



UNIVERSITÀ
DEGLI STUDI
DI PADOVA

Università degli Studi di Padova
Dipartimento di Studi Linguistici e Letterari

Corso di Laurea Triennale Interclasse in
Lingue, Letterature e Mediazione culturale (LTLLM)

Classe LT-12

Tesina di Laurea

*The Feminist Science Fiction of Ursula
Kroeber Le Guin: The Left Hand of
Darkness and The Dispossessed*

Relatore
Prof. Anna Scacchi

Laureanda
Chiara Crozzoli
n° matr.2003019 / LTLLM

Anno Accademico 2022 / 2023

TABLE OF CONTENTS

FOREWORD	5
1. SCIENCE FICTION	9
1.1 The controversy surrounding the definition of Science Fiction	9
1.2 From the magazine era to the feminist vision.....	11
1.3 New Media and SF: movies, tv series and video games	18
2. URSULA KROEBER LE GUIN: WOMAN, WRITER AND ACTIVIST	23
2.1 Upbringing and personal life	23
2.2 Essays, novels and children literature: Le Guin’s diverse expression of her art ..	25
2.3 Peace, feminism and environment in Le Guin’s activism	34
3. RELATIONSHIPS, GENDER AND ANARCHY IN <i>THE LEFT HAND OF DARKNESS</i> AND <i>THE DISPOSSESSED</i>	37
3.1 Genly Ai, Dr. Shevek and the characters of Le Guin’s novels.....	37
3.2 Gender, feminism and patriarchy on Gethen and Anarres/Urras	43
3.3 Questioning authority by portraying different political systems	47
CONCLUSIONS	51
REFERENCES	53
SUMMARY IN ITALIAN	57
RINGRAZIAMENTI	63

FOREWORD

Science Fiction, also referred to as SF, has been dominated and led by male writers since its origins. Because this genre is known to most readers for the works of male writers, such as Frank Herbert and Isaac Asimov, in this BA thesis I decided to focus my attention not on them, but instead on female authors, and in particular on a pioneer of women writers' SF, Ursula K. Le Guin.

In the first chapter I briefly discuss definitions of SF; then I will summarize its history and development, highlighting the important transformations in themes and styles triggered by cultural movements from the 1960s onward; finally, I focus on New Media and how SF has been enriched by movies, tv series and video games. There are numerous assumptions about the birth of this genre. Brian Aldiss, for instance, claims that the genre started with *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelly, linking SF with the gothic genre. Adam Roberts, on the other hand, indicates the birth of SF in the works of Jules Verne and H. G. Wells. Referred to as SF's fathers, both authors explored core SF's themes, such as technological and scientific discoveries and the encounters with otherness.

Two figures have been particularly important for the development of the genre: Hugo Gernsback and John Campbell, both magazine editors. The period dominated by these two editors is called "Pulp era", in which the format used for publishing was that of the magazine. The genre, then, developed from the magazine short story to the novel form. In this period between 1938 and 1950, SF authors were focusing on the dangers of new technologies and the consequences of their use. It is from the 1950s, which were led by the New Wave, that the topics changed. We can identify different types of SF, however two are particularly important: hard SF and soft SF. The former comprehends all the novels written especially by male writers before the 1960s, concerned with space conquest, interplanetary wars and the, not so hidden, ideology of human suprematism. One example of this type of Science Fiction is *The War of the Worlds* (1898) by H. G. Wells. However, as mentioned above, my work does not deal with male authors, who have predominantly favored hard SF, but focuses instead on women writers, whose works contributed greatly to the rise of soft SF. The 1960s and '70s were dominated by the second wave of feminism. During this period, the Soft SF developed and the genre opened up to female writers. This allowed important women, like Ursula K. Le Guin and Vonda

McIntyre, to express their thoughts and ideas through Science Fiction. Topics changed and the role of women, environmental issues and an attention for otherness as enriching, instead of dangerous, became the main issues explored by the new SF. Women writers had unique approaches to this genre and, thanks to them, it developed to be one of the most known and appreciated genre both in literature and in other media. One of the most famous and important female writers, who changed completely the genre and revolutionized it with her ideas, was Ursula K. Le Guin. The female authors that I mention in this chapter are just a few examples of extraordinary writers that revolutionized the genre, however, they are obviously not the only ones.

To conclude this chapter, I discuss about the influence of New Media on SF's topics. I mention important movies for this genre, such as *Alien* (1977) by Ridley Scott and *The Fly* (1986) by David Cronenberg. I also discuss about famous tv series and videogames which are internationally renowned. Especially SF videogames have gained a lot of interest within the gamers' community, being an example of how a genre like science fiction can interest different kinds of audience, not only readers.

In the second chapter, I focus on the figure of Le Guin. Starting with her special upbringing with the anthropologist Alfred L. Kroeber and the writer Theodora Kroeber, I introduce Le Guin first as a woman, then as a writer, and finally as an activist. Her upbringing was especially important for her career and the development of her ideas. Her father, being an anthropologist, educated her to embrace diversity, while her mother approached her to worldbuilding and writing. In 1953, she married Charles Le Guin in Paris and, with him, had three children: Elizabeth, Caroline and Theodore. Her experience as a mother enriched her, instead of limiting her.

