THE RHETORIC OF ANDROGYNY: GENDER AND BOUNDARIES

IN LE GUIN'S *THE LEFT HAND OF DARKNESS*

THESIS

Presented to the Graduate Council of the

University of North Texas in Partial

Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

By

Benjamin P. Gleason, B.A.

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Gleason, Benjamin P., <u>The rhetoric of androgyny: gender and boundaries in Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*.</u>  Master of Arts (English), August, 1996, 73 pp., references, 24 titles.

The androgyny of the Gethenians in *The Left Hand of Darkness* is a vehicle for Ursula Le Guin's rhetoric concerning gender roles. Le Guin attempts to make the reader identify with an ideal form of androgyny, through which she argues that many of the problems of human existence, from rape and war to dualistic thought and sexism, are products of gender roles and would be absent in an androgynous world. The novel also links barriers of separation and Othering with masculine thought, and deconstructs these separative boundaries of opposition, while promoting connective borders which acknowledge difference without creating opposition. The novel thus criticizes gendered thought processes and social roles, because they lead to opposition and separation.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The androgyny of the Gethenians in *The Left Hand of Darkness* is more than just an interesting science fiction device. It is a trope that acts as a vehicle for Le Guin's rhetoric concerning gender roles. Le Guin attempts to make the reader identify with an ideal form of androgyny, through which she argues that many of the problems of human existence, from rape and war to dualistic thought and sexism, are products of gender roles. The novel specifically demonstrates some of the problems with the dominance of masculine gender roles by showing that these problems don't exist in an androgynous world. The novel suggests that, since such problems are absent in an androgynous world, then we could do away with them by striving for diminished gender distinctions in the real world. While gender is the primary target of the rhetorical device of androgyny, the novel also deconstructs many other barriers, primarily national boundaries and the barriers between familiar and alien, which, like gender, involve Othering and power relationships. Also, while the novel deconstructs barriers and boundaries of opposition, it recognizes the importance of difference.

Before continuing with an analysis of *The Left Hand of Darkness*, it is necessary to define some crucial terms and trace some of the

major arguments concerning androgyny. In order to analyze these arguments, we must first distinguish between the terms *androgyny* and *hermaphroditism,* and to explore the role that androgyny has played in feminist theory and criticism. In *Androgyny* June Singer differentiates between *hermaphroditism* and *androgyny,* by defining hermaphroditism as a physical quality only:

> *Hermaphroditism* refers to a *physiological* abnormality in which sex characteristics of the opposite sex are found in an individual. . . . These qualities include the external genitals, the internal sexual apparatuses, the nature of the chromosomes, the hormonal states and the secondary sexual characteristics. In general usage, hermaphroditism refers primarily to the appearance of abnormally formed external genitals which resemble those of the opposite sex. (16; italics Singer's)

Singer then defines androgyny as a psychological condition: "The androgyne approaches the problem [of transcending gender roles] with the recognition that true change begins primarily within the psychic structure of the individual" (21). Carolyn Heilbrun, in *Toward a Recognition of Androgyny,* warns against confusing androgyny with hermaphroditism: "One danger perhaps remains: that androgyny, an ideal, might be confused with hermaphroditism, an anomalous physical condition" (xii).

Singer also differentiates between the concept of androgyny that she uses and an earlier artistic concept of androgyny:

>The new androgyny also suffers through confusion with an image that used to be popular in Romantic literature and art. The word *androgyne* has been mistakenly applied to effete young men who wore foppish clothes or to women with boyish figures and facade. (18)

Androgyny thus goes beyond clothing and outward appearance.

Singer further defines androgyny as differing from bisexuality, which is an expression of sexual orientation only (16-17). Singer's definitions, namely that a hermaphrodite has the physical features and genitals of both sexes, while an androgyne thinks and acts like both genders, are the definitions I will use throughout this paper.

A distinction between *sex* and *gender* is also necessary. I will use the word *sex,* like the word *hermaphroditism,* to refer to the genetic, bodily, *physical* makeup of a person. *Gender,* like *androgyny,* will then refer to the cultural, learned, constructed *psychological* makeup of a person. This usage not only agrees with Singer, but also with Carolyn Heilbrun's *Toward a Recognition of Androgyny* and Kari Weil's *Androgyny: The Denial of Difference.*

Feminist theorists disagree as to whether the concept of androgyny is helpful or harmful for feminism and feminist theory. One important issue is whether androgyny is an inherent potentiality in human nature, or whether it must be learned or enculturated. Instead of arguing prescriptively, many critics assert that androgyny is always already an inherent part of the human psyche: androgyny "is" rather than "ought." These theorists argue, not that we should

become androgynous, but that we already are androgynous, and need only acknowledge the fact. Two of the more important critics favor androgyny are Carolyn Heilbrun in *A Recognition of Androgyny* and Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own*. Heilbrun characterizes androgyny as an undercurrent that already exists in people and the literature they've created throughout history. The title of her first chapter, "The Hidden River of Androgyny," suggests that androgyny is already present in human nature, but is only hidden. Her book is an attempt to trace androgynous trends through Western literature from the Ancient Greeks to modern writers. The title of her book also suggests that androgyny need only be recognized, rather than created. Heilbrun writes: "My method is to use the vast world of myth and literature as a universe in which to seek out the sometimes obscure signs of androgyny" (x).

While Heilbrun sees androgyny from the perspective of a critic, Virginia Woolf sees it from a writer's perspective. In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf suggests that good writers have the potential to be androgynous in their writings, and great writers realize such potential. Woolf writes: "Perhaps a mind that is fully masculine cannot create, any more than a mind that is purely feminine" (102). Both Heilbrun and Woolf, in their analyses of writers and writing, describe androgyny as a condition that can be achieved by either men or women, in which a man or woman can write believably about the experiences of both genders, and in which men and women can discover the androgyny already within themselves. Androgyny

theory, as used in the social sciences and early feminist theory (characterized by Heilbrun and Woolf), involves the notion that both men and women are capable of being androgynous, of incorporating the roles and thought processes of both genders.

While many early feminists (including Woolf and Heilbrun) embraced the concept of androgyny, some later feminists (including Elaine Showalter, Mary Daly, and Adrienne Rich) disagree with it, exploring instead the differences between male and female modes of thought and discourse. These theorists argue that androgyny is susceptible to becoming just another strategy that the patriarchal hegemony uses to assimilate femininity into the masculine without actually recognizing femininity as legitimate. Androgyny can, like the use of the universal masculine pronoun, establish the masculine as being "truly human," while the feminine becomes merely "extra." Kari Weil argues in *Androgyny: The Denial of Difference* that androgyny is a way of denying women their own reality. Weil invokes Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of Their Own* as one of the more important feminist arguments against Woolf's androgyny. According to Weil, Showalter "rejects both androgyny as an ideal and Virginia Woolf as a positive model for women writers. . . [because] androgyny is an evasive fantasy that allowed Woolf to ignore her needs and self-expression as a woman writer" (149). Showalter argues that Woolf denied women's experiences by not addressing them in her fiction, and thus effectively equated androgyny more or less with the masculine. In "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness,"

Showalter says the newer feminist criticisms are more concerned with how women's writing differs from androcentric writing, than with the similarities. Androgyny, and its concern with transcending, or at least eliding, difference, is at odds with Showalter's difference-oriented critical approach, which she calls gynocriticism. According to Showalter, gynocritics are concerned with "women *as writers* . . . the psychodynamics of female creativity . . . and the evolution and laws of a female literary tradition." Ultimately, according to Showalter, gynocritics ask the question "What is *the difference* of women's writing?" (Feminist Criticism 248). Showalter is not the only theorist critical of androgyny; Weil goes on to discuss the rejection of androgyny by other notable feminists such as Adrienne Rich and Mary Daly (Androgyny 150-51). Showalter lists several other feminists who are at odds with androgyny: Nina Baym, Ellen Moers, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar all operate in the discourse of gynocriticism, and are thus critical of androgyny (Feminist Criticism 248).

Androgyny as portrayed in *The Left Hand of Darkness* is susceptible to many of the criticisms directed at the concept of androgyny, particularly the critiques outlined by Weil, Showalter, and others. In "Is Gender Necessary? Redux," Le Guin agrees that androgyny is a problematic and potentially treacherous concept for feminists, especially as she had portrayed it in *The Left Hand of Darkness*: "I now see it thus: Men were inclined to be satisfied with the book [*The Left Hand of Darkness*], 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" (Dancing 16). The androgyny in *The Left Hand of Darkness*, like many of the conceptions of androgyny which Weil and Showalter criticize, is not halfway between masculine and feminine, but is instead closer to the masculine. To start with, the novel takes place in two countries with governments similar to those of patriarchal hegemonic institutions: an almost absolute monarchy and a totalitarian communist bureaucracy. The main character and narrator is male, and, at first, very masculine; the novel is thus told from a masculine viewpoint. In addition to the male viewpoint, the androgynous Gethenians are almost invariably portrayed in masculine roles. In "Again, *The Left Hand of Darkness:* Androgyny or Homophobia?" Patricia Lamb and Diana Veith argue that the most masculine character in the novel is the "androgynous" Estraven, essentially a Byronic Romantic hero, masculine and self-destructive (228-29). Lamb and Veith go on to conclude that the androgyny in *The Left Hand of Darkness* leaves no room for homosexual or bisexual experiences. They agree with Weil that androgyny is primarily a heterosexist fantasy. Weil writes: *"For* women, but against feminism, against sexual polarization but exclusively for heterosexuality--such is the problematic platform on which androgyny is hailed in Heilbrun's book" (Androgyny 149).

Not only are the characters and governments more masculine

than feminine, the language of the novel causes the reader to see the Gethenians as men rather than androgynes. A constant reminder of the masculinity of the "androgynes," Le Guin's use of the generic masculine pronoun causes the Gethenians to seem more masculine than androgynous. While Le Guin at first defended this usage in "Is Gender Necessary?" she later acknowledged in the damage done by the the universal masculine pronoun, in that it establishes men as the norm and women as Other (Dancing 15).

