

**Exploring the subversion of the sex and gender dichotomy in Ursula K.  
LeGuin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* and Nicola Griffith's *Ammonite***

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## Abstract in Norwegian

Denne masteroppgaven tar for seg hvordan biologisk, og hovedsakelig sosialt kjønn (på engelsk «sex» og «gender»), blir utforsket og utfordret i bøkene *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) av Ursula LeGuin og *Ammonite* (1992) av Nicola Griffith. Begge forfatterne ønsker å stille spørsmålsteget ved oppfatninger rundt kjønn (biologisk og sosialt), kjønnsuttrykk og hvilke konsekvenser det kan få for hvordan man som kvinne blir oppfattet som menneske og subjekt. Bøkene er skrevet fra et feministisk perspektiv, hvor forfatterne på hver sin unike måte utfordrer kjønnsdikotomien fra to forskjellige ståsteder innenfor feministisk litteraturteori. LeGuin er tilsynelatende av oppfatningen at såkalte kvinnelige og mannlige egenskaper kan deles inn i to gjenkjennelige kategorier, mens Griffith ser ut til å avvise dette. Bøkene er tilknyttet hverandre, da Griffiths roman spiller på temaer og situasjoner fra LeGuins roman, og jeg kommer til å sammenligne og kontrastere der hvor jeg mener det er relevant.

Denne masteroppgaven undersøker de ulike framgangsmåtene til LeGuin og Griffith og hvordan de begge oppnår å belyse kjønnsproblematikk og vise til hvordan sosialt kjønn er en konstruksjon. Jeg argumenterer for at LeGuin oppnår dette gjennom å vise hvordan sosialt kjønn blir konstruert via hvordan protagonisten i *Left Hand* gjennomgående tillegger kjønnede karakteristikk til et androgynt folkeslag, og blir hele tiden utfordret på sine stereotypiseringer. Griffith på sin side belyser sosialt kjønn som konstruksjon ved å ikke henvise til det, eller anerkjenne at det eksisterer. Jeg argumenterer for at hun etablerer kvinner som subjekt, uavhengig av kjønnsdikotomien gjennom å utforske deres kroppsliggjorte, fysiske tilværelse.

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## Introduction

Feminist science fiction, defined as science fiction that focuses on exploring themes such as sexuality, gender, and reproduction, is a relatively new phenomenon within science fiction, emerging as a recognizable subgenre during the second wave of feminism that lasted from the 1960s until the 1980s. Before this, science fiction overall (especially within the United States) had been characterized by conservative attitudes towards themes relating to the examination of sex and gender. In his book *Decoding Gender in Science Fiction* (2002), Brian Attebery explains that these attitudes were probably due to science fiction's "role as a commercial product" that "tended to push it toward safe predictability and a reinforcement of existing social roles" (Attebery 2002, 5). The genre was in this way decidedly more exclusive than inclusive, and its underlying misogynistic tendencies went generally unquestioned. There were nevertheless authors that explored issues of sex and gender, but in a "deeply encrypted" manner by using science fiction code. According to Attebery, science fiction signs such as robots, aliens, psychic powers, and the like, could also be used as gender markers in a story (Attebery 2002, 5-6). Changes within the genre during the 1950s eased up on the restrictions on writing about sexual taboos, and more women writers (and probably readers) led to increasing changes in depictions of different forms of gender-expression (Attebery 2002, 6). This shift opened the way for the later feminist works of science fiction that were to be published during the 1970s, introduced by author Ursula K. LeGuin (1929-2018) and her novel *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969).

LeGuin gained widespread critical acclaim for her examination of feminist issues in *Left Hand*, where she explored sexual and gendered difference from an anthropological point of view, creating a world populated by an androgynous, ambisexual and genderless people. It was one of few, if any, works of science fiction at the time that dealt with these themes extensively. *Left Hand* helped pave the way for other women and feminist writers of science fiction, enabling them to enter these discussions more readily than before. In the subsequent decade, some of the most well-known science fiction novels exploring feminist issues were published, such as Joanna Russ' *The Female Man* (1970), Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976) and Sally Miller Gearhart's *The Wanderground* (1979). These, and later works, were undoubtedly inspired by *Left Hand*, one of the more evident of these perhaps being Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time*. Piercy writes about Consuelo, a Latin-American woman who is oppressed by a patriarchal state by being institutionalized for defending herself

and her daughter from violence. She hallucinates or is contacted by an androgynous woman from a future utopia where all the ills of society have been done away with in a classless, genderless society, due to Consuelo's resistance and sabotage of the patriarchy in the present. Another author who was clearly influenced by LeGuin was Nicola Griffith, who debuted with her science fiction novel *Ammonite* (1992) over two decades after *Left Hand's* publication. *Ammonite* picks up on many of the elements explored in LeGuin's novel and follows the journey of a female anthropologist who travels to a newly discovered planet populated solely by women, portraying the protagonist's experiences, interactions and integration into this society.

In this thesis, I examine how gender is portrayed and examined in LeGuin's *Left Hand* and Griffith's *Ammonite*. The novels are connected plot-wise and thematically, and yet both authors have their own distinct take on exploring the matters of sexual and gendered difference. My focus will be on the aspects that I believe show how gender works in the respective novels, and how gendering is or is not employed to make a statement about the subjectivity and humanity of women. I define subjectivity as the notion that a woman is as much of a subject as a man, possessing autonomy, agency and personhood. This is the opposite of being cast in an object position, that is the practice of categorizing women or other minority groups in society as "less than" or "other." As Ellen Anderson, Cynthia Millett and Diana Meyers succinctly state in their article "Feminist perspectives on the Self": "To be the Other is to be a non-subject, a non-agent—in short, a mere thing. Women's selfhood has been systematically subordinated or even outright denied by law, customary practice, and cultural stereotypes" (2020). LeGuin examines this "othering" in *Left Hand* by reflecting on how gender-stereotypes are portrayed and used to construe, in this case, women, as the "Other." This is done by using the concept of androgyny as a literary tool to examine, exemplify and expose gender bias through the main protagonist's interactions with a people who challenges his notions of gender categorization. LeGuin thus questions the misogynist sentiments that seeks to fix sexual and gendered difference into a hierarchical, binary system that values men over women and the masculine over the feminine. I argue that LeGuin exposes and challenges the sex and gender dichotomy by showing how gender is created and constructed by the main protagonist Genly Ai in *Left Hand*.

Nicola Griffith takes a different route than LeGuin in *Ammonite*, focusing not on examining gendering or "othering," but instead uses narrative strategies to focus on the embodied experiences of the female protagonist to establish her as a subject. Griffith does not acknowledge the gender dichotomy such as it is presented in LeGuin's novel and literally does

away with it by removing the male sex altogether. Its inclusion would quite possibly have normed women as "other," undermining the message Griffith wanted to deliver. I argue that Griffith also challenges and questions the sex and gender dichotomy in *Ammonite*, by focusing on showing the subjectivity of women through their embodied and lived experiences without engaging with gender categorizations and stereotyping.

These novels can both be said to have been significant contributions to feminist science fiction at their respective points in time. LeGuin's novel opened the discussion on sex and gender within science fiction, and Griffith's novel continued it, taking it one step further. The differences between them in their handling of sexual and gendered issues may be attributed to the social climates at the time of publication of their novels, and gives an insight into the developments regarding the discussion on feminist issues that took place within the science fiction community from the 1970s to 1990s.

*The Left Hand of Darkness* and *Ammonite* are literary works that inspire the readers to question their notions of what being human is from a gendered perspective and have contributed to the ongoing critical discussion of feminist issues within science fiction. I have entered into this discussion by examining how LeGuin and Griffith try to subvert the practice of "othering" in their works. They employ widely different methods to achieve this subversion: LeGuin shows how "othering" occurs by the constant gendering her main protagonist commits towards the androgynous people of the planet Gethen, and Griffith avoids "othering" altogether by not making use of gendered language and metaphor, but also more importantly by removing men entirely from the equation in her portrayal of the women of the planet Jeep.

## **This Thesis**

In chapter one, I give a brief introduction to Ursula K. LeGuin and her authorship, before I take an in-depth look at her own commentary of *Left Hand*. I then move on to present a literary review of a selection of critical articles that are relevant for my analysis of LeGuin's novel.

In her essay "Is Gender Necessary?" (1976) and its revision "Is Gender Necessary? Redux" (1987), LeGuin enters into the discussion surrounding her novel by addressing what she felt was the most prominent criticism towards it, explains her intentions behind writing *Left Hand*, and the choices she made during the process. I believe it is important to discuss



these essays, as it gives a unique insight into the author's thoughts regarding her novel, especially the themes concerning gender and androgyny that was criticized by several feminist critics. In the first publication of her essay, LeGuin seems to be rather defensive about the choices she had made when writing *Left Hand*, but interestingly she amended some of her stances in a revision of her article eleven years after its initial publication, conceding that some of the criticism was perhaps warranted. I discuss how this signals that even though LeGuin wanted to illuminate for her readers how gender stereotypes contributed to discrimination, she was likely influenced by some of the very same stereotyping herself. However, it seems that the discussion that ensued from her novel led to an acknowledgment that the critics were justified in some of their observations, and she amended her stance on several issues in her later essay.

Then I present a literary review of a selection of the critical reception that *Left Hand* received, spanning from after its publication in 1969 and up until the turn of the century. These relate to how LeGuin dealt with gender in *Left Hand*, with an emphasis on the androgynous element of her novel and how these critics believed it to function successfully or not. The review forms the basis of the theoretical framework for my literary analysis of *The Left Hand of Darkness*.

In chapter two, in my analysis of *Left Hand*, I will be focusing on how LeGuin portrays sexual and gendered difference through the male, main protagonist, by looking at instances in the text where gendering of Gethen's androgynous people takes place. I will provide examples where this gendering is overt and will also look at instances where gendering happens more covertly. I believe that these examples show that even though LeGuin quite thoughtfully explored gender bias in her overt depictions of gendering, she may inadvertently have done what critics of androgyny, such as Russ and others, saw as problematic in that she may be affirming the binary system of sexual and gendered difference.

In chapter three, I examine Nicola Griffith's *Ammonite*. My examination and textual analysis will be different from that of *Left Hand*, as various factors necessitate a somewhat different perspective. As I mentioned above, Griffith does not engage with gender as a dichotomy but seems to reject it as a system altogether. Griffith does not use gendered metaphors in her novel, but focuses instead on the physical, embodied experiences of her protagonist, to show the subjectivity of women. I will therefore examine instances in the novel where Griffith focuses on the physical aspects of the protagonist's bodily experiences, surroundings or the people she meets, and how she does this without using objectifying language or gendered metaphors. Furthermore, I compare and contrast *Ammonite* with *Left*

*Hand*, to examine how the novels are related and how Griffith handles these comparable instances differently than LeGuin and what she wanted to achieve by doing so.

### **Theoretical framework**

In this section, I take a brief overarching look at androgyny and how it was introduced as a concept for exploring feminist issues through LeGuin's *Left Hand*. I will also look at some concepts that are relevant for Griffith's *Ammonite*, such as "othering" and "embodiment."

Androgyny is not a concept that was new or unknown within the literary tradition when LeGuin published *Left Hand* in 1969. It had at the time been gaining popularity during the 1960s and 70s as a style within fashion (unisex clothing), and as representing a more relaxed approach to acceptable gender expression without it demarcating homosexuality (Attebery 2002, 129). Before this, androgyny had more or less been confined to the realms of academia. Critic Tracy Hargreaves details in *Androgyny in Modern Literature* (2005) how the concept of androgyny during the late 1800's to the 1900's "has been produced as a shifting category, mobilised in different discourses - literary, sexological, psychoanalytic, sociological, feminist. The meaning of androgyny depends on its function in a given discourse" (Hargreaves 2005, 3). It has in other words been a term with no fixed meaning in and of itself and has been used to stand for homosexuality, transsexuality and a balance between the masculine and feminine within a person's psyche, et cetera (Hargreaves 2005, 3).

Due to the influence of second-wave feminism emerging in the 1960s advocating for the social and economic equality between the sexes (Oxford English Dictionary 2018), many women and feminist writers were looking for "new tools for investigating and challenging gender assumptions" (Attebery 2002, 129). For some, the concept of androgyny could function as such a "tool" to do away with unfair gender distinctions (Attebery 2002, 129).

Critic Carolyn Heilbrun believed that "the androgynous ideal" could be a creative and civilizing force, and defined androgyny in her book *Toward a Recognition of Androgyny* (1973) as "a condition under which the characteristics of the sexes, and the human impulses expressed by men and women, are not rigidly assigned" (Attebery 2002, 130). Hargreaves defines androgyny as a "...protean concept whose function shifted according to the discourse that constructed it" (Hargreaves 2005, 97), and finds the term problematic because "the androgyne (and the idea of androgyny) concretises and simultaneously undoes gender binaries," which "still reasserts what masculine and feminine behaviors are supposed to be

(Hargreaves 2005, 37). Using the concept of androgyny, which historically had been used to describe the male desire for spiritual wholeness by subsuming the female “other” into the male psyche, was seen as problematic for many feminist writers and critics and was therefore challenged.

In his book *Decoding Gender in Science Fiction* (2002), Brian Attebery examines the concept of androgyny as it emerged in feminist science fiction during the 1970s. The first example he refers to that deals significantly with androgyny in a science fiction setting is LeGuin’s novel, *Left Hand*. In the novel, LeGuin envisions a planet populated by androgynes, who do not recognize binary categories of sex or gender. She exposes and questions the legitimacy of gender stereotyping by highlighting it through the compulsive gendering made by the male, heterosexual protagonist. The concept of androgyny is used as a novel literary device in *Left Hand* for examining and questioning these matters.

According to Attebery, the question at the time of *Left Hand*’s publication in 1969 and onwards was how even to represent an "androgynous identity," when everything in society was seen as being gendered as either male or female (Attebery 2002, 130). Attebery sees LeGuin's *Left Hand* as a part of the answer to this question and views her as successful in using the androgynous tool to "investigate the paradox of gender." He views the novel's Gethenian people as "particularly well suited for revealing that paradox, the polar opposition that is at the same time a complementary. They offer a challenge to the notion of gender by having none" (Attebery 2002, 130). LeGuin was in this way groundbreaking, by being able to disrupt the widespread cultural notion that sexual difference was natural and showing that no social role was inherently gendered (Attebery 2002, 130).

As I will discuss in more detail in chapter one, LeGuin’s novel did receive some criticism, where some feminist critics argued that the novel was not as accessible to the female reader as the male, and that female representation in the novel was insufficient. These critics did not mean that the novel was without its female proponents on the other hand, and it soon became part of the feminist canon (Attebery 2002, 131).

Hargreaves recounts that even though the use of androgyny as a tool for exploring sexual difference was embraced by some, there were also those who saw it as obstructive to feminism: "whilst critics and writers like Andrea Dworkin argued androgyny myths offered 'nonsexist, non-repressive notions of sexuality', 'many feminists' also repudiated androgyny precisely for reinforcing sexist and repressive notions of sexuality" (Hargreaves 2005, 116). These may have felt that the "androgynous vision, the integration of masculine and feminine into a single self," was just another way of trying to "eliminate the feminine" (Attebery 2002,

131). This was probably due to the history of the concept of the androgyne, which usually used to represent the fulfillment of the male self by accepting and incorporating the feminine. The only "good" androgyne in this context was traditionally the "male" androgyne (Attebery 2002, 133).

Attebery argues that these critiques do not take into account that androgyny must not be considered a condition, but that it instead can be viewed as a sign, that is as a placeholder for other things, other meanings. Attebery exemplifies this by pointing to LeGuin's Gethenian androgynes. Their bodies are a biological combination of the male and female, and the term androgyne may therefore easily be switched out with ambisexual. According to Attebery, the androgyne concept as used by LeGuin can really be understood as a sign, where "complex psychological and social alteration" means androgyny. This is what Attebery calls "slippage," where the concept of androgyny in itself has no single meaning but may instead be used to challenge assumptions about meaning and identity (Attebery 2002, 133).

For Attebery, LeGuin has employed androgyny to stand in for a set of images that stand for other images, that stand for ideas, which in turn stand for other ideas. This act of signifying the concept of androgyny, he claims, allowed LeGuin to encourage her readers to look at and think of sex and gender in new ways (Attebery 2002, 134). Attebery also points to what scholar John Pennington claims in his article "Exorcising Gender: Resisting Readers in Ursula K. LeGuin's *Left Hand of Darkness*" (2000), that the text may be seen as performing androgyny, or as inviting the reader to perform androgyny. They differ somewhat in their interpretations, however, as Pennington claims that *Left Hand* is an androgynous text that challenges the perceptions of both sexes (he mentions no others) as sexed and gendered readers (Pennington 2000). Attebery argues that what the sign (of androgyny) means, depends on who perceives and makes use of it. Using the act of crossdressing to exemplify what it may mean to signify differently, he argues that women crossdressing as a man in a suit may be viewed more favorably than that of a man crossdressing as a woman wearing a dress. In the woman's case, she is moving towards the "masculine," which is connected to being empowered. In the crossdressing man's case, on the other hand, he is moving toward the "feminine," which is seen as being emasculated/weak and his value is lessened for it (Attebery 2002, 134-135).

Attebery sees protagonist Genly as expressing some of the fears of his value being taken away in his interactions with the Gethenians, as they are in a sense moving towards the feminine in Genly's view due to his default norming of the Gethenians as male (Attebery 2002, 135). LeGuin however, sees androgyny as being additive according to Attebery, as

adding value by incorporating the "feminine" as equal to the "masculine." This union eliminates the many social evils of a patriarchal society and is symbolized towards the end of *Left Hand* by the spiritual "marriage" of main protagonist Genly Ai and the Gethenian androgyne Estraven (Attebery 2002, 138).

Attebery believes that androgyny as a sign can be a valuable device to explore and perhaps move past the system that locks sexual and gendered difference into binary opposites: "If we could take the androgynous voice as something other than a stand-in for a man or a woman-as a genuine alternative social position and perspective- then that voice could offer a more significant challenge to the dualities that pervade cultures" (Attebery 2002, 145). The criticism towards the concept of androgyny from those who see it as obstructive to feminism is challenged by Attebery's examination of androgyny as a sign. He views it as disruptive to the logic of any binary system by providing a third alternative, that breaks apart the binary categorization of the masculine as "good" and the feminine as "bad" and removes the automatic "on/off switching" taking place in such a binary model (Attebery 2002, 149). In other words, Attebery views the concept of the androgyne as a literary tool for exploring matters of sex and gender as "adding value" to this discourse, and that "the choice of words is less important than the sense that some word is needed. Stories like these suggest that we need more words for gender in order to understand even the genders we already have words for" (Attebery 2002, 149).

These discussions on the concept of androgyny posit some interesting questions as to its amorphous definitions historically, and also to the matter of its ontological nature. Attebery interprets the concept of androgyny as a sign that stands for some other meaning or idea that may be considered a third alternative that questions the system of binary sexual difference. Hargreaves on the other hand, exemplifies how the concept of androgyny may be seen as the reinforcement of sexual difference and a gender dichotomy.

In my analysis, I will be examining how the androgynous concept in *Left Hand* is used as a literary device to expose and challenge gender bias, and to show that gender is a social construct. I will rely on the discussions I have presented above and the critiques I will review in chapter one. While I recognize that both lines of argument have valid points regarding the use and function of the androgynous concept, I lean more towards Attebery's position.

For my examination of Griffith's *Ammonite*, I will not be including the concept of androgyny as a framework for analysis, as it is not relevant to Griffith's approach. The concept of androgyny may be seen as mutable, and as Attebery posits, be considered a "sign" that enables for the conception of a third alternative to the sex and gender dichotomy.

However, I believe that in Griffith's *Ammonite* it would, as Hargreaves argues, only have functioned to establish and reinforce difference. In addition, I believe that Griffith deliberately removed one sex from her all-woman society on Jeep to escape this binary division that might have arisen in the reader's mind if men were present in the story.

In my opinion, Griffith thus provides the reader with a "third" alternative by giving them no choice but to think outside the female/male binary system in removing one of its components. This omission makes it possible for Griffith to freely explore what it means to be a subject that also happens to be female. Her focus lies in showing this subjectivity by exploring and detailing the protagonist's embodied experience. Griffith's approach may be seen as displaying postmodern-feminist elements, most notably in her use of a non-gendered language and her rejection of the sex and gender dichotomy. I argue that Griffith focuses on the physical surroundings and the bodily experience of her female protagonist, in order to relate the reader to these through what she calls "embodiment." This approach avoids establishing a gendered subject and allows for identification with the protagonist across the sex and gender divide.

Griffith argues she achieves this by using "specific word-choice and metaphor" to "locate the examination of a focalised character's body in its physical and sensory setting. This examination of the body is referred to as embodiment" (Griffith 2017, i). Griffith claims that the embodiment of a focalized character enables her to activate neural mechanisms in the reader, to create what she calls narrative empathy (Griffith 2017, i). She argues in other words, that the way she "embodies" her focalized characters creates a real, physical response in the reader's brain that enables them to empathize with traditionally marginalized characters. Griffith furthermore claims that she avoids creating an aversive response in the reader, which in Pennington's article might be termed as a "throwing away the book" response, by excluding the "oppressive discourse associated with membership of maligned groups" (Griffith 2017, 2).

