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The Configuration of Society in *The Dispossessed* and *Blindness*

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One of literature's greatest strengths is its ability to teach readers about complex themes through engaging, fictional stories. Through novels, readers are able to grasp everlasting truths about life through entertaining stories with believable characters. One of these themes is the construction of society. Books can deal with the concept of a hierarchical society, and how people react to changes within society. Similarly, they can illuminate truths about human society that transcend the time or geographic region the book was published. However, not all novels deal with this concept the same. Both Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* and José Saramago's *Blindness* offer complementary but entirely unique perspectives on the establishment of society. *The Dispossessed* follows a man who travels to a world where the construction of society is the complete inverse of the one he is accustomed to, while *Blindness* explores what happens to society once an inexplicable epidemic of blindness spreads throughout the population. Keeping this in mind, how does each book rationalize the construction of society, and explain the complex relationship between a society and its peoples? Although both *The Dispossessed* and *Blindness* assert that individuals can both mold and be molded by the society they live in, *The Dispossessed* contends that the formation of hierarchical society is inevitable, while *Blindness* maintains that hierarchical society only exists with the collective consent of its citizens. Through an in-depth analysis of each novel and supplementary examination of related secondary sources, this point will become clearly established.

In *The Dispossessed*, Le Guin asserts that individuals can both mold and be molded by the societies they live in. Within the novel, the character Shevek is the most prevalent example of an individual interacting with the society they exist in. Throughout the duration of the book, Shevek leaves his collectivist home planet of Anarres, lives extensively in the hierarchical structured planet of Urras, and then later travels back to Anarres. All the while, Shevek is both shaping and being shaped by the societies he lives and interacts with. Most clearly, Shevek's character has been defined by his upbringing in Anarres. From a young age, the principles of Anarresti collectivism were drilled into Shevek's mind. During infancy, Shevek pushes another baby out of the sunlight, declaring that the spot belongs to him. The Anarresti nurse is quick to respond, saying "It is not yours...Nothing is yours. It is to use. It is to share. If you will not share it, you cannot use it" (Le Guin 27). As demonstrated by the matron, the pragmatic tenets of collectivism are taught to the people of Anarres from a young age. By looking at how Shevek behaves throughout his days on Anarres and initial time on Urras, it is unmistakable that his upbringing in Anarresti society has had a significant impact on him. However, this effect of "molding" is not exclusive to the world of Anarres. Shevek's time on Urras also plays a part in his development. During his time on Urras, Shevek finds himself thinking more and more like a "propertarian"- the very antithesis of his way of life on his home planet. This inner turmoil climaxes in Shevek's confrontation with Vea, a lifelong resident of the capitalist A-Io. Shevek attempts to have his way with Vea, groping and kissing her despite her vehement protests. Soon after, Vea is disgusted while Shevek is utterly ashamed of himself (Le Guin 230). This incident reflects the corruption of Shevek's collectivist ideals due to his extended time on Urras. In an act of lust and greed, two feelings that belong alone to the individualistic society of Urras, Shevek attempts to claim Vea as "his," signaling his transformation to a

propertarian. This change is only made possible through Shevek's time on Urras, as the differing culture of the society ultimately changes his own personal code.

As seen in *The Dispossessed*, individuals can be shaped by the society they exist in. However, the truth is the same for the opposite- individuals can also shape the society they exist in. In Carter F. Hanson's article "Memory's Offspring and Utopian Ambiguity in Ursula K. Le Guin's 'The Day Before the Revolution' and *The Dispossessed*," Hanson contends how just as the settlers of Anarres lost sight of the collectivist utopia they set out to establish, other societies commonly lose their original purpose over time (Hanson 3). Essentially, Hanson is arguing that societies can be changed due to the shifting beliefs of its inhabitants. This assertion is supported by the novel, as seen through the evolution of society on Anarres. When the first Odonian believers settled on Anarres, they participated in a truly anarchist society. However, by the time the novel takes place the PDC has been formed. Bedap, a lifelong citizen of Anarres insists to Shevek that "Government is defined as the legal use of power to maintain and extend power. Replace 'legal' with 'customary,' and you've got Sabul, and the Syndicate of Instruction, and the PDC" (Le Guin 164). This change on the planet is not random, it stems from the idea of the innate desire to form societies, a concept continuously reinforced throughout *The Dispossessed*. In the end, the society of Anarres was altered due to citizen's changing perspectives.

