

## Ursula K. Le Guin's Critical Dystopias

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It is by now commonly accepted that the utopian imagination today finds its strongest expression in science fiction (SF) and, perhaps paradoxically, in what a number of critics have called the *critical dystopia* (see Baccolini, "Gender and Genre"; Moylan, *Scraps*; Baccolini and Moylan). After the important renewal of utopian thought and literature through the critical utopias of the 1960s and 1970s (see Moylan, *Demand*), a number of social and historical conditions have steered utopian writing toward dystopia. In fact, utopian writing, be it eutopia or dystopia (see Sargent, "Three Faces," for definitions), is always occasioned by and related to the historical, political, and cultural atmosphere in which a writer is living and working. Early in the twentieth century, for example, the 1917 Russian Revolution, the rise of Fascism and Nazism, and the disillusionment that ensued about the experience of real "utopias" brought about a decline in utopian writing and an increase in classical dystopias such as Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* (1924), Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), and George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949). And while the oppositional political culture of the late 1960s and 1970s occasioned the revival of eutopian writings (with works, for instance, by Ursula K. Le Guin, Samuel R. Delany, Joanna Russ, Ernst Callenbach, and Marge Piercy), the turn to right-wing politics, the rise of different fundamentalisms and nationalisms, and the escalation of commodification in the last two decades of the twentieth century resonate throughout the dystopian writing of those years, including Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), Octavia E. Butler's *Kindred* (1979) and *Parable of the Sower* (1993), Piercy's *He, She and It* (1991), and Le Guin's *The Telling* (2000). Similarly, the traumatic event of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on New York and Washington, DC, and what followed seem to have influenced contemporary SF writing, and especially cinema, toward the representation of postapocalyptic dystopias centered on characters

involved in quests for self-survival or to rescue loved ones; see, for example, Cormac McCarthy's novel *The Road* (2006) or Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (2003).

If the different kinds of utopian writings share the fact that they are products of history and of the times in which they have been created, they are different in other respects. Although they are all located in time and space, utopia demands, by its own definition (*ou-/eu-topos* = no/good place), a suspension of real time and space. Dystopia, on the other hand, by its very function—that is, to warn readers about the possible outcomes of our present society—is very much rooted in history. Unlike utopias, dystopias often do away with the convention of the voyage and frequently revolve around the character of the misfit, a citizen who feels or learns to feel out of place and at odds with the generally accepted norms and values of the dystopian society. By contrast, the eutopian visitor may end up at odds with his or her own society only *after* an encounter with the utopian world. A dialogue between the visitor and a guide characterizes almost all eutopias, whereas the presence of a hegemonic narrative (the constructed, controlled social order) and a counter-narrative of resistance that the rebellious protagonist develops as he or she moves from apparent contentment into displacement, alienation, and struggle seems to compose one of the textual strategies of the dystopian text (see Baccolini, “It’s Not”). This formal structure frequently occurs through the use and control of language. The notions of coercion and consent, as developed by the Italian political philosopher Antonio Gramsci (see Boothman), in fact lie at the basis of the hegemonic order of most dystopias:

Language is a key weapon for the reigning dystopian power structure. Therefore, the dystopian protagonist's resistance often begins with a verbal confrontation and the reappropriation of language, since s/he is generally prohibited from using language, and, when s/he does, it means nothing but empty propaganda. From Kuno's conversations in [E. M. Forster's] “The Machine Stops” to Suttty's in *The Telling*, from D-503's diary in *We*

to Lauren's journal in *Parable of the Sower*, from the book people in [Ray Bradbury's] *Fahrenheit 451* to Jim's history in [Kim Stanley Robinson's] *Gold Coast*, the process of taking control over the means of language, representation, memory, and interpellation is a crucial weapon and strategy in moving dystopian resistance from an initial consciousness to an action that leads to a climactic event that attempts to change the society. As opposed to the eutopian plot of dislocation, education, and return of an informed visitor, the dystopia therefore generates its own didactic account in the critical encounter that ensues when the citizen confronts, or is confronted by, the contradictions of the society that is present on the very first page. (Baccolini and Moylan 5–6)

Language and its reappropriation, memory, and a critical knowledge of history are all necessary ingredients to stimulate resistance in dystopias—resistance that is nevertheless always crushed at the end of the novel. Classical dystopias, in fact, invariably end with the victory of the totalitarian state over the individual, and if hope is maintained at some level in these works, it is only possible outside the story: “It is only if we consider dystopia as a warning, that we as readers can hope to escape such a pessimistic future” (Baccolini, “Gender and Genre” 18). Such an option is not granted, for example, to the protagonists of Orwell's or Huxley's dystopias, for whom there is neither learning nor escape.

