispossessed is rarely initiated by Le Guin’s protagonists. Jameson perceived in both novels a “predilection for quietistic heroes and an anti-political, anti-activist stance, whether it be in the religion of Karhide… or in Shevek’s own reflective temperament.” 71 Easterbrook read Shevek as “both a yammering intellectual and a strong man who never equates strength with machismo…, virility or violence: the ‘strongest’ human is the ‘most ethical’.” 72 When confronted with soldiers in A-Io, Shevek does not accept the violence in which they participate. He sees the disciplined structure of the military as coercive, and understands why it must be coercive, since the “purpose was to enable men with machine-guns to kill unarmed men and women easily and in great quantities when told to do so.” 73 Both novels are read as emphasising individual agency and freedom with regard to violence. While Le Guin

72 Easterbrook, ”State, Heterotopia”, 1997, p.54.
might not choose to have her characters participate in violence, she accepts that violence is one form of interaction between free individuals. Her philosophy of partnership acknowledged that, as a consequence of an individualised morality, violence would occasionally occur between individuals. While this is a deeply unsettling idea for most readers, it is a logical consequence of privileging individual agency and the deep suspicion of the impact of institutions on radical freedom. The tension between the coercive power one strong individual has over another by using the threat of violence is not explored, either by readers or by Le Guin.

Expanding on Le Guin’s resistance to institutionalising violence is her presentation of war in both texts. Readers of *The Left Hand of Darkness* noted the growth of nationalism during the novel, as a consequence of Genly’s arrival on the planet which escalates a border dispute between the nations of Karhide and Orgoreyn, even though war is unknown on Gethen. The lack of war may be explained as result of gender homogeneity, war being “a purely masculine displacement activity, a vast Rape.” Where there are no men, there can be no masculine activity. Other readers argued that as capitalism had never existed, Gethen had never been exposed to the “disease of change and meaningless evolutionary momentum” that is progress, and so has had no incentive to go to war for territorial or economic reasons.

But despite readers’ understanding that war had never occurred, both novels include scenes of mass violence. In *The Dispossessed* there is a revolution in Benbili which eventually leads to a large protest in A-Io with Shevek at the centre. Helicopters arrive

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74 Kathryn Buckley, "Fantasy Review", *Vision of Tomorrow*, vol. 1, no. 9, 1970 (June), p.31.
and shoot into the group of protester to break up the demonstration. In *The Left Hand of Darkness* the reader sees a raid on the small village Siuwensin in which people are “shot and burned out of their houses,” as well as the institutional violence and brutality of the secret police in Orgoreyn and their prison camps – for example, a man being transported at the same time as Genly “had been clubbed or kicked in the abdomen, and died from haemorrhaging from anus and mouth. No one did anything for him; there was nothing to be done.” Finally, Estraven dies as he skis towards the border and is shot by the guards. The presence of institutionalised violence in both novels is rendered as shocking and unnatural – Le Guin takes care to present violence between individuals as natural, but each of the scenes detailed above are presented as shocking and abhorrent. Through both texts Le Guin shows institutions of violence, such as police forces and armies, as harmful to the social organism because of the unthinking harm caused to individuals. Violence on an institutional level, rather than a personal level, ceases to be an expression of an individual’s desire and becomes a coercive use of force. Soldiers are not free to choose who they will and will not fight; they are ordered to do the bidding of their superiors. This is incongruous with the philosophy of partnership Le Guin communicates through both novels, as it lack equality, reciprocal cooperation, and ongoing free choice.

Le Guin’s resistance to institutions of the capitalist economy forms a central part of her philosophy of partnership. Chapter Three outlined that Le Guin imagines a system in which sex and gender are irrelevant categories with regard to how people think about work; each person ought to pursue work based on their interests, abilities, and talents. Readers argued that Le Guin’s presentation of work challenged a “misunderstanding of what work is, and the warped reasons our society put out for it, seem to be among our