I am inclined to agree with Griffith in her claim that *Ammonite* is quite free from depictions that may induce an aversive reader response. Most notably, the women of the planet Jeep and protagonist Marghe do not have to endure any instances of sexualized violence or degradations based solely on their sex. That does not mean that the novel is a peaceable, utopia free from violence, but conflict is not made or justified along gendered lines. This allows female, male, and other readers to empathize with and relate to the protagonist's experiences without experiencing the abovementioned aversive responses. I argue that Griffith's approach, as she describes it in her thesis also offers a "third alternative"

that does not engage with sexual or gendered difference, but instead examines how affirming the subjectivity of women/other may be achieved without referring to or using a binary framework.

## **Chapter 1: Critical reception of *The Left Hand of Darkness*: Ursula K. LeGuin and later critics**

In this chapter, I will give a brief introduction of Ursula K. LeGuin, whose novel *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) I will discuss and analyze in chapter two. Then I will review LeGuin's response to some of the criticism focusing on her handling of the sexual and gendered themes of her novel, in the essay "Is Gender Necessary?" (LeGuin 1976) and "Is Gender Necessary? Redux" (LeGuin 1987). I include LeGuin's response, as it outlines the most important points of critique against her novel from a feminist literary perspective, and will make it easier to follow the later literary review. Furthermore, I believe it to provide valuable insight to LeGuin's thoughts and reasons for the choices she made when writing *Left Hand*, and how she herself became a part of the broader discussion *Left Hand* had helped instigate. Finally, I provide an overview of a selection of published articles that discuss LeGuin's approach to gender and her use of the concept of androgyny, which will help to frame my analysis of *Left Hand* in chapter two.

### **LeGuin, *The Left Hand of Darkness* and critical dialogue**

Ursula Kroeber LeGuin was born in Berkeley, California, on the 21st of October, 1921. Her parents, Theodora and Alfred Kroeber were well-equipped to ensure that their daughter was off to a great educational start in life. LeGuin's father became the first person granted a Ph.D. in anthropology in the United States and her mother was an anthropologist in her own right, publishing several works on the native peoples of California. Ursula went on to pursue a master's in romance literature of the middle ages and renaissance and graduated from Columbia University in New York in 1952. She met her husband when she was in Paris on a Fulbright scholarship and they eventually settled in Portland, Oregon (Clute 2018).

LeGuin became a well-known and prolific writer, and over the course of her career she touched upon many genres, including science fiction, fantasy, poetry, general fiction, book reviews, translations, essays, and more. Her first published novel, *Rocannon's world* (1966), was overshadowed by the works of her contemporaries (most notably Samuel R. Delany) and her literary career did not take off until she published her much acclaimed science fiction



novel *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969). It won her the “best novel” category for both the Hugo Award (Hugo Awards 2020) and the Nebula Award (Nebulas 2020) and is considered to be one of the first notable works of the twentieth century within the genre of feminist science fiction.

The reason for *Left Hand's* overwhelming success could be attributed to its revolutionary content. It was revolutionary in its depictions of sex and gender, which up until that point had been considerably one-sided within the science fiction genre. The representative stories that had usually been told up until that point, were more concerned with reproducing traditional hero-myths with a dash of fantastic technology and/or alien encounters added to the mix, than challenging established norms and practices concerning sex, gender, race, class et cetera. As critic Joanna Russ inquired in her article "The Image of Women in Science Fiction" originally published in 1973 (Latham 2017, 200-210), how could these authors imagine a future filled with new scientific and technological wonders, but fail to take into account how these would change our societal structures? In *Left Hand*, I argue that LeGuin manages to challenge these conventions by imagining a world populated by people who defy western notions of technological progress, societal organization, biological sex, and accepted expressions of gender.

LeGuin furthermore defied convention when she drew on the extensive knowledge of her parents and on her own interest in anthropology, to create a world that defied the pervasive ethnocentrism of the science fiction genre of the time. She did this by making her protagonist Genly Ai, a heterosexual, black man from earth, travel alone to try and persuade the androgynous people of the planet Gethen to join into an organization of interstellar, peaceful trade. Genly Ai comes not as the colonizer, subjugator and exploiter of an interstellar "Other," but as a lone alien hoping to engage with the Gethenians as equals. LeGuin reverses the "colonization-as-bringing-civilization" trope, where brave space-faring men travel to distant worlds to correct the alien natives' ways, subsuming them into a western colonization narrative. In *Left Hand*, Genly Ai must instead work on his own cultural conditioning of what is "right and natural" to overcome his biases and to try to come to a genuine understanding of the native androgynous Gethenians. This he must try to achieve despite the biological, communicative, and cultural differences between them.

LeGuin's *Left Hand* was generally well received by its reviewers, but as with any other work of art, there were some who believed LeGuin could have done better. She did not let these criticisms of her work go unanswered however, and in 1976 she responded by publishing an essay she called "Is Gender Necessary?" (LeGuin 1976). She revised it 11 years

later in 1987, renaming it "Is Gender Necessary? Redux," as she had then come to change her stance on some of the issues she addressed in the original essay. In her 1976 publication, LeGuin may come across as somewhat defensive to the criticism directed at her novel, especially that which concerned her examination of sex and gender, but that could perhaps only be expected. She had after all won both Nebula and Hugo awards for "Best Novel" in 1969 and 1970 respectively and her novel was one of a kind within the science fiction genre at the time of its publication, one of very few discussing and problematizing matters of sex, gender and society. Considering that the general response to the novel had been overwhelmingly positive, one can imagine it must have smarted for her to be "judged" and found lacking in her feminist inclinations when the novel dealt with the themes that it did. LeGuin states in her 1976 publication: "I considered myself a feminist; I didn't see how you could be a thinking woman and not be a feminist; but I had never taken a step beyond the ground gained to us by Emmeline Pankhurst and Virginia Woolf" (LeGuin 1989, 7-8). She goes on: "Along about 1967, I began to feel a certain unease, a need to step on a little farther, perhaps, on my own. I began to want to define and understand the meaning of sexuality and the meaning of gender, in my life and in our society" (LeGuin 1989, 8). This desire to "take a step beyond" and contribute to the feminist cause was realized by writing *Left Hand*.

However, despite LeGuin's expressed desire to contribute and declaring herself a proponent of the feminist cause, she did not want her novel to be considered primarily feminist in 1976: "The fact is that the real subject of the book is not feminism or sex or gender or anything of the sort; as far as I can see, it is a book about betrayal and fidelity" (LeGuin 1989, 8). Betrayal and fidelity are certainly important themes in her novel, but for many readers they are certainly not as prominent as those of sex and gender. LeGuin's attempt to downplay the feminist themes of her novel in her 1976 article was likely a way to try to protect her ego and perhaps also a way to focus on those aspects of her book that she felt the feminist critics overlooked.

LeGuin goes on to explain why she wrote the novel, and why she invented the Gethenians, calling them "...a heuristic device, a thought-experiment," (LeGuin 1989, 9) and that "I eliminated gender, to find out what was left. Whatever was left would be, presumably, simply human. It would define the area that is shared by men and women alike" (LeGuin 1989, 10). LeGuin's desire to try to examine that which makes us "simply human" is admirable, but "eliminating gender" is not necessarily a recipe for becoming more "human" (or less for that matter). I do not believe that she "eliminates" gender as she claims, but that she pointed out that gender is a social construct that is prone to cultural biases. All gendered

traits are human traits and these can not be considered to be inherently masculine or feminine ontologically, although it may seem that LeGuin was of this opinion.

I do however understand that LeGuin's statement probably refers to imagining a world where discrimination based solely on sex and gender has been done away with, recognizing the fact that there is only one human race, not two, and that one sex is not inherently better than the other. LeGuin lists some of the "findings" from her thought-experiment to illustrate that a world without gender, amongst other things, means no large-scale war, no exploitation and a weaker centralized government. The Gethenians chose instead to govern after a communist/syndicalist economic, organizational principle: This because there is a balance between masculine and feminine traits in the androgynous Gethenian society, which would suggest that LeGuin is seemingly of the belief that the greater ills of society are due to an imbalance between these two entities (LeGuin 1989, 10-12). Although LeGuin stated she did not want her novel considered purely "feminist" in her 1976 article, she did write *Left Hand* as a sort of vindication for what she calls the "the feminine principle." For LeGuin, the "feminine principle" has to do with traits and thinking that has traditionally been attributed to women or "femininity" (LeGuin 1989, 11). LeGuin moreover viewed a more or less peaceful anarchist organization of society as an expression of the feminine, as opposed to hierarchical and bureaucratic "masculine" forms of governing and organization (LeGuin 1989, 11). Since the Gethenians are balanced beings in terms of femininity/masculinity, they have no conflicts that escalate into war. Neither is there any rape since the Gethenians are biologically neuters until their sexual reproductive phase, and are unable to perform sexually outside of this state. Most importantly, there is no taboo surrounding sex, which is properly and ethically accommodated for within their society (LeGuin 1989, 11). LeGuin details how she sees her Gethenians to be an amalgam of "feminine" and "masculine" principles and that this is the crucial point in bringing forth a society that is free of the abovementioned ills of humanity (LeGuin 1989, 12).

Feeling that she has sufficiently explained her intentions with her "thought-experiment," LeGuin then directly addresses some areas she herself felt could have been stronger in her novel. She believes she could perhaps have imagined a form of government more suited to the Gethenian society, instead of relying on "a feudal monarchy and a modern-style bureaucracy" (LeGuin 1989, 14), and regretted not exploring the psychological implications that accompanied the Gethenian physiology (LeGuin 1989, 14). LeGuin then comes to the "central failure" that she sees "in the frequent criticism I receive," that her androgynous Gethenians are perceived as men, rather than the men-women she imagined them to be (LeGuin 1989, 14). She admits that this perception stems "in part from the choice

of pronoun" (LeGuin 1989, 14), but her stance is decidedly defensive when it comes to the matter of her use of it:

I call Gethenians "he" because I utterly refuse to mangle English by inventing a pronoun for "he/she." "He" is the generic pronoun, damn it, in English. (I envy the Japanese, who, I am told, do have a he/she pronoun.) But I do not consider this really very important. (LeGuin 1989, 14-15)

LeGuin refuses to engage with this point of criticism at all in the article of 1976, completely ignoring the fact that language has a great part to play when it comes to shaping and guiding the readers' perceptions of the androgynous nature of the Gethenians. Instead, LeGuin laments her inability to show "the "female" component of the Gethenian characters in *action*" so that, in her view, "pronouns wouldn't matter at all" (LeGuin 1989, 15). LeGuin excuses this lack by pointing to the plot and structure of her novel, which made it difficult to cast the main Gethenian protagonist Estraven in roles other than that which we "are culturally conditioned to perceive as "male" (LeGuin 1989, 15). She concedes (again somewhat defensively) that not being able to show Estraven as a mother or in other "feminine" roles "is a real flaw in the book" (LeGuin 1989, 15), and commends those readers that were able "to see Estraven as I saw him, as man and woman, familiar and different, alien and utterly human" (LeGuin 1989, 15). LeGuin is appreciative of her male readers regarding this, claiming that "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" (LeGuin 1989, 15). In my view, LeGuin could have provided more examples of Gethenians in traditional feminine roles, without it having compromised Genly's coding of the world around him as masculine. It might have given her even more opportunities to deconstruct gender-role stereotyping by having Estraven, whom Genly has coded "masculine" perform more roles attributed to the "feminine."

LeGuin ends her article by stating that the Gethenian society as depicted in *Left Hand* is not a "*practicable* alternative to contemporary society" (LeGuin 1989, 16) for obvious biological reasons, but that it tries to provide:

an alternative viewpoint, to widen the imagination, without making any very definite suggestions as to what might be seen from that new viewpoint. The most it says is, I think, something like this: If we were socially ambisexual, if men and women were completely and genuinely equal in their social roles, equal legally and economically,

equal in freedom, in responsibility, and in self-esteem, then society would be a very different thing. (LeGuin 1989, 16)

In the revised version of LeGuin's essay, titled "Is Gender Necessary? Redux" (LeGuin 1989), she prefaces the essay by informing the reader that she had for some time been "getting uncomfortable with some of the statements I made in it, and the discomfort soon became plain disagreement" (LeGuin 1989, 7). In this later version of the essay, LeGuin adds the revisions to her earlier statements by adding them in brackets within the original text. She believes that "the feminist mode... let's one's changes of mind, and the processes of change, stand as evidence-and perhaps to remind people that minds that don't change are like clams that don't open" (LeGuin 1989, 7). When reading the revised essay, the reader may almost immediately feel the shift that has taken place in LeGuin's thinking around her novel and the criticism leveled against it. She does not view this amendment as a concession, but rather as a positive addendum to her previous work, lauding "the feminist mode" as forgiving enough to allow people to go through the process of changing one's mind, presumably for the better.

LeGuin has in this essay of 1987 gained some insight, as she puts it herself, regarding her views on feminism as mentioned in her 1976 version, where she held to an "ideal of progress," thinking feminism would ever better itself and resolve into a final cumulative endpoint. Her thoughts then were that she "had never taken a step beyond the ground gained to us by Emmeline Pankhurst and Virginia Woolf" (LeGuin 1989, 8). In her revised essay, LeGuin wonders if anyone has actually taken that step, and focuses instead on how feminism has "enlarged its ground and strengthened its theory and practice immensely, and enduringly" (LeGuin 1989, 8). I believe LeGuin had come to realize that there isn't necessarily a linear kind of feminism, that must ever better itself and ultimately come to one universal conclusion, but that there are several different paths that may explore feminist issues. LeGuin has come to embrace her novel's feminist implications and adds in her 1987 revision after her 1976 statement about the subject of *Left Hand* being "not feminism or sex or gender or anything of the sort" (LeGuin 1989, 8), that "I was feeling defensive, and resentful that critics of the book insisted upon talking only about its "gender problems", as if it were an essay and not a novel...I had opened a can of worms and was trying hard to shut it" (LeGuin 1989, 8). By 1987 LeGuin has come to the conclusion that *Left Hand* is indeed a feminist work, as shown by the following bracketed comment where she talks about its feminist implications: "what it tried to do, and what it might have done, insofar as it is a "feminist" [*strike the quotation marks, please*] book" (LeGuin 1989, 8).

When LeGuin wrote *Left Hand*, she was interested in creating a world where there was a balance between what she considered to be the feminine and masculine qualities of human beings, highlighting a system where one did not take precedence over the other. She explains that this takes form through a vindication of what she called “the female principle”:

To me the “female principle”, is, or at least historically has been, basically anarchic. It values order without constraint, rule by custom not by force. It has been the male who enforces order, who constructs power structures, who makes, enforces, and breaks laws. On Gethen, these two principles are in balance: the decentralizing against the centralizing, the flexible against the rigid, the circular against the linear. (LeGuin 1989, 11)

This designation of some traits as belonging to the feminine or masculine respectively may come across as essentialist thinking, but as LeGuin states, these traits had *traditionally* been considered either feminine or masculine. She clarifies the statement and her position on gender essentialism in her 1987 article:

The “female principle” has historically been anarchic: that is, anarchy has historically been identified as female. The domain allotted to women-”the family,” for example-is the area of order without coercion, rule by custom not by force. Men have reserved the structures of social power to themselves (and those few women whom they admit to it on male terms, such as queens, prime ministers); men make the wars and peaces, men make, enforce and break the laws. On Gethen, the two polarities we perceive through our cultural conditioning as male and female are neither, and are in balance: consensus with authority, decentralizing with centralizing, flexible with rigid, circular with linear, hierarchy with network. (LeGuin 1989, 11-12)

As we can see in this clarification, LeGuin does not view herself as a proponent of gender essentialism but points out that our perceptions of gendered qualities are a matter of cultural conditioning, which is subject to change over time. She wanted to show that these principles, traditionally gendered as either masculine or feminine, were equal to each other, by emphasizing and bringing into balance that which had traditionally been considered as “feminine.”

LeGuin also amended her stance on her use of a “universal” male pronoun, which was one of the major points of criticism towards *Left Hand* that she adamantly refused to change

in 1976. In her 1987 revision, she has quietly changed the pronouns referring to the Gethenians to they/them, where they previously were written as "he/him" in the original essay. After stating that she refuses "to mangle English by inventing a pronoun for "he/she" (LeGuin 1989, 12) in 1976, she adds in her 1987 revision that:

This "utter refusal" of 1968 restated in 1976 collapsed, utterly, within a couple of years more. I still dislike invented pronouns, but I now dislike them less than the so-called generic pronouns he/him/his, which does in fact exclude women from discourse; and which was an invention of male grammarians, for until the sixteenth century the English generic singular pronoun was they/them/their, as it still is in English and American colloquial speak. (LeGuin 1989, 12)

She adds to her 1976 statement of "the pronouns wouldn't matter at all if I had been cleverer at *showing* the "female" component of the Gethenian characters in *action*", that "*If I had realized how the pronouns I used shaped, directed, controlled my own thinking, I might have been "cleverer"*" (LeGuin 1989, 15). I am inclined to agree with LeGuin in her later opinion, as it is my belief that words do indeed shape and change how we perceive the world. I do however believe that LeGuin's use of the masculine pronoun serves the purpose of showing the reader how Genly Ai genders his surroundings, how he norms the world as masculine and helps expose his gender biases when his "reading" of the Gethenians as exclusively male is proven false.

The matter of Gethenian sexuality is also discussed in LeGuin's 1987 revised essay, although it was not mentioned in her 1976 version. Perhaps a sign of how times had changed for the better in the wake of second-wave feminism, is that she is able and willing in 1987 to clarify and discuss that the Gethenians were not necessarily heterosexual. In the novel, the Gethenians seem to be locked into normative heterosexuality, and the reader is left with the impression that other sexualities are non-existent. LeGuin addresses and expands on this issue in 1987:

I quite unnecessarily locked the Gethenians into heterosexuality. It is a naively pragmatic view of sex that insists that sexual partners must be of opposite sex! In any kemmer-house homosexual practice would, of course, be possible and acceptable and welcomed-but I never thought to explore this option; and the omission, alas, implies that sexuality is heterosexuality. I regret this very much! (LeGuin 1989, 14)

LeGuin rectified this omission however, by writing a short-story years later called "Coming of age in Karhide" (LeGuin 2002, 1-22). There she tells the story of a young Gethenian entering puberty, who is undergoing the bodily transformation that will enable them to manifest as either female/male during their period of bodily sexual maturation. The Gethenian is shown to manifest as female-bodied during kemmer, and is shown to engage in both homosexual and heterosexual relations. This helped nuance the impression of Gethenian society as heteronormative, by depicting homosexual relations as normal practice. LeGuin also amended the matter of language by describing the inner workings of Gethenian hearth-life and by using female pronouns and familial designations, such as mother and grandmother, creating a more recognizable "feminine" space than that encountered in *Left Hand*.

In her 1976 article LeGuin concedes that there was a problem with how she portrayed Gethenian Estraven "...almost exclusively in roles that we are culturally conditioned to perceive as "male"..." and that this "...is a real flaw in the book, and I can only be very grateful to those readers, men and women, whose willingness to participate in the experiment led them to fill in that omission with the work of their own imagination" (LeGuin 1989, 15). She believed then that it seemed "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" (LeGuin 1989, 16). LeGuin had a more contemplated approach as to why this might be so in her revised essay of 1987:

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...I think women were justified in asking more courage of me and a more rigorous thinking-through of implications. (LeGuin 1989, 16)

"Is Gender Necessary? Redux" (LeGuin 1989) shows us an author that has grown and come to accept that although some of the criticism of her novel might have been harsh, it was perhaps justified in the instances LeGuin herself pointed out to us in her revised article. Criticism aside, LeGuin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) helped propel feminist issues within science fiction forward and lay down the cornerstone for opening the genre up to further allow for in-depth discussions concerning sex and gender.



## **A literary review of selected critical responses to *The Left Hand of Darkness***

In the following section, I will review and summarise some of the critical reception concerning *Left Hand* that was published, spanning from the early 1970s to the mid-2000s. The critical articles addressing feminism in relation to science fiction in general is quite extensive, including those discussing *Left Hand* in particular. I have therefore focused on a smaller selection of articles, which I believe to be most relevant to my later textual analysis and discussion of *Left Hand*. The critics whose articles I will be reviewing are those of Joanna Russ, Pamela J. Annas, Craig and Diana Barrow, Mona Fayad, John Pennington, Christine Cornell and Wendy Gay Pearson, appearing in chronological order. These all examine in some way or another how they believe the concept of androgyny and gender functions in *Left Hand*. My focus in the textual analysis will be primarily on gendering and how LeGuin's use of the concept of androgyny as a literary tool functions to help examine gender as a social construct. There are in addition to the critics mentioned above, several other known critics who have contributed to the discussion of *Left Hand*, such as Sarah Lefanu, Jewell Parker Rhodes, Patricia Lamb and Diana Veith. I will however not be reviewing their contributions, as these are not as relevant for the purposes of my own analysis.

### **Critical reception of *The Left Hand of Darkness***

Critic and author Joanna Russ was one of the earliest critics of LeGuin's *Left Hand*, discussing the novel in her 1973 article "The Image of Women in Science Fiction" (Latham 2017, 200-210). Russ sets out to show how there exist certain sets of images of women in science fiction that are based on sexist stereotyping, and if science fiction has or can fulfill its potential for being the "perfect literary mode in which to explore (and explode) our assumptions about "innate" values and "natural" social arrangements, in short our ideas about Human Nature, Which Never Changes" (Latham 2017, 201). Russ believes this exploration has been done to a certain extent, but that "speculation about the innate personality differences between men and women, about family structure, about sex, in short about gender roles, hardly exists" (Latham 2017, 201). For Russ, there is still much room for improvement, and she seeks to answer the question of why these themes are still not being examined more thoroughly, while looking at what "the image of women in science fiction" (Latham 2017, 201) is, and how it is rooted in patriarchal and conservative thought.