While androgyny is problematic both as a feminist theory in general, and as a rhetorical strategy in *The Left Hand of Darkness,* Toril Moi shows how it is nevertheless a useful concept for feminists in that it deconstructs gender roles. Moi argues that androgyny represents something other than a simple ideal: in *Sexual/Textual Politics* she argues in favor of Julia Kristeva's position that androgyny "reject[s] the dichotomy between masculine and feminine as metaphysical" (12). Androgyny thus rejects the notion that the dichotomy of gender is natural or inherent in humans. This rejection of essentialism is for Moi what makes feminism possible. Defending Woolf's androgyny, Moi writes: "She has understood that the goal of the feminist struggle must precisely be to deconstruct the death-dealing binary oppositions of masculinity and femininity" (13).

Despite the problematic aspects of androgyny in the novel, I argue that it is this deconstruction of gender roles that the rhetoric of *The Left Hand of Darkness* pursues most effectively. Androgyny functions as a successful tool in an argument against gender role

differentiation in general, and against the primacy of the masculine gender in particular. Androgyny also serves as a model and metaphor for deconstructing barriers surrounding and defining nation and self. Finally, androgyny is a metaphor for the deconstruction of the process of Othering and for the construction of relationships that do not rely on Othering.

CHAPTER 2

THE RHETORIC OF ANDROGYNY

In *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Le Guin considers a unique and idealistic form of androgyny which she derives from hermaphroditism. Real-world androgyny never exists in and of itself; instead, it obviously must either be achieved, created, attained, or realized. In the reader's world, most humans begin with either male or female sex characteristics, and are then taught to fit into the corresponding gender roles. It is theoretically impossible simply to be androgynous from the start. Likewise, if one attempts to free oneself from gender roles in thought and action, it is impossible to be sure that one's "androgyny" is free from any vestiges of one's early enculturated gender identity. *The Left Hand of Darkness* avoids these pitfalls by using hermaphroditism to construct an ideal form of androgyny, a form free of the uncertainties of real-world androgyny. The novel solves some of the problems involved with the concept of androgyny by removing it from the readers world to a fictional (and somewhat utopian) world. This fictional androgyny serves as a rhetorical tool to criticize several aspects of gender roles in the real world.

The Gethenians are hermaphroditic. An anthropologist in the novel describes their sexuality:

> The sexual cycle averages 26 to 28 days. . . . For 21 or 22 days
> the individual is in *somer*, sexually inactive, latent. On about
> the 18th day hormonal changes are initiated by the pituitary
> control and on the 22nd or 23rd day the individual enters
> *kemmer*, estrus. . . . When the individual finds a partner in
> kemmer, hormonal secretion is further stimulated . . . until in
> one partner either a male or a female dominance is
> established. The genitals engorge or shrink accordingly,
> foreplay intensifies, and the partner, triggered by the change,
> takes on the other sexual role. . . . (90)

Since they are sexless most of the time, and can become *either* male
or female part of the time, they lack gender differentiation. Physical
"male" and "female" are temporary states for them, and no one is
locked into either one; psychological "masculine" and "feminine" do
not exist. The lack of physical sexual differentiation makes possible
a sort of ideal form of androgyny in the novel. Since the Gethenians
have always been hermaphroditic, they have never had any fixed
sex differences upon which to base concepts of gender. The
androgyny of Gethen is a type of "pure" androgyny, possible only in
the speculative form of Le Guin's novel. The "purity" of this
androgyny is essential to the novel's rhetoric.

One might argue at this point that a novel is not a rhetorical
medium, but rather an aesthetic medium. However, in *A Rhetoric of
Motives*, Kenneth Burke asserts that all forms of communication are
in some sense rhetorical: language *is* rhetoric; all language is

persuasive (43). A novel can be a better medium for rhetoric, for constructing language in a way that is persuasive, than a direct, logical essay because novels can circumvent many of the rules and limitations of logical argument. One way in which novels do so is by achieving *consubstantiality* more easily than other genres. Consubstantiality literally means "to be one with." The reader must be made to identify with the rhetor and the rhetor's text. Burke writes: "To identify A with B is to make A 'consubstantial' with B" (21). The rhetor must make the reader identify with her text--the reader must be drawn into the argument in such a way that the reader does not see the workings of the argument. The rhetoric functions most strongly when the reader and the rhetor are one substance. Most importantly, the argument must engage readers enough that they do not analyze its logic or presuppositions.

In a novel, the reader has characters to identify with, a plot to follow, and an entire world to become part of, to become consubstantial with. A well-constructed novel thus draws readers in more easily than a direct essay, and can better ensure consubstantiality. Since readers engage a novel as an aesthetic medium, they are less likely to question its rhetoric; they are more likely to become one substance with the novel, chiefly through identifying with the characters. Rhetoric in novels is thus disguised, and more easily accepted by readers.

A science fiction novel is an even more appropriate medium for rhetoric. According to Sarah Lefanu in *Feminism and Science Fiction,*

science fiction allows feminist writers to "defamiliarize the familiar, and make familiar the new and strange" (21). While defamiliarization occurs in any work of fiction, science fiction operates *primarily* through defamiliarization. Through this process, "[t]he social and sexual hierarchies of the contemporary world can be examined through the process of 'estrangement', thus challenging the normative ideas of gender roles" (22). In other words, a science fiction novel can cause the reader to see absurdity of rigidly-enforced gender roles, while making the reader see androgyny as something familiar and comfortable. Lefanu concludes that "SF narrative can be used to break down, or to build up. . . illuminate both what is, and what is not" (22). By making such a "new and strange" concept as androgyny familiar to the reader, the novel achieves consubstantiality, so that the presentation of androgyny can, in Lefanu's terms, challenge the normative ideas of gender roles.

Le Guin achieves further consubstantiality (which strengthens her argument) by insisting that her science fiction is descriptive rather than predictive or prescriptive; she argues that androgyny does not show how humans ought to be, but what humans already are. Le Guin writes:

> Yes, indeed the people in it [*The Left Hand of Darkness*] are androgynous, but that doesn't mean that I'm predicting that in a millennium or so we will all be androgynous, or announcing that I think we damned well ought to be androgynous. I'm merely observing, in the peculiar, devious,

and thought-experimental manner proper to science fiction, that if you look at us at certain odd times of day in certain weathers, we already are. I am not predicting, or prescribing. I am describing. I am describing certain aspects of psychological reality. . . . ([xiii])

What is especially "peculiar" and "devious" is that she insists that she describes "psychological reality." Since "psychological reality" is the reality of the reader, she makes the reader more consubstantial with her text; the androgyny of the Gethenians is in part the androgyny of the reader. By saying that her novel is descriptive, she claims to be describing the reader and his or her world. Her "description" is a well-wrought construction, crucial to her argument. If androgyny is part of reality, then it is already given that gender roles are not an essential part of human nature, that they are instead constructed, and that they can be deconstructed. Le Guin's argument is half-won before she has even stated it.

Le Guin is not alone in suggesting that the concept of androgyny is a descriptive rather than a prescriptive one; as discussed above, Carolyn Heilbrun considers androgyny to be something inherent, rather than as something that is created. The novel starts with the premise that androgyny is a part of real human experience. Both Le Guin and Heilbrun suggest that if we could strip away gender roles and the sex differences blamed for those roles, then we could reveal what is truly human.

Much of what the novel suggests the world would be like without gender appears in "the field notes of Ong Tot Oppong, Investigator" in Chapter 7 "The Question of Sex." The Investigator links the lack of many social problems in Gethenian society to the lack of gender. It is at this point that the rhetoric's enthymeme is most clearly stated. The Investigator's voice is the only female one in the novel, so it is even more appropriate that she make the clearest statement of the novel's feminist thesis. The Investigator blames many problems, including war, misogyny, aggression, and rape on either the existence of gender roles, the masculine gender, or the constant sex drive:

> Consider: Anyone can turn his hand to anything. This sounds very simple, but its psychological effects are incalculable. The fact that everyone between seventeen and thirty-five or so is liable to be . . . "tied down to childbearing," implies that no one is quite so thoroughly "tied down" here as women, elsewhere, are likely to be--psychologically or physically. Burden and privilege are shared out pretty equally; everybody has the same risk to run or choice to make. Therefore nobody here is quite so free as a free male anywhere else. (93-4)

In modern societies where physical strength is less and less important, pregnancy and childbirth are perhaps the last remaining physical sex characteristics that limit women's freedom. Child-bearing is also one of the few gender roles that is truly inherent rather than constructed. Anyone advocating androgyny must

struggle with the problem of pregnancy. For instance, Marge Piercy also portrays an androgynous society in *Woman on the Edge of Time*. While the society still has sex differences (i.e., they are not hermaphroditic like Le Guin's Gethenians), they are psychologically androgynous. In order to approach the total lack of gender roles, Piercy's future society has done away with pregnancy, and reproduction takes place through the artificial wombs of the "brooder." Men are injected with hormones that make their breasts functional, so that they can breast-feed children. Luciente, the character from the future androgynous society, explains to Consuelo, the main character from the present:

> It was part of women's long revolution. When we were breaking all the old hierarchies. Finally there was that one thing we had to give up too, the only real power we ever had, in return for no more power for anyone. The original production: the power to give birth. Cause as long as we were biologically enchained, we'd never be equal. And males would never be humanized to be loving and tender. (98)

*Woman on the Edge of Time* provides further argument that, in an androgynous society, pregnancy, childbearing, and nursing must either be done away with, or shared by all parents. In *The Left Hand of Darkness,* the problem of pregnancy is solved through the Gethenians' hermaphroditism, in which everyone is a potential mother.

That Ong Tot Oppong identifies the "question of reproduction as the central problem that is solved on Gethen places *The Left Hand of Darkness* in this same realm of revolutionary rhetoric. Sarah Lefanu points out that one recurring theme in many feminist utopias is some way to eliminate or equalize the process of childbirth, childbirth, and child-rearing. Lefanu invokes Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution*, which argues that one of the most important issues for feminism is "the question of reproduction. . . the oppression of women as inextricably related to their work as child-rearers as well as child-bearers" (Science Fiction and Feminism 57). According to Lefanu, "Firestone's minimal demands for the feminist revolution are: that women should be freed from the tyranny of reproduction through the use of technology and that the rearing of children should be the responsibility of society as a whole, men as well as women" (28).

While the problem of childbirth is linked to the physical differences of sex, Oppong links other problems to the existence of gender differences and the problems of gender identity. Ong Tot Oppong's field notes continue: "Consider: A child has no psycho-sexual relationship to his mother and father. There is no myth of Oedipus on Winter" (94). The novel argues that most psychological problems can be traced to the early development of a child's gender identity and consciousness of sex. The differentiation of the gender roles of female and male through mother and father causes much confusion and trauma for babies, and the novel's rhetoric concludes

that the lack of such gender roles would result in the lack of the subsequent psychological problems.