One other recurring feature of these dystopias is the passivity and silence of the female characters. Women seem generally indifferent to, and at times even content with, the restrictions the regime has imposed on individual freedom, and if they rebel against such limits, they do so irrationally, as Winston Smith's (in)famous remark about Julia suggests in Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*: she is “a rebel from the waist downwards” (129) who falls asleep every time he tries to instruct her about the past.

The condition and role of women is particularly relevant because it is one of the features that characterize the first critical dystopias—works

predominantly by women writers that, with a few exceptions, started to appear with a certain regularity in the late 1970s and early 1980s. With regard to one of the first such works, *The Handmaid's Tale*, author Margaret Atwood has emphasized that it was precisely her desire to do something different from the otherwise influential classical dystopias:

The majority of dystopias—Orwell's included—have been written by men, and the point of view has been male. When women have appeared in them, they have been either sexless automatons or rebels who have defied the sex rules of the regime. They have acted as the temptresses of the male protagonists, however welcome this temptation may be to the men themselves.

Thus Julia; thus the cami-knicker-wearing, orgy-porgy seducer of the Savage in *Brave New World*; thus the subversive femme fatale of Yevgeny Zamyatin's 1924 seminal classic, *We*. I wanted to try a dystopia from the female point of view—the world according to Julia, as it were.

In their formal revisions of the conventions of dystopia, Atwood and other women writers also fashioned what I, Tom Moylan, and others have called “critical or open-ended dystopias,” that is, “texts that maintain a utopian core at their center, a locus of hope that contributes to deconstructing tradition and reconstructing alternatives” (Baccolini, “Gender and Genre” 13; see also Moylan, *Scraps*; Cavalcanti; Baccolini and Moylan). Unlike the classical dystopian texts, the ambiguous, open endings of these novels “maintain the utopian impulse *within* the work. In fact, by rejecting the traditional subjugation of the individual at the end of the novel, the critical dystopia opens a space of contestation and opposition for those groups . . . for whom subjectivity has yet to be attained” (Baccolini, “Gender and Genre” 18; italics in orig.).

Another element that characterizes these texts as both critical and feminist, and thus makes them sites of resistance and opposition, is the practice of genre blurring. By drawing on the feminist critique of uni-

versalist assumptions and borrowing specific conventions from other genres, such as the epistolary novel, the diary, the slave narrative, and the historical novel, the critical dystopias resist the discourse of genre purity: “It is the very notion of an *impure* science fiction genre, with permeable borders that allow contamination from other genres, that represents resistance to hegemonic ideology and renovates the resisting nature of science fiction and makes the new science fiction genre also *multi-oppositional*” (Baccolini, “Gender and Genre” 18; italics in orig.). Thus, despite the dreary events and societies these texts describe, the critical dystopia retains the potential for change and political renewal.

Among the writers who have most creatively experimented with and thus blurred the utopian genre, Ursula K. Le Guin certainly represents one of the most significant and critical voices (on Le Guin, see Bernardo and Murphy). Le Guin was one of the first to point out the limits of utopia and blur the genre itself by juxtaposing eutopian and dystopian elements in the same novel. In her famous Hainish cycle—a series of novels and short stories that include such classics as *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), *The Dispossessed* (1974), “The Day Before the Revolution” (1974), *The Word for World Is Forest* (1976), “A Fisherman of the Inland Sea” (1994), and *The Telling*—she often explores the difficult concurrence of and reconciliation between diverse or opposite cultures. Communication, understanding, and acceptance of differences are central concerns of Le Guin’s Hainish series, where the utopian idea of the Ekumen, an interplanetary “League of All Worlds” working to maintain a peaceful coexistence among all planets of the universe, allows her to explore intercultural potentialities and imagine possibilities as regards gender, politics, religion, and so on. The very notion of the Ekumen embodies the critical notion of utopia that is central to Le Guin’s work. In *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Genly Ai, an emissary from the Ekumen on a visit to the planet Gethen in order to convince its people to join the League, attempts to explain the complex, hybrid nature of the organization:

