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HETERONORMATIVITY OF THE AMBISEXUAL

A Queer Reading of the Science Fiction Novel *The
Left Hand of Darkness*

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Title: *Heteronormativity of the Genderless: A Queer Reading of the Science Fiction Novel “The Left Hand of Darkness”*

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Abstract: The utopian genre exists predominantly in science fiction and has in the twentieth century been extensively explored in feminist literature. Ursula K. Le Guin is considered one of the leading authors in this genre and has created numerous thought experiments concerned with gender construction and its problematics. The aim for this essay is to examine the probability of queer gender identities and sexuality in the ambisexual society of Gethen in the science fiction novel *The Left Hand of Darkness*, and the possibility of this world being a gender utopia. From a close reading of selected passages, and by relying on queer theory and Judith Butler’s ideas of gender, this essay will look critically at the ambisexual society and its heteronormativity. Furthermore, a meticulous analysis of the main characters Estraven and Genly Ai, as well as the marginalized so called “abnormals”, will be made to establish queerness within the novel. These discussions enable the significance of other aspects of gender rather than solely being biological.

Keywords: Ursula K. Le Guin, science fiction, *The Left Hand of Darkness*, queer theory, heteronormativity, Judith Butler, sexuality, thought experiment, queer

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1. Introduction

In this essay, I will analyse and explore some aspects of Ursula K. Le Guin's science fiction novel *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969). Le Guin is best known for her science fiction and fantasy works and is considered to be one of the leading authors in this genre. She has "challenged numerous conventions of science fiction in her novels, depicting characters who redefine our understandings of gender and race" (Rashley 22), an aspect which is eminently evident in *The Left Hand of Darkness*. This particular novel is a thought experiment set in an ambisexual world, where Le Guin has tried to create a society where gender and sex do not exist, and thus, no gender stereotypes or norms pervade their community, suggesting a utopian alternative world with no inequalities.

The utopian genre exists predominantly in science fiction and has in the twentieth century been extensively explored in feminist literature. Attebery claims that science fiction is an outstanding genre to explore gender construction and "fascinating series of thought experiments" (107), and is particularly accessible to create utopian and as well as dystopian worlds. The science fiction genre "offers new possibilities of being and the exploration of new alternative realities" (McCracken 102), making it an accessible tool for feminist critics to use in gender exploration since the 1960s. However, though science fiction is one of the most accessible fields of visualizing alternative realities, there has been a limited exploration of androgynes. McCracken writes that the "most productive scenarios" for creating alternative realities are through alien contact (114), a dominating aspect of the science fiction genre, which proposes there ought to be more inspection on the matter concerning genders outside of the stereotypical binary. Indeed, Le Guin is one of the few authors who has tried to challenge this notion, resulting in the creation of the Gethenians in *The Left Hand of Darkness*.

The novel is told through more than one narrator, and the two primary ones are, first of all, Genly Ai, who is a man from Earth who has come to the ambisexual world of Gethen, therefore an alien to the Gethenian inhabitants. And secondly, the other narrator is Therem Harth rem ir Estraven, who is a Gethenian native. Through their narratives, the perceptions and conflicts of gender – especially the binarized perception on gender which Genly has – develop into the most prominent factor of the story. The most important reason why gender is so compelling in this novel is that of the ambisexual nature, and androgynous traits of its Gethenian characters; also since they are sexless throughout almost their whole life, and genitalia is only used for reproduction. Approximately a fourth of the Gethenians' life, they are so-called

ambisexual, meaning, according to *Merriam-Webster*: “having qualities or characteristics associated with both sexes: sexually ambiguous” (“Ambisexual”). To complicate it a bit further, they also possess androgynous traits, and, again, according to *Merriam-Webster* this means: “having the characteristics or nature of both male and female” and “neither specifically feminine nor masculine” (“Androgynous”). To sum it up: the Gethenians are by nature sexless, although ambisexual when reproducing, and have androgynous gender traits.

Previous research has primarily focused on the chapters narrated by Genly Ai, and not nearly as much research has been done on the chapters on Gethenian myths and histories, and the diary entries by Estraven. What makes the latter chapters intriguing to examine is the fact that although Gethen is a world inhabited by androgynes, there are Gethenians considered to be “normal” and others “abnormal”, meaning Gethenians have a normativity aimed at sexual expression. Le Guin portrays the people on Gethen as ambisexual and only capable of having intercourse at the peak of their sexual cycle, called *kemmer*, with one of them always developing female genitalia and the other one male ones. However, on Gethen, there are also individuals who are born ‘always in kemmer’, which means their genitalia is always visible. These Gethenians are considered to be perverted and are marginalized for being different, much similar to how the Western society views gender identities which do not fit the binary stereotypes. Through the narrative of Genly Ai, Le Guin has compared the “Perverts” to the unjustified and unfair Western view on homosexuals; accordingly, Le Guin has recognized the “Perverts” as the marginalized individuals of her own novel, and is thus posing questions about the possibility of gender utopia.