Important for this exploration is Russ' claim that even though various science fiction stories are often set into the far future, space, or both, nothing or very little is altered when it comes to "human society, family life, personal relations, child-rearing" et cetera, instead keeping up the sociocultural status quo that was the reality for the predominantly white, male authors of science fiction in the US. Russ goes on to list some of what she finds to be prevalent themes within science fiction regarding the treatment of the abovementioned areas and divides them into stories written by men and stories written by women. She categorizes these into themes such as "intergalactic suburbia," "down among the he-men" and "space opera," and finds that "In general, stories by women tend to contain more active and lively female characters than do stories by men, and more often than men writers, women writers try to invent worlds in which men and women will be equals" (Latham 2017, 206). That does not mean that "the conventional idea that women are second-class people" is so easily shaken according to Russ, and she asks us to look to how writers deal with "the family scenes and the love scenes" to reveal "the author's real freedom from our most destructive prejudices" (Latham 2017, 206).

Russ specifically addresses LeGuin's *Left Hand* under a section she titles "An odd equality." She commends it as "a fine book" that "is beautifully written" (Latham 2017, 207), but she takes issue with LeGuin's lacking descriptions of Gethenian family life and with her use of the masculine pronoun "he." Russ laments that there is in her opinion, not only one male hero, but two, once in the main male protagonist Genly, and once again in Gethenian protagonist Estraven, whom she sees as "masculine in gender, if not in sex" (Latham 2017, 207). For Russ, Gethen "is a world of men" because of "the native hero's personal encounters in the book, the absolute lack of interest in child-raising" and "the concentration on work" (Latham 2017, 207). She therefore infers that the relationship between Genly and Estraven is "nominally homosexual" and argues that "perhaps the only way a woman (even in a love scene) can be made a man's equal...is to make her *nominally* male. That is, female in sex, but male in gender" (Latham 2017, 207). Russ furthermore finds Genly's apparent lacking insight and understanding hard to fathom, as he "is supposed to be a trained observer, a kind of anthropologist" (Latham 2017, 208) and his view of and statements about women seem to be rather crude when taken into consideration that "this is centuries in the future" (Latham 2017, 208).

In conclusion, Russ acknowledges the potential for science fiction to function as a genre that can question cultural and societal arrangements and beliefs when it comes to sex and gender, but through her exploration of "the image of women in science fiction" finds that

this potential goes unfulfilled. She uses LeGuin's novel as an example to illuminate the difficulties science fiction has with "how to get away from traditional assumptions which are nothing more than traditional straitjackets" (Latham 2017, 208). Russ finds LeGuin to be lacking when it comes to these challenging these assumptions: "Miss LeGuin seems to be aiming at some kind of equality between the sexes, but she certainly goes the long way around to get it; a whole new biology has to be invented, a whole society, a whole imagined world, so that finally she may bring together two persons of different sexes who will nonetheless be equals" (Latham 2017, 208). Russ's article probably had some gravitas within the science fiction community, as she herself was a published author nominated for the Nebula award, and was a known critic of science fiction. "The image of women in science fiction" was published at a time when science fiction literature still grappled with its conservative and misogynistic tendencies, and it is understandable that Russ might have expected more from LeGuin as a fellow woman author, whose novel she saw as perpetuating gender stereotypes rather than breaking them apart. Russ was however one of the harsher critics of *Left Hand*, as she was described as a provocative, uncompromising and brave feminist writer and academic (Priest 2011) that may have overlooked some of the finer points that redeem *Left Hand* as a work of feminist literature.

In her article "New Worlds, New Words: Androgyny in Feminist Science fiction" (Annas 1978, 143-156), critic Pamela J. Annas briefly examines how the science fiction genre in her opinion had recently shifted, allowing it to become an instrument for "exploring social change" (Annas 1978, 143). Her article comes only five years after that of Russ, and Annas argues that science fiction authors might now be able to extrapolate a present trend or analogy from our own society to the science fiction setting, thereby commenting "on the possibilities inherent in the here and now" (Annas 1978, 143). This was opposed to the earlier established practices within the genre (in the US) (Annas 1978, 143), focusing on imagining the fantastical without challenging the cultural and social status quo of their own societies, as mentioned by Russ above (Annas 1978, 144). Annas is especially interested in feminist writers' discovery of the genre's potential for exploring societal issues, focusing on how she believes authors Ursula LeGuin and the previously mentioned Joanna Russ both achieve this in their own manner.

Annas begins her article by giving a brief outline of the history of science fiction and how its conservatism made it unable to imagine an alternate reality that did not rely on technology, to ultimately do away with the socio-economic problems that are inherent in a

capitalist society: "technology does not free the worker from alienating labor" (Annas 1978, 144). The oppressed remain, in other words, the oppressed in the far future as well as today. She explains how this particular form chosen by science fiction authors to work with, shares a "perceptual technique" with oppressed groups, that she calls "dual vision": "For oppressed groups, dual vision means seeing the world and yourself through two sets of opposed values" (Annas 1978, 144). This duality, Annas explains, comes from having one's reality defined by someone else, and although this duality is rooted in being misconstrued by the dominant majority, Annas claims that it nonetheless has the "potential for becoming the dialectical perception of revolutionary groups" (Annas 1978, 144). By this Annas means that it moves away from the unchanging, static nature of dualism or static opposites, towards dialectical thought and "at least a conditional synthesis" (Annas 1978, 144). Annas also argues for science fiction's role being structurally suited "as revolutionary literature" because it is non-ethnocentric: "things-as-they-are should be questioned rather than merely accepted and described", and that it holds a dialectical vision of society: "alternate paradigms are played off against any given reality" (Annas 1978, 144).

Annas further explores what she argues is "the revolutionary potential of SF" for feminist writers, and how the genre may more readily lend itself to exploring social change than that of mainstream literature because:

it allows idea to become flesh, abstraction to become concrete, and imaginative extrapolation to become aesthetic reality. It allows the writer to create and the reader to experience and recreate a new or transformed world based on a set of assumptions different from those we usually accept. (Annas 1978, 145)

Annas believes that Ursula LeGuin and her novel *Left Hand* did revolutionize the science fiction genre by being able to realize this "revolutionary potential," in direct opposition to Joanna Russ' views. Annas thought that LeGuin's use of the concept of androgyny gave women writers a whole new possibility to explore sex and gender matters within this "new" androgynous concept. For Annas, androgyny functions as an additional element that female writers can use as an alternative to the traditional sex-role stereotyping that had been depicted up until then in feminist utopian visions (Annas 1978, 146). Even though feminist utopian fiction may range widely from stories of complete sexual polarization and segregation to that of LeGuin's own biologically androgynous Gethenians, Annas groups all of these stories as utilizing the concept of androgyny in some form or another. She argues that for the feminist writer androgyny functions as a metaphor that:

allows the writer to structure utopian visions that eliminate or transcend contradictions which she sees as crucial. These attempts to move from sexual polarization to androgyny are analogous to a movement in thought from dualism to a dialectical synthesis. (Annas 1978, 146)

Annas goes on to discuss some of the definitional challenges regarding the concept of androgyny within the literary tradition, in relation to her argument that androgyny allows the feminist writer to move towards a "dialectical synthesis." She argues that definitions of androgyny operate on two levels: psychological and social, and one she terms "the androgynous moment." By the latter she means that there exists either a "potential or actual" androgynous unity within all people (Annas 1978, 146). Androgyny as a concept, was at Annas' time of writing a term that was very inclusive and far-ranging in its definitions. Annas argues that this is a positive for the "utopian concern of feminist writers" because the amorphous concept of androgyny enables these writers to modify "sex roles to allow for full human development of each individual person" (Annas 1978, 146).

Historically, the problem for women writers when it came to the concept of androgyny had been that it had almost exclusively been employed by male writers extolling the completeness of man's (not woman's) being by accepting and realizing their feminine side. This rarely, if ever, happened the other way around. This is probably why some women/feminist writers are critical of the concept of androgyny, because they believe the image of a powerful woman is better suited to portray "energy, power, and movement" than that of the androgyne, which according to Cynthia Secor as mentioned in Annas, represents "static completion," instead of dialectical synthesis (Annas 1978, 146).

Annas on the other hand believes that it is necessary for women/feminist writers to work with the concept of androgyny to "create female characters who have recovered those aspects of themselves which are traditionally "masculine" yet nondestructive" (Annas 1978, 147). For Annas then, writing androgynously, or incorporating the androgynous concept as she defined it above – as a state of mind, or of society or simply within oneself, is an important part of the woman/feminist contribution to science fiction literature that is not impeded by its past historical use. It is also possible to imagine that Annas sees "writing androgynously" as simply writing without rigidly stereotyping based on sex and gender, as I would argue that this was a problem encountered especially within science fiction at the time, as pointed out by Russ in her article "Image of Women."

Annas provides LeGuin's *Left Hand* as an example (among several) of how androgyny

as a concept can be used by a female writer. Annas points out how the biological androgyny of the Gethenians have profound consequences for their society as a whole: no war, no rape, no division of labor by sex, little exploitation et cetera (Annas 1978, 150), and it is the envoy Genly Ai, a biological male, that must battle his own preconceptions to fully understand the Gethenians and accept them for what they are. It is in other words possible for LeGuin to depict a non-patriarchal, egalitarian society by utilizing the concept of androgyny and questioning her own society through the eyes of Genly as the outsider. Annas also addresses LeGuin's exclusive use of the masculine pronoun "he" throughout the novel, that Russ and other feminist critics took issue with. She argues that LeGuin has thus embodied in Genly Ai "the main problem feminists have had with the concept of androgyny: that it has usually been looked at and defined from a male perspective" (Annas 1978, 151). Even though this use of the masculine pronoun may be problematic for the reader, Annas argues that it shows the heterosexual male reader how Genly Ai comes to consciousness and transcends rigid dualism and sexual polarization (Annas 1978, 151). I believe Annas alludes to Genly's changing descriptions and interactions with the Gethenians at the end of *Left Hand*, when he has finally come to see them as they are, androgynous, and no longer derides their "femininity." Annas view comes into opposition with Russ' again, who seemed to view LeGuin's novel as having come up short due to there "being no women." Annas view is infinitely more positive, situating LeGuin as a writer who cleverly used the concept of androgyny to expose our own psychological, sociological and cultural conditioning when it comes to sex and gender.

Critics Craig and Diana Barrow continue the positive approach to LeGuin's *Left Hand* in their article "The Left Hand of Darkness": Feminism for men" (Barrow and Barrow 1987, 83-96), where they address what they consider to be the somewhat misplaced feminist criticism directed towards LeGuin, regarding the supposed gender injustice and lack of female representation in her novel. Craig and Diana Barrow argue the criticism is misplaced due to their belief that the intended audience for *Left Hand* is not women but men, and that LeGuin's intent is to address the biased, heterosexual male. Barrow and Barrow argue that the "feminist misunderstandings" arose due to this "failure" of comprehension on the feminist critics' side, and thus view the criticism as misguided since these critics do not consider LeGuin's authorial intent, such as Barrow and Barrow understands it (Barrow and Barrow 1987, 84). Barrow and Barrow also refer to LeGuin as a somewhat moderate feminist, who initially stated in her essay "Is Gender Necessary?" that she merely presented a worldview and not a feminist text per se, seemingly as another strike against the feminist criticism. For Barrow and Barrow,

“the major problem” of *Left Hand* has to do with what constitutes “a correct understanding” of androgyny (Barrow and Barrow 1987, 84). Quoting N.B Hayles, who states that “androgyny can be seen either as the augmentation and completion of the self or as a form of self-annihilation, the intrusion of the alien into the self” (Barrow and Barrow 1987, 85), Barrow and Barrow acknowledge that in the novel the male reader may readily relate to Genly Ai, who through his journey on Gethen augments and completes himself by discovering his “feminine” qualities, and that the female readers choice is not so readily available. This falls into line with what Annas explained was one of the issues when it came to the critical reception of the novel, that the concept of androgyny had historically been considered the masculine augmenting the self by subsuming the feminine “other.”

Barrow and Barrow also acknowledge LeGuin's concession to the critics, in that the novel's Gethenian protagonist Estraven, an androgynous “manwoman,” was not readily available for the female reader to identify with as “he” was not cast in traditionally “feminine” roles (Barrow and Barrow 1987, 85). This critique seems to be of minor importance to Barrow and Barrow however, as they spend the remainder of the article providing examples that illustrate how Genly Ai's role is to expose stereotypical male attitudes towards sex and gender (Barrow and Barrow 1987, 85). The matter of female representation is seemingly not so important for Barrow and Barrow, as they once again argue that LeGuin's authorial intent was to address the male reader through Genly Ai, and thus other elements of the novel may remain in the background.

Barrow and Barrow examine LeGuin's use of the concept of androgyny as rooted in her interest and belief in Taoism, where the main tenet is that “wholeness derives from a creative tension between dualities” (Barrow and Barrow 1987, 86). This duality consists of the interplay and balance between masculine and feminine traits, which are categorized into complementary, binary entities. Barrow and Barrow view this Taoist duality as an acceptable framework for grounding the concept of androgyny, unlike that of Plato's *Symposium*, where “lost halves of a divided self yearn for wholeness and an ending of division” (Barrow and Barrow 1987, 86). In Taoism the self and the other is neither incorporated nor obliterated, but “come into creative tension with the self” when the other and its “otherness is admitted and understood” and from the tension between self and other can “a new wholeness...emerge” (Barrow and Barrow 1987, 86). It is this that may be defined as the androgynous nature of LeGuin's work, according to Barrow and Barrow: “Genly Ai's coming to knowledge about a significant other” (Barrow and Barrow 1987, 86).

Critic Mona Fayad joins with Pamela J. Annas in arguing for the potential of an androgynous approach in literature. Fayad begins her article "Aliens, Androgynes and Anthropology: LeGuin's critique of representation in *The Left Hand of Darkness*" (Fayad 1997, 59-73) by detailing the problem of subject formation within gender studies and how the concept of androgyny may relate to this. She explains that "whether viewing gender as irreducible difference located in the body, or as a discursive construct," it is an argument that "has centered on a heterosexual norm that assumes a division between masculine and feminine identities, one that is specifically implicated in relations of power and domination" (Fayad 1997, 59). The historical alternative to this binarism of gendered subject formation Fayad argues, is the concept of androgyny that "functions as a third term that neutralizes the gendered way in which the subject is constructed," and that "androgyny can be seen as a space of resistance that redefines the ways in which gender identity is constructed" (Fayad 1997, 59). Fayad joins in with Annas in this regard, who argues that "androgyny is a metaphor" that allows the feminist writer to "move from sexual polarization to androgyny," away from being placed in an object position and towards being fully realized as a subject. There are however some problems with the term androgyny according to Fayad, one being that it is linguistically indeterminate, which was also pointed out by Annas, in that its definitions are so all-encompassing. Annas however believes this to be a positive, but the examples Fayad provides in her article paints a more problematized picture, where the inclusivity of the term is described by Daly (in Fayad) as "a vacuum that sucks its spellbound victims into itself" (Fayad 1997, 59). Another aspect Fayad points out mentioned by Annas and Barrow and Barrow alike, is the fact that the concept of androgyny historically is rooted in "patriarchal thought" (Fayad 1997, 59). Fayad directs us to Julia Kristeva's description of androgyny as understood in the western literary tradition, by looking at Plato's allegory of the androgynous being in *Symposium*. The androgyne is "a product of a patriarchal desire for wholeness which excludes femininity rather than accepting it," and androgyny then becomes just another way to assimilate otherness (Fayad 1997, 60). Scholars Helene Cixous' and Kari Weil's problematizations are also included; Cixous believes androgyny to be "a fantasy of unity" and that it "replaces the fear of castration and veils sexual difference," and Weil thinks it part of a "conservative, if not a misogynist tradition" where "the androgyne represents the dialectical synthesis of what is objectively known (identified as masculine) and the unknown Other (identified as feminine) who will make that knowledge complete" (Fayad 1997, 60). Within this context, the concept of androgyny may be a somewhat inadequate approach when it comes to creating a space free of so-called heterosexual binarism. Fayad asks if it is indeed



possible to "move beyond androgyny as a mere merging of gender roles in a polarization of traditional oppositions" and wonders if "androgyny, *as a category*" is "complicit in the cultural construction of gender" (Fayad 1997, 61). She admits that this is a difficult question with no clear cut answers and therefore she looks to speculative fiction, where "anatomical sex can be set aside in the interest of exploring the role of society in the construction of gender" (Fayad 1997, 61), specifically examining LeGuin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* when addressing the concept of androgyny within science fiction and its potential for discussing issues of gender in society.

For Fayad, it is not the actual construction of an androgynous people that is remarkable in LeGuin's novel, but rather her depiction of how these androgynes are perceived through the main protagonist Genly Ai, and how they are construed by Ekumen scientists. Fayad argues that LeGuin uses her background to write a science fiction story grounded within the anthropological tradition of documentary, but with no-one to "interpret" the information for the reader, leading them to draw their own conclusions untainted by scientific analysis that is culturally and sociologically biased (Fayad 1997, 62). Fayad joins in with Annas in her view of what *Left Hand* attempts to achieve: "The novel, consequently, preserves the *difference* of the alien culture and removes the observing neutral eye from the scene until the very end." It is through Genly Ai that LeGuin shows how gender is culturally constructed, by having this "neutral" investigator classify the androgynes he meets as more or less "masculine" or "feminine" (Fayad 1997, 62).

Fayad furthermore sees the need to address some of the criticism aimed at LeGuin's *Left Hand* in light of her own analysis. She argues that some critics may see LeGuin's attack on patriarchal binarism in her novel as also being an integration of it, and that this caused some to view the Gethenians as masculine and their androgyny as the traditional representation of it (Fayad 1997, 63). Fayad goes on to mention author Jewell Parker Rhodes, who critiques what she views as the novel's essentialist assumptions regarding androgyny as a balance between set feminine and masculine principles – and that this "reinforces damaging stereotypical male/female oppositions" (Fayad 1997, 63). Also mentioned are critics Patricia Lamb and Diana Veith, whose main issue with the novel is based on their perception of it as a "feminist critique of romantic love which tends to subordinate women," (Fayad 1997, 63) but also find the Gethenians being cast predominantly in traditionally masculine roles as problematic. Finally, Fayad mentions author Sarah Lefanu, who falls into line with Joanna Russ in believing LeGuin could have done more when it comes to using science fiction as a medium "for political experimentation through form." Lefanu furthermore argues that LeGuin

ignores the "problematics of sexual desire" and that the novel "offers a retreat from conflict" (Fayad 1997, 63).

Fayad argues that even though LeGuin's stated intention is to "abolish dualism...eliminate the struggle for dominance through assimilation" and therefore "denying difference", her novel "can be seen as a *parody* of the patriarchal need for assimilation and sameness, one in which the male eye is incapable of seeing anything other than what it wishes to construct" (Fayad 1997, 64). Fayad disagrees with Lefanu on the matter of conflict, arguing that the novel is "wrought with the tension between an imposed representation of the androgynes as gendered entities and the impossibility of ever fully capturing any "essence" that would identify who/what the androgyne really *is*." Fayad sees gender in the novel as an artifact, "which frames Genly Ai's discourse and his perception of himself as subject," that LeGuin invites the reader to question. In this way, the novel challenges the notion of absolute knowledge, neutral knowledge and "the cultural construction of gender identity" (Fayad 1997, 64).

Genly Ai's role as a scientific observer is used to show how the language of scientific discourse is perceived to be homogeneous and neutral, where those who categorize and label are the ones who "observes and appropriates," and "the object of knowledge" is "controlled, categorized, and hence contained" (Fayad 1997, 64-65). This separation is gendered according to Fayad, where the world is divided "into nature, which is feminine and submissive, and knowledge, which is masculine and dominant" (Fayad 1997, 65). Fayad argues that *Left Hand* mimics this "male scientific objectivity in its dominant relation to its object" through Genly Ai, and that "LeGuin draws attention to the fallibility of the supposed neutrality of the scientific eye" (Fayad 1997, 65) by setting Genly Ai up as an unreliable narrator and asserting that truth is relative. Fayad also mentions "master narratives" that are especially relevant to the novel, as master narratives project cultural assumptions onto their interpretation of other cultures and Genly interprets the Gethenians from his own "cultural imperialism which insists on its own superiority, a superiority based on the sameness of patriarchal vision" (Fayad 1997, 65).

Fayad points out how Genly's perceived superiority is proven as false in his relations to the environment and the Gethenians. He is poorly physically suited to live in the climate on Gethen, and is shown throughout the novel to have little control over events. Genly's dismissal of the "feminine" in the Gethenians is according to Fayad, a mechanism to protect his sense of self and especially masculine self. Fayad argues that Genly himself becomes briefly androgynous when he is traveling together with Estraven over the ice, but it does not

last. His androgyny was based on the coming together of himself and Estraven in an androgynous union that is dissolved upon Estraven's death.