Le Guin is not alone in considering how psychological problems would be affected by a lack of gender roles. Androgyny and psychological health are also clearly linked in Lois Gould's "X: A Fabulous Child's Story," a story about a government "Xperiment." According to the editors' introduction to the story, Gould "fantasizes about a scientific 'xperiment' in which the Jones family attempts to raise a *child* rather than a *boy* or a *girl*" (9). The Joneses raise their child without any gender-role identification whatsoever: "This baby was named X so that nobody could tell whether it was a boy or a girl" (9). Gould goes on to describe how the parents treat the child as neither masculine or feminine, they dress it in gender-neutral clothes, and they support the child's pursuit of both girl's and boy's pastimes and behaviors. As can be expected, all the other parents in the community are outraged, and insist that the child undergo psychological testing to determine the child's own perception of its gender. After many hours of testing, the psychiatrist comes out and joyfully exclaims "'Don't you see? . . . it's wonderful! X has absolutely no identity problem! X isn't one bit mixed up! As for being a misfit- -ridiculous! X knows perfectly well what it is!'" (16). In this story, as well as in *The Left Hand of Darkness,* gender is the cause of identity problems. As in Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time,* though, Gould postulates androgyny without hermaphroditism, but the rhetoric is like that of *The Left Hand of Darkness:* gender

differentiation causes psychological problems, and androgyny is the way to escape such problems. Not only does gender cause psychological problems, but the novel also makes, through Investigator Ong Tot Oppong, one of the strongest rhetorical moves in the novel: the link between gender and war. Investigator Oppong theorizes that the Gethenians may be the result of an ancient and prehistoric experiment in genetic engineering, with motives similar to Lois Gould's "Xperiment." The Investigator theorizes:

> Another guess concerning the hypothetical experiment's object: The elimination of war. Did the Ancient Hainish. . . consider war to be a purely masculine displacement-activity, a vast Rape, and therefore in their experiment eliminate the masculinity that rapes and the femininity that is raped. God knows. The fact is that Gethenians, though highly competitive. . . seem not to be very aggressive; at least they apparently have never yet had what one could call a war.
> (96)

The concept that androgyny doesn't merely *happen* to prevent war, but that it might be designed for that very purpose strengthens the novel's thesis. The causal links which *The Left Hand of Darkness* constructs between the masculine gender and warfare, and between androgyny and the lack of warfare, seem at first merely descriptive details in the portrayal of Gethenian culture and psychology. Such causal associations, which Oppong describes in matter-of-fact ways, are the heart of Le Guin's rhetoric about gender.

In "Is Gender Necessary? Redux" Le Guin identifies the absence of war as the first "result" of the thought experiment of writing *The Left Hand of Darkness*. "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" (11). In her later commentary on the essay, she writes: "At the very inception of the whole book, I was interested in writing a novel about people in a society that had never had a war. That came first. The androgyny came second. (Cause and effect? Effect and cause?)" (11). Le Guin's rhetorical question is (appropriately) the basis of her rhetoric regarding war: warfare is caused by an imbalance toward the masculine principle and away from the female principle.

Le Guin's rhetoric thus functions to construct in the reader's mind a causal relationship between gender roles and problems such as war, rape, and unequal distribution of work and wealth. In the context of the novel, gender roles cause these problems; if the reader is consubstantial with the novel, then the reader learns to see these causal links as real. Since causality, like all aspects of "reality," does not exist in and of itself, but is constructed in the mind, the novel's rhetoric operates by constructing particular causal relationships in the reader's mind. By constructing these causal relationships, Le Guin creates the possibility of positive change, in the reader's mind, and, therefore, in the world at large.

Language as a vehicle for change is the subject of Jennifer Shaddock's article "Mixed Blood Women: The Dynamic of Women's Relations in the Novels of Louise Erdrich and Leslie Silko." Shaddock writes that "language is much more than a vehicle through which reality is translated; . . . language creates reality" (Feminist Nightmares 107). Shaddock quotes Native American writer Leslie Silko concerning using stories as rhetoric for change: "She [Silko] asserts that it is 'more effective to write a story . . . than to rant and rave' against oppression, explaining that 'for me [Silko] the most effective political statement I could make is through my art work'" (107). Shaddock continues:

> The idea that language has the power to create rather than simply reflect reality has been a preoccupying theme not only of Native American thought but also of twentieth-century Western European semiotic and narrative studies. In the last twenty years, Western feminists, in particular, have recognized language as both a foundational structure for the oppression of women and, consequently, as one of the most powerful sites of transformation. (108)

It is as a "site of transformation" that Le Guin uses language, particularly the novel, to relate, in the reader's mind, gender to war, rape, and inequality. Not only does she draw a connection between gender and war, but Le Guin also specifically implicates the masculine gender as the cause of war. By defining war as "a purely masculine displacement-activity, a vast Rape," the novel seems to

argue more in favor of a specifically feminine ethic, rather than for androgyny (96). The rhetoric at this point falls much more in favor of femininity than androgyny. Heilbrun points out that arguments in favor of androgyny often emulate feminist arguments, in that both often use the term "masculine" as a pejorative. Heilbrun explains:

> Because "masculine" traits are now and have for so many years been the dominant ones, we have ample evidence of the danger the free play of such traits brings in its wake. By developing in men the ideal "masculine" characteristics of competitiveness, aggressiveness, and defensiveness, and by placing in power those men who most embody these traits, we have, I believe, gravely endangered our own survival. Unless we can effectively check the power of manly men and the women who willingly support them, we will experience new Vietnams, My Lais, Kent States. Even the animal world is now threatened by the aggression of man, the hunter. So long as we continue to believe the "feminine" qualities of gentleness, lovingness, and the counting of cost in human rather than national or property terms are out of place among rulers, we can look forward to continued self-brutalization and perhaps even to self-destruction. (xvi)

While Heilbrun argues in favor of androgyny, she, like Le Guin, sees masculinity as the root of war and exploitation. This viewpoint can be reconciled with androgyny if it is considered, not as a means for making masculinity the enemy, but for regaining balance. Heilbrun

writes: "In appearing to exalt feminine traits, I mean to suggest that these, since they have been so drastically undervalued, must now gain respect, so that a sort of *balance* is achieved among those in power, and within individuals" (xvi; emphasis added).

The arguments for androgyny and for feminism are similar simply because of the prevalence and power of the patriarchal hegemony. At the risk of distancing herself too much from feminism, Heilbrun writes: "If the argument on behalf of androgyny sounds, more often than not, like a feminist or 'women's lib' cry, that is because of the power men now hold, and because of the political weakness of women" (xvii).

In addition to the more obviously rhetorical stance that the novel takes in chapter 7 through the voice of Ong Tot Oppong, Le Guin uses other more subtle tools to deconstruct gender throughout the novel. While an understanding that gender is constructed is perhaps a "given" when discussing *The Left Hand of Darkness*, the construction of gender is in itself one of the rhetorical points of the novel. Le Guin deconstructs gender--showing how it is constructed and how that construction is often harmful, but she goes about deconstructing it in a peculiar way, using attack metaphors, as defined by Karlyn Kohrs Campbell in "The Rhetoric of Women's Liberation: An Oxymoron."

According to Campbell, feminist rhetoric makes use of several stylistic devices not found in conventional rhetoric, one of which is the attack metaphor. This technique involves identifying a metaphor which is used to support the patriarchal construction of thought and

society, and then subverting it, often by reversing its gender associations. An example of an attack metaphor described by Campbell is the image of Rodin's "Thinker" as a female (82). The sculpture functions as a metaphor for human thought in general, and shows the norm for a thinking human to be a male. Showing an image of the sculpture as female would subvert, or attack, the metaphor of the masculine monopoly on rational thought.

According to Campbell, the attack metaphor is primarily a tool of feminist rhetoric which serves to "mix matrices in order to reveal the 'nonconscious ideology' of sexism in language and belief, or . . . attempt[s] to shock through a kind of 'perspective by incongruity'" (82). This "mixing of matrices" involves portraying metaphors which normally support the masculinist society, but with a twist which not only calls attention to the usually unnoticed metaphor, but also reveals the latent sexism in the metaphor.

The most obvious attack metaphor in *The Left Hand of Darkness* is the sentence "The King was pregnant" (100). The concept of Kingship is perhaps one of the most direct metaphors for the patriarchal hegemony. The metaphor of a pregnant King, is, like a female "Thinker", a direct attack on an institution defined as masculine. When the King is pregnant, the hegemony is no longer patriarchal, but androgynous. If Le Guin had called the ruler of Karhide a Queen, it would not have had the same effect--Queens are expected to be pregnant, kings are not.

The pregnant King attacks more than the metaphor of masculine political power; it also subverts the concepts of masculinity and femininity themselves. The juxtaposition of male and female in the same person, jars the reader's sense of the gender roles involved in both Kingship and pregnancy. Masculinity proves to be something we construct, such that it is compatible with Kingship but incompatible with pregnancy, while femininity is constructed so as to be incompatible with Kingship but compatible with pregnancy.

Of course, the way in which these concepts are constructed differs. The construction of the feminine gender proceeds from the biological phenomenon of pregnancy, among other things. The construction of masculinity, however, is the source from which the construction of Kingship proceeds. The King is the ultimate male, the ultimate father, being the father of an entire nation; the power he has over others reflects the masculine desire to control. The sentence "The King was pregnant" deconstructs the masculine gender by equating masculinity with femininity. The ultimate masculinity of Kingship is connected to the "weakness" which defines femininity--the possibility of becoming pregnant.

Le Guin uses other attack metaphors in the novel. The phrase "My landlady, a voluble man" links the masculine and feminine in the same entity, as seen in the sentence "The King was pregnant," but it also plays on the stereotypes of both landladies and talkative men (47). The landlady is a curious gossip: "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). Meanwhile, as the voluble man, he talks without listening and gives advice without being asked: "[H]aving discovered that I had no shifgrethor [Gethenian honor, which is insulted by direct advice] took every chance to give me advice" (48). The phrase "My landlady, a voluble man" thus links a negative feminine stereotype with a negative masculine stereotype, and the connection of the two demonstrates the constructed nature of each. Stereotypes are by definition constructed, so by putting two gender stereotypes together, Le Guin plays the construction of one gender against the construction of the other. Interestingly, Genly's landlady is the only Gethenian who is portrayed in feminine terms and who assumes a feminine role.