My thesis in this essay is that the ambisexual Gethenian society is not the right approach, for creating a gender utopia; I predict that simply eradicating biological sex will not also eliminate gender inequalities in the world of Gethen, and will instead produce its own heteronormativity and problematics. I argue that Le Guin has in her attempt at eliminating the binary gender perception instead created an alternative heteronormativity to our own in her fictive ambisexual world Gethen; for instance, the norm is that even an androgynous person should either be “male” or “female” based on her choice to make them develop either male or female genitalia when performing intercourse. Furthermore, I will look critically at their ambisexual society, and compare it to the current Western view on the non-binary. However, this does not mean that this kind of ambisexual society does not have potential, and poses as a great example of a thought experiment in terms of gender and the idea of a utopia. Therefore, my aim is to look into the probability of other sexualities and gender identities, notably queer

and ‘Other’ ones, within the Gethenian community. The characters I will examine are Estraven an inhabitant of Gethen, the envoy from Earth Genly Ai, and the so-called “Perverts” – all queer ‘Others’ with different traits.

An important reference for the discussion of the marginalized ‘Other’ in *The Left Hand of Darkness* is Wendy Pearson’s research on the queer as a traitor towards the norm. In her research, she illustrates how the Gethenian Estraven could be interpreted as queer and therefore a traitor to the Gethenian society’s perceptions and beliefs. For instance, one of the dominant traits of Estraven, which could be considered traitorous according to Gethen, is how Estraven always treats the alien Genly Ai as an equal, and not as an outsider, and this factor will contribute to the analysis of Estraven’s identity in a later chapter. The relationship between Estraven and Genly will also be analysed to get a further understanding of their presumed ‘othernesses’. For instance, there have been divided opinions in regards to them having sexual intercourse or not; however, Pearson argues against any sexual action ever taking place since such an act “would jeopardize the reader’s ability to believe in Gethen’s androgynes” (82). Accordingly, in the perceptions of Gethenians, Genly is perceived as perverted for always having his genitals visible – just as the so considered “Perverts” and “abnormal” Gethenians – and performing sexual intercourse with him would be erroneous. Thus, the sexual desires Estraven feels for Genly deem him a traitor to his “biological sex and his appropriate gender role” (79). This emphasizes the evident factor that there is just one acceptable sexual orientation on the world of Gethen, and any other actions would go against their society’s heteronormativity. Still, since the Gethenians are by nature ambisexual, and have no fixed gender or gender roles, Pearson argues that “sexual orientation should not be at issue in *The Left Hand of Darkness*” (81). With this in mind, a meticulous study on specifically the “Perverts” and the Gethenian heteronormativity is particularly compelling.

In much of the scholarship on Le Guin, she has been criticized for her use of male characters in her attempt at eliminating the binary gender roles and conceptions. The most prominent criticism on *The Left Hand of Darkness* is her choice of giving the androgynous Gethenians the pronoun ‘he’ instead of inventing a third and fictive pronoun. Feminist critics claim that because of the masculine pronoun the text fails to deliver the ‘female’ dimension of the characters, resulting in the Gethenians only appearing ‘male’ to the reader. This is one of the main problems feminist critics have with androgyny: it is dominantly explored through the perspective of male protagonists (Annas). Through this point of view, the intention of creating

a utopia where gender roles and stereotypes are eliminated loses its credibility and creates unconvincing results.

In response to these criticisms, Le Guin wrote her essay titled “Is Gender Necessary?” in 1976. Here she defended her choice in selecting the masculine pronoun and tried to demonstrate her thoughts when writing the novel. She describes *The Left Hand of Darkness* as a thought experiment, and her intention in eliminating gender was to “find out what was left” (160). Her anticipated answer was that her created people would simply be human. The argument on this novel being fictional and not factional, referring to gender, is appropriate enough, however, in her original essay, any mention of other sexual orientation or the subject of the ‘Other’, is lacking. She later in the 1980s released an updated version of the essay called “Is Gender Necessary? Redux”, where she expressed regret in “quite unnecessarily lock[ing] Gethenians into heterosexuality” (169). Indeed, Le Guin has, quite unconsciously, created a world with its own heteronormativity on gender and sexuality. Buchanan emphasizes this with “if Gethenians did not possess both male and female productive organs [...] *Left Hand* [...] would serve as more convincing challenges to gender roles and heteronormativity” (19).

For the theoretical approach for this essay, I will use queer theory. Queer theory is concerned with deconstructing binaries and creating opportunities for sexualities and identities other than the heterosexual stereotype, and therefore I find this theory applicable to my studies. This theory and a brief understanding of Butler’s own analysis on gender trouble will be presented in the first chapter. Then, I will give an analysis of the Gethenian character Estraven in Chapter 2. This chapter will heavily focus on Estraven’s identity and queer attributes, and also on the relationship between the characters Estraven and Genly Ai. Further, in Chapter 3, I will contrast the otherness of Genly Ai and “the Pervert” with each other for a deeper understanding of the Gethenian heteronormativity and marginalization. Finally, I will give my conclusion in Chapter 4.

2. Chapter 1 – An Introduction to Queer Theory and Judith Butler

In order to make an attempt to answer my research questions and elaborate my aim, I will use queer theory and Judith Butler's analysis and questionings on gender. Both Butler and queer theory challenge Western heteronormativity and the binary gender conception, exploring the probabilities of there being more than the normative sexualities and gender identities; hence, this theoretical approach is highly applicable to this study.