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major ills as individuals and cultural components."\textsuperscript{83} Even though work constitutes such an important part of society and peoples’ lives, rarely are the underlying associated justifications interrogated in fiction and, in fact, there seems to be a “stigma to discussing what seems to be the prime activity of just about everyone, as if it’s a mystical taboo ‘given’ that we observe and accede to."\textsuperscript{84} Le Guin creates an idealised system in \textit{The Dispossessed} in which people are assigned to work they want to do, can reject it if they don’t want to do it, or are mobilised and redistributed to areas of the planet where they are most needed in order to deal with a crisis. She does not, however, show this in an ideal and functional state. Rather, readers learned that “the need for stability and expertise inevitably leads to the development of bureaucracy and hierarchy."\textsuperscript{85} The creation of institutions interferes with the ability of individuals to choose their work freely, as demonstrated in a conversation between Shevek and Takver. Shevek argues that

\begin{quote}
Every emergency, every labour draft even, tends to leave behind it an increment of bureaucratic machinery within the PDC, and a kind of rigidity: this is the way it was done, this is the way it \textit{has} to be done.\textsuperscript{86}
\end{quote}

He presents as evidence the rarity of people refusing posting, and, if they do, the social stigma attached to actually refusing the posting – “we’re ashamed to say we’ve refused a posting… the social conscience completely dominates the individual conscience, instead of striking a balance with it. We don’t cooperate – we \textit{obey}.”\textsuperscript{87} This exchange speaks to the core of Le Guin’s philosophy of partnership; individuals need to negotiate their relationship with their society, but ultimately this relationship must be one of partnership. Institutions interfere with this partnership, by becoming safe havens for

\textsuperscript{86} Le Guin, \textit{The Dispossessed}, 1975, p.272.
\textsuperscript{87} Le Guin, \textit{The Dispossessed}, 1975, p.273.
hierarchy and bureaucracy, but also through formalising patterns of thought and approaches to the point that questioning them becomes unthinkable. Mumper reflected on his context after reading *The Dispossessed* and identified a ‘mystical taboo’ around questioning attitudes to work, an idea echoed by Shevek in describing the informal “laws of conventional behaviour.” Mumper’s reaction demonstrates that Le Guin’s presentation of the impact of institutions was successful in inculcating utopian desire for a more open attitude to analysing how and why people engage in work in the real world.

The other aspect of the contemporary economic system which Le Guin critiques through playfully adjusting the imagined world is materialism. A number of readers saw the elimination of private property in *The Dispossessed* as a crucial change. Removing private property from Anarres “successfully deemphasized, if not obliterated, the competitive and materialistic mores of the parent culture on Urras,” and was the key feature to reading Anarres as communist. Easterbrook read the lack of private property as essential to Le Guin’s imagined world, “since personal profit is replaced by community ownership and collective aid.” These features contribute to the philosophy of partnership Le Guin constructs, as a lack of personal property reinforced the need for cooperation and each individual’s equality in outcomes and opportunity.

The use of language and imagery was a particularly effective technique for readers to engage with the utopian dimension of the lack of private property. Hyde emphasised how the lack of personal pronouns enabled him to better understand “the relationship between social forms and language.” Language was also important in framing the readers’ experience of gender and sexuality in both novels, as discussed in Chapter Three. The lack of personal pronouns served to linguistically ‘trip’ the reader, jolting

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them into noticing the communal nature of the society again and again. Sleight interpreted the recurring image of empty hands in *The Dispossessed* as “an implicit challenge to readers: could you imagine being able to live in a world like this?”94 which forced readers to stop and reflect on what it would be like to live in a world in which they owned nothing but had access to everything they needed. People on Anarres are radically free from all obligations and restraints only by virtue of a total lack of property and institutions which might bind them.95 But the lack of institutions also means that there are no institutions to enforce social obligations between individuals, obligations become voluntary service, and the only responsibility each person really has is to maintain this institution-less freedom. Nadir noted that

*The Dispossessed* examines how the forms of discourse, knowledge, and power that propose a sustainable, equitable society also restrict freedoms of thought and desire – emancipating, in other words, while dominating at the same time.96

The language might not enable an Anarresti to say something belongs to her, but she may still retain it for her personal use, and even guard it when she no longer has use for the object. That constitutes private property, but it is obscured by her inability to express the concept. Language was a useful access point for readers to be educated in Le Guin’s utopian vision that private property contributes to personal identity but also limits understanding of identity. Without private property, or in a world without gender pronouns, individuals must find other traits to define their ‘selves.’ Through reading the novels, readers reflect on the extent to which their social relations are artificially framed, and are therefore able to challenge or change this reduction in identity.