Le Guin makes much more effective use of attack metaphors in her short story "Winter's King," which also takes place on Gethen. In the revised version that appears in the collection *The Wind's Twelve Quarters,* she uses "the feminine pronoun for all Gethenians, while preserving certain masculine titles such as "King" and "Lord," just to remind one of the ambiguity. That may drive some nonfeminists mad, but that's only fair" (118). This usage of pronouns may at first seem merely a compromise, a way to portray the Gethenians as true androgynes without creating awkward new pronouns. The pronouns, however, serve a much more powerful function: they make every sentence in which they appear with a masculine title into an attack metaphor. The concepts of Guards, Prime Ministers, Kings, Lords, and

masculine-sounding names (like Argaven, Emran, and Hoge) are crucial metaphors in the construction of patriarchy. The story serves to deconstruct gender by constantly jarring the reader's sense of these metaphors and of proper gender roles--every time the King is referred to as "she" or "her," the reader's constructions of gender are threatened.

Of course, these pronouns are all tied to the hermaphroditism and androgyny of the the Gethenians. However, as with other aspects of gender that are explored in the novel, the Gethenians' lack of sex and gender make possible the novel's rhetoric, but that rhetoric is not limited to a discussion of hermaphroditic aliens, since Le Guin's science fiction claims to be descriptive.

Through the creation of an androgynous world, Le Guin makes possible her rhetorical argument in favor of the deconstruction of gender roles. By creating such a world without many of the problems of the reader's world, *The Left Hand of Darkness* constructs in the reader's mind the idea that gender is the cause of such problems. Once the reader's mind is open to the deconstruction of gender, the reader becomes prepared for the deconstruction of other barriers, such as those of race, class, and national origin.

CHAPTER 3

DECONSTRUCTION OF BOUNDARIES

The rhetoric of androgyny in *The Left Hand of Darkness* goes beyond the arena of gender. Toril Moi suggests that androgyny deconstructs gender; if we allow the particular to stand for the general, then androgyny is a metonymy for deconstruction in general. The male/female opposition is the model for all other oppositions, such as light/dark, good/bad, and strong/weak. Androgyny is a particular instance of deconstruction, and gender is a special case of a binary opposition to be deconstructed. The male/female pair thus synecdochically stands for binary oppositions in general, and androgyny stands for deconstruction in general.

Before continuing with a discussion of the novel's deconstruction of oppositions, we must understand the difference between opposition and difference. With opposition, and especially binary opposition, a relationship between two things is constructed such that they are considered opposites. Further, even though they are opposites, one side is privileged while the other is devalued (examples include light/dark and male/female). It is possible to deconstruct these binary oppositions without erasing difference, which is merely the recognition that two things are different from one another and that each can be valued equally. *The Left Hand of*

*Darkness* deals with both opposition and difference. This chapter considers how opposition is deconstructed in the novel, and the next chapter explores how the novel recognizes the importance of difference.

Much of Le Guin's deconstructive rhetoric in *The Left Hand of Darkness* involves the deconstruction of dualistic bipolar opposites (a traditional deconstructionist approach). *The Left Hand of Darkness* deals with many binary oppositions besides those of gender, but since gender is the most obvious and important one, it makes sense that the deconstruction of gender is a metaphor for discussing and for introducing the deconstruction of other oppositions throughout the novel.

Another important binary opposition is that of self/other, which makes possible the process of Othering; this process leads to the construction of boundaries that separate people from each other. The process of Othering involves creating a binary opposition in the form of self/other. When one sees oneself as the human norm, and then denies other people's humanity, one constructs a binary opposition, in which one self is privileged, and the other devalued. In *The Origins of Satan,* Elaine Pagels points out that "anthropologist Robert Redfield has argued that the worldview of many peoples consists essentially of two pairs of binary oppositions: human/nonhuman and we/they. These two are often correlated, as Jonathan Z. Smith observes, so that 'we' equals 'human' and 'they' equals 'not human'" (xviii). One's self, or one's own ethnicity, nation,

or one's own gender (if male) is given the privileged position of being human, while whatever one is Othering is given the devalued position of being nonhuman. One of the most important forms of Othering is the Othering of woman, the view that the male human is the norm for humans, and the female human is an aberration or variation on that norm. Dale Spender defines this Othering as the "male-as-norm syndrome," which is a "process of validating male experience" (2).

Le Guin explains the concept of the Other in her essay "American SF and The Other" as "the being who is different from yourself" (97). She goes on to assert that the process of Othering (of designating a person or group as Other) necessarily involves power relationships. Le Guin writes:

> If you deny any affinity with another person or kind of person, if you declare it to be wholly different from yourself-
> -as men have done to women, and class has done to class, and nation has done to nation--you may hate it, or deify it; but in either case you have denied its spiritual equality, and its human reality. You have made it into a thing, to which the only possible relationship is a power relationship. And thus you have fatally impoverished your own reality. You have, in fact, alienated yourself. (Language 99)

The power-relationship resulting from Othering causes both rape and war. Rape is one way a man attempts to assert his (perceived) sexual power over women, while war is one way in which nations

attempt to assert power over each other. The process of Othering could be said to be at the root of any act of violence or aggression, whether between groups or between individuals. In chapter 7 of *The Left Hand of Darkness*, the Investigator Ong Tot Oppong compares war to rape, suggesting that war is "a purely masculine displacement-activity, a vast Rape" (96).

Oppong identifies dualism and Othering as the masculine, gendered thought processes that lead to war. Oppong then theorizes that androgyny deconstructs not only gender, but the entire tendency to construct binary oppositions:

> Consider: There is no division of humanity into strong and weak halves, protective/protected, dominant/submissive, owner/chattel, active/passive. In fact the whole tendency to dualism that pervades human thinking may be found to be lessened, or changed, on Winter. (94)

Each of these dualistic word-pairs involves a power relationship, in which the first term, the privileged one, has power over the second, devalued term. The first term is seen as the norm, and the second as the Other. According to Dale Spender, such dualistic pairs are encoded into language at its most basic levels. Spender argues that, since it is through language that humans perceive and order reality, these dualistic pairs are integral to our basic perceptions and ordering of reality. In *Man Made Language*, Spender asserts, "this superiority/inferiority dichotomy. . . is a principle encoded in our language. It is a prefigured pattern of our language" (168). The

"tendency toward dualism," which is a "prefigured pattern," places the masculine in the superior position, along with "active," "dominant," and all the others mentioned by Oppong. The privileged aspects, associated with the masculine, are seen as normative; the devalued aspects, associated with the feminine, are seen as Other. The Investigator suggests that the androgyny of Gethenian society leads them to avoid creating many such dualities of masculine and feminine qualities. There is, therefore, no masculine "norm" or feminine "other" on Gethen. Othering based on gender is impossible on Gethen.

Le Guin discusses these problems with dualism and binary opposition in "Is Gender Necessary? Redux," and identifies the subversion of such oppositions as one of the enthymemes of her novel:

> Our curse is alienation, the separation of yang from yin. . . . Instead of a search for balance and integration, there is a struggle for dominance. Divisions are insisted upon, interdependence is denied. The dualism of value that destroys us, the dualism of superior/inferior, ruler/ruled, owner/owned, user/used, might give way to what seems to me, from here, a much healthier, sounder, more promising modality of integration and integrity. (16)

This "dualism of value" makes the process of Othering possible, and Le Guin argues, both here and in the novel, that only by escaping such dualism is it possible to escape war and exploitation.

The lack of such destructive dualism and Othering leads to the absence of an Industrial Revolution and environmental exploitation among Gethen's cultures. According to Le Guin, the absence of the exploitation of people and the environment is the second "result" of her novel/thought-experiment: "The Gethenians do not rape their world. . . . They have no myth of Progress at all" (Dancing 12). The "myth of Progress" stems from the Othering of the environment, of denying the interdependence between humans and environment. "Progress" makes the environment into a commodity. The process of Othering is necessary in order to develop technology at such a rate that the well-being of people, animals, and the ecology are forever threatened. Le Guin repeatedly points out in the novel that the technological development of Gethen's nations have avoided ecological destruction. She shows that Karhiders do not hurry, but instead operate their businesses and their technology methodically and safely:

> [In] four millennia the electric engine was developed, radios and power looms and power vehicles and farm machinery and all the rest began to be used, and a Machine Age got going, gradually, without any industrial revolution, without any revolution at all. Winter hasn't achieved in thirty centuries what Terra once achieved in thirty decades. Neither has Winter paid the price that Terra paid. (98-99)

The inhabitants of Gethen have thus not "paid the price" for the Othering of environment and ecology, as did Terra.

While the tendency to construct such binary oppositions, and thus to categorize groups of humans as Other, is lessened on Gethen, it is not entirely absent, however. Boundaries often arise from Othering. In order for two nations, like Karhide and Orgoreyn, to draw boundaries separating them, each nation must see the other as Other. As long as Genly Ai and the Ekumen are seen as Other, the boundary between Gethen and the rest of humanity remains intact. The political boundaries in the novel are the product of Othering on an international scale, and such Othering threatens to lead to the first war in the planet's history.

The construction of boundaries is a two-way affair, involving two groups that Other each other. Each group sees itself as normative, and the other group as Other. The boundary between Karhide and Orgoreyn actually involves several boundaries: each nation constructs its version of the borders drawn on the map, and each nation also constructs the view of the other nation as Other. The constructions of the territorial boundaries disagree in terms of placement; the psychological boundaries disagree as to which is the norm and which is Other. The Karhiders see themselves as normative, and the Orgota as Other, and the Orgota see just the opposite.