In her article, Fayad argues that LeGuin writes androgynous resistance to appropriation, by showing how Genly Ai is unable to understand and depict the course of events as they are happening in the novel, subverting his role and authority as a "scientific" and "neutral" observer. Fayad argues that LeGuin thus resists what Fayad terms the "empire of the selfsame," which Ai tries to affirm through his imperialistic mission (Fayad 1997, 71). By this, Fayad means that Genly's reading of the Gethenians from his own cultural standpoint, is thwarted and he is unable to replicate and impose his own culture unto the Gethenians. For Fayad, LeGuin successfully disrupts the colonizing, patriarchal master narrative that seeks to define and dominate the "other."

In his article "Exorcising Gender: Resisting Readers in Ursula K. LeGuin's *Left Hand of Darkness*" (Pennington 2000, 351-358), John Pennington starts by reiterating some of the critiques as mentioned in Mona Fayad's article above, to use as a starting point for his own examination of LeGuin's novel. Critic Sarah Lefanu's disappointment in LeGuin's not "experimenting through form," and her claim that LeGuin's male characters "act as a dead weight at the center of the novel" are mentioned (Pennington 2000, 351). Pennington also includes author Jewell Parker Rhodes' critique, who thought LeGuin should have aspired to create new words to properly convey the Gethenians androgynous nature, instead of relegating them into binary male/female roles. Pennington boils these criticisms down to the matter of LeGuin's use of the English language and "traditional narrative conventions," as both Lefanu, Rhodes and others felt that LeGuin had "not quite escaped maledom" through her Gethenian androgynes (Pennington 2000, 351).

Pennington however, views the novel in a different light and wants to examine what *Left Hand* does to the reader: "it attempts to expose or escape patriarchy while simultaneously using traditional gender patterns familiar to the readers" (Pennington 2000, 352). Coming to LeGuin's defense in a manner of speaking, Pennington also points out that like all writers of science fiction, LeGuin was faced with the problem of trying to explain the impossible and alien by using "common language and largely conventional narrative structures," and that she like everyone else, is "controlled by language and the gender conventions of the reader's world" (Pennington 2000, 352). LeGuin was aware of these linguistic difficulties (although initially staunchly denied the possibility of finding an alternative to the masculine pronoun) but wanted nevertheless to discover what would be left when she "eliminated gender"

(LeGuin 1989, 10). However, many readers found that the use of the masculine pronoun took away from the novel. Pennington argues that this is not due to any particular failings on LeGuin's part, but stems in his view from the fact that readers "cannot escape their own gendered perspectives conditioned by society" (Pennington 2000, 352).

Pennington's argument regarding the matter is that the dialectic of having a female author writing to readers (male and female) about a genderless society "forces readers to become androgynous readers: readers are asked to resist reading from any gendered perspective" (Pennington 2000, 352). The result of such a request is to keep the reader continuously off guard and unsettled, mirroring Genly Ai's predicament in the novel as he is forced to confront gender from his own limited perspective" (Pennington 2000, 352-353). Pennington furthermore argues that "becoming resisting readers" is an act of feminist critique in itself, because American literature can be said to be "male" (Pennington 2000, 353). He therefore claims that when reading LeGuin's novel "both male and female readers become resisting readers, who must identify against their gendered selves and critique those stereotypes," and that therefore "The Left Hand of Darkness may be labeled an androgynous text that thwarts gendered reading" (Pennington 2000, 353).

Pennington furthermore argues that men and women read texts differently. Women must also become adept at reading so-called androcentric texts as well as feminist texts, and Pennington states that the two types of text evoke different kinds of reading. This, he suggests, could be why women readers had trouble with *Left Hand*, as it "is a simultaneously androcentric and feminist text" (Pennington 2000, 353), and that it was difficult for the female reader to connect to it as they had to try to read "as both male and female" (Pennington 2000, 354). This is however one of the obstacles the reader must overcome when it comes to the novel for Pennington: "As an androgynous text, this novel tempts us to misread it through our gendered eyes, correcting us and minding us of our limited perspectives" (Pennington 2000, 354).

Pennington further examines how LeGuin has gone about constructing what he argues to be an androgynous text, making use of shifting narrative foregrounds, debunking "gender stereotypes that clashes with readers' identity themes" et cetera. Perhaps most importantly is protagonist Genly Ai's introductory note where the matter of truth and storytelling is brought to the foreground as a way to point out to the reader that "Ai's text is an androcentric interpretation of the androgynous society he attempts to objectively describe" (Pennington 2000, 354). Through his journey, Genly will however "be challenged by his encounter with Gethen society, where he will have to reevaluate---to (re)-vise---his masculine perspective as

the reader evaluates Ai's struggle to understand an androgynous world" (Pennington 2000, 355). Pennington sees the novel as "a meta-reader-response narrative," as the reader echoes Genly's assumption/reassessment process in the novel through their reading (Pennington 2000, 355). The reader is "asked to read as both a man and a woman," through the other main character the androgyne Estraven, since "he" is quite literally "the other"/alien, and genderless (Pennington 2000, 355). Pennington is clear that he believes that the novel requires the same from men and women readers, as both are faced with "the negative hermeneutic of patriarchal control" due to the androgyne nature of the text (Pennington 2000, 356).

Pennington finds LeGuin's response to her critics in her revised essay, "Is Gender Necessary? Redux" (1987) and her concession that she had not explored androgyny "from a woman's point of view as well as a man's" to be somewhat ironic, as he thinks she "falls unwittingly into a gendered perspective that the book tries to resist, for the novel is simultaneously androcentric and feminist, thus inherently contradictory" (Pennington 2000, 356). For Pennington, LeGuin's initial claim to have "escaped maledom" is problematic, as he argues that it is "impossible to exorcise the female or the male mind" (Pennington 2000, 356). Conclusively, Pennington argues that *Left Hand* "works as a resistant text because it thematically addresses the murky gender arena by trying to structurally find a way to eliminate gendered perspectives," and that "the novel erases in reader's time gender dichotomy by keeping the reader off balance, forcing the reader to resist that gendered reading, ultimately exorcising the (fe) (male) mind" (Pennington 2000, 357). Pennington thus defines the androgynous nature of LeGuin's novel by it working, for him, as an androcentric and feminist text simultaneously. He therefore rejects most of the criticism that centers on perceived representation and matters of language, putting the onus of making the text work androgynously on the reader.

In her article "The Interpretative journey in Ursula K. LeGuin's *The Left hand of Darkness*," (Cornell 2001, 317-327) scholar Christine Cornell joins with Pennington in examining how readers interact with a text, specifically in *Left Hand*. Her emphasis lies not so much on the readers of *Left Hand*, as with how Genly Ai reads and interprets his surroundings. Cornell begins by looking briefly at the general diversity of the critical response to *Left Hand*, positing that "there is no agreement on central themes of even the basic trajectory of the plot" (Cornell 2001, 317). She believes that these differences are "too extreme to be explained away by pointing to the diversity of methodological approaches" and that only an "examination of the interaction between this work and its readers can illuminate

unresolved critical issues and explain some of the frustration readers and critics have expressed” (Cornell 2001, 317). For Cornell, *Left Hand* is structured in such a way that the reader “is restrained so that he or she must retrace Genly Ai’s (the human protagonist’s) intellectual and emotional development while following his physical journey” (Cornell 2001, 317). Cornell is as she puts it “conscious” of adding another element to the slew of varying critiques of the novel, but believes herself justified, referring to Pamela J. Annas view that there are some “problems for the reader as noted by various critics” (Cornell 2001, 317). Annas sums these problems up as being: “a male narrator, the use of masculine pronouns as the generic, and the depiction of androgynous Estraven in roles traditionally perceived as masculine” (Cornell 2001, 317-318).

Cornell examines the issues with “the male narrator and with the masculine pronouns,” by looking at how Genly Ai is a reader of both the culture and people of Gethen, and how he is also a narrator (Cornell 2001, 318). Cornell argues that since Genly is the only man on Gethen he has to come to terms with his own uniqueness as such, and “copes by assigning gender to the people around him” (as previously addressed by Pennington). Genly does this on the most basic level by initially reading the Gethenians as male, referring to them by using the masculine pronoun. In addition, qualities that do not fit in with Genly’s reading of the Gethenians as male, qualities that he finds “suspicious or disconcerting” are categorized as feminine (Cornell 2001, 318). Cornell argues that the critics claiming LeGuin had created “a world of men,” did not fully grasp that LeGuin was having the reader interpret the Gethenians vicariously through Genly’s eyes. Cornell believes LeGuin’s approach to be inevitable, as it would have been “a false imposition” to have Genly imagine a world only populated by women or indeed even half of each sex (Cornell 2001, 318).

Cornell does in this sense join with Pennington in refuting Sarah Lefanu's claim that "there are no women" on Gethen and argues that the "problem" lies instead with there being only one man on the planet (Cornell 2001, 318). Cornell, like Pennington, views Genly as a reader who has "populated the planet with others like himself," Cornell quoting Wolfgang Iser on what happens when a reader faces textual gaps, which is to "reduce a text in order to grasp a specific meaning" (Cornell 2001, 318). According to Cornell, "Genly responds as all colonists do" and perceives the Gethenians and their culture from within his own, making it into something familiar that he can try to understand (Cornell 2001, 318-319). Cornell's argument is that Genly is reacting drastically to "the text" presented to him on Gethen and, in some instances, tries to "throw the book away," to preserve and "continue his own preconceptions." This is Genly the narrator's deficiency as a reader and initially he "blithely

identifies with that which seems familiar," only to be betrayed by "his tendency to be over-dependent on appearances" (Cornell 2001, 319). He must however revise his preconceptions based on behavior that contradicts these during his interpretative journey. Cornell mentions that although some critics think that Genly does not learn from his experiences, critics such as Pamela J. Annas and Craig and Diana Barrow maintains that this is not the case. Annas sees Genly's journey in *Left Hand* as his "...gradual coming to consciousness, his own conceptual transcendence of dualism and sexual polarization" (Annas 1978, 151), and Craig and Diana Barrow examines Genly's growth from a "self-righteous figure" (Barrow and Barrow 1987, 87) to someone who sees "the sexual balance of Gethenians as desirable" (Barrow and Barrow 1987, 94). This is according to Cornell due to true communication finally being attained, when Genly and Estraven must traverse the ice together to return to Karhide (Cornell 2001, 320).

Cornell then continues to examine the use of the masculine pronoun in the novel. She believes that altering the pronouns to gender-neutral would "fundamentally alter the experience of reading this novel," due to Genly knowing "on some basic level that he is being inaccurate" and that "we know he is being inaccurate." This trap of language shows us how language itself is gendered and how Genly has a "tendency to masculinize the world around him" (Cornell 2001, 323). She claims gender-neutral pronouns would have attributed Genly with a level of awareness that "he achieves only toward the end of his experiences with Estraven" (Cornell 2001, 323). Cornell acknowledges that "There is no doubt that the pronouns are an additional burden on the reader, but they are a valuable part of our education" (Cornell 2001, 323). In conclusion, Cornell understands how the criticism towards *Left Hand* developed, as the novel requires much of the reader and may call forth a drastic reaction as it contradicts the readers' preconceptions (Cornell 2001, 324). As Cornell succinctly puts it, we are confused, annoyed and misled by Genly's narrative, but it is necessary that we as readers take part in Genly's education, to better understand our own misconceptions and "misreadings."

In critic Wendy Gay Pearson's article "Postcolonialism/s, Gender/s, Sexuality/ies and the Legacy of *The Left Hand of Darkness*: Gwyneth Jones's Aleutians Talk back" (Pearson 2007, 182-196), Pearson aims to examine LeGuin's *Left Hand* and Gwyneth Jones's Aleutians from her Aleutian trilogy by examining how these approach sexuality and gender, grounded in "science fiction, postcolonial theory and...predominantly queer theory," emphasising "the relationship between racialized and gendered identities and the colonial/postcolonial

condition” (Pearson 2007, 183).

What Pearson finds interesting in LeGuin's and Jones' novels, is that they both present a people that are in her words hermaphroditic, with a culture seemingly comparable to our own, that "overtly refute the (Euramerican) human insistence on duality and binary thinking"(Pearson 2007, 184). Pearson seems to be another critic that sees LeGuin's Genly as having learned through his experiences by the end of his journey, as she argues that for him, "the Gethenians have become Self and the humans Other/Alien" (Pearson 2007, 184). Pearson believes *Left Hand* (and Aleutians) can be “read as interrogations of our current sex/gender system and its implications for the relations between women and men” (Pearson 2007, 184), falling in line with Barrow and Barrow and Cornell above. Pearson is also positively inclined towards what LeGuin achieved in *Left Hand*, stating that it:

most effectively established within SF the possibility that the genre might produce works capable of powerfully critiquing colonial forms of economic exchange and their inherent underpinning in discourses that produce both cultural, or, as Michel Foucault would say, both statist and biologized and thus institutional forms of racism, sexism, and homophobia. (Pearson 2007, 184)

Furthermore, Pearson sees *Left Hand* as a central work that links “issues of gender and race to the history and legacy of colonialism” (Pearson 2007, 184) and even though Pearson does not think the exploration between “gender, sexuality, alterity, and colonialism” is very explicit in *Left Hand*, "they remain part of the genealogy of postcolonial science fiction" (Pearson 2007, 185). LeGuin quietly making her main protagonist a black man, describing the Gethenians as brown in color and turning the colonizing narrative around, are probably some of the postcolonial elements Pearson alludes to.

Pearson also addresses some of the criticism towards *Left Hand*, such as many finding the use of the masculine pronouns for the Gethenians disagreeable. She points out that even though that is the case, the Gethenian's sexual cycle is comparable to the female menstrual cycle, which situates their bodies more in the realm of human women's experience (Pearson 2007, 185). Furthermore, LeGuin has given the Gethenians characteristics that are not usually linked to contemporary human societies, that are perhaps more associated with the feminine or the native/Other, such as being "less organized, less aggressive, less technologically oriented, and less driven by teleological narratives" (Pearson 2007, 185). Pearson seems in this way to find "markers" of the feminine or Other that other critics either do not see or ignore. She believes that the most vocal critics have perhaps focused too much and too



narrowly on certain elements (such as the masculine pronoun), ignore the other significant contributions of *Left Hand*. For Pearson, LeGuin's work has had a great impact on later science fiction writing and she states that:

LeGuin's legacy of thought experiment in anticolonial gender construction underlies, consciously or otherwise, in admiration or dissatisfaction, contemporary work, particularly by writers of feminist SF. That legacy provokes subsequent generations of SF writers to call into question the production of gender in colonial conditions. (Pearson 2007, 186)

Pearson considers *Left Hand* a significant contribution to science fiction literature, as it opened up and entered seriously into the conversation on gender, encouraging later feminist and female science fiction writers to do the same.

Another important aspect Pearson points out in LeGuin's novel is how it deals with "the question of alterity," meaning "the alterity that the sex/gender system creates for us as a society" and "the alterity that allows the construction of Us and Them, of a binary that is automatically hierarchical, so that They are always less (human) than We" (Pearson 2007, 189). In *Left Hand* alien-ness and othering is exposed for what it is – a social construction – through Genly seeing the Gethenians as “other” and the Gethenians in turn seeing Genly as the anomaly, both characterizations being proven wrong (Pearson 2007, 191).

Pearson goes on to address what she considers a critical moment in *Left Hand*, when Genly and Estraven refrain from engaging sexually with each other on their journey over the ice. She argues that "this encounter works as a reversal of the cultural expectation that sex reveals the truth of the self" and that "rather than a sexual encounter revealing their true natures, Genly argues that it would only have made them alien to each other" (Pearson 2007, 193). For Pearson, any such encounter would always cast Genly as male and Estraven as female, which would increase the distance between them, since Genly believes that "women are more alien to human men than are Gethenians" (Pearson 2007, 193). Therefore they can never truly know one another, as Estraven will always embody a part of "the female other", but they embrace one another as equals none the less" (Pearson 2007, 193). Other critics also addressed this particular point in the novel, such as for example Patricia F. Lamb and Diana L. Veith who argues that not including a sexual encounter between Genly and Estraven expresses homophobia, as they read Estraven as male and thus such an encounter would for them be homosexual in nature. More recent critics, such as Pennington and Cornell, do not hold to any such position, as they believe the reader must resist a gendered reading of the novel to be able

to read the text androgynously (Pearson 2007, 193).

Pearson herself is of the opinion that LeGuin was justified in having no sexual encounter between Genly and Estraven. She argues this could only lead to certain outcomes based on how Genly views the world (masculinizing his surroundings) and that it would have undermined the androgynous/postcolonial aspects of the novel. Such an encounter could either have been homosexual or that between a man/woman, and would only have functioned to reify gender, denying Estraven's androgynous nature (Pearson 2007, 194). In addition, the relationship between Estraven and Genly is one of equals, something Genly "does not quite believe possible with women" (Pearson 2007, 195). For Genly to engage in a sexual encounter would then be to "revive the specter of interracial sex and miscegenation that has so occupied the anxieties of colonizer and colonized alike" (Pearson 2007, 195). Pearson argues that Genly and Estraven could not have met in that manner, as it would risk "undoing LeGuin's imaginative creation of the Ekumen as an actively and decisively anticolonial body" (Pearson 2007, 195).

Pearson concludes that although neither LeGuin nor Jones presented the reader with "a utopian solution to the problem of gender in a postcolonial world," they illustrated "how gender works in the world and how its workings might be changed or even eliminated" (Pearson 2007, 196)

## **Chapter 2: Textual analysis of LeGuin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*: Gendering the androgynous**

In this chapter, I examine LeGuin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), grounding my analysis primarily in the critical discussions of the previous chapter. I examine how LeGuin employs the concept of androgyny to question and explore attitudes towards sex and gender, specifically how she exposes and challenges sex and gender stereotyping, primarily through the narrative voice of the main protagonist Genly Ai. I will examine passages from the novel where Genly assigns gender to the androgynous Gethenians and will look at both overt and covert instances of gendering. The overt instances are included to show how the readers are exposed to and take part in the gender stereotyping of the Gethenians through Genly's observations. Then I will examine some instances where the instances of gendering may be perceived as more ambiguous or hidden, which functions to illustrate how much gendering informs Genly's perceptions of the Gethenians. I believe that both the overt and covert instances of gendering taking place in the novel were carefully deliberated on LeGuin's part to make her point, but I think that this approach may also, as Hargreaves claims, further lock into place the dichotomy of gendered difference. I furthermore think that LeGuin's use of androgyny in *Left Hand* is enabling her to explore and question assumptions regarding "natural social arrangements" (Latham 2017, 201), but does fall somewhat short on questioning the notions of whether or not masculinity and femininity are "innate values." LeGuin does however in my opinion manage to create a "third alternative," as mentioned by Attebery in *Decoding Gender*, questioning gender stereotypes by using the concept of androgyny as a tool for doing so.

The critics reviewed in chapter one have all explored many interesting approaches to LeGuin's *Left Hand* and her examination of sex and gender by employing the concept of androgyny. Their views are both converging and diverging as to whether the concept of androgyny could successfully be employed to examine feminist issues, but the majority of those included here felt that LeGuin achieved her goal. The majority of these critics also believe that the feminist criticism towards her novel was either too harsh, or beside the point of what they believe the novel achieves, making the matter of female gender role representation or the use of the masculine first-person pronoun less important for their discussions.

There are many different perspectives on how androgyny works in LeGuin's *Left Hand*. Joanna Russ argued that the androgynous element in *Left Hand* functioned more as an exploration of "male androgyny," leading to an erasure of the female viewpoint. Pamela J. Annas believes that LeGuin's use of the concept of androgyny created an alternative to the traditional binary sex/gender dichotomy, which could lead to a "dialectical synthesis" between the binary and non-binary systems for constructing gender. Craig and Diana Barrow view LeGuin's androgyny as rooted in Taoist dualism, where the androgyny of the Gethenians may be seen as the psychological and spiritual balance between the complementary and binary masculine and feminine entities, that together forms a whole. Mona Fayad considers androgyny as a third alternative to the binary division into the masculine and feminine, which challenges the way gender identity and the perception of oneself as a gendered subject is constructed. She argues that the readers of *Left Hand* are shown through Genly's observations how gender is a social construct and may be seen as a parody of a patriarchal need for assimilation and sameness, challenging the notion of a "scientific," "neutral" observer. John Pennington argues that the androgynous nature of *Left Hand* lies in the reader's interaction with the text. He claims that LeGuin forces the male and female readers to resist a gendered reading by writing about a genderless society, creating an androgynous text that challenges the gendered perspectives of the readers. Christine Cornell argues that LeGuin portrays Genly as a reader and narrator that reads his surroundings androcentrically. This reading is challenged by the androgynous "text" and the reader of *Left Hand* is made to take part in Genly's interpretative journey as he grows and reassesses his preconceptions. Finally, Wendy Gay Pearson argues that LeGuin's approach to androgyny in *Left Hand* enables her to successfully question the sex/gender system, and its consequences for the relations between men and women, questioning the binary system that divides in us/them and self/other.

In my analysis, I will be joining in with Cornell's interpretation of Genly as a reader, who interprets the text androcentrically. The sex and gender system is questioned and challenged by showing how Genly's interpretations do not reflect any "objective" reality but is rather an expression of Genly's flawed reading. This, as Pearson argues, highlights the consequences such a binary system has on the relations between the sexes and tries to show that there is another alternative. It is in this context that I will examine Genly's gendering of his surroundings and how this illuminates gender as a social construct.