To begin with, a brief definition of the word 'queer' and its usage is practical for further understanding of Butler's suggestions on gender and the basis of queer theory. According to the *Merriam-Webster's* dictionary, the origin and etymology of the word 'queer' are unknown but the word has been used in the English language since the sixteenth century ("Queer"). One definition of the word is "differing in some odd way from what is usual or normal," but the most prominent definition is of the word as a noun and is then related to sexuality and people who are sexually attracted to the same sex ("Queer"). This definition is fairly newly developed, and for the past two decades, both the adjective and noun usage of 'queer' have sometimes been recognized as offensive, but also as a sign of pride.

One of the primary features of queer theory is the concern with how gender and sexuality are portrayed and discussed in literature and culture. Derived from feminist criticism and gender studies, queer theory focuses on the breakdown of binaries, such as male and female, and masculine and feminine, and explores gender issues regarding power, sexuality, and marginalized populations. Further, according to the theory, the matter of sex can be divided into four elements: biological sex, gender identity, genus, and the juridical sex assigned at birth, contributing to a complex cognizance on the subject of sex. Many of the queer theorists are interested in the in-betweens, for instance, transsexuals, hermaphrodites, and drag-queens, and one of those theorists is Judith Butler. Her work *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), where she argues that gender is a kind of performance, is considered to be one of the foundational texts culminating in queer theory.

In her first chapter, Butler introduces the question "what is 'sex' anyway?" and continues with "is it anatomical, chromosomal, or hormonal, and how is a feminist critic to assess the scientific discourses which purport to establish such 'facts' for us?" (9). She is, indeed, critical to the notions of gender according to feminist theorists, and argues that feminists have rejected the belief that biology is the factor which determines "sex", and instead they have created an

inevitable destiny where culture is the determining factor, allowing no space for defiance or complexity. In splitting gender into the normative binaries of male and female, Butler argues, that “this radical splitting [...] poses yet another set of problems” (9); for instance, “can we refer to a ‘given’ sex or a ‘given’ gender without first inquiring into how sex and/or gender is given, through what means?” (9). Consequently, Butler proposes that gender is a performance, although, not a gender performance someone *does*, but the form that performance will take. Clarifying what she meant by this statement, she explained in a video interview:

When we say that gender is performed, we usually mean that we've taken on a role; we're acting in some way... To say that gender is performative is a little different... For something to be performative means that it produces a series of effects. We act and walk and speak and talk that consolidate an impression of being a man or being a woman... we act as if that being of a man or that being of a woman is actually an internal reality or simply something that is true about us. Actually, it is a phenomenon that is being produced all the time and reproduced all the time. (*Judith Butler: Your Behaviour Creates Your Gender*)

This interpretation of gender contributes to an extensive understanding of the binaries of masculinity and femininity, and to the contention that gender norms are changeable.

Furthermore, Butler questions the normative ideal of “identity”, and since identities are stereotypically connected to concepts of sex, gender, and sexuality, these factors also contribute to further marginalizing people “who fail to conform to the gendered norms of cultural intelligibility by which persons are defined” (23). That is, she speaks of “intelligible” genders and their relations associated with the heteronormative binaries male/female, masculine/feminine, and heterosexual desire. She further argues that the “unintelligible” genders are those who fail to fit into the heteronormative society, for instance, transsexuals and homosexuals. Her idea of identity is that “identity” is free-floating, and is, in accordance with gender, a performance and not an essence; identity is a dramatic *effect* of our performances.

To emphasize Butler’s notion of gender and its issues, she has created an interesting analogy of gender perception with drag-queens:

The performance of drag plays upon the distinction between the anatomy of the performer and the gender that is being performed. But we are actually in the presence of three contingent dimensions of significant corporeality: anatomical sex, gender identity, and gender performance. If the anatomy of the performer is already distinct from the gender of the performer, and both of [these] are distinct from the gender of the performance, then the performance suggests a dissonance not only between sex and performance, but sex and gender, and gender and performance. As much as drag creates a unified picture of “woman” (which its critics often oppose), it also reveals the distinctness of those aspects of gendered experience which are falsely naturalized as a unity through the regulatory fiction of heterosexual coherence. *In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself – as well as its contingency.* Indeed, part of the pleasure, the giddiness of the performance is in the recognition of a radical contingency in the relation between sex

and gender in the face of cultural configurations of casual unities that are regularly assumed to be natural and necessary. (187, original emphasis.)

This comparison between the performances of gender and of drags-queens accentuate the idea of there being more elements of gender than anatomy and cultural construction, one of the foundational interpretations of queer theory. In her preface, Butler explains the comparison as such: “Drag is an example that is meant to establish that ‘reality’ is not as fixed as we generally assume it to be. The purpose of the example is to expose the tenuousness of gender ‘reality’ in order to counter the violence performed by gender norms” (XXV).

Thus, queer theory and Butler’s ideas are applicable to the novel *The Left Hand of Darkness* since both the theory, Butler, and Le Guin challenge the heteronormative perceptions of gender and sexuality. With the basis of Butler’s arguments one can further a critical understanding of the fictional heteronormativity on the world of Gethen, and therefore, deconstruct it. Also, a queer reading of the novel with a focus on the marginalized ‘Other’ – the “Perverts” and the alien – can contribute to new realizations regarding the possibility of a gender utopia which Le Guin has created.