Anarres requires “constant vigilance – and a continuing revolutionary spirit – to hold to its ideas”97 because it is a society predicated on promises between individuals. The

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complementary relationship outlined above between freedom and responsibility can only be bridged by a promise (or contract) from the individual, to every other individual, to maintain the society through their personal actions, but being bound by a promise limits radical freedom.\textsuperscript{98} Readers understood that individuals need to form a communal society because community “is at the heart of human meaning,”\textsuperscript{99} but this necessitated the sacrifice of some freedom because “the choices of a social being are never made alone.”\textsuperscript{100} On Anarres, each individual’s only resource is solidarity.\textsuperscript{101} The promise

that binds Anarres together is the vow of fidelity to each other to do that which ensures the continuation of a society without government, dominance, and ownership; it is a vow of human solidarity, a moral commitment to mutual aid and cooperation.\textsuperscript{102}

This promise to maintain freedom forms the core of Le Guin’s philosophy of partnership as experienced in political readings. In keeping with the aspects outlined in Chapter Three, this promise is entered into freely and recommitted to constantly. As soon as institutions develop which compel individuals to do something against their will, every single member of society has broken their promise to maintain radical freedom. Readers learned that “freedom is more fragile than communism, and the spirit of freedom can easily lapse into conformity.”\textsuperscript{103} But readers understood that freedom is a necessary condition for the best of human nature to bloom, and “the free exercise of human initiative is not only compatible with but positively conducive to the benefit of society.”\textsuperscript{104} Le Guin presented a model which subverted assumptions that societies based on mutual cooperation rather than profit are unworkable by “showing us the

\textsuperscript{98} Jaeckle, "Embodied Anarchy in Ursula K. Le Guin's The Dispossessed", 2009, pp.82-3.
\textsuperscript{99} Sleight, "Yesterday's Tomorrows", 2008 (October), p.31.
\textsuperscript{100} Le Guin, The Dispossessed, 1975, p.224.
\textsuperscript{101} Easterbrook, "State, Heterotopia", 1997, p.54.
\textsuperscript{102} Elizabeth Cummins, Understanding Ursula K. Le Guin, Colombia, University of South Carolina Press, 1990, p.110.
\textsuperscript{103} Urbanowicz, "Personal and Political in The Dispossessed", 1986, p.152.
similar uncomprehending questions Shevek and other Anarresti ask about how a society based on competition and coercion could possibly succeed.\footnote{Benfield, "The Interplanetary Dialectic: Freedom and Equality in Ursula K. Le Guin's The Dispossessed", 2006 (Summer), p.134.} At least one reader read this cooperative individualism in The Left Hand of Darkness as well, in “the opening scene, the parade in Karhide, where nobody marches in step, [which] images that country’s social and political structure.”\footnote{Martin Bickman, "Le Guin's The Left Hand of Darkness: Form and Content", Science Fiction Studies, vol. 4, no. 1, 1977 (March), p.43.} Each member of Le Guin’s utopian societies freely enters a contract to maintain the radical freedom that their society offers them. They enter this contract through making a promise to resist conformity and institutions which would limit their self-expression.

Additionally, there is an emergent theme of the utopian imagination reflected in commentary on The Left Hand of Darkness and The Dispossessed, which the analysis so far has not included – ecology and environment. Mention of the Gethen’s frozen landscape, Anarres’ barren desert, and the fertility of Urras is evident from the earliest reviews. Gethen was described as experiencing “a glacial age”\footnote{P. Schuyler Miller, "The Reference Library", Analog: Science Fiction, Science Fact, vol. LXXXIII, no. 1, 1969 (March), p.167.} and as being “fundamentally hostile,”\footnote{Miller, "The Reference Library", 1969 (March), p.167.} Urras’ “ hospitable ecology”\footnote{Richard Lupoff, "Lupoff's Book Week", Algol: A Magazine about Science Fiction, vol. 12, no. 1, 1976 (Winter), p.32.} was responsible for its similarity to the contemporary world, and Anarres is utopian “against the environmental odds.”\footnote{Jaeckle, "Embodied Anarchy in Ursula K. Le Guin's The Dispossessed", 2009, p.76.} These reviews do not interrogate the significance of these environs, preferring to describe the environment and then engage with another aspect of the utopian imagination at work in each novel. Jameson was one of the first to consider the presentation of environment and the impact on the reader. Rather than seeing these imagined environments as a representation of a utopian environmental commentary, Jameson argued that Gethen’s ecology can be read as an example of Le Guin’s use of