But the Ekumen is not essentially a government at all. It is an attempt to reunify the mystical with the political, and as such is of course mostly a failure; but its failure has done more good for humanity so far than the successes of its predecessors. It is a society and it has, at least potentially, a culture. It is a form of education; in one aspect, it's a sort of very large school—very large indeed. The motives of communication and cooperation are of its essence, and therefore in another aspect it's a league or union of worlds, possessing some degree of centralized conventional organization. . . . The Ekumen as a political entity functions through coordination, not by rule. It does not enforce laws; decisions are reached by council and consent, not by consensus or command. As an economic entity it is immensely active, looking after interworld communication, keeping the balance of trade among the Eighty Worlds. (119)

Failure, imperfection, and limits underscore Genly Ai's description of the Ekumen, and yet these are the necessary ingredients for the survival of the utopian project. These same features characterize the very notion of utopia that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s. As Tom Moylan has observed, the texts by Le Guin and others “reject utopia as blueprint while preserving it as dream” (*Demand* 10). By focusing on the presence of difference and imperfection within the utopian world, the critical utopia counters “static ideals, preserves radical action, and creates a neutral space in which opposition can be articulated and received” (51). Such a transformation in the notion of utopia has brought critics and writers alike to focus on utopia not as the space to be ultimately reached but, rather, as the process that must be undertaken. In light of this, *The Left Hand of Darkness* can be read as a text that explores themes of cultural diversity and the possibility of pacific coexistence. At the same time, the educational journey embarked on by the two protagonists, the Ekumen envoy Genly Ai and Gethen's prime minister Estraven, and the use of androgyny to characterize Gethenian sexuality allow Le Guin to radically transform the genre. (The inhabitants of Gethen maintain an androgynous state most of the time until they reach the peak of their

sexual cycle, called “kemmer,” when they develop either male or female genitals.) On the one hand, Le Guin emphasizes the function of utopia that “reverts from that of goal and catalyst of change to one of criticism and the education of desire” (Levitas 226); “utopia does not express desire, but enables people to work towards an understanding of what is necessary for human fulfilment, a broadening, deepening and raising of aspirations in terms quite different from those of their everyday life” (141). On the other, her use of androgyny becomes a critique of the social construction of gender and its implications for society, as well as a way to open up possibilities by deconstructing heteronormativity (on *Left Hand* as a queer critical dystopia, see Thibodeau).

The work of Le Guin that best exemplifies the copresence of utopia and dystopia is *The Dispossessed*. Situated at the beginning of the internal chronology of Le Guin’s Hainish cycle, the action takes place before the Ekumen comes into being; in fact, it is the book’s protagonist, the scientist Shevek, who invents the “ansible,” an instrument of instantaneous communication that will aid in the foundation of the Ekumen. The novel’s setting, theme, and structure all contribute to this copresence. The novel is in fact set on two planets, Urras and Anarres—respectively, an opulent capitalist society and one that is anarchist-pacifist—which are constantly in conflict, and it alternates chapters on each one. The theme of the journey from reality to utopia is here reversed: Shevek leaves his planet, an imperfect utopia, to go to Urras, which, after an initial positive impression, nevertheless turns out to be a dystopia; as a result, he will be an outsider in both worlds. By employing the utopian strategy of juxtaposing different realities as seen through the traveler’s eye, Le Guin criticizes our society while offering critical models of possible social change. On this journey, Shevek, the utopian traveler, returns to the problematic world of his ancestors—which is none other than a dystopian representation of Western societies, with their military hierarchies, capitalist economics, and patriarchies. The juxtaposition of worlds conveys Le Guin’s idea of democracy as a dynamic process that must negotiate between oppositions without erasing differences.

The themes of ambiguity and utopia-as-process are also maintained at the level of narrative structure. While the alternating scenes between the planets displace the overall traditional linear narrative, the narrative line on Anarres unfolds in sequential time, following Shevek from childhood until his departure for Urras (and thus ending where the story began). The structure of the novel is circular, thus reinforcing the Anarresti principle that “true journey is return” (Le Guin, *Dispossessed* 386), provided that it is also clear that you “*can* go home again . . . so long as you understand that home is a place where you have never been” (55; italics in orig.). But, like the juxtaposition of different worlds, the alternating chapters describing life on the planets at different times in Shevek’s life also serve to emphasize how the future is inevitably linked to the past and is a product of the present. Or, as Shevek says, stressing the importance of agency and memory, “Unless the past and the future were made part of the present by memory and intention, there was, in human terms, no road, nowhere to go” (183–84). Most of all, the novel suggests the importance of maintaining utopia as impulse and not as blueprint. This is made clear by what is now considered to be the subtitle of the novel—“an ambiguous utopia”—as well as by the depiction of Anarres. Shevek’s planet is, in fact, defined and delimited by a wall that becomes an apt metaphor for its contradictions and ambiguity; looked at from Shevek’s double perspective, the wall protects Anarres from an external attack, but it also makes it a prison, cut off from other worlds. Anarres becomes, then, the representation of an imperfect and flawed utopian society: it is self-sufficient and maintains its integrity only at the cost of detaching itself from other realities. Shevek’s journey and experience, therefore, also become metaphors for the importance of retaining utopia as process.