3. Chapter 2: Estraven as the Subversive ‘Other’

Genly: “Perhaps you are as obsessed with wholeness as we are with dualism.” Estraven: “We are dualists too. Duality is an essential, isn’t it? So long as there is *myself* and *the other*.” – Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Left Hand of Darkness* (233)

The central aim of this essay is to examine the possibility of queerness and the notion of the ‘Other’ existing in Le Guin’s novel *The Left Hand of Darkness*. Therefore, this chapter will give a thorough exploration of one of the main characters, Therem Harth rem ir Estraven, who is one of the ambisexual inhabitants of Gethen, since “he” offers great opportunities in terms of queerness. I will begin with a description and analysis of Estraven in terms of “his” person and identity. Further, how Estraven is afflicted by the Tellurian Genly Ai’s heteronormative perception will be discussed. Indeed, one of the primary and imperative issues in the novel is how Genly genders Estraven by giving “him” (and all the other Gethenians) the generic pronoun ‘he’; thus, this chapter will end with a discussion of Le Guin’s choice in pronouns and its impact on the reader’s perception of the Gethenians. Henceforth, I will refer to Estraven with the variations of the third-person pronoun ‘s/he’ (s/he, his/r and him/r) instead of the generic ‘he’ to try to emphasize the ambisexual nature of the Gethenians.

As previously discussed in the introductory chapter, the world of Gethen is an ambisexual society, meaning all its habitants are androgynes. For about three fourths of their monthly cycle they are sexless, and only develop either female or male genitalia in the last part of their cycle to reproduce. Furthermore, regarding their sexuality, since they always *kemmer* into either a female or male sex, this could be perceived as their form of heterosexuality and the norm of Gethen. Therefore, the Gethenian norm is to only possess genitalia when reproducing, otherwise being sexless, and anything outside of this norm is regarded as ‘Other’ to them. Furthermore, when performing intercourse the norm is a male and female sexual interaction, and therefore this is their heterosexual normativity. This heteronormativity is apparent in the character Estraven; however, his/r identity and sexuality will be analysed based on Butler’s gender behaviour assumption.

The reader is introduced to the character Estraven through the narrative of Genly Ai, who has before established a male-gendered projection on the Gethenians, leaving the reader little choice in perceiving Estraven as anything else than male:

Though I had been nearly two years on Winter I was still far from being able to see the people of the planet through their own eyes. I tried to, but my efforts took the form of self-consciously seeing a Gethenian first as a man, then as a woman, forcing him into those categories so irrelevant to his nature and so essential to my own. (11-12)

Although Genly seems aware of his own binarized perceptions, and the issues caused by it, he continues to describe all the Gethenians with the pronoun ‘he’ even in situations when he considers an individual more female than male as in this passage:

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. (48, emphasis added.)

Indeed, the pronoun issue continues in the chapters narrated by Estraven, where s/he is constricted by the English binary and heteronormative language, where here, above all, is room for a non-binary and gendered language use. These chapters are certainly narrated by Estraven; however, what the reader soon forgets is that the diary entries written by the Gethenian, are also edited by the stranger Genly, which could explain the lack of any Gethenian words and grammatical usage, and this results in limited comprehension of who Estraven really is. For instance, a passage where Estraven conveys his/r feelings of being in the company of Genly Ai in a sexual situation is full of binarized pronouns:

As I am in kemmer I would find it easier to ignore Ai’s presence, but this is difficult in a two-man tent. The trouble is of course that he is, in his curious fashion, also in kemmer: always in kemmer ... Finally he asked, had he offended me? I explained my silence, with some embarrassment. I was afraid he would laugh at me. After all he is no more an oddity, a sexual freak, than I am ... He did not laugh, of course. (232)

Although provided with limited genuine attributes regarding Estraven, I suggest that a close reading of the given information could produce queer aspects of his/r identity. The information given about Estraven shows signs of him/r possessing what Butler refers to as “incoherent” and “discontinuous” gendered beings (23). She further argues that these identities are those “who appear to be persons but fail to conform to the gendered norms of cultural intelligibility by which persons are defined” (23). Estraven does, indeed, fail in conforming to the matrix of norms of the Gethenians society since s/he does not follow the political and cultural laws set up by the government, what we may call the heteronormativity of the Gethen community. This is similar to the notion in Western society where “the cultural matrix through which gender identity has become intelligible requires that certain kind of ‘identities’ cannot ‘exist’ [...] and those in which the practices of desire do not ‘follow’ from either sex or gender” (Butler 24); Butler is referring to established cultural and political norms. Estraven is, in fact, the prime minister of the capital Karhide, and is supposed to perform in a certain way – in a cultural and political way – however, s/he does not. S/he goes against his/r “gendered” role by agreeing with the Envoy, Genly Ai, and by not conforming to the plans set up by the Gethenian regime. Genly is indeed an envoy sent to Gethen to collect data about their society, and form a close

relationship with the government with the intention of convincing them of a truce and cooperation with the rest of the Hainish¹ universe. With this collaboration, the worlds could, for instance, trade with each other, and Estraven is in agreement with this; however, the rest of the regime is not and has their own agenda. Consequently, by going against these regulations, Estraven loses his/r, in a Western perspective, gendered identity, much like a woman would lose her feminine identity. As Butler puts it: “the notion that there might be a ‘truth’ of sex [...] is produced precisely through the regulatory practices that generate coherent identities through the matrix of coherent gender norms.” (23) As a result, Estraven becomes a traitor to his/r gender and also a subversive ‘Other’.