Likewise, in *Blindness*, Saramago contends that individuals can both alter and be altered by the organization of the community they reside in. In a similar matter to *The Dispossessed*, *Blindness* also demonstrates how individuals can change and be changed by the societies they exist under. In the novel, society is plunged into confusion as a plague of blindness rapidly spreads throughout a nameless city. As a result of this conflict, societies and

communities are strained, destroyed, and formed. The inmates' reaction to the strained society within the prison for the blind illustrates how individuals are molded by their societies. Before the epidemic, the characters of the novel were all members of typical hierarchical society. While moral repugnancy still existed as seen by the car thief and lady with dark glasses, the characters were mostly respectable citizens. They followed traffic laws, had jobs, and attempted to help each other for altruistic reasons. However, once they became blind and were held prisoner in the old hospital, the characters of the novel quickly begin to change due to their new conditions. The inmates begin fighting over beds, defecating in their wards, and attacking each other. The instinct to remain civil quickly disappears among the blind as they adjust to their new society. In the most apparent example, a gang of thieves quickly forms after an influx of the blind, and holds the food hostage. The group then demands that other wards exchange their valuables for food, and later, their women (Saramago 139, 166). This barbarism demonstrated by the internees is directly caused by the deteriorating state of society. These people who were once regular members of the public have been transformed into savages as a result of the new lack of order. It is not only the blind internees who are victims of this change. The soldiers guarding the medical center are equally as molded by the new strained society they now must function in. In multiple instances, the soldiers gun down defenseless blind people who pose little threat to their safety. The soldiers are even described as massacring hordes of the blind who are simply trying to obtain their rations (Saramago 86). It is difficult to imagine these soldiers would be doing the same under different conditions. Rather, it is the stressed condition that society is currently under that provokes the soldiers to now act the way they do.

However, in a manner akin to *The Dispossessed*, the characters of *Blindness* are also able to mold their societies. Saramago's character development of the doctor's wife is a strong example of this idea. In James Martel's article "An Anarchist Power Amidst Pessimism: The Overcoming of Optimism in José Saramago's *Blindness* and *Seeing*," Martel argues that as the prevailing pessimist of the novel, the doctor's wife is able both identify and face challenges, and inspire others to do the same (Martel 4). Martel even writes that "she seems to be acting as an independent agent but as I'll argue further, in fact she is acting on behalf of the entire community" (Martel 3). Through her courage, the doctor's wife is able to change the current state of society, and even form new communities. This line of thinking is supported in numerous instances throughout the novel. To start, there is the doctor's wife's ability to see. Even though the other inmates are unaware, the doctor's wife's sight helps her guide the group throughout the hospital, and to locate the shovel and bury the corpses. Both of these actions help maintain some sense of society within the prison. Furthermore, the doctor's wife is directly able to mold society through her killing of the gang leader (Saramago 189). She is directly responsible for liberating the other internees from the primitive bartering system that the gang imposed. Moreover, the doctor's wife is able to create a community with the group of the blind she brings to her house. By her own power, the doctor's wife provides them food, shelter, and adequate hygiene. She is the one who helps transform the group's reality of chaos into some semblance of order. As seen through the novel and Martel's piece, the characters in *Blindness* both are molded and mold the societies they exist in.