### **Instances of overt gendering in *The Left Hand of Darkness***

In this section, I focus on a handful of instances in the novel where the main protagonist Genly clearly assigns gender to the androgynous Gethenians in his interactions and observations of them. These instances illustrate for the reader that Genly is interpreting the world around him from a gendered perspective, most probably representing notions that reflected the stereotypical, heterosexual, white males of LeGuin's time, whose assumptions regarding sex and gender she wanted to challenge. In the previous chapter on the critical reception of the novel, I mentioned that there were critics who thought LeGuin came up short in her feminist aspirations, due to a perceived lack of female representation in the novel. I on the other hand, believe that LeGuin was to a certain (and significant) degree successful in creating a novel that was using science fiction to its true potential as a genre for "exploring social change" (Annas 1978, 143). I also believe it gave women and feminist writers a "third alternative" for exploring feminist issues through the concept of androgyny.

In *Left Hand* LeGuin, presents this alternative by exploring how the androgynous people on Gethen are not constrained or defined by biological or social gender. By detailing the protagonist's observations and experiences, as well as his interaction and developing relationship with the Gethenian Estraven, LeGuin challenges the reader's preconceptions and biases when it comes to biological sex, gender and gender roles. This is achieved by showing that Genly's thoughts and actions towards the Gethenians are rooted in and stemming from patriarchal culture and how this creates a false reality that hampers him in achieving his goal. Estraven, the Gethenian closest to Genly Ai, is cast as his foil, as "he" lives in a culture that does not designate human traits along these binary concepts of feminine or masculine. Estraven functions to balance Genly's constant gendering, by showing how Gethenian language and interactions are free from gendered metaphor. Genly's perception of what constitutes accepted gender-expressions is in this way contrasted to Estraven's and the Gethenian society's lacking ontological understanding of social gender constructs. Genly's gendering of the Gethenians as male is continually challenged throughout the novel, primarily by jolting his sense of what is acceptable gendered behavior.

Genly's conduct on Gethen is based on what I would argue to be a broken expectation of what he considers accepted gender expressions. His notions of what acceptable masculine or feminine behavior is, as rooted in his own culture, does not apply to Gethen and he experiences continued cultural shocks in his daily interactions. These ingrained and learned preconceptions of what acceptable behavior based on sex and gender is, makes him unable to

engage with the Gethenians on a meaningful level and complicates his ability to communicate with them. This hinders Genly in his mission as envoy on behalf of the interplanetary Ekumen and portrays how such biases may interfere with and hamper interpersonal relationships.

In the following, I will look at some instances from the novel that I believe portray the most prominent examples of Genly's overt gendering of the Gethenians. As I have established above, Genly has difficulties with engaging with the Gethenians without assigning gender and he designates them as male by default: "Wiping sweat from his dark forehead the man---*man* I must say, having said *he* and *his*---the man answers" (LeGuin 1969, 5). Cornell's argument for understanding Genly as a reader and narrator of the Gethenian "text," describes in my opinion well what mechanism lies behind LeGuin's depictions of Genly's interpretations. As Cornell argues, he responds to the "text" of his surroundings in the only way he can, by reading it androcentrically. LeGuin shows the reader this in the passage above, that even though Genly knows he is wrong in his categorization, he cannot help but gender the Gethenians as male, seeking to give meaning to his surroundings in a way that he can comprehend. However, reality cannot be negated by one's beliefs and convictions and Genly's androcentric perspective and perception is soon challenged when he is invited to dinner by Estraven in a manner he interprets as unbecoming:

Estraven had done a great deal for me in the last six or eight months, but I did not expect or desire such a show of personal favor as an invitation to his house. Harge reminds Tibe was still close to us, overhearing, and I felt that he was meant to overhear.

Annoyed by this sense of effeminate intrigue I got off the platform (LeGuin 1969, 7-8)

Genly's perception of Estraven the "man" is distorted by what Genly deems to be behavior unbecoming of a man, given away by his categorization of intrigue as "effeminate," clearly connecting negative connotations to what he perceives as feminine behavior. This is the first clear instance in the novel where a certain type of behavior is coded as feminine, thereby casting Estraven as womanly and therefore "less than" a man. In the next passage where Estraven is gendered, Genly does however wonder to himself if his reactions towards Estraven are affected by what he perceives to be feminine traits that he observes in Estraven, fueling his feelings of distrust towards the Gethenian:

Thus as I sipped my smoking sour beer I thought that at table Estraven's performance had been womanly, all charm and tact and lack of substance, specious and adroit. Was it perhaps this soft supple femininity that I disliked and distrusted in him? For it was

impossible to think of him as a woman, that dark, ironic, powerful presence near me in the firelit darkness, and yet whenever I thought of him as a man I felt a sense of falseness, of imposture: in him, or in my own attitude towards him? His voice was soft and rather resonant but not deep, scarcely a man's voice, but scarcely a woman's voice either (LeGuin 1969, 12)

Genly, who is reading Estraven as male even though he knows it to be incorrect, cannot easily accept Estraven's display of what Genly perceives and attributes to the feminine. Genly is clearly attributing value to these "feminine" traits that reflect an underlying binary system of thinking, where generally, the good/bad dichotomy reflects the masculine/feminine. Charm and tact are not inherently feminine qualities, or negative for that matter, but combined with the more negatively connotated "specious," "adroit," and "lack of substance" these become negatively valued markers of "feminine" behavior. Genly also deems Estraven's behavior a "performance," which may be interpreted in a number of ways, but here most likely as the performance of "femininity," which Genly cannot reconcile with his reading of Estraven as a man. Genly's negative response reflects his broken expectations of what constitutes "correct" gender performance.

In addition to this, there is also another element that devalues Estraven in the eyes of Genly. That is, as explained by Attebery in the introduction, the fact that in a binary, hierarchical sex and gender system, those who perform "masculinity" may be seen as having added value to their performance, while those who perform "femininity" has taken value away. In Genly's interpretation of Estraven's performance, he views Estraven the "man" as devalued due to "his" performance of "feminine" behavior. Genly's distrust may therefore stem from a position where traits associated with femininity, especially when displayed by men, is seen as a sort of attack on masculinity and maledom. In particular, it may be seen as an attack on Genly's sense of gendered self. If being a "man" is not defined by being "not woman," then what defines Genly as a man socially?

Another instance of where Genly is clearly assigning gender, and associating perceived femininity negatively is closely connected to traits and qualities that are associated with the body. In patriarchal societies, the male body is seen as the norm, while that of the female is seen as "other." The most obvious example of this is how the menstrual cycle is viewed and handled in patriarchal cultures, where it is considered taboo, unclean, shameful, et cetera. It is possible to see how Genly norms the female body as "other" in his consideration of the proprietor at his place of residency in Karhide:

He was the superintendent of my island; I thought of him as my landlady, for he had fat buttocks that wagged as he walked, and a soft fat face, and a prying, spying, ignoble, kindly nature. He was good to me, and also showed my room while I was out to thrill-seekers for a small fee: See the Mysterious Envoy's room! He was so feminine in looks and manner that I once asked him how many children he had. He looked glum. He had never borne any. He had, however, sired four. It was one of the little jolts I was always getting. Cultural shock was nothing much compared to the biological shock I suffered as a human male among human beings who were, five-sixths of the time, hermaphroditic neuters." (LeGuin 1969, 48)

Genly genders his Gethenian proprietor as "female," basing this on a set of markers that within his own culture is perceived as "feminine," such as being fat, inquisitive, chatty and so forth. None of these traits are inherently gendered, but there is a connection between considering a trait to be feminine and it being viewed as negative, especially in Genly's descriptions of the Gethenians. In this case, it is how Genly perceives his "landlady's" body that is interesting. That which Genly perceives as feminine is the proprietor's fatness, softness of features and body-language, leading him to wrongly sex the Gethenian as female, as witnessed in Genly's asking how many children the proprietor has borne. The fact that the proprietor has never been a mother, but instead a father several times, challenges the view of what is "natural." This division into binary categories of fat/thin and soft/hard, which are in turn corresponding to the masculine/feminine dichotomy, shows the readers how these are a construction as opposed to an inherent quality. Genly's perceptions, and that of the novel's readers, are questioned by having these notions exposed and challenged in such a manner.

Genly's negative reactions towards the qualities, traits and behaviors he categorizes as feminine are made apparent many times over. Another interesting aspect of Genly's gendering is how it functions as a part of his construction of a gendered subject, as mentioned by Fayad in the previous section. His sense of masculine self is built partly on his understanding of being "not woman" and not performing femininity. I argue that Genly's negative reactions to the Gethenians he perceives as "men," performing "femininity" is due in part to a fear of being perceived as "other" himself. If the Gethenians' androgynous nature means that the sex and gender dichotomy that informs his identity as a gendered self is untrue or false, then his sense of self can also be said to be untrue. His insistence therefore on keeping to this binary when interacting with the Gethenians, can be said to be a kind of self-preservation.

In these instances where Genly genders the Gethenians, I have shown that he attributes



negative values towards that which he perceives as feminine, after a hierarchical system where being "masculine" and male is better than being "feminine" or female. Certain traits and characteristics are attributed as being "feminine" and usually undesirable, and Genly distances himself further from the Gethenians as he reads these as "men" who embrace these feminine traits. In this way, Genly's reactions expose some of the negative consequences of such a rigid system. It casts women, or those performing "femininity" as "other," and to be associated with this is to risk losing value and losing self. This gender stereotyping is also reinforced and perpetuated by being seen as "natural," leading to a policing of what is considered fitting behavior according to sex and gender. In recent times, a term called "toxic masculinity" has been established to describe such cultural notions that devalue both women, men and others, based on certain expressions of "masculinity." It often encourages toxic, sexist behaviors, and limits and categorizes the accepted gender-expressions allowed to each sex. Even though "toxic masculinity" was not a term that existed when LeGuin wrote *Left Hand*, I believe that it may in many instances help to explain Genly Ai's actions and reactions. It is an expression of the discriminatory notions governing sex and gender expressions that are rooted in culture and society.

I argue that this "toxic masculinity" is exemplified in Genly's attitude towards the Gethenians. As he perceives himself as the only "proper" man on Gethen (not explicitly, but implicitly), he exhibits a sense of masculine superiority. When Genly finds himself in dire straits, having been arrested and sent on his way to a detention facility, he still perceives himself as somehow "stronger" and set apart from his fellow detainees in the prison transport, taking them to their ultimate destination. On one occasion, Genly sits beside one of the other prisoners, who is seeking contact and is casually touching him and talking to him. Up until that point, Genly has been preoccupied with the harsh reality of his situation and has observed his fellow detainees as generally "dull." Upon realizing that the person beside him is going into kemmer as a female however, his perception changes and he sees "a girl, a filthy, pretty, stupid, weary girl looking up into my face as she talked, smiling timidly, looking for solace" (LeGuin 1969, 171). Genly sees himself as superior to the Gethenian that has entered into kemmer as a woman, or a "girl." I find it interesting to note that it is when this Gethenian is sexed as a woman (due to his male presence) that Genly suddenly notices "her," and uses descriptors such as "pretty," "stupid," and "timid," which he could hardly have used describing a man without some kind of explanation for negating homosexual overtures and insult. The Gethenian, whose body now is sexed as female, is also described as "filthy" and looking for "solace." I find it peculiar that the matter of cleanliness only becomes important

when Genly sees the Gethenian as female, whose need to connect sexually becomes imperative during kemmer. This connection between what is manifest female sexuality and uncleanliness is yet another of the subtler cues as to how the sex and gender dichotomy devalues the female body and sexuality. Genly himself is presumably just as filthy and is furthermore always sexed as male, but still perceives himself as superior and apart.

In this last example of overt gendering, Genly still has not come to a fuller understanding of how vulnerable he really is, and his sense of masculine superiority is once again expressed in observations of the inmates and guards at the detention facility he been imprisoned in. Here, the connection between inferiority, femininity and the female body is made explicit in Genly's descriptions:

stolid, slovenly, heavy, and to my eyes-not in the sense of delicacy, etc., but in just the opposite sense: a gross, bland fleshiness, a bovinity without point or edge. Among my fellow-prisoners I had also for the first time on Winter a certain feeling of being a man among women, or among eunuchs. The prisoners had that same fleshiness and coarseness. They were hard to tell apart; their emotional tone seems always low, their talk trivial. (LeGuin 1969, 177)

Genly genders and defines all these negative attributes as feminine, likening these Gethenians to something not even human, but beastlike in their "otherness." These people, categorized as "female," are gross, or animal-like, fleshy, trivial, et cetera. It is probably the most succinct example of the novel that exposes how much these negatively gendered attributions create a distinction between "human" and "other." Genly is rejecting "the text," as mentioned by Cornell, so thoroughly due to the circumstances of his situation. To sympathize or relate with his fellow prisoners would be to cast himself as the other, which would be detrimental to his sense of self as "man."

### **Ambiguous or covert gendering in *The Left Hand of Darkness***

In the following, I will examine some of the passages in *Left Hand* that may come across as ambiguous with regards to Genly's gendering of the Gethenians. I argue that the provided examples are also subject to gendering and that they function to further immerse and make complicit the reader in Genly Ai's "interpretative journey," as we as readers are asked to assume his position and experience the journey as he did in the novel. I believe that in

addition to Cornell's argument for Genly as a reader/narrator, critic Wendy Pearson's thoughts on the novel are also relevant, as she argues that *Left Hand* can be read as an interrogation of our current sex/gender system and its implications for the relations between men and women. Thus, the readers' "forced" identification with Genly allows them to take part in his emotional and intellectual development through his physical journey, echoing Genly's assumption/reassessment process, helping them identify and challenge the gendered stereotypes in the text.

As the previously mentioned example passages of overt gendering have helped to illustrate, Genly Ai is made out to be a man who is affected by the patriarchal culture he grew up in, expressed most clearly in his tendency to attribute "masculine" traits and behaviors as positive, and "feminine" traits/behaviors as negative. These instances are made apparent by Genly connecting some perceived "feminine" quality, behavior, or bodily appearance/function to negative descriptors. However, there are many instances where Genly is made to feel distrustful or uneasy, that may not be so easily recognized as Genly's biases coming into play. I will examine some passages where Genly's gendering of his surroundings is more covert, and his negative emotions are a consequence of his broken expectations of gendered behavior, that is - where the Gethenians he has coded as "male" in some way or other perform as "female."

Throughout the novel, it is more often than not in Genly's relationship with Estraven feelings of distrust on Genly's part comes to the surface. Genly explains initially that it may be in the nature of every person to distrust a politician, but I would argue that these emotions are a consequence of Genly perceiving certain aspects of Estraven's behavior as "feminine" on a subconscious level. Early on, the readers are given the impression of Estraven as being quite "masculine" by Genly's descriptions of "him," and by "his" official position as prime minister. However, Genly feels that something is amiss when he considers the "man" and states: "I don't trust Estraven, whose motives are forever obscure; I don't like him; yet I feel and respond to his authority as surely as I do to the warmth of the sun" (LeGuin 1969, 7). At first glance, this statement might not induce any particular thoughts as to why Genly feels this way, but I would argue that the use of binary opposites and symbolic imagery clarifies the gendered nature of the statement. Here two perceived qualities in Estraven are set up against each other, that he is secretive and that he is powerful. For Genly, these two come into conflict, as being secretive is traditionally attributed to the "feminine" realm and authoritative to the masculine. Moreover, being "obscure" or unclear is often associated with feminine communicative styles, while directness is valued as a communicative norm more often found

in masculine communicative styles. Genly's response therefore is negative, as he finds Estraven to be distrustful due to "his" secretiveness that is coded as "feminine," but also because of Estraven's authoritative presence, which Genly sees as "masculine" and which he cannot help but respond to. There is also the factor of Genly having gendered Estraven as masculine, and thus a display of "feminine" characteristics, to a large degree unacceptable or frowned upon in patriarchal cultures, further instills a sense of distrust, even though Genly is aware that he is misgendering Estraven.

Distrust based on gendered modes of communication is something that will very much define Genly's relationship with Estraven onwards, who ironically is the only person on Gethen who has wholeheartedly believed in his mission and has tried to back it politically. However, Genly's underlying unease towards Estraven is (to him) only confirmed, when after a meal at Estraven's residence, "he" explains to Genly that "he" has fallen out of favor with the king and has not been able to directly champion Genly's cause:

He spoke as if ashamed of me, not of himself. There was a significance in his invitation and my acceptance of it that I had missed. But my blunder was in manners, his in morals. All I thought at first was that I had been right all along not to trust Estraven. He was not merely adroit and not merely powerful, he was faithless.  
(LeGuin 1969, 12)

The significance is that Estraven is now finally able to overtly back Genly's mission, but Genly sees only betrayal in these actions. The lack of understanding on Genly's part for the socio-political situation existing in Karhide leads him to draw conclusions based in his own cultural perspective, which values masculine communicative forms that call for directness and openness. So the sense of distrust is cemented as Genly feels betrayed and attributes it to a lack of morals on Estraven's part.

In the novel, LeGuin created a communicative mode that she called "shifgrethor," which consists mainly of saving face and gaining prestige in conversation, and functions as a socially acceptable mode for displaying aggression. "Shifgrethor" is seemingly LeGuin's way to highlight how feminine and masculine communicative modes differ and are valued. By making Shifgrethor, which is perceived as "feminine" due to its focus on indirectness, the normative mode of communication on Gethen and Genly's "masculine" mode of communication the "other," another layer of how gender functions is brought to light and questioned. LeGuin also illustrates through Genly how communication coded as feminine is dismissed and viewed negatively, echoing many communicative situations that take place in

real life. The communicative difficulties between Genly and Estraven are, for example, attributed by Genly to shifgrethor and Estraven's personal failings, blaming "his" "effeminate deviousness" (LeGuin 1969, 14), with Genly taking little to no responsibility for their communicative breakdowns. This refusal and unwillingness to understand is a pattern that can also be observed in interpersonal interactions in our own societies, where it is accepted in patriarchal cultures that the masculine mode of communication is "correct," clear, and easily understandable, whereas the feminine mode of communication is "other," unclear and convoluted. In this instance therefore, it is natural to view shifgrethor as the near equivalent of a "feminine" mode of communication, and Genly's unwillingness to make an effort to understand it (expressed in his overall inability to make any educated guesses) when it comes to its use in daily conversation and his devaluation of shifgrethor itself. This examination of communicative differences that are valued differently is one of the ways that LeGuin looks at the implications the gender dichotomy has for interpersonal relations, as Pearson suggests LeGuin's approach made possible.

This dismissiveness and distrust Genly has towards Estraven makes Genly unable to recognize advice when it is "finally" given to him, that he should seek support for his cause in the nation of Orgoreyn. Instead, his obtuseness deriving from an unwillingness to understand based on his perception of the "feminine" elements of shifgrethor, leads him to read Estraven as purposefully obstructive:

I had no idea what he was driving at, but was sure that he did not mean what he seemed to mean. Of all the dark, obstructive, enigmatic souls I had met in this bleak city, his was the darkest. I would not play his labyrinthine game. (LeGuin 1969,19)

The gendering of Estraven is evident in Genly's use of language, which may not seem gendered at first glance. Being unclear is one of those traits that is often attributed to the feminine, and also the image of "the dark, obstructive, enigmatic" is used to signify the feminine in a binary symbolic system, as opposed to light, open and unhidden. It portrays something that is not quite possible to understand, something that is "other" in this context, as the use of "labyrinthine" also suggests. The distrust Genly feels towards Estraven stems from his distrust and disdain for the "feminine" aspects he observes in "his" personality and interactions. This leads only to a breakdown in relations, as Genly is unable to engage with Estraven as an equal.

Genly's reactions are an expression of how he as a reader of Gethenian culture and society, must come to terms with the deeply ingrained notions regarding sex and gender. His

sense of what is "natural" and right is constantly challenged on Gethen, tying into his very own perception of self that has been constructed on certain notions of what it means to be a man. As Cornell mentions in her article, Genly is the only one of his kind on Gethen, unique, and "other." In this context, he grips onto that which is familiar to him and tries to make sense of the Gethenians and their society by interpreting theirs from within the framework of his own, and thus he keeps assigning gender. Since he is the only man on Gethen and comes from a culture that norms "man" as human and "woman" as "other", he defaults to populating the world with people he might have a chance to relate to.

It is possible to observe how, when Genly meets with the King of Karhide, this reading unfolds and how the expectation of the king's gender performance as "man" and "sovereign" is broken. To be sovereign is to be in a position of tremendous power, which is usually connected to the masculine and certain ideals of masculinity, such as strength and wisdom, qualities that Genly may readily relate to. However, once again, the "feminine" traits Genly perceives in a Gethenian he has assigned as more or less male is counted as a negative:

The face that turned towards me, reddened and cratered by firelight and shadow, was as flat and cruel as the moon, Winter's dull rufous moon. Argaven was less kingly, less manly, than he looked at a distance among his courtiers. His voice was thin, and held his fierce lunatic head at an angle of bizarre arrogance (LeGuin 1969, 31)

The "feminine" traits are not as easily identifiable in this passage, as they are hidden in dualist symbolism, where certain symbols and imagery are seen as representations of either the "masculine" or the "feminine." When Genly likens the king's face with the moon, he is in fact gendering the king as female. This is due to the moon being representative of the "feminine," as opposed to a "masculine" sun. Furthermore, "flat" and "cruel" can be interpreted as "feminine" characteristics here, as they are negative traits that are being linked to the king's moonlike face. Genly continues by stating that the king is "less kingly, less manly," making a clear connection between these two attributes so that we understand that in order to be "kingly," one must also be "manly," and in order to be properly authoritative one must therefore be male. Genly continues to paint the king as "less than" by observing that "his" voice is "thin," as opposed to a suitably darker, "manly" voice and that "he" exhibits lunacy and arrogance. Lunacy is linked back to the "feminine" moon symbolism and has in many cases through history been used to remove power from women perceived as too powerful or knowledgeable.