As previously discussed, Le Guin’s choice in assigning the Gethenians the English generic pronoun does indeed complicate the perception of Estraven being anything else than male. Therefore, applying the above analysis on Estraven’s identity as ‘Other’ becomes a strenuous task; indeed, Genly’s narration manipulates the reader’s interpretation into reading Estraven as a male almost throughout the whole novel. However, there is one exception when Genly finally sees him/r beyond his gendered vision:

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*. Any need to explain the sources of that fear vanished with the fear; what I was left with was, at last, acceptance of *him* as *he* was. (247, emphasis added)

This is a distinct contrast to the way Estraven has always treated the Envoy:

For *he* was the only one who had entirely accepted me as a human being: who had liked me personally and given me entire personal loyalty, and who therefore had demanded of me an equal degree of recognition of acceptance. (247, emphasis added)

This revelation developed through Genly seeing him in a sexual situation where Estraven *kemmered* into, by bisexual standards, a woman; and not as much from them getting to know each other. Indeed, they have spent an excessive amount of time together on their journey through the Winter landscape, and it is not until this moment in the tent where Genly finally shows some indication of accepting Estraven for who s/he really is.

The issue regarding this situation is that due to the restricted translation of Estraven as an androgyne, the reader once again assigns Estraven one of the heteronormative binary genders: female. Certainly, as Pearson points out: “because Le Guin sets up a heteronormative version of Gethenian sexuality in *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Estraven kemmers as female” (81).

¹ A fictional universe created by Le Guin set sometime in the future.

Estraven's presumed sexuality in this context is the Gethenian's answer to heterosexuality since one always develops female genitalia and the other male ones. Hence, due to Genly's male presence, it seems inevitable that the outcome of Estraven's *kemmering* is female sexual organs. Sexual organs, and sexual intercourse, in this context, is only used for reproductive purposes, and similar to many animals, not for the purpose of pleasure. If Le Guin had allowed the Gethenians the liberty of either choosing the preferred sex or, the development of sexual organs always being at random but not affected by the other partner's process, then the potential of creating a utopian society equal to all gender identities and sexualities would be greater, and might also allow the Gethenians using intercourse as a form of pleasure and not just for reproduction.

Furthermore, Sedgwick states in her work *Epistemology of the Closet*, that "it is certainly true that without a concept of gender there could be, quite simply, no concept of homo- or heterosexuality" (31). There is, indeed, no binary concept of gender on Gethen; however, since Le Guin locked the inhabitants in a heterosexual position during intercourse, this does form a concept of sexuality in the mind of the reader. No sexual interaction between Estraven and Genly ever occurs in the novel, but since there is sexual tension between them it does indicate the possibility. Whether they did, in fact, perform sexual intercourse or not, is quite unclear:

I expect it will turn out that sexual intercourse is possible between Gethenian double-sexed and Hainishnorm one-sexed human beings, though such intercourse will inevitably be sterile. It remains to be proved; Estraven and I proved nothing except perhaps a rather subtler point. The nearest to crisis that our sexual desires brought us was on a night early in the journey, our second night up on the Ice. (247-248)

Most critics argue that they did, in fact, not perform intercourse, since it would actually obstruct the "reader's ability to believe in Gethen's androgynes" (Pearson, 82). Also, a sexual act between the two would be perceived as homosexual, due to the obstruction caused by the pronoun 'he'. In such an act, Pearson argues that Estraven would inevitably be assigned the role of "the passive partner in sex", and also, as "feminine" "by his biological response to Genly's permanent maleness" (82). Additionally, Lande claims that "a sex scene between Estraven and Genly would most likely work towards reinforcing gender oppositions rather than exploring or breaking them apart ... the representation of alien sex scenes will never be truly alien" (26).

When Ursula Le Guin wrote the novel *The Left Hand of Darkness* she did not intend to create a world restricted by any heterosexual hegemony or gender norms; quite the opposite, she wanted to create a society where gender did not exist and find out what was left, thus, a science fictional thought experiment. In the introduction to the novel she emphasizes the

importance of managing a thought experiment as something which is *describing* a reality, and not *predicting* it:

The purpose of a thought-experiment, as the term was used by Schrödinger and other physicists, is not to predict the future – indeed Schrödinger’s most famous thought-experiment goes to show that the ‘future’, on the quantum level, *cannot* be predicted – but to describe reality, the present world. (XIV)

With this in mind, even Le Guin herself could not have predicted the outcome of the reality of her own novel. More importantly, her idea of eliminating gender is not the same as eliminating gender and sex altogether.

Her ideas of eliminating gender echoes the similar opinions of Monique Wittig, where Wittig claims that “the category of sex would itself disappear and, indeed, *dissipate* through the disruption and displacement of heterosexual hegemony” (Butler 25). Further, Wittig argues that “a true humanism of ‘the person’” would surface if a “non-phallogocentric erotic economy [would] dispel the illusion of sex, gender, and identity” (25). Accordingly, Le Guin in her essay “Is Gender Necessary?” writes:

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. (172)

Le Guin suggests, like Wittig, that a non-phallogocentric society would, indeed, be equal in the aspects where men and women are today unequal in the Western society. Moreover, most dualisms would dissipate and this dissolution would lead to a gender utopia. However, just like in the quote from the beginning of this chapter says, as long as there is *myself* and *the other*, a form of dualism will always exist. Thus, the novel could not be regarded as a gender utopia free from heteronormativity because of two imperative errors: the usage of the English pronoun ‘he’, and locking the Gethenians in heterosexuality (the issues regarding sexuality will be discussed in chapter 3). Although, these are just two aspects of the novel which could easily be fixed since it is, indeed, fictional and not factual.