The theme of the contradictions and the cost of eutopia is perhaps best embodied by Le Guin’s short story “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas” (1973). The existence of the short story’s utopian society, Omelas, is dependent on the sacrifice and suffering of one child. Le Guin is therefore raising uncomfortable questions about our be-

havior and standard of living. What is the cost of our material utopia? How many of us would knowingly and responsibly accept such a cost? And how many of us would be willing to lower our standard of living so that people in the so-called third world could raise theirs (see Sargent, “Problem”)? But the theme of the cost and contradictions of eutopia is also central to Le Guin’s novella *The Word for World Is Forest*. As in “Omelas,” exploitation and enslavement combined with the price of protecting one’s eutopia make up the themes of *Word*, a space-exploration or space-western story combined with the genre of war literature. *Word* has in fact been considered an explicit condemnation of colonial exploitation and a thinly veiled metaphor for the Vietnam War experience. It represents a clear indictment of what Greg Grewell calls the “combative”—as opposed to “explorative” or “domesticative” (28)—master narrative typical of final-frontier SF stories, in which one civilization “battl[es] it out with another for existence or sometimes for something less immediate such as territorial or trade rights” (29). Set on Athshe, a planet peopled by a nonviolent race of short green individuals, the novella narrates the conflict between the natives of the planet and the humans who have been sent there to gather lumber, which has become scarce on their own planet. The Terran protagonists are represented by Davidson and Lyubov, two extremes of our own culture: Davidson is a caricature of the macho who embraces the Western disregard for native populations in the way of progress, while Lyubov is a liberal scientist interested in understanding the other culture. The forest is the central metaphor for the representation of different philosophies of and attitudes toward life. The Terrans’ arrival upsets and violates the peaceful utopian community, and their continual enslavement and exploitation of the natives force the alien race to resist by embracing violence. The painful decision to resort to violence comes to Selver, the Athshean protagonist, in a “dream,” which is the way native men reach a deeper consciousness, while women help them interpret these dreams. By recognizing the need to resort to armed resistance, Selver becomes a god-translator for his people. The price of

freedom is a terrible one for a pacifist society that uses ritualized singing to replace physical combat; the loss of many lives is accompanied by the tragic doubt, almost a recognition, that once violence has entered their culture, it will never leave it:

“Sometimes a god comes,” Selver said. “He brings a new way to do a thing, or a new thing to be done. A new kind of singing, or a new kind of death. He brings this across the bridge between the dream-time and the world-time. When he has done this, it is done. You cannot take things that exist in the world and try to drive them back into the dream, to hold them inside the dream with walls and pretenses. That is insanity. What is, is. There is no use pretending, now, that we do not know how to kill one another.” (Le Guin, *Word* 188–89)

Called a pessimist utopia (see Baggesen), Le Guin’s dystopian novella investigates the possibility of utopia itself; it is a story about resistance, the right to and the moral imperative of self-defense, the difficult task of accepting and reconciling differences as well as that of accepting responsibilities, but it is also about the contradictions and the price of utopia.