The following passage illustrates how thorough Genly's misreading of the Gethenians

is when he tries to entreat the king to join the Ekumen, trying to appeal to what he believes to be their commonalities: "We are all men, you know, sir. All of us. All the worlds of men were settled, eons ago, from one world, Hain. We vary, but we are all sons of the same hearth....None of this caught the king's curiosity or gave him any reassurance" (LeGuin 1969, 35). Genly's mistake here lies in trying to appeal to the king as a man who might understand and relate to Genly from a shared experience. However, the Gethenians are not "men," nor "sons," and Genly's attempt to instill a sense of kinship falls flat. Communication is once again deteriorating due to Genly's misunderstanding of the Gethenians as an androgynous people. Genly effectively fails to read the situation he is in, or rather interprets it in accordance with his reading of the Gethenians as somehow universally male. The king's dismissal of Genly, and perhaps even of the concept of gender when "he" learns that all other people "are in permanent kemmer," that is either of the female or male sex, is complete: "Well, it may be the fact, but it's a disgusting idea, Mr. Ai, and I don't see why human beings here on earth should want or tolerate any dealings with creatures so monstrously different" (LeGuin 1969, 36). On Gethen, Genly Ai is the "other," the anomalous entity that differs from the norm, a position that is traditionally consigned to women, minorities and other sexualities.

These subtler, more ambiguous examples of gendering may function both as a way to leave the reader with a sense of how deeply ingrained this binary symbolic system is, and how it informs Genly's conflicting responses to the Gethenians. It may also allude to LeGuin's own beliefs regarding this binary system, as she herself expresses them in her essay. She states that she wanted *Left Hand* to be a vindication of "the female principle," that historically had been attributed to anarchist thought, decentralization, rule by custom and not force, and so forth. LeGuin sets out to do this by creating balance based in her Taoist belief, between the "masculine" and "feminine" principles, as mentioned in Barrow and Barrow, to express that one is not inherently better or worse than the other. However, in doing so the gender dichotomy is acknowledged and perhaps even reinforced to an extent, in that the "masculine" and the "feminine" are seen to be values that exist in complementary pairs. LeGuin is no proponent of gender essentialism, but as Hargreaves pointed out, this exploration of androgyny may be seen as a reinforcement of the system that she wishes to challenge.

In addition to Genly misinterpreting and misreading the people and situations he finds himself in, he has as established earlier, a tendency to attribute gender to the various personal and bodily qualities of the Gethenians. Throughout the majority of the novel, as I have shown in the example passages, Genly categorizes those qualities he perceives to be feminine as negative and masculine as positive, almost without fail. In his audience with the king, the

"feminine" qualities he perceived and attributed to "him" categorized "him" as "less than." Genly further describes the king as a "madwoman," as alluded to in his likening the king's face to the moon. The moon has traditionally (and presently) been connected to "femininity," menstruation and mental illness. Genly goes on to gender the king's display of anger as well: "He laughed shrilly like an angry woman pretending to be amused" (LeGuin 1969, 31). The king's display of these emotions, which by using the word "shrill" is coded as "feminine," is seen as being unstable and unreliable. "His" anger is by being categorized as feminine somehow more dangerous and volatile than masculine displays of the same emotions. We can see this in Genly's response to the king's display towards him: "Still laughing and still snarling Argaven came up close and stared straight at me. The dark irises of his eyes glowed slightly orange. I was a good deal more afraid of him than I expected to be" (LeGuin 1969, 32). Understandably, most people would not feel comfortable when facing such direct displays of aggression, but I believe Genly's response is also determined by his notions of what is acceptable gendered behavior. He has subconsciously categorized the king as female and a mentally unstable one at that, and thus the unease and fear Genly feels may be a deep-seated fear of the unknown "other."

The next examples of gendering take place after Genly has traveled to the neighboring nation of Orgoreyn, after failing to achieve his goal in Karhide. Estraven has been exiled due to his association with Genly and has taken refuge in Orgoreyn. Estraven, foreseeing the course of events, has been lobbying for his reception by its authorities, unbeknownst to Genly. Genly's initial response to the different culture and organization that he encounters in Orgoreyn, is yet another opportunity that LeGuin takes to show how pervasive gendering is. Genly perceives the Orgotan society as more "masculine" than that of Karhide, and noticeably more positively inclined towards it: "They were slow, they were thorough; none of the slapdash arrogance and sudden deviousness that marked Karhidish officialdom" (LeGuin 1969, 102). Even the architecture seems better, as he finds it "cleaner, larger, lighter than Erhenrang, more open and imposing" (LeGuin 1969, 113-114). That Genly is reading Karhide as "feminine" and Orgoreyn as "masculine" becomes clear in his juxtaposition of these two nations against each other and in his use of descriptors that are a part of binary opposites. For Genly, Orgoreyn seems to be a fresh start, that is however quickly marred by learning that Estraven is present. They meet, after which Genly thinks that:

I was glad to get the confrontation over with at once. It was plain that no tolerable relationship could exist between Estraven and myself. Even though his disgrace and



exile was nominally on my account, I could take no responsibility for them, feel no rational guilt; he had made neither his acts nor his motives clear to me in Erhenrang, and I could not trust the fellow. (LeGuin 1969, 129)

Genly still cannot relate to Estraven without letting his gender biases affect his interpretations and assessments of Estraven's behavior and motives. Genly makes a non-apologetic admission to being part of Estraven's troubles but refuses to take any real responsibility. This is yet another example of how Genly's gendering and bias causes breakdowns in communication and interaction, as Genly still interprets the world from a cultural perspective that values masculine forms of communication and interaction as normative. That Genly has thought Estraven to be unclear is due to his inability and reluctance to understand how Shifgrethor works, as it is evocative of a "feminine" communicative style. Genly furthermore attributes his increasing possibility of failure, also in Orgoreyn, to Estraven's appearance: "Everything had gone all right, I thought, until Estraven had appeared shadowlike at my side last night" (LeGuin 1969, 143). Genly's sense of self, on Gethen more so than other places rooted in notions of what makes him "not-woman," cannot bear to shoulder the responsibility of his own actions, so therefore he seeks to place it elsewhere. This desire to remain unblemished is further expressed in Genly's eagerness to accept his Orgotan hosts' poor testimonials as to Estraven's motives, not quite understanding that they might have an agenda of their own (LeGuin 1969, 145). The trust that Genly puts in the Orgota society and its officials due to their seemingly "masculine" presentation goes to show how the perception of "masculine" as positive is a falseness based on normative construction. It is by the Orgotan government's hand that Genly is unceremoniously shipped to a prison facility and left to die, among the "eunuchs" and "women" as he first describes his fellow prisoners. The one who comes to his aid is the person he least expects, the "faithless," "effeminate" and distrusted Estraven.

It is in Estraven's rescue of Genly from the Orgotan prison facility and their subsequent escape to Karhide over a deadly expanse of ice that the reader finally comes to the greater part of the "reassessment" that Genly must do when it comes to his biases and preconceptions in terms of gender. I agree with Pearson in her argument that towards the end of Genly's journey, he has come to a new understanding regarding the Gethenians, and the nature of his previous assessments of them. Through Genly and Estraven's shared ordeal, are they able to attain true communication and engage with each other as equals, as Genly has been unable to do before. The first realization that Estraven was actually his ally comes from the act of "his" rescuing Genly, but Genly struggles to understand Estraven's past behavior:

"But for what purpose-all this intriguing, this hiding and power-seeking and plotting-what was it all for, Estraven? What were you after?" "I was after what you're after: the alliance of my world with your worlds. What did you think?" (LeGuin 1969, 198). After finally being able to address each other with the understanding that their goals have always been the same, Genly and Estraven may move forward together. In this final part of their journey, the readers are presented with Estraven's observations of Genly and their interactions with each other over the ice, in a kind of role reversal where Estraven becomes the anthropological observer. These observations are a marked contrast from those of Genly's, providing the reader with an account of events that is free from making gendered assumptions, and illustrates for the reader how much Genly's interactions have been governed by his underlying biases. Estraven, being androgynous and ambisexual, has unlike Genly no binary framework for categorization, informing how "he" views the world, and this is reflected in "his" descriptions of it. Estraven does not assign gender to any traits or actions, as witnessed in "his" observations of Genly:

There is a frailty about him. He is all unprotected, exposed, vulnerable, even to his sexual organ, which he must carry always outside himself; but he is strong, unbelievably strong...To match his frailty and strength, he has a spirit easy to despair and quick to defiance: a fierce impatient courage. (LeGuin 1969, 227)

In Estraven's description, frailty and strength of both body and mind are acknowledged without referencing to gender. It is an observation that reflects reality more accurately and neutrally than Genly's, illustrating how much his perceptions have been colored by the sex and gender dichotomy. Estraven's further observations on Genly's emotional state and how he handles it, questioning the norms that govern accepted emotional expressions divided by sex:

Ai was exhausted and enraged. He looked ready to cry, but did not. I believe he considers crying either evil or shameful. Even when he was very ill and weak, the first days of our escape, he hid his face from me when he wept. Reasons personal, racial, social, sexual - how can I guess why Ai must not weep? (LeGuin 1969, 229)

Gethenians have no cultural taboo against crying before others or in public, as it is seen as a natural expression of emotions, and Estraven's wondering how crying might be considered either "evil or shameful" encourages the readers to examine the why of their own attitudes towards such displays of emotion. Estraven is also able to question Genly regarding the binary nature of human biological sexual differences as their relationship has naturally improved

during their struggle to survive together. Once again, this questioning of the "naturalness" of the sex and gender binary challenges the readers' own notions, here when Estraven asks if women are fundamentally different from men and Genly answers:

“Do they differ much from your sex in mind behaviour? Are they like a different species?” “No. Yes. No, of course not, not really...the heaviest single factor in one's life, is whether one's born male or female. In most societies it determines one's expectations, activities, outlook, ethics, manners - almost everything. (LeGuin 1969, 234)

Genly's answer illustrates how little he has actually considered the female human experience, as he is uncertain, it seems, if he should explain them in terms of being another species. He is surprisingly aware of how much sex influences a person's experiences in life, but the insights seem to come up short as to why this is. When Estraven asks if they are "mentally inferior," Genly answers, "I don't know," still not being able to examine this notion from a cultural and sociological perspective, after having observed the androgynous society of the Gethenians. Genly gives up trying to explain in the end, as he simply does not know what women are like: "I can't tell you what women are like. I never thought about it much in the abstract...In a sense, women are more alien to me than you are. With you I share one sex, anyhow...." (LeGuin 1969, 234). This seems like yet another example of how the underlying sexist notions that follow from a hierarchical structuring of sex and gender, color Genly's perceptions so thoroughly that he categorizes women as something completely "other," or more alien than the alien.

However, Genly comes to a revelation together with Estraven on the ice. This happens after Estraven has entered kemmer, and has manifested as female-bodied due to the influence of the male-bodied Genly. It is first at this point when Genly fully realizes and acknowledges that Estraven is not a man in the Terran sense of the word, and that the distrust and antagonistic feelings he has held towards "him" has stemmed from his inability to accept the female aspects he sensed in Estraven:

And I saw then again, and for good, what I had always been afraid to see, and had pretended not to see in him: that he was a woman as well as a man...what I was left with was, at last, acceptance of him as he was. Until then I had rejected him, refused him his own reality. (LeGuin 1969, 248).

In this moment, Genly realizes to what extent he has been rejecting the feminine in the Gethenians and he finally comes to accept reality as it is. The change in Genly from that point onwards is palpable. He no longer categorizes into male and female, no longer attributes traits as masculine or feminine, assigning value accordingly. After their return to Karhide, having survived the months-long escape over the unforgiving ice, Genly's observations of the Gethenians reflect his new-found realization: "The physician, a grave, maternal young fellow, told me with an air of peaceable certainty..." (LeGuin 1969, 286). Where Genly before would have considered being "grave" as masculine and "maternal" as feminine, no such gendering takes place, and the description seems to be neutral and reflective of a more objective reality. In the end, Genly has come to accept and embrace the Gethenians not as "other," but as "self," which can be witnessed in his thoughts on the arrival of his fellow envoys, who have been sleeping in orbit around the planet up until Genly was able to contact them: "But they all looked strange to me, men and women, well as I knew them. Their voices sounded strange: too deep, too shrill. They were like a troupe of great, strange animals, of two different species; great apes with intelligent eyes, all of them in rut, in kemmer..." (LeGuin 1969, 296). Genly has come to embrace the dualist balance between the masculine and feminine as it is represented in the androgynous Gethenians as the norm, and therefore his own people's stark division into one or the other as presented by their bodies is jarring to him.

In the end, I believe that LeGuin succeeded in questioning the sex/gender dichotomy that permeates society, and how it affects the relations between men and women in *Left Hand*. LeGuin challenged gender as a social construct by forcing the readers to join in Genly's physical and psychological journey, and by reading the Gethenians through his eyes. The instances of overt and ambiguous gendering as exemplified in this thesis, have assisted in showing how Genly is interpreting "the text" around him androcentrically, forcing the reader to follow and join in on his assumptions, and then ultimately in his reassessment of these (Pennington 2000, 352-353). Genly comes to read the world androgynously, perceiving the division of male and female as stranger than the "union" of these characteristics and traits as they are manifested in the Gethenians.

### **Chapter 3: Women as subjects in Nicola Griffith's *Ammonite***

In the following chapter, I will take a look at author Nicola Griffith's debut novel *Ammonite* (1992) and how it relates to LeGuin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969). I begin by providing some examples from the novels to establish a link between them, specifically that Griffith's *Ammonite* was a response to LeGuin's *Left Hand*. I want to examine in particular how Griffith portrays sex and gender in *Ammonite*, how her approach differs from LeGuin's and what she wanted to achieve through her novel. I will examine how Griffith norms the female body and establishes women as subjects in *Ammonite*, by detailing their physical experiences without engaging with the sex and gender dichotomy.

#### **Nicola Griffith and *Ammonite***

Nicola Griffith was born in Yorkshire, England, in September 1960 (SFE 2019) where she was brought up in a Catholic household and attended catholic school (Griffith 2011). She discovered at the early age of 13 that she was a lesbian and chose to keep it hidden until she could move out from her parents' house, as they did not approve of homosexuality (Griffith 2011). Griffith felt early on an affinity for reading and a fondness for writing. Griffith recounts that she did not feel like her real education began until after she relocated to Hull around age 18 when she moved in with her girlfriend and was able to meet people from all walks of life. There she found what she called her "first community of women," consisting of many feminists and intellectuals, and was introduced to feminist works of science fiction, inspiring her to create her own stories later on (Griffith 2011).

The first attempt at the story that was to become *Ammonite* came to be when Griffith wrote a short story that she developed into a novel during her early twenties. She tried to have it published but it was rejected, and after her initial disappointment, she set it aside and focused on bettering her writing skills (Aqueductpress 2007). It was not until Griffith moved to the States, that the ideas from her previous attempts and stories coalesced into the story that became her debut novel - *Ammonite* (Aqueductpress 2007). *Ammonite's* reception and reviews seemed to be overwhelmingly positive and it was the focus of much praise, receiving among others, the following statement from LeGuin herself:

*Ammonite* is a self-assured, unselfconscious, convincing depiction of a world without men...doing what only SF can do, and doing it with skill and brio. It answers the question 'When you eliminate one gender, what's left?' ('A whole world,' is the answer.) But a lot of books, like *Moby Dick*, eliminate one gender, and yet nobody thinks anything about it. I believe Kate Clinton has the answer: 'When women go off together it's called separatism; when men go off together it's called Congress. (Griffith 2014)

Griffith claimed further recognition for her work on *Ammonite* as it was nominated for a number of awards and won both the Lambda literary award for LGBT fiction in 1992 (Lambdaliterary n.d) and the James Tiptree Jr. award for science fiction in 1993 (Otherwiseaward n.d). She went on to write several novels, spanning genres such as fantasy, science fiction and noir fiction, amongst others. Griffith hosts her own blog online and has maintained an active online presence, engaging in various literary discussions on online media. In 2017 Griffith also obtained a Ph.D. without having any prior degrees, writing a dissertation that examines her own writing and what she believes she achieves through the use of specific textual techniques. Griffith is still actively writing and is currently working on her latest novel.

### **Summary of *Ammonite***

In the following section, I will give a brief plot summary of *Ammonite* to familiarize the reader with the novel and to help situate my later analysis.

In *Ammonite*, the story centers around Earth anthropologist Marguerite Angelica Taishan, as she travels to a newly rediscovered planet called Jeep. The planet that has been long forgotten after its initial colonization centuries ago has now been rediscovered by the Durallium Company. Marguerite Taishan comes as a representative for the Earth government agency for Settlement and Education (SeC), ostensibly to function as a bridge between the natives of the planet and the Durallium Company, whose eyes are set on recolonization and exploitation of Jeep's resources. Alongside Marguerite's story, the reader also follows that of Hannah Danner, acting Commander of the Durallium Company's technical and security personnel situated on the planet to protect their interests. The Company's goals are not so easily achieved however, as there are some extraordinary challenges and circumstances that hamper their recolonization efforts due to the environmental and biological makeup of the

planet.

One such circumstance is that Jeep's native population, who are the descendants of Earth settlers from centuries past, are all women. These women have all survived, thrived and procreated for centuries without the presence of men. In fact, any men who descend to Jeep have and will invariably die. This is a consequence of a virus present on the planet that the native population have adapted to. All male Company personnel who were initially stationed on the planet have died, and due to this, the remaining female personnel are effectively trapped in quarantine under Commander Danner's supervision.

Marguerite, or Marghe's true mission on Jeep is in actuality to test a vaccine for the Jeep virus, which has been a well-kept secret within Earth's government and Company ranks due to its possibly dangerous nature. There is no love lost between Marghe and SeC, but she nonetheless volunteers for this mission, knowing that it might result in her death. Her concern is for discovery, anthropological work and learning of the virus, and she has no ties that bind her to Earth. Marghe will make a journey to research the initial landing site of the Earth settlers, making anthropological observations and testing the effects of the vaccine during her journey. Marghe spends a short amount of time at the Company base before leaving and learns that all is not as it seems on Jeep. The Company personnel have been quarantined on Jeep for years without any real sense of purpose, and many have started to settle, some even joining with local communities. Marghe starts to suspect that Company is willing to cut all ties and leave their staff behind should the vaccine be unsuccessful, as the virus poses too great of a risk if "untreated."

Marghe leaves the Company base but loses all her supplies due to an electrical storm. She is guided by Company personnel to a neighboring community of Jeep women and must barter for new supplies. Marghe must act as a representative for the Company settlement in order to trade for goods, as trade is made between groups and communities, not individuals. Thus, Marghe is able to gain a trading partner and tentative ally for Commander Danner, in case they find themselves abandoned by Company. Marghe set out with plenty of supplies and makes camp within a mysterious ring of stones after hours of journeying. She is discovered there the next morning by a band of women on horseback, who revere the stones as sacred and believe all who trespass belong to their tribe, the Echraidhe. Marghe is taken prisoner and transported to the Echraidhe camp, where she is put into the care of the tribe's next leader, a woman called Aoife. Marghe spends the next several months as a prisoner, where she learns much about the virus, the tribeswomen and how the people of Jeep are able to survive and procreate without men. It is revealed that it is the virus that makes it possible for the women

of Jeep to induce pregnancy in either themselves or each other, and it is likely that all life on Jeep is infected by the virus.

However, there is not much Marghe can do with her newfound insights in the middle of the unforgiving, icy lands of the Echraidhe, and her months of captivity has taken its toll. In addition, Marghe has been receiving increasingly disturbing attention from another tribeswoman called Uaithne, who believes she is the reincarnation of the Echraidhe death spirit and that Marghe has been sent to test her. When a fire breaks out in the Echraidhe camp, Marghe finally has her chance to escape and sets off with nothing but the horse she is riding. After nearly dying of starvation and cold after several days on the ice, she reaches the forest at the end of the plateau and is found by a woman hunting.

Marghe is then slowly nursed back to health by the woman's family unit and must repay the family for expending their time and resources on her care after recovering. She has during this time fallen in love with one of its members called Thenike, and Marghe decides to join the family. Her ties to the Company settlement, and by extension the local community tied to them by trade agreements, gain her full acceptance into the family. Marghe has by this time run out of the vaccine she has been taking regularly and contracts the virus. Thenike, who is a traveling wise-woman guides Marghe to accept the virus wholeheartedly, so that her body does not use its energy to fight it and can focus on surviving. Marghe falls terribly ill but survives and gains a whole new understanding of herself and her surroundings. The virus is present in all living things on Jeep and helps the women to live in pact with the Earth. It is also this that enables them to procreate and to distribute any functioning vaccine among them would render them infertile and ultimately result in genocide.