In *The Dispossessed*, Le Guin contends that the formation of hierarchical society is inevitable. In the world of the novel, several forms of hierarchical society can be seen. First, there are the nations of Urras, which include A-Io, Thu, and Benbili. All of these societies are

clear in their hierarchies, and draw similarities to contemporary nations during the time of the novel's publishing. A-Io is a stand in for any capitalist nation. Though it may be tiered more economically than politically, the country has explicit classes that construct society. Shevek interacts with the upper class of the planet, who are vain, excessively opulent, and greedy. Seemingly excluded from the nation's wealth are the working class people of the nation, which suggests that this specific population is exceedingly poor, unrepresented, and forced to live out of the sight of the wealthy. Neighboring A-Io, there is the nation of Thu. Thu represents any nation with communist aspirations. Drawing on knowledge of communist nations in the real world indicates that while Thu's citizens might be "equal," there is almost absolutely an authoritarian political hierarchy present within the country. The last country on Urras is Benbili, which stands in for any developing nation with political turmoil. If the country of Benbili is anything like the proxy-war nations of the Cold War, it likely also possesses a hierarchical society with a military dictatorship. Le Guin establishes these nations on Urras to emphasize how the formation of hierarchical society is inevitable. Just as these nations with hierarchical societies ended up existing on Earth, they also ended up existing on the fictional planet of Urras. Though the existence of Anarres might seem to contradict this claim, it actually only reinforces it. Though the collectivist society of Anarres was initially an anarchist society, it eventually became a hierarchical one through the continued growth of the PDC. Though many Anarresti view the PDC as a necessary institution to keep life on the planet viable, the syndicate proves to have similar tendencies to hierarchical governments that ultimately undermine the anarchist Odonian mission.

To start, the PDC is in complete control of foreign trade. Even though there are continued protests of Anarres's ore trade with Urras, the PDC ultimately has the final say in the

matter (Le Guin 92). This monopoly of power is a far call from the anarchist ideals that Anarres was built upon. Additionally, the PDC also monitors intellectual information that travels between the planets. Sabul, Shevek's associate, notes that "Defense insists that every word that leaves here on those freighters be passed by a PDC-approved expert" (Le Guin 115). Later, Shevek finds that his work has been severely censored by the institution. Essentially, the PDC acts exactly as a government in a hierarchical society would- just without the official nominal recognition. This conclusion is reinforced by Daniel P. Jaeckle's reasoning in his article "Embodied Anarchy in Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Dispossessed*." In his piece, Jaeckle claims that anarchism is ultimately the best political structure seen throughout *The Dispossessed*, and how the anarchist society of Anarres is constantly at odds with the environment, organized religion, and the state. Jaeckle correctly theorizes that these opponents challenge if the collectivist society of Anarres is truly anarchist (Jaeckle 2). Jaeckle articulates how an organized state must rise to face the environmental challenges seen on Anarres, and how it is impossible for an anarchist society to deal with this problem alone. Continuing, Jaeckle discusses how the "organized religion" of societal pressures on Anarres naturally take the place of laws. Those who deviate from these norms are subsequently punished, as exemplified by Tirin the radical playwright's banishment to an asylum for his unorthodox ideas (Jaeckle 12). As seen in *The Dispossessed*, The rise of the PDC on Anarres supports the idea that hierarchical societies are inevitable.

Conversely in *Blindness*, Saramago maintains that hierarchical society only exists with the collective consent of its citizens. In the novel, the presence of hierarchical society quickly disappears and reappears. Throughout the first few chapters, society in the unnamed city functions normally. Saramago intentionally does not provide a specific setting for the story so

that readers can fill their own society into the events of the novel. However, as the blind begin to accumulate in the medical center, notions of society immediately begin to disappear. Average individuals are compelled to act in violent, disturbing, and strange matters, and act in manners they would not have done before the outbreak. Additionally, the government of the fictional state appears to fall apart, as the soldiers stop guarding the hospital of the blind. As the crisis continues however, small communities with typical societal norms such as rationing and non-violence begin to form. This progression eventually culminates in society being reformed upon the lifting of the “white sickness.” Through this rapid formation and destruction of society, Saramago is suggesting that society only exists as much as its citizens perceive or “see” it. Saramago uses the allegory of blindness as a stand-in for the social construction of order- as the ability to see is lost and people become accustomed to blindness, society consequently deteriorates. Essentially, there is no external force keeping society in place, and society can come and go as quickly as its people choose to believe it. The most clear example is the decay of the military. Consistently portrayed as the most sturdy and orderly structure in the novel through its use of violence and courage in the face of danger, even the military quickly falls apart as it is put into a high-pressure situation.