Le Guin has received a lot of criticism especially regarding her choice of pronouns. In her essay “Is Gender Necessary?” she answers this criticism, although, defending her choice by explaining that she does not like fictional pronouns and therefore decided upon using the pronoun ‘he’ for her Gethenians. This reason has left both readers and critics quite quizzical, especially since Le Guin wrote the chapter “The Matter of Sex” where it seems she has done what she urges the readers not to do:

[w]hen you meet a Gethenian you cannot and must not do what a bisexual naturally does, which is to cast him in the role of Man or Woman, while adopting towards him a corresponding role dependent on your expectations of the patterned or possible interactions between persons of the same or the opposite sex. Our entire pattern of sociosexual interaction is non-existent here. (94)

Over two decades later, Le Guin once again revisited the subject of gender and pronouns used in the ambisexual Gethen society. This time she wrote a short story called “Coming of Age in Karhide” which is centred on a teenage Gethenian named Sov. Similar to the chapters by Estraven, this short story is narrated by a Gethenian – Sov – but, in contrast to *The Left Hand of Darkness*, this text is not edited by an outlander. For the first time, the reader is presented with alternative nouns and a Gethenian grammar and language. *The Left Hand of Darkness* frequently mentions other forms of pronouns, but never uses them, whereas in “Coming of Age in Karhide” new words such as ‘clitopenis’, and ‘wombchildren’ are introduced into the Gethenian vocabulary. Also, when referring to parents the word ‘mother’ is being used; however, since all Gethenians can both become a mother and a father, instead of saying ‘father’ they say ‘getter’. The usage of pronouns is rare, hence, as Sov explains: “I have already had some trouble trying to tell this story in a language that has no somer pronouns, only gendered pronouns” (3). Instead, when referring to an individual, Sov frequently uses their first or last name. Accordingly, the usage of first and last names could easily be applied to the narration of Genly Ai and Estraven.

From analysing chosen passages from the book, and attributes regarding the character Estraven, along with other critics and a critical queer reading, I have shown in this chapter that although Le Guin claims to have eliminated gender and heteronormativity, there are, indeed, queer identities and the notion of ‘Other’ in the novel. The novel introduces a complex and complicated comprehension of gender and heteronormativity due to the frequent use of the English pronoun ‘he’ and heterosexualization of its androgyne characters. When not conforming to the manipulations the language offers, one can understand that the ontology of Estraven is, indeed, a form of ‘Other’, and a queer individual.

4. Chapter 3: The Tellurian Alien and the Perverted Other

In this chapter, other possibilities of queer identities and sexualities will be explored in *The Left Hand of Darkness*. The two primary concerns will be: first, the perception of the alien Genly Ai, and how he is treated as an ‘Other’, and, secondly, an examination of the Gethenian view of their own species of ‘Other’ – the “abnormals”, also referred to as the “Perverts”. An important note is that Genly Ai is, of course, an alien and stranger to the Gethenian society since he is an inhabitant from the planet Earth, however, some aspects of how he is treated by the Gethenians are more equivalent to the treatment of the “abnormals”, rather than a stranger. I will, therefore, contrast the “abnormals” with Genly in my attempt at finding queerness in the novel, and primarily make use of Wendy Pearson’s ideas on the alien *outside* society, and the alien *inside*. Later in the chapter, the heterosexualization of the Gethenian society and the possibility of a gender utopia will be discussed.

Pearson has in her chapter on “Alien Cryptographies: The View from Queer” discussed the notion of how “one must be able to identify the enemy” (6); in this case, the enemies, and aliens, are Genly Ai and the “abnormals”, although these individuals are perceived differently in the Gethenian community. Pearson further emphasizes the fear of the alien who has the ability to “pass invisibly in the midst of ‘normal’ people” (9), and “the fear of the perfect imitation” (8). The outlander Genly Ai is an impeccable example of this kind of imitation since he blends in so perfectly “one must know him to know him alien” (Le Guin 152). In a diary entry by Estraven, s/he writes:

It is a pity he looks so like us. In Erhenrang people often pointed him out on the street, for they knew some truth or talk about him and knew he was there. Here where his presence is kept secret his person goes unremarked. They see him no doubt much as I first saw him: an unusually tall, husky, and dark youth just entering kemmer. (152)

Accordingly, for the Gethenians to treat an outsider like Genly as an ‘Other’, they must first know him to be alien. For instance, when convicted and trapped in a cart together with other captives, Genly Ai is approached by one of these *kemmering* captives and mistaken for also being in a *kemmering* state: “The young Orgota was in kemmer, and had been drawn to me. The one time any one of them asked anything of me, and I couldn’t give it” (171). In other cases, when he was known to be alien and ‘Other’, the Gethenians have shown reluctance towards the envoy and expressed disgust:

So all of them, out on these other planets, are in permanent kemmer? A society of perverts? ... 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 to tolerate any dealings with creatures so monstrously different. (36)

Here one can clearly distinguish the contrast between *knowing* the individual being 'Other', and *not knowing* it, resulting in a contrasting recognition.