Her career as a writer was incredibly varied, in fact, she not only wrote adult science fiction, but also young adult fantasy, children's literature and essays. The Hainish and the Earthsea cycles are still renowned works of SF and Fantasy, which have paved the way for many other authors to write about themes such as gender, anarchism, witchery schools, and outcasts. Le Guin was also famous for her short stories. In this chapter I mention one of her most renowned short stories: "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" (1973). This short story is particularly important because it is a clear example of how Le Guin empathized with less privileged people. In this story she describes a

village where people live happily at the expense of a little child, locked in a dark and dirty room. The inhabitants of this village know about the existence of this child; however, they decide not to intervene to preserve their state of happiness. This short story raises many questions on humans' morality, while also hinting at a parallelism between the child's situation and the less developed countries' one. In this chapter I also mention Le Guin's essay writings, many of which are collected in *The Language of the Night* (1979) and *Dancing at the Edge of the World* (1989). In these essays Le Guin explores literary and social issues such as gender norms, the writing process, but also literature itself. To conclude my discussion on Le Guin's works, I mention her children's literature. In particular, I discuss about *Catwings* (1988-99), an illustrated series of children's books.

The last portion of this chapter is completely devoted to Le Guin's activism. During her life, she participated in feminism, pacifist and environmental movements. Her novel *The Word for World is Forest* (1972) is particularly important because of Le Guin's takes on wars. Here, she strongly criticizes the war that was taking place in Viet Nam. Furthermore, she describes the horrors of wars, focusing on how environmentally and culturally destructive they can be.

Le Guin's most famous novels, *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) and *The Dispossessed* (1974), are the two works that I analyze in the third chapter, in particular for their exploration of: personal relationships, gender norms and roles, and power dynamics. In *The Left Hand of Darkness*, the topic of personal relationships is more central to the narration. In fact, the bond between Genly Ai and Estraven, which develops throughout the narration of the novel, is particularly important at the end of Le Guin's work because of the impact of Estraven's death. In *The Dispossessed*, this theme may be less central to the narration; however, it is still important in the development of Shevek, the main character. Although he travels alone, the encounters he does on Urras are critical for his final decision.

Gender, feminism and patriarchy are important themes in both novels. *The Left Hand of Darkness* is internationally known for Le Guin's invention of a genderless population. Here, she creates a society without male figures that oppress female ones. This novel is still important and mentioned in feminist and gender studies since it describes a reality where patriarchy does not exist. However less central in the narration, Le Guin still

criticizes patriarchal ideologies in *The Dispossessed*, where she focuses on the different role women have on Urras and Anarres. In fact, while on Urras women are treated as objects, on Anarres they are equal to men. Both novels were written at the peak of the second wave of feminism, which Le Guin was extremely devoted to, therefore it is not surprising that she approached themes such as gender norms and women's role in these two novels.

The last topic I discuss in this chapter is the political system portrayed in these two novels. This topic is central in *The Dispossessed*, where Le Guin describes an anarchist society, founded by a female revolutionary, Odo. The anarchist society on Anarres is in opposition to the society of consumerism on Urras. In *The Left Hand of Darkness*, the political system is still important. In this chapter I identify analogies between the political systems present on Annares and Karhide, and on Urras and Orgoreyn. In fact, I find that the duality of Urras and Anarres is also present between Orgoreyn and Karhide. While Karhide is similar to Anarres in its naivety, Orgoreyn does not differ from Urras for its political strategies led by a hidden xenophobia. In both novels there two important settings: Old Town on Urras and Pulufen Farm in Orgoreyn. These two places are fundamental in the main character's development, since it is in these places that the exiled and outcasts are exploited by the government and both Shevek and Genly Ai discover the truth about how Urras and Orgoreyn treat less privileged people and particular individuals, such as prisoners.

In this BA thesis I analyze Le Guin as a woman, a writer and an activist. My intention is to highlight the importance of Le Guin's works within the SF genre. To do so, I focus my attention on Le Guin's approach to the three topics I have mentioned above by studying her most renowned SF novels and by mentioning her revolutionary takes on social, environmental and feminist topics.

1. SCIENCE FICTION

1.1 The controversy surrounding the definition of Science Fiction

Over the decades, many critical authors of Science Fiction have tried to contain the genre in an inflexible definition, failing in each attempt. Writers such as Carl Freedman and Adam Roberts, who devoted a number of critical essays to Science Fiction, are skeptical about limiting this literary genre to a precise definition, or worse identifying a set of rules based on which a novel, short story, poem can be described as Science Fiction.