*The Telling* is one of Le Guin’s few clear forays into the dystopian genre. Yet when she chooses to experiment with this genre, it is not to classical dystopia that Le Guin turns but rather to critical dystopia. Like most of her fiction, it is a story of cultural contact, the type of anthropological SF that is characteristic of her work. The novel also marks Le Guin’s full-length return to the Hainish cycle after more than twenty years. As in the previous novels here discussed, *The Telling* features a visitor to an alien planet who must come to terms with the difficulties arising from the encounter between different cultures and values. The novel follows the experiences and struggles of Sutti, a young Terran observer for the Ekumen who is on a mission to planet Aka to study its language and culture, both of which have been destroyed during

her journey. Unlike novels such as *The Dispossessed* or *The Word for World Is Forest* that posit two contrasting worlds or cultures, of which one is clearly a dystopia and the other a (possibly imperfect) utopia, *The Telling* presents two contrasting dystopian societies, Terra and Aka. In a series of flashbacks, the reader learns that Suttu has become an observer partly to flee from the fundamentalist theocracy of the Unist on Terra. Ironically, because of the relative difference in time spans occasioned by near-light-speed travel (seventy-some years have actually elapsed in the much shorter time it took Suttu to journey from Terra to Aka), she reaches Aka after a “Cultural Revolution” has taken place and the now-ruling Corporation has erased nearly all traces of the past system of spiritual beliefs and knowledge, called the Telling. A secular fundamentalism dedicated to science, technology, and consumerism characterizes the new society. The two worlds then mirror one another, and Suttu has simply traded religious fundamentalism for secular.

With her mission compromised, Suttu is sent by Ekumen envoy Tong Ov on a journey outside Dovza City to the rural villages, where a remnant of the old culture may have survived. There, she learns of a pocket of resistance, at first through small details in behavior and environment. After winning the confidence of the clandestine culture and apparently evading the surveillance of a Corporation agent known as a monitor, she embarks on a third journey, this time to Mount Silong, one of the biggest *umyazu* (temple or monastery) and the last repository of books and historical treasures. Suttu’s official, albeit covert, mission to find and record lost traces of the planet’s past also becomes a private and personal quest. In order for her to understand the Akan past, she must come to terms with her own history and painful memories, particularly the death of her lover Pao at the hands of Terran religious fundamentalists. In her quest to recover and preserve an endangered history, she discovers that she needs to do her own telling. In a series of challenging meetings, Suttu and Yara, the agent who has followed her to Silong, reveal to one another their painful pasts and are thus able

to maintain their positions with respect and understanding. The novel ends on the critical question of how Suttu and the Ekumen might intervene to save the old culture.

In an interview, Le Guin stated that “what happened to the practice and teaching of Taoism under Mao . . . was the initial impetus of the book. . . . The atrocity, and my long ignorance of it, haunted me. I had to write about it, in my own sidelong fashion” (Le Guin, “Driven”). The novel becomes, then, her own telling of Taoism and her own attempt to resist its destruction (Lindow 73). However, the novel’s themes and its open and fragmentary structure provide a larger commentary on the global rise of materialism and fundamentalism in the last few decades. *The Telling* shows a similar shift in both worlds Le Guin describes: the suppression of an ancient belief on planet Aka, together with the rise of materialism, and the dominance of a fundamentalist religion and suppression of politics on Terra. The novel, therefore, provides an extrapolated dystopia of our world. But hope is maintained within the novel: in its structure, its settings, its themes, and, most clearly, its open ending.

Against this bleak setting, Le Guin juxtaposes a fragmentary and open narrative that uses the theme of Suttu’s quest for history and memory to counter dystopian pessimism with hope and responsibility. The novel offers a powerful story of utopian resistance against oppression. Its unresolved ending, with the bargaining meeting between representatives of the Ekumen and the Corporation, opens the door to a possible utopia. Such a strategy, together with the fragmentary nature of the novel, provides a “utopian” resistance, also at the level of form, to the dystopian fundamentalism of the events narrated. In fact, Suttu’s recovery of the Telling enriches the novel’s events with stories, almost parables, that resist a traditional pattern of reading and explication. The central element of these stories is their ambiguity, as they challenge both Suttu’s and readers’ certainties, suggesting that there is no single truth and that it is dangerous to allow one idea to become the only idea. Moreover, the very presence of the stories also represents another fea-

ture of the critical dystopia, since, by blurring the genre, they present another form of opposition and resistance.

A second way to maintain hope within the story is represented by the setting. Suttý's journey upriver allows her to find a utopian enclave where she discovers fragments of what once was "a way of thinking and living developed and elaborated over thousands of years" (Le Guin, *Telling* 98). The Telling is "a religion of process" (102) that is "very different from Terran religions, since it entirely lack[s] dogmatic belief, emotional frenzy, deferral of reward to a future life, and sanctioned bigotry" (121). Against the double dystopian setting, Le Guin then posits enclaves of resistance as exemplified by the physical space of the *umy-azu*, the nature of the Telling, and the *maz*—professionals whose work is "telling: reading aloud, reciting, telling stories, and talking about the stories" (115) in order to pass on such a heterogeneous system of belief.