While the territorial boundary is created by an arbitrary line drawn on a map to separate the two countries and to indicate land claims, the psychological boundary is created by propaganda and patriotic rhetoric in both countries. Both countries prepare to go to

war over both types of boundary. The propaganda and rhetoric that creates the psychological boundary does so through mutual Othering, led by the Sarf [secret police] and the Domination Faction in Orgoreyn, and by the king's cousin Tibe in Karhide; both use fascist rhetoric, fear, and propaganda to reinforce their nation's Othering of Orgoreyn (48, 101). Ai describes Tibe's rhetoric:

> Tibe spoke on the radio a good deal. . . . His speeches were long and loud: praises of Karhide, disparagements of Orgoreyn, vilifications of "disloyal factions," discussions of the "integrity of the Kingdom's borders," lectures in history and ethics and economics, all in a ranting, canting, emotional tone that went shrill with vituperation or adulation. He talked much about pride of country and love of the parentland, but little about shifgrethor, personal pride or prestige. . . He wanted his hearers to be frightened and angry. His themes were not pride and love at all, though he used the words perpetually; as he used them they meant self-praise and hate. (101-2)

Tibe uses the radio to disseminate rhetoric which leads Karhiders more and more to perceive the Orgota as Other. The construction of the boundary is furthered by trade embargoes (201) and armed "forays" across the border (104, 110-13).

The barriers between Karhide and Orgoreyn are thus created through mutual Othering, in which each nation sees itself as the norm, as superior, and the other nation as abnormal and inferior.

Each nation thus constructs a binary opposition in which it is privileged while the other is devalued. "Self-praise and hate" are the emotions which reinforce the binary opposition of self/other, and they reinforce the privileging of self and devaluing of Other. The national barrier is constructed and strengthened by this mutual Othering, which threatens to lead to war and is designated with the misleading euphemism "patriotism." Early in the novel, Estraven draws the connection between patriotism and Othering when he tells Ai that he believes that growing patriotism is causing many of the difficulties between the two countries of Karhide and Orgoreyn:

> "No, I don't mean love, when I say patriotism. I mean fear.
> The fear of the other. And its expressions are political, not
> poetical: hate, rivalry, aggression. It grows in us, that fear.
> It grows in us year by year. We've followed our road too far.
> And you, who come from a world that outgrew nations
> centuries ago, who hardly know what I'm talking about, who
> show us the new road--" He broke off. (19)

Estraven's personal point of view is more mature than that of his country's citizens since he realizes that patriotism is merely a euphemism for something much more negative. While Estraven argues that patriotism and Othering are connected, he does not argue against all forms of love for one's country. Estraven describes later in the novel the difference between patriotism/Othering and love for one's country when Ai asks if he hates Orgoreyn:

"Hate Orgoreyn? No, how should I? How does one hate a country, or love one? Tibe talks about it; I lack the trick of it. I know people, I know towns, farms, hills and rivers and rocks, I know how the sun at sunset in autumn falls on the side of a certain plowland in the hills; but what is the sense of giving a boundary to all that, of giving it a name and ceasing to love where the name ceases to apply? What is love of one's country; is it hate of one's uncountry? Then it's not a good thing. Is it simply self-love? That's a good thing, but one mustn't make a virtue of it, or a profession. . . . Insofar as I love life, I love the hills of the Domain of Estre, but that sort of love does not have a boundary-line of hate." (211-12)

The "boundary-line of hate" is the product of mutual Othering between the two nations. Estraven, like the Investigator Ong Tot Oppong, is a voice for Le Guin's rhetoric in the novel; at this point he gives one of the clearest descriptions of Le Guin's enthymeme concerning boundaries.

Estraven understands that it is possible to dislike some aspects of Orgoreyn without forming a "boundary-line of hate." He dislikes Orgota cooking, for example: "'Very few Orgota know how to cook'" (212). He also dislikes their government, with its prison farms, bureaucratic totalitarianism and secret police: "'A man who doesn't detest a bad government is a fool. And if there were such a thing as a good government on earth, it would be a great joy to serve it'" (212). Estraven dislikes these particular things about Orgoreyn, but

he realizes that these things are no reason to hate all the people in Orgoreyn.

Bernard Selinger discusses the novel's treatment of boundaries in *Le Guin and Identity in Contemporary Fiction*. Indeed, Selinger shows how the novel seems crowded with boundaries, making it clear that the novel involves boundaries as a central problem or theme. Selinger writes: "It becomes quite apparent that Genly Ai's experience on the planet has to do with boundaries and barriers" (53). After tracing seemingly every mention of boundaries and borders in the book, Selinger concludes, "Whatever levels of meaning *LHD* contains, we find that the basic level that connects with and informs all the other levels is about barriers which separate one person from another and the consequences of removing them" (54). Selinger also identifies Le Guin's rhetorical enthymeme throughout the novel, and connects it to the theme of boundaries: "The writer, then (Le Guin at least), ultimately wants to break down barriers between people" (70). Selinger explores the boundaries in the novel, but he explores them only in terms of the psychological study of the self, and of Genly Ai's conception of self in particular. Selinger does not consider the connections between boundaries, Othering, and the construction of binary oppositions.

*The Left Hand of Darkness* argues that boundaries can function to separate groups of humanity and necessarily involve Othering, in that they cause each group to be unable to see the shared humanity in the other groups. While Robert Frost's neighbor in "Mending Wall"

may think "Good fences make good neighbors" (27), the novel's rhetoric agrees with Frost that the construction of boundaries is often pointless. Le Guin, like Frost, asks "Why do they make good neighbors?" (30). Le Guin's novel *The Word for World is Forest* demonstrates that emphasizing boundaries between groups of people leads to xenophobia, nationalism, fascism, and racial hatred. Breaking down barriers (which are constructed anyway) leads to "Material profit. Increase of knowledge. The augmentation of the complexity and intensity of the field of intelligent life. The enrichment of harmony and the greater glory of God. Curiosity. Adventure. Delight" (34), the ideals supported by the Ekumen, an institution whose purpose is to break down barriers and bring groups of people together.

Le Guin deconstructs boundaries in several ways. Perhaps the most straightforward way she does so is by showing the similarities between those on either side of a constructed boundary. She uses this strategy in several of her other novels, which also deconstruct boundaries. *The Word for World is Forest,* demonstrates how xenophobic/ethnocentric masculine military imperialists construct the definition of what is human very narrowly, so as to rationalize the exploitation of native species. The native species in *The Word for World is Forest* is as intelligent and culturally sophisticated as the human species of Earth, but the imperialist military forces see them only as animals, because they are small, furry, and use little technology. The boundary between the humans and the natives is

constructed by the humans' Othering of the natives. Some of the less militaristic characters in the novel, especially the anthropologist Lyubov, learn that the natives have a complex culture and sophisticated thought patterns, and are more like humans than mere animals. Lyubov goes to the trouble to learn about these natives and their culture, while the militaristic characters, primarily Captain Davidson, merely kill, rape, and enslave the natives.

Le Guin uses a different strategy in *The Dispossessed*, which describes a communist/anarchist society in which all boundaries of class are abolished along with concepts of personal property. The society in *The Dispossessed* also seems to have done away with most gender roles, even though the people are not hermaphrodites like the Gethenians. The society is specifically designed to thwart the construction of boundaries between classes, between men and women, between ruler and subjects, even between citizens and government. The novel shows that boundaries form as a result of private ownership of property and the use of money: the utopian society in *The Dispossessed* has neither of these. That a carefully-designed utopian community would strategically avoid the construction of boundaries and Othering is in itself an argument against boundaries.

Another strategy that Le Guin uses in *The Left Hand of Darkness* is to show that boundaries are meaningless in "the grand scheme of things:" the boundary between Karhide and Orgoreyn is proved to be meaningless in light of the rest of humanity and the Ekumen. In

arguing Ai's case to the Orgota, Estraven says, "in his [Ai's] presence, lines drawn on the earth make no boundaries, and no defense" (87). The existence of the Ekumen demonstrates to Gethenians how petty their earthly national boundaries are. While Gethen may be an example to the rest of humanity of the virtues of freedom from gender roles, the Ekumen is an example to Gethen of the necessity of dissolving other boundaries. Even though the Ekumen supports these ideals, it is still composed of humans, who still construct boundaries and perceive different people as Other. It is for this reason that the Ekumen sends only one First Mobile (Genly Ai's title) at a time. When Estraven asks why the First Envoy to a world comes alone, Ai replies: "'One alien is a curiosity, two are an invasion'" (208). Later, Ai realizes more of the reason behind that policy. This realization is a part of Ai's development as a character, which is dealt with in the next chapter of this thesis.

While the Ekumen provides a positive example in the novel's rhetoric against boundaries and Othering, Le Guin uses a negative example to deconstruct Othering in *The Word for World is Forest.* The reason that the imperialists in the novel feel free to exploit the ecology and kill and rape the natives is that they perceive both the planet and the natives as Other. In that novel, large numbers of Terrans come to cut down the trees to send back to Earth, which has almost no sources of wood anymore. The large numbers of Terrans equipped with military force make it unnecessary for them to communicate with the natives or to see them as human. Such

behavior in *The Left Hand of Darkness* is impossible with a single First Mobile; alone, the First Mobile must learn to communicate rather than dominate.

Part of the process of learning to communicate involves breaking down the dichotomy of objective/subjective. If one believes one's own perspective is objective, this implies that the belief that it is the only true perspective; one denies even that it is *a perspective*, asserting that one sees things as they "really are." Any different perspectives must therefore be flawed or false; in any case, they are *merely* subjective, and therefore incomplete. Asserting that one's point of view is objective elides the simple fact that, by definition, *all* perspectives are merely subjective, and thus incomplete. There is no such thing as an objective point of view, a "God's-eye view of the world." Only with the awareness that one's own perspective, like everyone else's, is subjective can one interact with others in any serious way. It is for this reason that, while the novel argues against boundaries of opposition, it affirms the necessity to recognize difference. Seeing one's own perspective as one of many subjective points of view recognizes difference, but if one believes one's own perspective is objective, and opposed to the subjective views of others, then one constructs a boundary of opposition through the basic dichotomy of self/other.