Company comes across this information when Marghe tries to inform Commander Danner of her situation, and Company believes that the vaccine has failed. This endangers all inhabitants of Jeep, including Company personnel, as Jeep is now deemed too dangerous of a venture. They eliminate the single space station orbiting the planet and subsequently leave Jeep to its own devices. In Marghe's time as captive, Commander Danner has been trying to prepare for Company abandonment, keeping amicable relations with their newfound trade partners.

Commander Danner and her remaining people thus become a part of the larger network of communities on Jeep, guided by Marghe and her newfound lover. Marghe has further integrated into the community by becoming a wise-woman, like her lover Thenike, and has also become pregnant. She has bridged the gap between being an outsider/other by



accepting the virus as symbolized by her pregnancy and has found a sense of self, of community and wholeness on Jeep.

### **Links between Nicola Griffith's *Ammonite* and Ursula LeGuin's *The Left Hand of Darkness***

When comparing *Ammonite* to *Left Hand* it is clear that Griffith was influenced by LeGuin's novel, as there are definite parallels between the two works. Griffith herself has not made or acknowledged this connection but lists *Left Hand* as one of a number of works of feminist science fiction that she read during the '80s (Griffith 2011). Critics however, draw clear links between the two novels. In *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of Science Fiction and Fantasy: Themes, Works and Wonders*, scholar Wendy Pearson mentions *Ammonite* as a feminist novel that is “written in response to *The Left Hand of Darkness*” (Pearson 2005, 1135). Pearson describes LeGuin's *Left Hand* as “a prime example of how science fiction can capture the imagination of readers and reflect on social and political realities, serving as a model for thinking through issues of gender, biology and society” (Pearson 2005, 1135), thus marking *Ammonite* as *Left Hand*'s successor in this regard. Science Fiction and Fantasy critic Graham Sleight also view Griffith's *Ammonite* as a response to the feminist science fiction novels of the 1970s, particularly to authors Joanna Russ' *The Female Man* (1975), and Ursula LeGuin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*. In his introduction to the novel's 2012 Gollancz SF Masterworks publication, Sleight describes the connection to LeGuin as such:

For LeGuin's protagonist, as for Griffith's, the question is how long an observer can remain dispassionate and uninvolved. LeGuin's work is saturated in anthropological thought; Griffith's main protagonist Marghe is an anthropologist, very thoroughly trained to understand other cultures. (Griffith 2012, viii)

Sleight points out that both Griffith and LeGuin take an anthropological approach in their portrayal of an alien society, which grounds them within the scientific tradition of studying people, behavior and societies. The protagonists are both trained anthropologists, who initially try to keep a professional, observational distance, but as Sleight identifies, they cannot remain uninvolved over time. This approach allows both authors to explore issues of sex and gender from a vantage point that often presents itself objective rather than subjective.

Lastly, scholar and historian Laura Tisdall also makes the connection between the two novels on her webpage, where she reviews *Ammonite* as a part of SciFi Month 2019:

As this all suggests, *Ammonite* draws heavily from Ursula Le Guin's classic *The Left Hand of Darkness*; not only philosophically – Le Guin famously depicts a society where biological sex is mutable and often absent – but spatially. A centerpiece of the novel is the time Marghe spends in the freezing northern wastes of this planet, reflecting the journey that Le Guin's narrator undertakes across a frozen sea. (Tisdall 2019)

Tisdall draws the connection between not only the novels' paralleling themes regarding sex and gender but also comments on the clear borrowing of the imagery of a journey over the ice from *Left Hand*. As these examples illustrate, the connection between *Ammonite* and *Left Hand* is very much present and noted. I will nonetheless provide some examples from Griffith's novel, where I believe that she is playing off of *Left Hand*.

Generally speaking, there are some obvious similarities between *Ammonite* and *Left Hand* plot-wise and thematically. In both novels, the reader is introduced to a newly discovered planet, where the ecological, sociological and biological reality is quite different from that of the protagonist's own. On both LeGuin's and Griffith's worlds, the inhabitants are made up of a single sex, androgynes on Gethen and women on Jeep. The protagonists of *Left Hand* and *Ammonite* are both sent to these planets as representatives of powerful organizations that have an interest in establishing some sort of exchange, be it benign or exploitative. Their respective journeys are perilous both physically and mentally and their sense of self and ontological truths will be tested.

The most significant similarity between these two works however, may be that both LeGuin and Griffith ultimately wrote these stories to explore what it means to be human but from a gendered perspective. In patriarchal societies, being human is usually equated with being a man, and women may be seen as "lesser than" human or "other" (Anderson, Willett and Meyer 2020). LeGuin and Griffith each wish to establish that women are as much a part of humanity as men are. LeGuin states in her essay, "Is Gender Necessary?" (1976), that *Left Hand* was an attempt to find out what our society would be like "if we were socially ambisexual, if men and women were completely and genuinely equal in their social roles, equal legally and economically, equal in freedom, in responsibility, and in self-esteem" (LeGuin 1976, 16). LeGuin and Griffith both explore the significance of how women are perceived and portrayed in their novels: LeGuin examining gender stereotypes and the

negative bias towards perceived feminine traits, and Griffith examining the experiences of women in an environment free from gender stereotyping. Griffith wanted specifically to show that a society of women would simply be human. As she states in her author's note written in 1992, she wanted *Ammonite* to be “a body blow” to those that felt that the question “Are women human?” was still relevant. She also wanted to avoid the discourse prevalent in many previous works of science fiction, where aliens were just thinly veiled representations of the author’s ideas about women. Griffith states that:

Women are not aliens. Take away men and we do not automatically lose our fire and intelligence and sex drive; we do not form hierarchical, static, insectlike societies that are dreadfully inefficient. We do not turn into a homogeneous Thought Police culture where meat-eating is banned and men are burned in effigy every full moon. Women are not inherently passive or dominant, maternal or vicious. We are all different. We are people. (Griffith 1992)

Griffith rejects the notion of women as being somehow fundamentally different on the basis of sexual and gendered characteristics, and their “othering” in the disguise of aliens or the alien as it has been presented in traditional science fiction.

When examining some of the more specific examples from Griffith’s novel, it is possible to note several thematic and plot similarities to LeGuin’s beyond the more general examples I have mentioned above. There are also many ways in which the novels differ from each other, and I will address these more thoroughly in my analysis section.

In *Ammonite* Griffith mirrors Genly Ai’s journey in *Left Hand* through her own protagonist Marghe Taishan. Marghe, like LeGuin’s Genly, is a trained anthropologist, makes a one-way journey to a newly discovered planet and traverses the planet through perilous conditions. She descends to a world whose civilization does not have any kind of significant technology, and certainly not any of the spacefaring kind. This mirrors Genly’s situation in *Left Hand*, although he must make his way alone, whereas Marghe has a settled community of Company personnel that assists her upon her arrival.

Both Marghe and Genly experience a culture shock, albeit in varying degrees, and both struggle with a sense of alienation and feelings of otherness. In this instance, Griffith differs significantly from LeGuin when it comes to the underlying reasons for the protagonists’ feelings of alienation. For Genly it is difficult to reconcile the fact that the Gethenians, that he reads as male even though they are androgynous, exhibit both feminine and masculine traits regardless of what gender category he has placed them in. This leaves

him continually on edge, as he constantly has to re-evaluate his readings of the Gethenians and makes him question his own sense of masculine selfhood. Marghe's sense of alienation on the other hand, does not directly relate to matters of sex or gender but originates from within her own person. In her capacity as an anthropologist, she keeps the world at a distance, observes before she interacts and rarely opens up to other people. This may well be interpreted as a rejection of her own patriarchal culture, as she has avoided engaging meaningfully with the world around her until she came to Jeep.

Another important similarity is how both Griffith and LeGuin populated their worlds with people who can not be categorized according to a binary system of sexual and gendered difference. The androgynes of Gethen and the women of Jeep do not operate with or even recognize the sexual and gendered stereotypes of the protagonists' cultures. This means that both Genly and Marghe are encountering societies that are singular within their existing ontologies, and that these cannot be interpreted or read from within Genly and Marghe's cultural frameworks, framing Genly and Marghe, in a sense, as the "other."

Griffith envisions a much more decentralized, agrarian and communal society than that of LeGuin, as there exists no organized nation, state or government on Jeep. There are no big cities and no means for radio-communication as on Gethen, and villages are spread across the land. Messages are sent physically with travelers if needed and the villages govern themselves. There is no space-age technology left from the first colonizers from Earth, which populated Jeep, and its loss is not mourned by the current inhabitants of Jeep, whose need for technology seems to be non-existent. Technology and technological progress is in other words not particularly valued on either world, but much less so on Jeep. LeGuin's Gethen is technologically advanced, but progress has stood still for centuries as progress for progress' sake is not sought after. There are big cities, land-roving vehicles, radio technology and a system of government. This is the backdrop for the protagonists' journeys, which span vast distances through terrains and societies that are predominantly rural, agrarian and decentralized in nature.

Furthermore, both societies are based along communal rather than individualistic lines, where the most important unit of social organization and control is the extended family and village. In LeGuin's *Left Hand*, all individuals belong to a hearth containing the core and extended family and its dependents. The family will always provide for its members and familial responsibilities such as child-rearing is a combined effort. While Griffith mirrors this system in *Ammonite*, she emphasizes it even more by excluding any larger, urbanized areas, instead, limiting Jeep's communities to farming/fishing/trading villages. These are made up of

several family units comprised of women who may be related, unrelated or married. The unit works together to sustain themselves and the village, and here child-rearing is also a shared responsibility. These systems of societal organization that LeGuin and Griffith envision are both examples of societies that can be said to be non-patriarchal, as social and political power is not based on biological sex, and childbearing and rearing are quite naturally made provisions for.

The most pronounced example that clearly connects *Left Hand* and *Ammonite* spatially is when Griffith details Marghe's escape from the Echraidhe, the tribal horsewomen residing on the inhospitable and icy plateau Tehuantepec. Marghe is captured by these women when making her way to the original colonists landing site, and after months of being a prisoner, she makes an epic escape through the snow and cold, with nothing but a horse and her own wit to help her survive. Griffith is clearly borrowing the imagery from *Left Hand* and is mirroring Genly and Estraven's arduous journey over the ice to escape Orgoreyn and its detention camps. The important difference between Marghe's, and Genly and Estraven's escape, is that Marghe escapes unaided and alone. No one is coming to her rescue and she must somehow manage to survive the journey over the plateau by what she has learned from the Echraidhe. I will further examine the implications of the difference between Griffith's reimagining of LeGuin's portrayal of Genly and Estraven's escape in my analysis below.

The examples that I have provided above prove that there is a clear connection between *Ammonite* and *Left Hand*. Before proceeding to my analysis, I will briefly introduce and examine some of the critical reception *Ammonite* received after its publication.

### **Critical reception of *Ammonite***

*Ammonite* was well received within the literary community, as proven by winning the James Tiptree Jr and the Lambda Literary awards shortly after its publication in 1992. The critical response within academia was not nearly as abundant as that of the response to LeGuin's *Left Hand*. This does not indicate that *Ammonite* did not inspire discussions, as these still took place in less conventional fora, predominantly online.

The academic articles I have been able to find that concern *Ammonite* specifically are those of Anna Lorian Nelson and John Nelson, "Institutions in Feminist and Republican Science Fiction" (1998) and Anne-Marie Thomas, "To Devour and Transform: Viral Metaphors in Science Fiction by Women" (2000). In "Institutions," Nelson and Nelson examine "the images and reforms of institutions found in science fiction with a focus on

republican and feminist projects in the genre,” (Nelson and Nelson 1998) examining *Ammonite* as one of the feminist examples of this. In her article “To Devour and Transform,” Thomas explores how viral infection may be seen as a metaphor for the “other,” and how this may be transfigured in fiction to represent a gain for the human subject, rather than a loss (Thomas 2000, 144). She focuses her examination on a handful of works, including Griffith’s *Ammonite*, where she argues that “the Jeep virus may be the harbinger of feminist Utopia...” (Thomas 2000, 152).

Among the written academic material there are also some doctoral theses that are noteworthy, such as Elisabeth M. Wulff’s “Exploring Alternative Notions of the Heroic in Feminist Science Fiction” (2007) and Nicola Griffith’s “Norming the Other: Narrative Empathy via Focalised Heterotopia” (2017). In her thesis, Wulff explores “alternative notions of the heroic inspired by feminist critiques of the traditional heroic” by discussing “feminist science fiction as a literature that explores a variety of alternative social realities” (Wulff 2007). Wulff examines how Griffith portrays the heroic without connecting it to assumptions regarding gender, and how biological sex is just an aspect of a who a person is, rather than all of their being. In “Norming the Other” Griffith carries out a close-reading of a selection of her own novels, with an emphasis on *Ammonite* (1992), *The Blue Place* (1998) and *Hild* (2013), to examine how she creates narrative empathy in the reader without eliciting hostile or dissociative feelings for her protagonists. This, Griffith argues, she achieves by using specific word-choices and metaphors, locating “the examination of a focalised character’s body in its physical and sensory setting” (Griffith 2017, i). She posits that this “embodiment” of the focalized character, elicits a neuro-physical response that “activates neural mechanisms within the reader to create and sustain narrative empathy” (Griffith 2017, i). Of the material mentioned above, I will be referring to Thomas’ article and Griffith’s thesis in my analysis. Although I will be referring to Griffith’s thoughts on her own work, I do not view her voice as more authoritative than that of other critics.

Outside of the realm of peer-reviewed published academic papers, *Ammonite* is also mentioned in a variety of different online literary journals, reviews and web content. Included in these are interviews, both in written and video format, a variety of blogs (including Griffith’s own), and other fora for discussions that include *Ammonite* and the rest of Griffith’s writing. One of the more recent of these online mentions and discussions is Tisdall’s review of *Ammonite* on her blog entry for science fiction history Month 2019, illustrating that *Ammonite* is still a work that is relevant and worthy of discussion today, even if it does not generate the same volume of published academic content as *Left Hand*.

## Background

In this section I would like to briefly situate LeGuin and Griffith in their respective historical contexts, considering that their first published novels stand 23 years apart and that they wrote in very different social climates. As I discussed earlier in this thesis, when LeGuin published *Left Hand* in 1969, she was entering into a genre that had very much been dominated by male writers since its inception in the 20's-30's ("modern" science fiction). Like any other genre, it operated with a set of certain more or less prescriptive conventions, and it was not particularly progressive when it came to exploring social structures governing sex and gender, as Russ claimed in her article "The Image of Women in Science Fiction" (Latham 2017, 200-210). It was particularly for this reason LeGuin's publication of *Left Hand* was so groundbreaking, as she explored and discussed themes that up until then had been ignored or deemed irrelevant within the science fiction literary community, and thus opened it up to a whole new conversation. LeGuin was probably influenced by the growing movement of second-wave feminism that sought to combat systemic inequalities between the sexes during the 1960s through the 1980s when writing *Left Hand*, as it questions many notions and stereotypes regarding sex and gender that were probably commonly held. LeGuin thus helped pave the way for women and feminist science fiction writers by broadening the discussion that they could be entered into.

When Griffith entered the scene with *Ammonite* in 1992, over 20 years later, some considerable changes had taken place in society at large and within the science fiction community. Second-wave feminism had put the fight against systemic sexual discrimination on the agenda, and there had emerged a greater awareness of the existence and pervasiveness of gender bias. Griffith was now entering into a quite different field of science fiction than that which existed in LeGuin's time and had access to and knowledge of several science fiction works written by female and/or feminist authors. Some of the most prominent science fiction authors who explored feminist issues in their writing during the '70s were, among others, Joanna Russ, Suzy McKee Charnas, Marge Piercy and of course, Ursula LeGuin herself. They had all contributed to exploring issues of sex, gender and more, adding to the discussion that had ensued from LeGuin's publication of *Left Hand*. Griffith recounts that she was familiar with many of these authors' works, as she had actively searched for and read science fiction about women during her 20s, and recalls coming to a point where she wanted to add to these stories by writing her own (Aqueductpress 2007). When Griffith published *Ammonite*, she had the legacy of the feminist works of the 1970s and 1980s to draw from, and

the developments of second-wave feminism to frame her work.

Griffith's initial attempt at writing *Ammonite* did not turn out to be as straightforward as she imagined it to be. She recounts in her interview by Aqueductpress (2008) that she fell into an essentialist trap of imagining a feminist, lesbian utopia, where the women were always "good," and the men always "bad." Upon further consideration, she realized that these notions were reductive, consigning and restricting the possibilities that existed, especially for women, within the human experience. Women were not essentially better or worse than men and were of course capable of exhibiting all the traits and qualities of humanity (Aqueductpress 2007). The tenet that women are human, with all that it entails, has been at the crux of Griffith's writing career ever since.

Griffith thus set out to portray that women are fully realized people in *Ammonite*, picking up the mantle of the feminist science fiction authors that came before. I argue that Griffith achieves her goal by mirroring certain plot-elements and themes from LeGuin's *Left Hand*, reimagining these elements in her own novel to support her own argument, that women are people who cannot and should not be defined by binary categories that cast them as "other." Therefore, unlike the previous authors of feminist science fiction, Griffith does not engage with the sex and gender dichotomy. Instead, she deliberately ignores these matters to avoid falling into a reductive categorization of human beings into two distinct groups, where one is valued as less than the other.

### **Analysis and comparison of *Ammonite* to *The Left Hand of Darkness*:**

As I have established above, LeGuin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* and Griffith's *Ammonite* are closely related. I wanted to establish the link between the novels in order to explore how the authors approach sex and gender in their respective works. There are many apparent similarities between the novels, but they are also considerably different in what the authors wanted to achieve. LeGuin wanted to explore what was left when women and men were seen as and lived as equals, by eliminating social gender and exploring the negative impact of gender bias through the observations and interactions of Genly Ai. Griffith on the other hand, does seemingly not explore or address gender bias at all in *Ammonite*, although I argue that she still addresses gender issues, by not addressing these issues explicitly. I believe she deliberately avoids gendering her characters, to focus on and show women in a subject position, as opposed to an object position (as being the sum of a set of sexed and gendered traits). Griffith was not interested in rehashing the tired old science fiction convention of



“aliens who are really women, or women who are really aliens” (Griffith 2009), but wanted to show that women are human beings in their own right.

In the following section, I will examine how Griffith establishes the subjectivity of women as human beings, by avoiding engagement with the sex and gender dichotomy and instead focusing on the physicality of the main protagonist and her surroundings.

I argue she does this by consciously avoiding establishing biological sex as a binary category, not acknowledging socially constructed gender roles and by not using language rooted in gendered metaphors in her novel. She focuses instead on confirming this subjectivity by predominantly showing the main protagonist Marghe's bodily autonomy and grounding her experiences in a non-gendered physicality. This is the opposite of what LeGuin did in *Left Hand*, where she questions socially constructed gender roles and gender bias through the “lens” of Genly Ai. Griffith does explore her point of view however, by borrowing elements from LeGuin’s *Left Hand*, reimagining them and developing her own distinct story in *Ammonite*. Where LeGuin seemingly operates with a Taoist notion that there are masculine and feminine traits that must each be equally valued to achieve balance and create harmony in *Left Hand*, Griffith seems to reject the notion of masculinity and femininity altogether in her portrayal of the women of Jeep. Hers is an exploration of a single-sexed, but also non-gendered position, contrasting with LeGuin’s double or entwined sex and gender approach. Griffith’s approach thus differs significantly from LeGuin’s, and her alternative vision of *Left Hand* highlights the subjectivity of women from an embodied perspective. This allows the reader to identify with the women in *Ammonite*, regardless of their sex and gender expression.

This avoidance of focusing on sexual and gendered difference, and instead focusing on the physicality of the protagonist and her surroundings, is also how Griffith creates what she calls “narrative empathy” in the reader. By “narrative empathy” Griffith is referring to a neurological process that takes place when we perform or see others perform actions, that enables us to “recreate others’ experience, emotions, and motivations inside ourselves” (Griffith 2017, 4), which in turn enables the reader to empathize with and “norm” the other.

In *Ammonite*, I believe that Griffith rather successfully reimagines *Left Hand* to support her view, by avoiding focusing on the “overwhelming experience of gender discrimination or sexual violence, or the homophobic violence” (Griffith 2017, 5), enabling the reader to empathize with and norm the “other.” Her female protagonists are made readily available for identification by the reader by grounding them in physical experiences. The experiences and physicality of the women in *Ammonite* are furthermore not described by

using sexualized or gendered language, so that there are not any instances, such as I could recognize, that are objectifying the female body. These women are in other words, free to define, categorize and reject one another as human beings, but not on the basis of sex, sexual orientation or gendered stereotypes. In such a society where the sex and gender binary does not exist, oppressive and discriminatory practices based on biological sex and gender performance will not exist either. The women of *Jeep* are in this way put in subject position throughout Griffith's novel. This is contrasted in LeGuin's approach in *Left Hand*, which is full of gendered metaphors and objectifying language towards what may be perceived as "feminine" bodies, as I have shown earlier in this thesis.