Hope is further maintained within the novel through the themes of historical awareness and memory. The Telling and the library of Silong resist their official erasure with knowledge and a utopian, collective process of memory:

History, memory, and the telling of tales are subversive elements in that they promote hope and the potential for change. In living their culture, the people of the Telling challenge the hegemonic discourse of the Corporation and create for themselves a way to attain freedom. . . . Utopia then is maintained in the very choice to make memory and history the central subjects of the book. (Baccolini, "Useful" 126–27)

Sharing knowledge, one of the principles of the Ekumen, is promoting awareness both of the past and of who we are, thus becoming a necessary step to foster change or open up possibilities. The themes of history, memory, and storytelling represent an alternative to the false, imposed, and singular story of the regime, and these themes become instruments of resistance that create the utopian dimension of Le Guin's book: "Unlike in classical dystopia, where the *art of memory* remains

trapped in an individual, regressive nostalgia, in *The Telling* and in other critical dystopias the *culture of memory* allows for the formation of a collective resistance” (Baccolini, “Useful” 127; italics in orig.).

Finally, the ending also offers another site of resistance and utopian possibility within the novel. *The Telling* ends as negotiations between representatives of the Ekumen and the Corporation are just about to start—negotiations that have been facilitated by the confrontation at Mount Silong between Suttu and Yara. In these meetings concerning their past, the two “engage in a utopian process of memory and telling” (Baccolini, “Useful” 128) that brings them both to understand and accept the past and acknowledge their responsibility without the need to resort to forgiveness or, worse, denial. This process also allows Suttu to move toward individual and collective action at the bargaining table. By interweaving the recovery of the Telling with Suttu’s and Yara’s sharing of their different and yet similar pasts, Le Guin is able to set in motion a memory process that becomes both liberating and utopian, in that it enacts a possible change. The macro- and micro-histories Suttu and Yara learn allow them to share their past histories, transcend prejudice, challenge fundamentalist thought, and move toward change. They are able to move from paralyzing pain and hatred to mutual respect, but with no need for forgiveness for the crimes and violence experienced. The novel’s structure, themes, and open ending emphasize, then, the utopian dimension of the story. Its closing image, of Suttu at the bargaining table negotiating the survival of the library at Silong, reinforces the utopian process of memory:

But it was not the Monitor’s, it was Yara’s face that she held in her mind as the bargaining began.

His life, that was what underwrote her bargaining. His life, Pao’s life. (Le Guin, *Telling* 264)

Thus Le Guin’s critical dystopia becomes a site of resistance, hope, and political renewal.

Le Guin's work has always combined utopian and dystopian elements critically, increasingly moving toward the critical dystopia:

Sometimes I think I am just trying superstitiously to avert evil by talking about it; I certainly don't consider my fictions prophetic. Yet throughout my whole adult life, I have watched us blighting our world irrevocably, irremediably, and mindlessly—ignoring every warning and neglecting every benevolent alternative in the pursuit of “growth” and immediate profit. It is quite hard to live in the United States in 2001 and feel any long term hopefulness about the unrelenting use of increasingly exploitative and destructive technologies. (Le Guin, “Driven”)

And yet, in so doing, she has maintained a utopian horizon by constantly exposing the need for a radical change in society that can be achieved through collective struggles and individual political agency. These themes are reflected in the narrative structures of her work as well as in her multiple settings and her blurring of utopia and dystopia. In turn, they also reflect the contemporary critical debates within post-structuralist, postcolonialist, and gender studies. One dichotomy that needs to be deconstructed in our own society—and thus in future worlds as well—is that between reason and imagination, rationality and spirituality, and high and low culture. In particular, Le Guin's work indicts the Western binary system that, far from being neutral, is functional to the maintenance of white male domination as well as of any fundamentalism. The difficult encounter between different cultures and traditions, be it about gender, class, sexual preference, religion, ethnicity, “race,” or politics, is what allows Le Guin to flesh out her critique of contemporary society. Through the eyes of flawed travelers, Le Guin encourages us readers to think critically about our own societies, opens up possibilities of radical change, teaches us to understand what is necessary to begin to articulate our desires, and reveals the shortcomings and limits of utopia, thus stressing the importance of maintaining utopia as impulse and not as blueprint.

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