\textsuperscript{110} Jaeckle, "Embodied Anarchy in Ursula K. Le Guin's The Dispossessed", 2009, p.76.
'world-reduction'. World-reduction means thinning out and simplifying the layers of reality, in order to clearly articulate a message or worldview. He argued that it functions as a third form of narrative experimentation, distinct from analogy or extrapolation.\textsuperscript{111} Rather than seeing the frozen planet as an extrapolation of Earth’s winter, it is more interesting as an experiment “based on a principle of systematic exclusion, a kind of surgical excision of empirical reality.”\textsuperscript{112} Jameson also noted a parallel theme of near-uniqueness of human beings on both Anarres and Gethen, due to the lack of other animal life. He considers that the isolation of this ‘lack of life’ leads to an introspective kind of human being, more disconnected from the world around them, but that this isolation is utopian inasmuch as it dissolves the Darwinian determinism of predator and prey, allowing humans to be masters of themselves and their destinies.\textsuperscript{113} In Jameson’s reading, the presentation of environment was not so much utopian, but a narrative technique.

Few readers have interpreted the ecology of Gethen, Anarres, or Urras as a serious call to engage in utopian dreaming. In 2010, Nadir identified the lack of attention to the environment as a key oversight in previous readings.\textsuperscript{114} She argued that “\textit{The Dispossessed} can be read as an examination of the environmentalist discourses of sacrifice, scarcity, and economy that coalesced in a veritable political movement in the 1970s.”\textsuperscript{115} In her reading, environment was a crucial ingredient for the success of Anarres as a utopia because the harshness of the landscape forces the humans living there to collaborate and cooperate.\textsuperscript{116} Le Guin subverted classic tropes of ecotopian literature by implying that the ongoing sacrifice of the Anarresti is unnatural – both to

\begin{itemize}
\end{itemize}
the planet and to the inhabitants (who are descended from the propertarian Urrasti). The radical freedom of a society can be undermined when particular ways of doing or being become normalised, as in the case of religion. If critical reflection is prevented by ‘habituation’, the anarchist possibilities of “creativity and desiring ‘otherwise’” are prevented. Nature, in *The Dispossessed*, serves to remind the inhabitants to sacrifice, to limit consumption, to share, and so the environment reinforces and underpins the kind of utopia Le Guin is imagining. The success of a utopian desire may therefore depend on the relationship the society has to the environment in which it is situated. The society cannot refrain from social exploitation if it is based on an exploitative relationship with nature. Nadir’s reading highlights that humanity needs to work in a spirit of partnership with its own environment, in order to create a more perfect society. On that basis, they are more likely to be able to maintain partnership between individuals.

Both *The Left Hand of Darkness* and *The Dispossessed* educate the utopian desire of readers in the theme of politics. Across readings of race, religion, social contracts, violence, war, economics, and freedom, her audience has demonstrated an awareness of aspects of Le Guin’s philosophy of partnership. Readers understand that social relations can be made more equal and fairer by non-judgemental individuals cooperating to protect the freedom of each person by resisting the development of coercive institutions like religion, war, work, and private property. These institutions may make life easier, but they have the potential to erode personal freedom and lead to less individual lives and less authentic interpersonal interactions.

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Conclusion

Knowing what comes next

“The only thing that makes life possible is permanent, intolerable uncertainty: not knowing what comes next.”


This thesis set out to examine what insights could be gained into the utopian imagination of the Anglosphere through studying reactions to two utopian texts in the form of letters, reviews, and academic analyses. It has established that Le Guin is an author worthy of study, reviewed the theory of utopian thought from an academic perspective, and traced the two major themes of gender and politics through the period of study to develop an original argument that Le Guin articulates a cohesive philosophy of partnership which resonates in reader responses. In addition, this thesis provides evidence that Le Guin educates utopian desire in readers through presenting material detailing the reactions of a wide variety of readers. This conclusion summarises and reemphasises my arguments, and then suggests what might come next.

By using letters, reviews, and academic commentary on The Left Hand of Darkness and The Dispossessed, this thesis has built a meta-analysis demonstrating that the corpus of commentary on Le Guin provides evidence of common experiences for readers in the Anglosphere. There is sufficient evidence within the source material to argue that there is a cohesive discourse animated by Le Guin’s philosophy of partnership.

Chapter One established that Le Guin was capable of weaving complex messages through her work, in a non-didactic way, which appealed to a broad cross-section of the community. She is an author whose audience reaches beyond the boundaries of the science fiction and fantasy genres, and her approach to writing is multivalent, incorporating her childhood experiences, her academic study, and her critical dialogues. Her approach created work which was rooted in critique of the present but beguiling and
engaging. Both novels were well received by contemporary readers and have left a legacy continuing into the twenty-first century.