This claim is reinforced through Duncan Chesney’s article “Re-Reading Saramago on Community – *Blindness*, Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction,” where Chesney discusses how Saramago’s depiction of community in *Blindness* displays truths about humanity when it comes to destitute situations. Chesney asserts that Saramago uses the “white sickness” as an allegory to explore notions of community in the contemporary world, and that the lessons found in *Blindness* are applicable to the world at large (Chesney 2). Chesney discusses how “Saramago stages a crisis situation in order to reveal latent weaknesses undergirding social

relations in this non-specified modern urban society: the violent and callous institutional state response; the recourse to a Hobbesian state of war among some of the people; but he does this to emphasize the ethical resilience of the band that finds in community strength to survive the extreme situation of the white blindness” (Chesney 4). Here, Chesney acutely describes the lessons of society Sarmago tells the reader in *Blindness*. Considering hierarchical society only exists with the collective consent of its citizens, in intense scenarios, society is likely to quickly collapse and reform. By placing responsibility on community, Chesney correctly attributes the construction of society to people, and not an outside invisible force. Though the collapse of society and the confounding of regular moral principles dominates the novel, it is also important to focus on instances where societies are formed. The main group of characters following the escape from the medical center are exemplary of a society forming during a time of crisis. Despite the group being small, admittedly only seven individuals, they undeniably form a community. And as Chesney notes, societies are built upon communities which in turn are built upon individuals. In this sense, the main group’s experience is a sample that can be applied to society in the novel as a whole. As the group settles into the doctor’s wife’s house, they agree to a number of typical societal norms. The group agrees to share any food they find, share the space of the house, and to bathe themselves. The doctor’s wife, acting as the leader of the group, even agrees to read to the other members. Perhaps most importantly, the members of the group subconsciously agree to treat each other with respect and dignity. The collective assurance of non-violence is one of the greatest signals of typical hierarchical society being formed. Again, this creation of order is not by random, but from the conscious collective decision of the group.

The Dispossessed and *Blindness* both share messages regarding hierarchical society, yet differ upon its construction. Both novels share ideas concerning hierarchical society, but differ on its extent or how it looks in practice. For example, *The Dispossessed* paints hierarchical society as a plainly tiered system, while *Blindness* views it as a more discreet phenomenon. On Urras, there are established governments presumably with heads of state. A-Io may sport a president and Thu an autocratic leader, but both share distinct levels of power. When compared to the assumed working class in each country, the disparity becomes obvious. Even on Anarres, there exists social ranks. Though these ranks are not established by an official form of government, they still prevail. Take Sabul as compared to Shevek, or the head of any syndicate compared to a laborer. It is never explicitly stated whether the higher-ups in the PDC are also subject to the constant changing of jobs. Consequently, one can reason that even on the supposed collectivist society of Anarres there exists hierarchy. This broader, larger vision of hierarchical society is contrasted with *Blindness's* depiction. In Saramago's novel, the members of the main group are all close in societal standing. This is made even more true considering the group is mostly blind, stripping away any physical or occupational advantage a person might have had. The doctor's wife, being the only one that can see, is naturally the leader of the group though she views herself as equal amongst the blind. Hierarchy still exists within the group- the doctor's wife is the one responsible for gathering food, providing clothes, and keeping the house clean. However, the gap between social statuses in the group is not as extreme as the ones seen in *The Dispossessed*.