The dichotomy of objective/subjective and its relationship to the self/other dichotomy are thus tied to the process of Othering. Dale Spender demonstrates how the concept of objectivity, like the

process of Othering, is a construction of a masculine hegemony. Masculine language posits that objectivity is not only possible, but that it is equal to the masculine perspective. Female experience is then labeled *merely* subjective, incomplete. The fact that the male experience is just as subjective as the female experience is suppressed by the masculine assertion that the masculine experience is "the way the world really is." Spender writes: "It has been male subjectivity which has been the source of those meanings, including the meaning that their own subjectivity is objectivity" (143). By deconstructing the opposition between objective and subjective, Le Guin subverts the masculine *phallacy* of objectivity. The opening paragraph of the novel, told from Ai's perspective, subverts the concept of objective Truth, diminishing the boundary between it and subjectivity:

> I was taught as a child on my homeworld [Earth] that Truth is a matter of the imagination. The soundest fact may fail or prevail in the style of its telling: like that singular organic jewel of our seas, which grows brighter as one woman wears it and, worn by another, dulls and goes to dust. Facts are no more solid, coherent, round, and real than pearls are. But both are sensitive.
>
> The story is not all mine, nor told by me alone. Indeed I am not sure whose story it is; you can judge better. But it is all one, and if at moments the facts seem to alter with an

>altered voice, why then you can choose the fact you like best;
>
>yet none of them are false, and it is all one story. (1-2)

This opening subverts the dichotomy of objective/subjective by privileging the subjective. The process is two-fold: he first dismisses the idea of a single objective Truth, and he then takes the next logical step and embraces a manifold of subjective truths. The narrator (Genly Ai *after* the novel's time-frame) does not claim phallogocentric "objective" authority: rather than hold a monopoly on the discourse, Ai and Le Guin allow it to move about among oral legend, Estraven's narrative, and the notes of the Ekumen's Investigators. Le Guin subverts the phallacy of an objective truth by forcing the reader to construct his or her own subjective truth from the variety of subjective truths presented in the novel.

The binary opposition of objective/subjective is the first of many oppositions which the novel deconstructs. These pairs, such as light/dark and yang/yin, are often associated with the masculine/feminine opposition. The novel deconstructs the light/dark opposition by subverting the primacy of light. Ai and Estraven discover, during their journey on the Ice, that dark and shadow are as essential to sight as light. At one point during their journey, the weather becomes overcast in such a way that there are no shadows. Ai and Estraven cannot see any obstacles that are in their way because everything is white without shadows; even though the landscape is well-lit, they are as blind as if it were dark:

All brightness was gone, leaving nothing. Sledge and tent were there, Estraven stood beside me, but neither he nor I cast any shadow. There was dull light all around, everywhere. When we walked on the crisp snow no shadow showed the footprint. We left no track. . . . No sun, no sky, no horizon, no world. A whitish-gray void, in which we appeared to hang. The illusion was so complete that I had trouble keeping my balance. (260)

This situation, which Estraven calls "Unshadow," deconstructs the binary opposition of light and dark (261). The boundary between the two is diminished, on one hand, as Genly learns that light and darkness together are necessary to see; but, on the other hand, the physical boundary between light and shadow is what makes vision possible. The novel thus shows that there are some situations in which some type of boundary must remain. While the boundary may still be necessary, the privileging of light is subverted, so that light and dark are seen as equally valuable.

Estraven and Ai learn that this lesson can be applied to other positive/negative pairs. According to Estraven, "'Fear's very useful. Like darkness; like shadows. . . . It's queer that daylight's not enough. We need the shadows, in order to walk'" (267). Ai then teaches Estraven about the Taoist yin/yang pair: "'It's found on Earth, and on Hain-Davenant, and on Chiffewar. It is yin and yang. . . . Light, dark. Fear, courage. Cold, warmth. Female, male. It is yourself, Therem [Estraven]. Both and one. A shadow on snow'" (267). This

deconstructive principle is described poetically in "Tormer's Lay," a Karhidish poem which Estraven teaches Ai:

> Light is the left hand of darkness
>
> and darkness the right hand of light.
>
> Two are one, life and death, lying
>
> together like lovers in kemmer
>
> like hands joined together,
>
> like the end and the way. (233-4)

The poem not only deconstructs the privileging of light and the devaluing of darkness, but it also points to the relationship between the two and the necessity of difference. By comparing light and dark to lovers in kemmer, the poem shows that it is the relationship of difference that is productive. While boundaries which involve Othering and opposition are harmful, some boundaries of difference and relationship are helpful. Lovers in kemmer are on an equal footing, but they are differentiated into male and female for procreation and sexual pleasure (assuming they are not homosexual, a possibility Le Guin de-emphasizes).

While Estraven and Ai learn to subvert boundaries between nations and between both sides of binary oppositions, they see that indiscriminately blending two sides of a seemingly oppositing pair can lead to other problems. The Unshadow is a situation in which light and shadow are equally blended, and without the border between the two, Ai and Estraven are blind. Erasing the difference between light and darkness is just as problematic as placing them in

opposition and valuing only one. Similar to the light/dark pair, the differences between male and female are also necessary. Even the usually androgynous Gethenians must have difference between male and female during kemmer in order to procreate. The novel thus argues for the deconstruction of boundaries, but also for an awareness of difference and of the relationships between opposites.

The tension between the denial of difference (total deconstruction of boundaries) and the embracing of equally-valued differences is an important source of conflict among feminist theorists. While theorists such as Heilbrun and Woolf argue that gender difference should be overcome and defeated like a disease, later theorists such as Weil and Showalter argue that differences between the sexes are not only inevitable but valuable. These later theorists argue that we should learn to value the unique aspects of both sexes/genders equally, rather than try to do away with those unique aspects. *The Left Hand of Darkness* forges a path between these two theoretical camps. One the one hand, it argues for androgyny and the absence of differences of value. On the other hand, it shows the necessity of difference (especially sexual difference) in the Gethenian sex act.

*The Left Hand of Darkness* shows how difference is important, whether between sexes or between nations; some type of boundary is necessary in order to retain identity. The novel also shows that, while some boundary, some recognition of difference, is necessary, the differences can be valued equally. It is difficult, though, to

embrace difference without assigning lesser and greater values to such differences; the next chapter deals with these difficulties.

CHAPTER 4

REPLACING SEPARATIVE BOUNDARIES

WITH CONNECTIVE BOUNDARIES

While *The Left Hand of Darkness* argues for dissolving and
breaking down barriers and boundaries, it does not aim for a
complete lack of all national, social, and individual boundaries.
Bernard Selinger asserts, "a boundary is something that divides two
entities. . . but it is something they have in common as well" (Selinger
52). Instead of arguing merely for dissolving all boundaries, *The Left
Hand of Darkness* argues for a different kind of boundary, replacing
the separative boundaries of Othering and strife with boundaries
that are more connective (as in Selinger's concept that boundaries
are something held in common). *The Left Hand of Darkness*
deconstructs divisive boundaries, while affirming boundaries that
connect and further communication.

The separative type of boundary could be characterized as
"masculine," and the connective type of boundary as "feminine."
While the construction of separative and connective boundaries may
originally stem from early gender differentiation, one should not
assume that males can construct only "masculine" boundaries which
separate, and females can construct only "feminine" boundaries
which connect. The ways in which people construct boundaries are

learned as parts of masculine and feminine gender roles, but they can be changed or unlearned as well.

The concept of linking separative boundaries to masculinity and connective boundaries to femininity has its basis in psychology. In *In a Different Voice,* Carol Gilligan argues that males and females develop different identity boundaries due to their early conditioning. Gilligan writes:

> Given that for both sexes the primary caretaker in the first three years of life is typically female, the interpersonal dynamics of gender identity formation are different for boys and girls. Female identity formation takes place in a context of ongoing relationship since "mothers tend to experience their daughters as more like, and continuous with, themselves." [Gilligan quotes Nancy Chodorow] Correspondingly, girls, in identifying themselves as female, experience themselves as like their mothers, thus fusing the experience of attachment with the process of identity formation. In contrast, "mothers experience their sons as a male opposite," and boys, in defining themselves as masculine, separate their mothers from themselves, thus curtailing "their primary love and sense of empathic tie." Consequently, male development entails a "more emphatic individuation and a more defensive firming of experienced ego boundaries." (8-9)

Thus, males see their identity in terms of separation, difference and Otherness, while females see their identity in terms of connection, continuity and sameness. "Masculine" boundaries are created through contradiction, "feminine" boundaries through complementarity. The complementary boundary is one which is not constructed through Othering.

While separative and connective boundaries are usually linked to gender roles, they are not necessarily so. Gilligan's argument is not a prescriptive one: she does not argue that boys and girls *should* be raised in the way she describes. Rather, she merely states the way boys and girls are raised. Le Guin shows how men can learn to construct connective boundaries and dissolve their boundaries of separation through her portrayal of Genly Ai. She also shows that the Gethenians, without permanent gender, can construct both connective and separative boundaries. Moreover, the novel argues that separative boundaries are harmful and destructive, while connective boundaries allow friendship, love, and communication.

Another way to imagine these images of separative and connective boundaries is in terms of walls. A separative boundary is like a wall with no windows or doors, with each side continually adding to the wall so that it is perpetually stronger. A connective boundary is a movable partition with windows and doors, each side always communicating across, or through, the partition.

In *Le Guin and Identity in Contemporary Fiction*, Bernard Selinger analyzes boundaries in *The Left Hand of Darkness* in terms

of how they relate to identity and the self (specifically, Genly Ai's identity). Selinger does not differentiate between separative and connective boundaries but only between boundaries and the lack of boundaries. According to Selinger: "Borders or boundaries do ultimately separate people from people" (53). Although he also states that boundaries can connect as well as separate, he privileges the position that boundaries separate. For Selinger, separative barriers are necessary components for a healthy ego (Selinger is a psychological critic, after all); the removal of barriers is therefore unhealthy, resulting in disintegration of ego and identity. According to Selinger, "Whatever levels of meaning *LHD* contains, we find that the basic level that connects and informs all the other levels is about barriers which separate one person from another and the consequences of removing them" (54). While Selinger correctly identifies boundaries as one of the more important themes in the novel, he argues that removing or deconstructing barriers is bad, since such actions have unspecified "consequences." Selinger's view of boundaries is too simplistic, however, overlooking the rhetorical aspect of the novel, which involves both separative and connective boundaries. *The Left Hand of Darkness* does argue for the deconstruction of *separative* boundaries; but it also argues for replacing them with connective boundaries.

One example of a "masculine" separative boundary and its negative effects in *The Left Hand of Darkness* is the border between the two nations, Karhide and Orgoreyn. The boundaries between

Karhide and Orgoreyn are threatening to lead to such "masculine-displacement activities" as war, described in chapter seven by Ong Tot Oppong (96). The possibility of war arises from the boundaries being constructed in a masculine way, in terms of Othering and contradiction. Le Guin explains, in "Is Gender Necessary? Redux" that the balance on Gethen is tipping toward the masculine, and that the androgynes of Karhide and Orgoreyn are learning to construct masculine separating boundaries between their nations, and to Other each other. Le Guin writes:

> 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. But balance is a precarious state, and at the moment of the novel the balance, which had leaned toward the "feminine," is tipping the other way. (11)

It is this tipping of the balance toward the masculine that causes the build-up of masculine boundaries between Karhide and Orgoreyn. As the balance tips more toward the masculine, each side Others and demonizes the other through propaganda, trade embargoes, armed forays, and the Sinoth Valley border dispute.