Griffith is very deliberate in avoiding engaging with the sex and gender dichotomy throughout *Ammonite*. This is first illustrated in the text when Marghe has her first face to face encounter with a woman that has chosen to leave *Jeep*, when she returns to the space station in orbit where Marghe is waiting to descend: "Janet Eagan was small, naked, and coughing so hard she did not have the breath to greet Marghe...Marghe draped the sheet around her shoulders. They were bony, and pale except for freckles, but her hands and face and legs were weathered" (Griffith 1992, 24). The language Marghe uses to describe this woman's bodily features is neutral and does not connect these to any perceived femininity or masculinity. When compared to how Genly describes the bodily features of Gethenians he perceives to be feminine for example, the difference is obvious: "They tended to be stolid, slovenly, heavy, and to my eyes effeminate" (LeGuin 1969, 176). The matter of Janet Eagan's nudity is also described in such a way that it does not sexualize or objectify but is rather used to say something about Eagan's lived experience. The sex and sexual characteristics of Eagan are of minor or no consequence in this interpersonal exchange, as it is what the body conveys about Eagan as a subject that is important. This is also the case in the following passage when Marghe meets the native woman Thenike, who will later become her lover:

'I'm Thenike.' Her voice was textured, rich with harmonies...she was taller than average, though not by much. Her skin was darker than the sailor's, and differently textured: close-pored. Her features were planed to bones and hollows and looked strong, like the exposed roots of a mature tree. Unlike Hilt's, her hair was long, coiled up on her head, dark and glossy, like the wood of massive trees that were too dense to float: mahogany, teak, silkwood. (Griffith 1992, 198).

Griffith's description of Thenike's physicality is also here free from gendered metaphorical language, and the description is framed to convey information about the person herself, rather

than only focusing on appearance. The language describing Thenike is in itself tied to the physical and natural world and evokes an almost tactile response in the reader. Her voice is described as being "textured" and "rich with harmonies," conjuring up an image of vibrations that may be physically felt. In Marghe's description of Thenike's appearance, there is no mention of "empty," objectifying markers that denote Thenike's desirability to the observer. Instead, Marghe's observations place Thenike firmly in a subject position, as they paint a picture of the person Thenike is, and how her personality is portrayed through her body. The impression is that she is strong, as indicated by the similes likening her to hardy types of trees, bones and hollows. Thenike's personhood is thus not dictated by what her biological sex is or by any perceived expressions of gendered traits. For Griffith, these binary categories are meaningless for saying anything about the subjectivity of the women of Jeep, as this sex and gender dichotomy only reifies differences and women's position as "other" or object (Hargreaves 2004). Griffith avoids "othering" Thenike on the basis of her biological sex, and objectification on the basis of accepted gender performance. This is contrasted to LeGuin's approach, which focused on Genly's othering and objectifying of the Gethenians, to challenge the "naturalness" of his observations and to show how gender is a social construction. I believe Griffith in a sense also comments on the constructed-ness of gender in *Ammonite* by not engaging with it as a system for categorizing people. She challenges and denies its validity as such by removing men from Jeep, which removes the physical possibility for such a categorization into perceived masculinity and femininity. The gender binary is also denied in Griffith's portrayals of the women of Jeep through non-gendered metaphors, which does not cast any one woman into a performative mimicry of "man" and "woman."

This way to describe the women of Jeep is consistently used by Griffith throughout the novel and is not limited to Marghe's observations only. Commander Danner, the highest-ranking Company employee on Jeep, and the second point of view in the novel describes Marghe in their first meeting:

Vincio rapped on her door and ushered in a tallish, stocky woman with thick dark hair. Danner took her hands in greeting. They were smooth and cool. Her eyes were brown, with a hint of green, but that might have been the light. She chose the chair nearest the door, but seemed relaxed enough. (Griffith 1992, 32-33)

In this passage, the neutral tone is present again in the descriptions of Marghe's bodily traits. The descriptors used to inform the reader of Marghe's appearance, being tallish, stocky and with thick dark hair, are not gendered or objectifying of Marghe. Once again the near tactile

description is important for conveying information about the person observed and helps the reader to become situated in their experiences, as when Danner takes Marghe's hand and notices the "smooth and cool" feel of it. This overall focus on physicality and awareness in the interactions between the women in these passages draws the readers' attention to their physical experiences and to the body. The reader becomes "embodied" as Griffith herself would put it, meaning that the focus on the physical experiences of the characters allows for identification with them, as the reader is situated within their experiences.

Griffith's ability to do this through using non-gendered and non-objectifying descriptive language is succinctly illustrated in the following passage, where the reader is brought along as Marghe's focus moves inwards in a meditative exercise to direct her blood flow:

Adrenaline, faster than conscious thought, flooded through Marghe and she had to discipline her breathing, decreasing her pulse and respiration rate, slowing blood flow and reducing the sudden over-oxygenation of her long muscles. Her face pinked as the capillaries under her skin reopened; her muscles stopped fluttering. It was a routine learned long ago. (Griffith 1992, 2)

This passage illustrates Marghe's remarkable bodily control and awareness of her body's functions down to an almost cellular level. Marghe's control over her body is detailed in language that remains free from metaphors that may be perceived as gendered, such as bodily control being equaled to either the domination of the body or the submission to Marghe's will. Marghe's control is instead portrayed as the result of long training, resulting in the mastery of a physical ability rather than anything else, and the confidence that follows: "Marghe hunched down and concentrated on her breathing. If she did get stung, she was confident she could neutralize the worst of the venom herself, or at least keep the effects localized" (Griffith 1992, 47). Confidence, and confidence in her body and its abilities, is key in showing how Marghe is a subject. Usually, the body that is shown as being in control is sexed as male and is connected to a number of traditional "masculine" traits such as hardness, muscular strength, control et cetera. The female body, on the other hand, has been traditionally perceived and depicted as weak, soft, yielding and subjected to the forces of nature. Griffith's depiction of Marghe as confident in her body's abilities subverts the notion of women and women's bodies as weak and subject to outside forces without agency. Genly in *Left Hand* represents this normed male body and he, like Marghe, is confident in his bodily ability, but his confidence comes from the aforementioned sense of sexed superiority. LeGuin exposes this notion of the

male body always being in control, by showing throughout her novel how little control Genly truly has over the course of events.

Griffith continues using the body, or rather bodily sensation, as a descriptive tool throughout *Ammonite*, to situate the reader firmly in Marghe's (and Commander Danner's) experiences. Griffith's remarkable ability to do so is illustrated in the following passage:

She closed her eyes against the searing cold, began her breathing. In and out, in and out. Hold. In. Out. Hold. In the left nostril, out the right. Hold. The extra oxygen made her dizzy. She visualised the corpuscles rushing red and busy through her arm to her finger, back up to her shoulder, through the pulmonary vessels, the heart, and out again in a gushing rush. Hot red. Hot. And full of information. She sank her entire awareness into her arm. Listened with it, extended her own electromagnetic field as had learned to do, dowsing. Out and out, thinner, diffuse. Wait. (Griffith 1992, 155)

The entire focus of the passage is on Marghe's physical experience, specifically breathing, coldness, blood flow and warmth. The first two sentences are reminiscent of meditative breathing exercises and leads the readers to focus on their own breathing together with Marghe. The further focusing on the inner workings of the body, leading the readers through the extremities and inner organs, to focus on a single point in her arm also takes the readers "along for the ride," and immerses them in Marghe's physical experience. The bodily sensations that are described is something that is shared by all people regardless of sex, and allows for identification on the basis of shared experience, rather than reinforcement of arbitrary difference, such as in *Left Hand* and the depictions of Genly's highly gendered observations. Another significant difference to *Left Hand* is the depiction of emotions and how they are dealt with by the protagonists:

Fear, sudden and sharp, flashed under her skin, setting a muscle by her eye twitching. Her breath whistled. She had to get back into that saddle. She leaned her face against the mare's ice-shagged withers and rested a moment. She could do it. Blood to her upper arms, to her thighs and claws. Breathe. Gather. (Griffith 1992, 157)

In *Left Hand*, Genly's views the expression of fear as weakness, as it is "unmanly" and it is only when he is panicked due to the life threatening conditions on his trek together with Estraven on the ice, that he is able to express this fear due to his panicked state. His fear up until the moment he expressed it to Estraven, was paralyzing, and may be seen as an expression of how crippling his suppression of his "feminine" emotions could be. In the

passage above Marghe's fear is not connected to any such gendered notions, but is a "neutral" reaction to what is also a life threatening situation in her escape over the ice, which is that her body might fail her due to extreme undernourishment, exhaustion and frost. For Marghe, her fear spurs her into acting, to keep moving and to survive. It functions as a catalyst to put her body into motion by using her extraordinary control to usher blood to where she needs it most. Her struggle is also once again made the struggle of the reader by Griffith focusing on the descriptions of Marghe directing her blood flow to provide life, warmth and motion when she needs it most.

The connection between bodily control, autonomy and being in subject position is drawn even more firmly in the following passage: "The ovum - the blastosphere, her enhanced memory whispered to her - was just cells. She could abort them, it, as easily as she had induced cell division. She could just be herself; she did not need to be responsible" (Griffith 1992, 285). Marghe has contracted and accepted the virus of Jeep, which has enhanced her underlying abilities to regulate her body down to a cellular level, an ability the virus grants all the women of Jeep. This enables them to become pregnant by inducing cell-division in themselves and each other. Marghe has decided to become pregnant by her lover Thenike's induction but is at this moment having doubts. She is however comforted by the fact that she may end the pregnancy at any time and on her own terms but chooses to go through with the decision she has made. Reproductive control over one's own body can be said to be one of the most fundamental issues that concern women, that is closely connected to autonomy, personhood and subjectivity. In patriarchal societies, the reproductive capacities of women are more often than not a matter of outside control and coercion, which effectively robs these individuals of their bodily autonomy and their subjectivity. Griffith subverts the existing dichotomy of female bodies as weak, submissive receptacles, by placing the reproductive power entirely in their hands, making it a matter of choice at every step of the way. Furthermore, Griffith's description of the inner workings of the female body further cements its unassailability as an autonomous entity:

And Marghe was standing before the cathedral that was Thenike's body and all its systems, as Thenike stood before hers. She stepped inside. It stretched far over her head, a vast, echoing space. She wandered, laying a hand here, against the muscles sheathing the stomach, a hand there, between ribs. She stopped and looked in a side chapel where bronchioles narrowed to alveoli. She wandered on, noting cells and bones and connective tissue, glands and tubes. Ovaries. (Griffith 1992, 266).

Marghe has extended her awareness into Thenike's body by her invitation and is able to do so due to her virus-enhanced abilities. The composition of Thenike's body as described from Marghe's point of view, is reverent, likening it to a place of worship and in turn to something holy. The reader is once more led step by step through the physical experience of Marghe, and by extension Thenike, the metaphorical language referring to a holy body. The only element of this experience that sexes the body is the mention of ovaries, but these become just another natural part of the body described instead of a focus on a particular gendered difference. The biological sexual difference, as represented by the ovaries in Marghe's observation, is not something that sets the female body apart as "other," however, due to Griffith's ability to include it as a natural part of the body described. The dichotomy of sexual, bodily difference is subverted by Griffith, by her refusal to accept the sexed, female body as "other."

The issue of "the male gaze" or the trope of the scientific, "objective" eye, that figures in a lot of traditional science fiction literature, is also addressed and subverted by Griffith in *Ammonite*. Brian Attebery explores this trope in his book *Decoding Gender*, arguing that the eyes "stand for a complex cluster of ideas: identity, status, intellectual prowess...all conceived of in gendered or even sexual terms. Accordingly, the masculine act of seeing bestows on its object the complementary gender" (Attebery 2003, 51). In much of pulp science fiction Attebery argues, this masculine gaze is somehow seen as neutral, but in fact, it objectifies and feminizes that which it gazes upon. It seeks to dominate that which is observed, by defining and categorizing the observed into "fitting categories." This is also what happens in *Left Hand* through the observations of Genly Ai, who gives the reader the impression initially that his gaze and observations are "objective." Genly's gaze is subverted in the end, as both Genly and the reader comes to realize that his observations have been colored by his biases. Griffith's approach to this in *Ammonite* takes the form of subverting the traditional, scientific and "neutral" practices of modern medicine, which may be read as a representation of oppressive patriarchal practices. Modern medicine has traditionally been a male-dominated field in most societies, where the female body has been categorically normed as "other," leading to consistent and systemic discriminatory practices.

In *Ammonite*, Griffith takes back the autonomy and power of the female body, that often is removed in modern medicinal practice and defined in terms of "scientific objectivity" as "other." This she does by Marghe's contracting the Jeep virus, and more importantly, her acceptance of it. It is also important to note that Marghe chooses to be infected by not taking the experimental vaccine she presumably was tasked with testing. When Marghe then falls ill, her very survival depends on her acceptance of the virus into every fiber of her body:

"...Marghe, you're strong, and what you call virus is weak. Accept it. Let it into the deepest parts of you. It's the fighting that takes your strength. Let it be. Just breathe, listen to the blood singing in your veins" (Griffith 1992, 249). Although Marghe must "give up control" to the virus, as one might have interpreted it by using metaphors that likens the body to a machine, it is this that will enable her even greater bodily autonomy in the end, enabling her to heal faster and better than by modern medicine and by giving her full biological and reproductive agency.

Anne-Marie Thomas examines the role of the virus in feminist science fiction in her article "To Devour and Transform," and looks also to Griffith's use of it in *Ammonite*. Thomas argues that the virus facilitates the semblance of a feminist, separatist utopia, that brings about "compulsory homosexuality" (Thomas 2000, 153). She furthermore argues that the Jeep virus may be coded as "essentially feminine" (Thomas 2000, 154), primarily due to its connection with granting the women of Jeep biological agency. While I can understand why Thomas' may find this to be so, I argue that Griffith's virus is more important for establishing women as autonomous subjects with full agency over their bodies, rather than trying to promote essentialism. It is by exploring these issues that may indeed, in many cases, be particular to women's experiences and bodies, and situating the reader within them, that Griffith is able to "norm the other" and show that women are people too.

In *Ammonite*, Griffith has in my opinion, created a "third alternative" to the traditional sex and gender binary to explore what it means to be a subject as a woman or female-bodied person. She explores the experiences of the all-female societies of Jeep to norm the "other," specifically women and queer women. I have argued that even though Griffith's approach focuses on the experiences of a single sex, as was her intention, she is able to achieve her goal of showing the subjectivity of women and evoke an empathetic response from the reader. It is fully possible for readers of any sex to relate to Marghe by means of Griffith's ability to situate them in her physical experiences.



## Conclusion

In chapter one of this thesis, I introduce Ursula K. LeGuin and her novel *The Left Hand of Darkness*. I examine some of the critical academic discussion surrounding the novel and also review her responses to this. I give a review of critics who addresses LeGuin's use of the concept of androgyny as a literary tool in *Left Hand* to explore and challenge issues related to sex and gender. Most of these critics consider it to be a successful "third alternative" to the binary sex and gender system, whilst some find that it reifies the very binary it claims to question. I examine this to build a theoretical framework for my later analysis of *Left Hand* in chapter two. I also review LeGuin's responses to the critics that found *Left Hand* to be lacking in its examination of feminist issues, in her essay "Is Gender Necessary?" (1976) and her later revisitation, "Is Gender Necessary? Redux" (1987). This gives the reader an insight into LeGuin's thoughts and considerations regarding these issues, and illustrates her later change of opinion, where she recognizes some of the critiques and clarifies her stance at the time of the essay's last publication.

In chapter two of this thesis I examine how LeGuin employs the concept of androgyny to question and challenge social and cultural notions regarding sexual and gendered difference in my textual analysis of *Left Hand*. I do this by examining instances in the text where main protagonist Genly assigns gender or uses gendered metaphors in his observations and interactions with the androgynous Gethenians. I find that although her use of androgyny as rooted in a Taoist belief of balance between the masculine and feminine may reify sexual and gendered difference, her exploration and challenging of patriarchal notions regarding these issues in *Left Hand* still creates a "third alternative," that forces the reader to question their own beliefs and perceptions regarding the sex and gender dichotomy.

In chapter three, I examine Nicola Griffith's approach to the sex and gender dichotomy in *Ammonite*, from a perspective that rejects this as a valid system for classification of perceived sexual and gendered difference. I examine her novel in relation to *Left Hand*, as I have shown that there are clear links between the two novels plot-wise and thematically, and both authors intended to show that women are human and not "other." I compare and contrast the novels to better show how Griffith argues for the humanity and subjectivity of women by focusing on their physical experiences from a non-gendered perspective. I find that she can also be said to have created a "third alternative" in her

situating the readers in the protagonists experiences, by focusing on their “embodiment” and physical surroundings without using sexed or gendered metaphorical language.

### **Feminist science fiction today**

Since LeGuin and Griffith first published their respective works during the late 1960’s and early 1990’s, there has been an ever evolving and ongoing discussion regarding the issues of sex and gender within the science fiction genre. Recently, feminist works such as Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985) has been rediscovered and made into a widely popular series on a known streaming service, and Naomi Alderman gained much popularity and critical acclaim for her novel *The Power* in 2016, which was directly influenced by Atwood’s *Handmaid* (Guardian 2016). While the first is dystopian tale of a future fundamentally Christian, oppressive patriarchy that enslaves and abuses the few fertile women who are left after humanity’s reproductive capacities has decreased fatally, Alderman’s novel is a dystopia where the women of earth has discovered innate powers that enable them to gain the physical advantage over men and uses it to take over the world, setting up a matriarchy that grown into an oppressive system towards men. The recent and present trend towards dystopian, feminist science fiction functions is perhaps a reflection of the worries towards the trend in many countries and cultures at present, where women’s rights are under attack. The potential for science fiction to question and examine the social arrangements of our own societies is probably the reason for the popularity of dystopian, feminist fiction that examines these issues relating the sex and gender dichotomy.

However, there are a number of popular sub-genres within science fiction, and then again within feminist science fiction, which may all be said to provide the reader with a number of feminist approaches, many focusing on the varied lives and experiences of women, be it romance, action or horror, all told from a female bodied perspective. This might be considered a victory in and of itself, when compared to matter of the underwhelming female representation in science fiction just 20 years ago. The number of novels that represent intersectional female points of view has also increased in recent years, where the representation of people of different sexualities, gender expressions, colors, cultures and more has become ever more accepted and present. These female characters are in addition more often than not fully fleshed out characters, that present women in subject positions. In my own

experience, I believe that Griffith's *Ammonite* can be said to be most representative of the seeming trend or development within many works of feminist science fiction today, which is not to engage overly much with the sex and gender dichotomy, and rather focus on the subjectivity of the persons portrayed, regardless of their biological sex. I will illustrate this point by briefly examining the trilogies of two critically acclaimed female authors of present-day science fiction: N.K. Jemisin's *Broken Earth* (2016) trilogy and Ann Leckie's *Imperial Radch* (2013) trilogy. Both authors take up Griffith's mantle in their portrayal of sex and gender in their respective novels. Notions of sexual and gendered differences are not widely accommodated for or commented upon and are subverted in the portrayals of the main protagonists and their interpersonal relationships.

In Jemisin's *Broken Earth* trilogy, the people of a postapocalyptic world all live in a society where the sex and gender dichotomy is meaningless. Due to the apocalyptic nature of the world, people are all divided into castes after their abilities and usefulness for the scattered communities and cities that are left, and this determines their worth over everything else. There is no discrimination on the basis of sex and gender, and both women and men may be laborers (valued for their strength) or breeders (keeping the communities alive and preventing inbreeding). The only factor in Jemisin's trilogy that leads to discrimination and ostracizing is whether or not a person is able to use magic, which is believed to have destroyed the world. The novel follows the life of one such female magic user, at three different points in her life as she comes to terms with who she is and how the world works. Although not as free from gendered language as that of Griffith's *Ammonite*, the protagonist is shown to be a woman of strong will and action, defined by what she does rather than her sex or gender expression. Sexuality, love and interpersonal relations is also portrayed in a non-binary way, as the protagonist at one point finds herself in a polyamorous relationship with two men, who are also romantically involved with each other. The relationship is described and dealt with as something completely natural and demonstrates for me how far the science fiction genre has come, where previously conservative depictions of sexuality were the norm.

In Ann Leckie's *Imperial Radch* trilogy, the protagonist Breq is the sole surviving part of a spaceship's artificial intelligence (AI), which belonged to the intergalactic, colonialistic empire of the Radch. Its consciousness is now contained in a female body that used to be one of its "ship-self's" operating components. All other parts of Breq's self has been destroyed, and we follow its journey as it tries to piece together what happened. Breq, being an AI, has trouble with recognizing sexual characteristics of people and does not understand how attributing gender works, which leads to it consistently determining all others as "she" and

“her.” I find this to be an interesting reversal of the use of the universal masculine pronoun, which may illustrate for the reader how “universal” the it “actually” is. The Radch consists of a people who do not use or assign gender in their language, much as with LeGuin’s Gethenians, and their culture and society do not recognize or employ the gender dichotomy. It is however hierarchical and military in nature, but is also based on meritocracy, so that any capable person will be rewarded for their efforts. The military is also made out to be accommodating for romantic interpersonal relationships between its members and mental health is also made a priority alongside physical, without any sense of shame being connected to either aspect. Thus, Leckie does her own kind of subversion by playing with what the reader may believe to be sexed and gendered aspects of the society she describes.

I have included these two examples because I believe they are indicative of a profound and significant change as to how the issues of sex and gender are presented and explored in recent science fiction literature, reflecting an ongoing shift in how western society views these aspects of the human experience. From LeGuin’s questioning of sex and gender roles in *Left Hand*, to Griffith’s non-gendered, embodied approach in *Ammonite*, and up to Jemisin and Leckie’s exploration of societies that matter-of-factly are not governed by sexual or gender binaries.

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