Furthermore, regarding similarities, both novels share ideas about how hierarchical society's creation and altering is strongly linked to memory. Starting with *The Dispossessed*, the society of Anarres itself was largely created and then changed due to memory. As argued in

Hanson's piece, "Le Guin situates collective memory, as well as the Odonian historical tradition, as the means by which the Odonian/Anarresti people gradually lose sight of the idea of utopia as process, as well as their rights and responsibilities as free people" (Hanson 2). Hanson asserts that for a society such as Anarres to maintain the "continuous revolution" that it is in, its people must rely on memory. The memory, in this case, being the conditions of society on Urras before the settlers left to establish their own colony. Just as memory is a large part in creating societies in the novel, it also helps in changing them. Those on Anarres who embrace the PDC, and do not view the system of social pressures as imprisoning as Shevek comes to see them are some of the biggest proponents of "Odonian ideals." These individuals are warping history to fit the current state of society, in turn facilitating its change. This concept is also supported through Shevek's participation in the revolution on Urras. It is Shevek's memory of collectivist life on Anarres that provides the catalyst for the riot. These same ideas are also seen in *Blindness*. It is the visceral memory of the mental ward that drives the main group to create the community within the doctor's wife's home. It is the disturbing memory of society's quick collapse that provokes the population of the fictional nation to come together at the end of the novel. Moreover, just as Shevek was able to shape Urras due to his memory, the doctor's wife is able to mold the hierarchy in the hospital due to her past experiences. The doctor's wife is pushed to kill the leader of the thugs due to her intense memory of the brutalization of herself and the other women. After stabbing the leader, she yells "Remember what I said the other day, that I'd never forget his face, and from now on think about what I am telling you, for I won't forget your faces either" (Saramago 191). The doctor's wife's mention of remembering faces demonstrates how memory drove her to kill the leader, and subsequently alter the society of the

medical center. As proven, both books contain evidence to support the idea that the creation and changing of hierarchical society is tightly linked to the power of memory.

Touching on a final similarity between the two novels, both Le Guin and Saramago contend within their respective works that individual actors are often the most influential players when it comes to configuring societies. This claim is most broadly supported through the characters of Shevek and the doctor's wife. Both characters are the epitome of individuals being the driving force behind societal upheaval or formation. Perhaps the easiest way to see the extent that both characters had in their stories is to imagine the outcomes of their worlds without them. In *The Dispossessed*, there was little progress regarding development of relations between Urras and Anarres, and not much had changed in the Anarres way of life over two centuries. As seen through the PDC's censorship and Sabul's apprehensions concerning transplanetary physics academia, the chances of sharing technological ideas or even basic communication between the two planets was low. It was Shevek that started the cultural shift in both societies, and reconciled the unspoken barrier that separated the two worlds. Similarly, without the doctor's wife in *Blindness*, it is unlikely that that barbaric bartering system employed by the third ward would ever be resolved. As an individual actor, the doctor's wife was the most influential force behind the altering of society in, and later outside of the hospital. Both of these characters' impact on their world's societies reinforces Le Guin and Saramago's idea that single actors can commonly be influential players when configuring societies.

Although both *The Dispossessed* and *Blindness* assert that individuals can both mold and be molded by the society they live in, *The Dispossessed* contends that the formation of hierarchical society is inevitable, while *Blindness* maintains that hierarchical society only exists with the collective consent of its citizens. Both of these novels offer explanations to

how societies are formed, how they are changed, and how they are ultimately destroyed. The events of *Blindness* intentionally take place in an unnamed city, and the societies of *The Dispossessed*, though on alien worlds, bear striking resemblance to contemporary societies in the real world. Considering this, it is imperative to understand that the lessons found in the novels certainly apply to one's own contemporary society. Absorbing the ideas that Le Guin and Saramago impart can help one understand the state of their own society better, where their society may be headed, and that they have the power to shape their own society.

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