The thesis then moved on in Chapter Two to investigate what ‘utopia’ means in the context of the Anglosphere in the twentieth century and whether the two books fit comfortably within this tradition. After establishing that notions of utopian novels as ‘blueprints to perfect societies’ were no longer accepted by Le Guin’s period, the thesis outlined how texts in the utopian mode engage in a critique of the contemporary moment. Through imagining a radically different alternative, utopian novels can be understood as attempts to educate readers in the possibility of a better world, or to suggest that the reader’s world does not have to be as it is; they can challenge the aspects of their society which are obstacles to the imagined utopian potential. The world presented in a utopian novel is not the end goal. The end goal is the propagation of the practices and values of that world. Within this schema, *The Left Hand of Darkness* and *The Dispossessed* can both legitimately be classified as utopian novels.

The third chapter moved on to tackle the complex issue of Le Guin’s presentation of gender, sexuality, and feminism in both books. While reactions to the novels have hotly debated the success of different elements of the imaginary worlds, Le Guin’s utopian philosophy of partnership clearly emerges from the diverse readings. Bringing these reactions together clarified that there were common elements to readings of the presentation of work, marriage, friendship, and sex in both novels. Each of these elements presented gender relationships without shame or repression, or used an imaginary world which estranged readers from their context to present and critique contemporary gender relations. The desire to overcome gender and sexuality as points of alienation and domination is the major element of Le Guin’s philosophy of partnership which this chapter elucidated, and established the core texts as attempts to educate readers in a more perfect way of organising social relationships.
The final chapter focused on reactions to the political systems envisioned in Le Guin’s two novels. Her readers again highlighted the ways in which the presentation of different elements of political life, such as religion, social relations, violence, war, economics, and the relationship between society and natural environment emphasised the value of radical freedom for the individual and the importance of individuals committing to each other to protect their radical freedom from the coercion institutions would bring. The implication of such partnership – resistance to the erosion of authentic relationships – for individuals and their freedom is the utopian impulse Le Guin’s novels evoke in readers.

The common experience for readers detailed in this research is the experience of Le Guin’s philosophy of partnership. The outcome I initially expected, that different themes would be important during different decades, was not supported by the research. Regardless of the context of the reader, reactions consistently engaged with an aspect of this philosophy. As each reader is an individual, that experience was slightly different, depending on their history and personality.

The philosophy of partnership reflected throughout receptions of Le Guin’s two novels is an approach to life which can be considered a more perfect way of living – and is therefore utopian. This philosophy advocates acceptance and equality between people of all genders and sexualities, harmonious political organisation predicated on freedom and respect, and congruence between the treatment of humans and the treatment of the environment. There is no call to broad social action in either novel; instead Le Guin presents societies on the cusp of change but emphasises that that change takes place within the mentality and actions of an individual, and suggests this is the only way in which sustainable social change can come to pass.
So what comes next? As more people read *The Left Hand of Darkness* and *The Dispossessed* and respond to it, more facets of the philosophy of partnership within may become apparent, just as the theme of environment is developing. Further research could engage in psychological or anthropological study, to attempt to measure how far these novels can be associated with changing behaviour or informing social change movements. The work of this thesis could also be deepened, by including more online sources, which could potentially access further non-academic primary material for the later part of the period of study. Or, by engaging in a close examination of utopian texts from other authors produced at the same time as the core Le Guin texts, this history of utopian thought could be broadened and the philosophy of partnership could be investigated to see if it is a reflection of a broader social sentiment than simply Le Guin’s personal view.

Perhaps another researcher will find the uncertainty of these many potential avenues of research intolerable, but this thesis firmly lays a groundwork for further study the of previously under-explored utopian philosophy of partnership within Le Guin’s *The Left Hand of Darkness* and *The Dispossessed*. 
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## Appendix: Table of Le Guin’s Awards and Honours

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Award</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Years</th>
<th>Texts</th>
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<td>Mythsopoeic Society</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td><em>Lavinia</em></td>
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<td>Best Fantasy Novel</td>
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<td>LA Times: Lifetime Achievement</td>
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<td>Bumbershoot Awards</td>
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<td>James Tiptree Jr Retrospective Award</td>
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<td>1996</td>
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<td>Theodore Sturgeon Award</td>
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<td>&quot;Forgiveness Day&quot;</td>
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<td>Year</td>
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