Accordingly, the border between the two nations is the river Ey. According to Selinger, the river's name and Ai's name are pronounced alike to show the connection between Ai and boundaries (Selinger 54). The connection is deeper than Selinger recognizes, for there is a connection between both Ai/Ey and "I." The river Ey, being the border between the nations, is the way each defines its self, its "I." It is each nation's masculine separate "I", or ego, that leads to the Othering of the other nation, and that threatens to lead to war. The river Ey shows how each nation's "I" is integral to the border between the two nations.

Selinger also overlooks the fact that the name of the river also looks and sounds like "eye." This is also important, because the way each nation defines itself and its borders depends on and reflects how each nation sees the other. Conversely, the way each nation sees each other is defined by its self-definition: Karhiders define Orgoreyn as not-Karhide, and vice versa. It is a vicious circle. By seeing the other nation as Other, each nation constructs the borders with its "eye." Each nation's eye is limited though, able only to see difference and negativity in the other nation.

Genly Ai's name also sounds like "eye," which makes sense because he is the "eye" through which the Ekumen sees Gethen, and he is also the "eye" through which the Gethenians see the Ekumen. More importantly, as Selinger observes, his name sounds like "I," not only because he is the "I" of the first-person narrative, but also because his self or ego, his "I," undergoes the transformation from

being defined by separative boundaries to being defined by connective boundaries (Selinger 66). This development serves as a prototype or model for the transformation of "masculine" separative boundaries into "feminine" connective boundaries.

Perhaps the most obvious and important transformation occurs through the development of Genly Ai's character. As the novel opens, Ai sees the Gethenians as Other, even though he has been among them for two years. In the parade at the beginning of the novel, he seems to feel more like an observer of a strange ritual than a participant. The short and simple sentence structure conveys a dreamlike sense of bewilderment or alienation: "I was in a parade. I walked just behind the gossiwors and just before the king. It was raining" (2). The royal panoply of the parade is for him exotic, strange, and insane. The gossiwors, a type of ceremonial musical instrument, are the foci of this sense of insanity, or absurdity: "The gossiwor, played only in the king's presence, produces a preposterous disconsolate bellow" (3). The scene is described from an outsider's point of view, constantly reminding the reader that Ai is different from the participants and the surroundings.

The sense of absurdity and incoherence is reinforced by Ai's physical discomfort. The parade takes place on an unusually hot day, and Ai's uneasiness is an integral part of the scene: "I have never before been hot, on Winter; I never will be again; yet I fail to appreciate the event. I am dressed for the Ice Age and not for the sunshine" (6). The juxtaposition of hotness and winter, of Ai being

uncomfortable by being hot on a world where he can never get warm enough, emphasizes the scene's sense of absurdity and alien incoherence.

Not only does Ai feel he does not belong--that he is surrounded by insanity, absurdity, and a bit of exoticism--but he also ruminates on the superiority of his culture to that which surrounds him. He sees their culture as interesting, but primitive and barbaric:

> I am simply interested in the behavior of these people who rule a nation, in the old-fashioned sense, who govern the fortunes of twenty million other people. Power has become so subtle and complex a thing in the ways taken by the Ekumen that only a subtle mind can watch it work; here it is still limited, still visible. (7)

Ai's interest is similar to what he would have for an interesting animal specimen or of primitive idiosyncrasies. He sees the Ekumen and his own culture as vastly superior to, and more subtle than Karhide and its government. He thus Others their government, and constructs "masculine" boundaries of separation between his culture and theirs.

Ai's Othering of the Gethenians reaches a more personal level when he meets with Estraven for dinner. When Estraven tries to tell him about some of Karhide's political problems, Ai dismisses them as insignificant, even though they will interfere with Ai's mission. Ai is blind to the connection between what he sees as local squabbles and his vastly more important mission: Estraven's "ironies, and these ins

and outs of a border-dispute with Orgoreyn, were of no interest to me. I returned to the matter that lay between us" (16). Ai's single-mindedness here is part of his Othering of Estraven; Ai's insistence on discussing the matter between them, the "important" matter of his mission for the Ekumen, phallocentrically forces the conversation to return to that which has to do directly with Ai and his mission. Ai continues the Othering process by belittling the situation: "'I'm sorry. . . but it seems a pity that this question of a few farmers may be allowed to spoil the chances of my mission with the king. There's more at stake than a few miles of national boundary'" (16). He Others Estraven and Karhide, belittling their political problems and privileging his own mission. By seeing the Gethenians as Other, he constructs his own sense of identity using separative boundaries of Othering. He fails to respect differences between himself and Gethenians, and between himself and Estraven. He also fails to see the similarities, to place Estraven's priorities on an equal footing with his own priorities.

Ai also Others the Gethenians' androgyny. He tries to force them into either masculine or feminine gender roles, and he feels betrayed when they fail to fit his expectations. Early in the novel, he sees the problem as something for the Gethenians to deal with, but not him: "This was the hurdle I could not lower for them. They must, in the end, learn to take it in their stride" (36). Ai fails, at this point, to realize that he must also learn to take it in his stride, and learn to deal with their genderlessness and fluctuating, transitory sexuality.

Whether this is merely a failure on Ai's part, or an inevitable failure of human gendered perception is not made clear in the novel.

Ai's attitude toward the Gethenians' androgyny is more evident in his dealings with Estraven early in the novel. After the parade, he is "annoyed by this sense of effeminate intrigue" between Estraven and Tibe (8). Later, after having dinner with Estraven, he self-consciously considers his own Othering of Estraven's androgyny, but he continues to Other him nonetheless:

> 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. Thus . . . I thought that at table Estraven's performance had been womanly, all charm and tact and lack of substance, specious, adroit. Was it in fact 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? (12)

Although self-conscious of his limitations, Ai nevertheless Others Estraven and all Gethenians. His inability to see the Gethenians except in terms of gender is understandable, since gender is so much

a part of his own identity. Unfortunately for him and Estraven, the categories of gender behavior also determine his perceptions of trustworthiness. He sees Estraven as untrustworthy because Estraven "betrays" both masculinity and femininity by being androgynous. When Ai later learns to trust Estraven, he learns to break the connection between his perceptions of gender and his perceptions of trustworthiness. By learning to trust Estraven, Ai learns to stop Othering Estraven.

Ai also Others Estraven by thinking of him in animalistic terms: "Can one read a cat's face, a seal's, an otter's? Some Gethenians, I thought, are like such animals, with deep bright eyes that do not change expression when you speak" (15). Ai also perceives the King as an animal: "Argaven stood there sullen as an old she-otter in a cage" (35). Ai's characterizing the Gethenians in terms of animals is similar to the how African-American slaves were often described through animalistic images. While these bestial images help to characterize the novel's characters, they also illustrate how Ai thinks of them as not quite human.

Ai learns to break down these boundaries, and learns to stop Othering the Gethenians as the novel progresses. Instrumental in this process is Ai's experience with fellow prisoners in the prison truck on the way to the "Pulefen Voluntary Farm," a type of prison camp. Ai develops a relationship with the fellow prisoners that breaks down his sense of difference. In the prison truck, naked, starving, thirsty, and drugged, it is impossible for Ai to maintain any

sense of difference, except in the difference of anatomy. Treated the same as the other prisoners, he can no longer think of himself as superior to them. His most important experience in the prison truck is when one of his fellow prisoners enters kemmer.

> I saw a girl, a filthy, pretty, stupid, weary girl looking up into my face as she talked, smiling timidly, looking for solace. 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. I got up and went to the window-slit as if for air and a look out, and did not come back to my place for a long time. (171)

Ai attempts to reestablish his difference by walking away, but in the prison truck, naked and cold, he can only do so through retreat to the other side of the truck. While the experience in the truck places him on the same level with them, he is not yet ready to confront them as truly sexual creatures. He cannot do so until confronted with the crisis of isolation on the Ice with Estraven in kemmer.

Before this crisis, however, Estraven is instrumental in breaking down Ai's separative boundaries in other, less dramatic ways. One of these ways is by showing Ai the limitations of his own non-Gethenian perspective. When Estraven first rescues Ai and explains to him what he had misunderstood about their meeting at the beginning of the novel, Ai realizes the seriousness of his failure to understand the cultures of Gethen. "Mr. Ai, we've seen the same events with different eyes; I wrongly thought they'd seem the same

to us. Let me go back to last spring" (196-7). Estraven then sets aside his culture's rules of etiquette (shifgrethor) by telling Ai clearly and directly the political situation at the beginning of the novel; moreover, Estraven admits his mistake in assuming Ai would understand in the first place. Estraven's ability to overcome communication barriers where Ai could not subverts Ai's sense of superiority. Ai realizes that it is Estraven, not himself, who is more willing to make a connection between the two cultures. Ai learns that he must also be willing to forsake some of his culture's rules and taboos in order to make such a connection. By placing his faith in Estraven, he stops Othering Estraven, at least to some extent.

Ai also learns to stop Othering Estraven through the course of their Winter journey on the Ice. Le Guin structures the Winter journey to break down Othering in the reader's mind. By alternating Ai's narrative with Estraven's narrative, she places their experiences and perceptions on the same level. Some of each narrative overlaps with the other. The most important overlap occurs when Estraven enters kemmer. Le Guin's portrayal of Estraven's perspective also deconstructs the opposition of alien/familiar so integral to Othering:

> After all he is no more an oddity, a sexual freak, than I am; up here on the Ice each of us is singular, isolate, I as cut off from those like me, from my society and its rules, as he from his. There is no world full of other Gethenians here to explain and support my existence. We are equals at last, equal, alien, alone. (232)

While Estraven's perspective deconstructs the alien/familiar opposition, Estraven's sexuality deconstructs some of Ai's last barriers later in the novel. Through most of the novel, Ai has perceived Estraven as basically masculine. When Estraven enters kemmer, becoming female in response to Ai's maleness, Ai is confronted with the same threat as when his fellow prisoner in the prison truck entered kemmer. Since sexual differentiation is so much a part of Ai's identity, he is threatened by his encounters with Gethenian sexuality, which cannot be given fixed classifications of masculine or feminine, or even (for Ai) of homo- or hetero-sexual. With Estraven, however, Ai cannot retreat. The two are so isolated and so dependent on each other for survival, that Ai must confront Estraven's sexuality:

> 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. . . . I had not wanted to give my trust, my friendship to a man who was a woman, a woman who was a man. (248)

Once Ai learns to give his trust, however, the boundaries of his personality are threatened again with the possibility of having sex with Estraven. By deciding not to have sex, the two retain some sense of boundary between their identities, but it is a feminine boundary in that it enables their friendship to deepen.