Continuing on the subject of *knowing* who is alien and 'Other': as previously stated, the Gethenians are ambisexual meaning they are genderless. However, some of the individuals are born with their genitals visible and outside of their body throughout their whole lives. It is eminently clear that the Gethenian society considers these individuals as outlaws and marginalize them for being different, even in Le Guin's later short story "Coming of Age in Karhide":

There are always a few people born that way here. Some of them can be cured; those who can't or choose not to be usually live in a Fastness and learn the disciplines, or they become Doorkeepers. It's convenient for them, and for normal people too. (Le Guin 10)

Le Guin, through the narration of Genly Ai, compares the marginalization of the "Perverts" with how the Western society treats homosexuals: "They are not excluded from society, but they are tolerated with some disdain, as homosexuals are in many bisexual societies" (*The Left Hand of Darkness* 63); indeed, a further example of how this discrimination can be related to the Western views is how historically homosexuality was perceived as an illness – a mental illness – and could be cured, as the previous quote mentions: "some of them can be cured" (10). How the "Perverts" respond to this marginalization is never revealed to the reader, as they are not a frequent part of the story. This *de facto* can be related to those which Pearson considers being the other part of queer people as "their history and their cultural production, remain invisible and unrecognized, even when that invisibility comes at the cost of a willful act of blindness" (10).

Furthermore, other considerable evidence of the "abnormals" being marginalized 'Others' is how they are treated in social interactions. In the fifth chapter "The Domestication of Hunch", although a participant in an important spiritual ritual, the "Pervert" is handled with both disgust and fear: "The Pervert laid his hand quickly and softly on the kemmerer's hand. The Kemmerer avoided the touch hastily, with fear or disgust" (63) and the "normal" Gethenians show great reluctance in accepting them as human beings: "Goss used the pronoun that designates a male animal, not the pronoun for a human being in the masculine role of kemmer" (63). Indeed, this form of discrimination and ignorance is not only performed by the

Gethenians but also by Genly who – except for the remark on their marginalization resembling that of homosexuals – shows little interest in the “abnormals”. This, however, is again brought up in the short story “Coming of Age in Karhide”, where the narrator, and Gethenian, Sov reflects on the life of a “Pervert”: “responsible Doorkeepers, of course, keep well away from anybody who doesn't invite them to come close. But permanent kemmer may not lead to responsibility of character; nor does being called halfdead and pervert all your life, I imagine” (10). Sov even goes as far as showing genuine interest in the Pervert's person:

He fascinated me. Ebbeche [the Pervert] was certainly not handsome, and yet I noticed how musical his rather deep voice was; and pale skin was more attractive than I had ever thought it. I felt that he had been maligned, that his life must be a strange one. I wanted to talk to him. (10)

Sov never did speak to “him”, and an interaction where the reader gets real insight into the “abnormal's” inner thoughts and feelings never occurs in either the novel or the short story.

Although the “abnormals” and the Tellurian are both ‘Other’ and queer, they are treated considerably differently. The Gethenians born with their genitals permanently outside of their bodies are openly treated as something outside of the norm, and outside of the Gethenian heteronormativity; their alienness being challenging to disguise. However, Genly Ai is permitted to openly display his alienness, interacting freely with the Gethenian society; his alienness is always in disguise if not revealed. Even when Genly's true self is revealed this is mostly met with curiosity and not with the reluctance that the “abnormal” Gethenians meet. The difference in acceptance is so distinct and leads to the question of why the fear of your own race (the Gethenians) being different is greater than the fear of an actual other? Genly Ai does indeed, as Pearson puts it, “escape the heteronormative gaze” (10), whereas the “abnormals” are still affected by the Gethenian heteronormativity, although their otherness is much similar anatomically to the alien, and only differentiates in heritage.

In accordance with the science fictional heteronormativity on Gethen, their form of heterosexuality is when two Gethenians perform sexual intercourse with one as female and the other as male, both otherwise sexless and impotent. An interpretation of the “Perverts” could be that they are what the Western would call transsexual since no evidence of sexual preference of these individuals is presented in the novel; however, they do, in fact, differ in gender to other Gethenians since they are always in *kemmer* and never enter the sexless state. This, I would argue, could be perceived as the Gethenian form of transsexuality; however, performing any sexual activity with an “abnormal” Gethenian is not accepted in the Gethenian society, and there is no evidence of any sexual interaction of this sort occurring throughout the novel.