> For it seemed to me, and I think to him, that it was from that
> sexual tension between us, admitted now and understood, but
> not assuaged, that the great and sudden assurance of
> friendship between us
> rose. . . . But it was from the differences between us, not from
> the affinities and likenesses, but from the difference, that that
> love came. (249)

The ability to recognize each other's differences as complementary, rather than demonizing the differences as Other, is central to constructing more feminine boundaries of identity.

Diana Veith and Patricia Lamb, in "Again, *The Left Hand of Darkness:* Androgyny or Homophobia?" suggest that Ai's not having sex with Estraven is evidence that the novel is homophobic. Selinger asserts, however, that some boundary is necessary between the two characters. Sexual union would dissolve that boundary. Lamb and Veith are correct in pointing out the seeming threat of homosexuality here--it is a threat to Ai's hetero-sexually defined identity to be aroused by someone who is, in a way, half-male. Rather than dissolving his identity by having sex, or reinforcing the masculine separative barrier by running away (as he did in the prison truck when the other prisoner entered kemmer), Ai recognizes their mutual desire and discomfort but realizes the tension can become a way of deepening their friendship. He understands sex as something that would lead back to each perceiving the other as alien: "For us to meet sexually would be for us to meet once more as aliens" (249).

Instead of attempting to use sex to create a boundary of continuity and connection rather than separation, Ai and Estraven choose to make deeper connections through "mindspeech."

In the context of the novel, mindspeech is a form of telepathy. It must be learned as one would learn a foreign language. Perhaps one of the more important qualities of mindspeech is that it is impossible to lie with mindspeech. Selinger characterizes it as "a different kind of language; it is the most private language in that it attempts to go beyond spoken language and its lies . . . because it can be learned . . . in the preverbal stage" (65). Selinger argues that mindspeech leads to a deeper level of intimacy than would sex: "Once the sexual barrier is dealt with (or avoided?), Ai and Estraven are able to move to an even more intimate level of communication by getting rid of the language barrier" (64). According to Selinger, mindspeech "is an even closer union than sexual union, partly because there is no possibility of deceit" (65).

Mindspeech allows the two characters to retain their individual identities while communicating at the deepest levels. They thus learn to form more connective boundaries through mindspeech, while breaking down separative boundaries.

Just as Ai learns that he must deal with Estraven as an equal, he also discovers that he must deal with the governments of Gethen as equal to the Ekumen he represents. While Ai at first Others the Gethenian regimes, he later realizes that, in order to bring them into the Ekumen, he must perceive the Gethenian governments as

legitimate. He realizes that he is not there to sell them advanced technology or governmental strategies: "I'm not a salesman, I'm not selling Progress to the Abos. We have to meet as equals, with mutual understanding and candor, before my mission can even begin" (119). He learns to stop Othering their governments, while still able to see the flaws in their organization. Part of this process involves also seeing the ways in which the Ekumen is limited. He realizes that the Ekumen is not omnipotent, but is as susceptible to failure as any other government: "Now if the Ekumen, as an experiment in the superorganic, does eventually fail, it will have to become a peace-keeping force, develop a police" (137). Ai realizes that the connection between the Ekumen and the governments of Gethen is between equals, rather than between a superior and an inferior government (which would involve a power-relationship and Othering). He comes to understand the weaknesses and the strengths of his government as well as theirs.

Genly's learning to stop Othering Estraven, Gethenians, and their governments is facilitated by the fact that the Ekumen has sent him to Gethen alone. In the context of Le Guin's Hainish-cycle novels (which include *The Left Hand of Darkness*), the Ekumen always makes first contact with a new world by sending emissaries, called Mobiles, only one at a time. At the beginning of the novel, Ai explains the Ekumen's reasoning for this only as a strategy to convince natives of the truth of his mission:

> There is only one First Mobile. The first news from the
> Ekumen on any world is spoken by one voice, one man [note
> the androcentrism] present in the flesh, present and alone. . . .
> One voice speaking truth is a greater force than fleets or
> armies, given time . . . (27)

While this position is obviously less ethnocentric and involves less Othering than the "fleets and armies" with which Ai contrasts it, it is still a position of difference. Ai's position at the begining of the novel involves changing the natives by teaching them "the truth," while neither Ai nor the Ekumen undergo any change. Later, though, Ai realizes that there are deeper reasons for sending the First Mobile alone, and that his understanding of those reasons has matured:

> It's the Ekumen's custom, and there are reasons for it.
> Though in fact I begin to wonder if I've ever understood the
> reasons. I thought it was for your sake that I came alone, so
> obviously alone, so vulnerable, that I could in myself post [sic]
> no threat, change no balance: not an invasion, but a mere
> messenger-boy. But there's more to it than that. Alone, I
> cannot change your world. But I can be changed by it. Alone,
> I must listen, as well as speak. Alone, the relationship I
> finally make, if I make one, is not impersonal and not only
> political: it is individual, it is personal, it is both more and less
> than political. Not We and They; not I and It; but I and Thou.
> (259)

The system is thus designed to force the First Mobile or First Envoy to stop Othering the planet's inhabitants and to develop connections through equal communication; to develop connective rather than separative boundaries. Martin Buber contrasts the relationship of I-Thou with that of I-It in *I and Thou:* "When *Thou* is spoken, the speaker has no thing for his object. . . . But he takes his stand in relation" (4). Buber argues that the I-Thou relationship does not involve separation of the I from the Thou, but that the I-It relationship does involve such a separation (22). The I-It relationship thus involves Othering and separative boundaries, while the I-Thou relationship involves building connective boundaries. As long as Genly sees the Gethenians as Other (as "It" in Buber's terms), he can't really complete his mission, because he cannot communicate with them. Completing his mission necessarily means that he must stop caring only about completing his mission, and learn to care about the Gethenian perspectives more. When the relationship becomes "I and Thou" instead of "I and It," he no longer subordinates the Gethenians to his mission, but subordinates his mission to the Gethenians. It breaks down the boundaries of Othering, but still recognizes two separate entities.

While the opposition of self and other is important in Othering, it does not necessarily lead to Othering. Self and other are a dualistic fact of subjective existence, but the novel shows that it is possible to have the difference between self and other without engaging in Othering. One must achieve a relationship characterized by "I and

Thou" rather than by "I and It." When Genly links dualistic thought to gender, Estraven reminds him:

> "We are dualists too. Duality is an essential, isn't it? So long as there is *myself* and *the other.*"
>
> "I and thou," he [Ai] said. "Yes, it does after all, go even wider than sex. . . ." (234; emphasis Le Guin's)

Their conversation shows that, while boundaries are necessary, one can construct connective boundaries of "I and Thou" rather than "I and It." These connective boundaries differ from the mere absence of boundaries: Selinger argues that the consequence of complete loss of boundaries is insanity--an inability to distinguish between oneself and others.

Having been sent to Gethen alone forces Ai to deconstruct and dissolve separative boundaries, while constructing and affirming connective boundaries of complementarity, communication, and responsiveness. With "I and Thou" there is no Othering, and only in the absence of Othering can Ai accomplish the Ekumen's mission.

Ai's transformation has some limitations. When he describes women to Estraven, he realizes that he hasn't thought much about women, he's forgotten what women are like, and he admits that women are more alien to him than the androgynes. When Estraven asks what women are like, Ai answers "'I can't tell you what women are like. I never thought about it much in the abstract, you know, and--God!--by now I've practically forgotten. I've been here two years. . . . In a sense, women are more alien to me than you are'"

(235). The obvious weakness here is that our example of someone constructing feminine boundaries has forgotten what women are like.

Even as Ai realizes this weakness, however, he identifies some of the more important concerns of the novel: "'It's extremely hard to separate the innate differences from the learned ones. Even where women participate equally with men in society, they still after all do all the childbearing, and so most of the child-rearing'" (235). Ai thus identifies the problems of gender roles, and the "pregnancy problem" that limits women's lives--these are two of the more important aspects of the novel.

This discussion between Ai and Estraven points out one of the limitations of the novel as a whole--whatever we think or conclude about androgyny, and gender-defined boundaries does not change the fact that we in the real world are gendered creatures, unable to escape the fact of our sex and gender differences. While we may change gender roles, we will inevitably have to come to grips with the differences of sex and gender. Valuing gender differences equally is more complex than simply erasing gender differences and ignoring sex differences. Genly Ai demonstrates that, while our ability to change is powerful, it is still limited by the existential reality we are faced with. Recognizing this limitation and dealing with it, is the first step toward positive change.

While we need not become androgynes, the lesson to be learned from *The Left Hand of Darkness* is that it is necessary to tread a middle ground--between rigidly-enforced gender roles and no

gender roles at all, between separation and disintegration. We need to see similarities, acknowledge differences, and establish connection instead of Othering, demonizing, and separating; one route leads to the potential for peace and harmony, the other to racism, misogyny, and bigotry. We need boundaries, but not those which separate; just as we need identity, but not Othering. It is important to know our own position without denying the validity of others. We cannot ignore gender and sex, but we need not be confined to the prison of rigid gender roles because such rigidly-defined roles inevitably lead to unfair distribution of rights and labor. At the other extreme, a total suppression or denial of sex and gender differences would also be a prison in which men and women would not be able to express their sexuality. *The Left Hand of Darkness* is a novel of compromise and complementarity, and argues against extremes and ideology. Gender boundaries, national boundaries, and boundaries of ego and identity need to create both independence and *inter* dependence. We need to break down boundaries of opposition which make us "*separate* but equal" (as with the Jim Crow laws), and establish connective boundaries that make us "*different* but equal." *The Left Hand of Darkness* demonstrates that we need connection, difference, and diversity, but without separation, opposition, and Othering.

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