Therefore, hypothetically, if a “normal” and an “abnormal” Gethenian would perform sexual intercourse, the “normal” Gethenian would break the heterosexual norm of the Gethen society, and this, in my opinion, could be perceived as homosexuality. Furthermore, Ursula Le Guin has later stated she regretted that she unconsciously assigned the Gethenians a heterosexual orientation, and further implied that any other sexual orientation would not pose a problem on Gethen. Indeed, Pearson has also made a similar assumption:

Logically, given that all Gethenians must, in this later incarnation of the story, be by nature bisexual, that they must, if they can, find a partner in kemmer, and that Gethenians have no fixed biological sex or gender roles, sexual orientation should not be at issue in *The Left Hand of Darkness*. (81)

There is, however, another type of taboo which has been naturalized in the novel: the incest taboo. In the seventh chapter “The Question of Sex”, an observer gives a meticulous description of how the Gethenians are allowed to *kemmer* with their siblings: “Incest is permitted, with various restrictions, between siblings, even the full siblings of a vowed-kemmering pair. Siblings are not however allowed to vow kemmering², nor keep kemmering after the birth of a child to one of the pair. Incest between generations is strictly forbidden” (92). The narrator of the chapter also emphasizes the heteronormativity on Gethen: “Normal individuals have no predisposition to either sexual role in kemmer, they do not know whether they will be the male or the female, and have no choice in the matter” (91), establishing the inevitable two-sex outcome. Accordingly, I would not suggest this as being queer and ‘Other’. I would, however, consider it a part of the heteronormativity, and heterosexuality, on Gethen as it is within what is considered “normal”; whereas the “abnormals” are so out of the norm they should be assigned their own sexuality and gender.

Furthermore, in the introduction to *Queer Universes: Sexualities in Science Fiction* the authors state that “in science fiction, as in life, sexuality is a complicated and remarkably intransigent subject of inquiry” (2), and it is indeed a strenuous task in trying to determine whether a character’s sexuality, gender, and identity is, as Butler puts it, intelligible or not. The inhabitants of Gethen are both genderless and androgynous at the same time, and by eliminating gender Le Guin wanted to find out what was left. Although androgyny suggests a utopia, Lisa Buchanan states that “the androgyny presented in science fiction does not necessarily lead to what might be considered utopian results” (1). This is indeed apparent in the novel *The Left Hand of Darkness*, where Le Guin has tried in the form of a thought experiment to eliminate gender, but never did quite lead to utopian results, for instance, social constructions and

² ‘To vow kemmering’ is the equivalent to marriage.

behaviour as previously discussed in the chapter on Butler were still apparent in the novel. However, Ursula Le Guin has even declared in her essay “Is Gender Necessary?” that she does not consider the novel a utopia, and never had the intention of creating one. Le Guin’s intention was all along to create a thought experiment on eliminating gender and see what was left. Indeed, a utopia is in itself also a thought experiment and literally means “nowhere” (“Utopia”), so one can draw the conclusion that a utopia, and a gender utopia, is quite unattainable. In Le Guin’s science fictional thought experiment one can, however, find queerness and aspects of ‘Otherness’ in both the character Genly Ai and the “Perverts”, culminating in the result of creating other forms of gender and sexualities than those of the heteronormativity and binarized stereotype. However, the marginalization and discrimination and the fact that ‘Otherness’ and queer characters exist in an otherwise genderless world is quite remarkable.

5. Conclusion

In this essay, I have explored the possibility of queer identities and sexuality in the science fiction novel *The Left Hand of Darkness*; and, discussed whether or not the novel could be considered a utopia. My thesis in this essay has been that the ambisexual Gethenian society is not the right approach for creating a gender utopia – even in a thought experiment such as in the novel – where only the biological part has been eliminated. The issues of a fictional heterosexualization have also been a main concern.

To answer my thesis and research questions, I have used queer theory and Judith Butler's ideas on gender and sexuality. In the first chapter, I have tried to present this theory and Butler in a summarized way and connected it to the novel. Accordingly, Butler's research has assisted in establishing the queer identity of the Gethenian character Estraven which was discussed in the second chapter. This discussion and an analysis of his/r identity submitted evidence of his/r queerness and that his/r gender differentiates not through biological sex, but via political and cultural behaviour. Also, although Ursula Le Guin assigned Estraven the generic English pronoun 'he', with the help of a queer reading the reader is able to see past the manipulation of the pronoun and start to visualize Estraven as an 'Other' in both identity and gender and put down the binarized binoculars.

In terms of sexuality, the third chapter covers a discussion of the alien and envoy from Earth – Genly Ai – and the marginalized inhabitants of Gethen referred to as the "Perverts". Examining these characters with the idea presented by Wendy Pearson where an alien can be either *inside* the society or *outside* society, concluded in distinct evidence of the discrimination and ignorance towards the "Perverts". Both Genly Ai and the "abnormal" Gethenians are queer and 'Other', however, the acceptance of their existence in the Gethenian society differs in tolerance. The Tellurian alien is blending in with the society and met with curiosity, whereas the "Perverts", although still Gethenians, are met with fear and disgust much similar to the prior Western homosexual taboo. How the "Perverts" are treated emphasizes the heteronormativity existing in the world of Gethen, and sexual intercourse with these individuals could be perceived as the Gethenian form of homosexuality since it has also been established in this essay that the "Perverts" could be interpreted as transsexuals.

With a queer close reading of selected passages of the novel, I have shown that creating a genderless world, and only eliminating fixed biological sex, is not enough to create a gender utopia. Other aspects of gender enabled a heterosexuality to develop throughout this thought

experiment; while an ambisexual society does still pose the possibility of a gender utopia, it needs to elaborate a greater acceptance for other forms of sexualities and gender identities in the novel for utopian results. I, therefore, suggest that other aspects of gender have to be taken into thorough consideration for achieving the ultimate goal of creating a gender utopia. Also, I encourage more queer readings on both the novel as a whole since most research is based on feminist criticism, and further research on the “Pervert” since previous research on this subject is rather limited.

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