Freedman states that genre is more appropriately a “tendency” than a classification; this tendency can be present in writings to a certain degree: for instance, a novel which has a high romance tendency may have a degree of fantasy to it (Freedman 2000: 20). So, in bookshelves, how do we label these works? It is important to change the perspective in which we see genre. For Freedman, it is not genre that classifies a text, instead it is the latter that may present one or more generic tendencies.

With this concept in mind, Freedman continues by giving what may be a controversial delineation of where to find the Science Fiction tendency in literary texts:

For the construction of an alternative world is the very definition of fiction: owing to the character of representation as a nontransparent process that necessarily involves not only similarity but difference between representation and the “referent” of the latter, an irreducible degree of alterity and estrangement is bound to obtain even in the case of the most “realistic” fiction imaginable.

(Freedman 2000: 21)

However, is it really convenient to say that Science Fiction is part of every fictional text just because there is imagination in each one of them? Freedman’s argument is clearly disputable, nevertheless it is important to open our minds to a more flexible understanding of genre since nowadays it might be more difficult to put a text into one category, given that more and more authors of fictional texts tend to blend traditional genres together.

The term “estrangement” used by Freedman is not original. It was created by the Russian formalist Victor Shklovsky and then used by the critical author Darko Suvin in *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*, according to whom

SF is, then, a literary genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author's empirical environment.

(Suvin 1979: 7-8)

This is known to be the most widely accepted interpretation of Science Fiction, which revolves around the concept of cognitive estrangement. Estrangement is a method largely used in Science Fiction where settings, situations and relationships which are normal to the reader are replaced by uncanny counterparts. In this genre the estrangement involves the readers' perception, cognition or rather the mental process of acquiring information. With this definition, Suvin tried to distinguish Science Fiction from genres such as Fantasy, Fairy-tale and Myth.

The main other notion coined by Suvin in his work is 'novum', 'new' in Latin, 'nova' in the plural form. It defines a technological or also a non-technological innovation included in works of Science Fiction where the supernatural is not employed. Some examples of 'nova' can be found in the role of gender in Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) or interstellar travel, also present in the same novel. It is crucial that these 'nova' are explained in terms of scientific and logical reasoning rather than supernatural ones for the texts to be included in the category of Science Fiction (Roberts 2000: 5).

For Adam Roberts it is significant to define Science Fiction as a symbolist genre, using the "novum" as an example of a "symbolic manifestation of something that connects it specifically with the world we live in" (Roberts 2000: 16). This thesis derives from the explanation of Science Fiction as a "symbolic system" made by Suvin, where the novum is the centre of the system and "is to be cognitively validated within the narrative reality of the tale" (Suvin 1979: 80).

By analysing different interpretations of the genre, the concepts that are mostly used are the ones coined by Darko Suvin: cognitive estrangement and novum. It is around these two terms that Science Fiction is centred and finally finds its own definition.

1.2 From the magazine era to the feminist vision

To identify the point of origin of Science Fiction, Brian Aldiss indicates Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) as the first work in the history of the genre (Aldiss 1973: 20-31, quoted in Brantlinger 1980: 31), linking the birth of Science Fiction with Gothic Romance. In *Frankenstein*, there are themes similar to the ones present in typical Science Fiction novels: the mad scientist and the encounter with the other. In Shelley's work, the mad scientist abuses his intelligence and capacities creating a monster, the other, and then abandoning him to his fate because of his horrendous looks. This creature has to learn by himself how to form relationships with the new world that surrounds him while the mad scientist, acknowledging his mistake, escapes. This pessimistic look at future science and at humans as beings who want to create a perfect specimen without thinking about repercussions, would characterize the anti-Promethean, anti-utopian and anti-scientific pessimism in future works of Science Fiction (Brantlinger 1980: 32).

Although similarities between Gothic Romance and Science Fiction are present, other critical authors do not identify the origin of Science Fiction so back in time, stating that by doing so we could also say that Dante Alighieri's *Commedia* or more extremely *The Bible* could be situated within the genre.

Based on Adam Roberts' view, we can place the actual birth and growth of Science Fiction in the nineteenth century and in the works of its two fathers: Jules Verne and H G Wells. While Jules Verne concentrates his work around the themes of travel and new technologies, H G Wells is particularly concerned with the encounter with the other. The most famous works by Verne are *Voyage au centre de la Terre* (*Voyage to the Centre of the Earth*, 1863) and *20,000 lieues sous les mers* (*Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*, 1872). The first one narrates the adventures of the protagonist into Earth's core, encountering dinosaurs and wild nature; in the second one the author concentrates his attention into developing the Nautilus, a high-tech submarine which in this case works as the novum of the novel. As Adam Roberts states: "All Verne's books are set in a version of his present day, and when he invented such SF props as a spaceship he was keen to work them from existing scientific principles" (Roberts, 2000: 60). On the other hand, in his works, H G Wells narrates the strange and attractive encounters with difference. It is shown in the short novel *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896), where the scientist

attempts to create the perfect specimen by reworking animals to make them more human and smarter. This narrative is of course inspired by Shelley's *Frankenstein*, both works concerning a mad scientist and his failure in attempting to create perfection. What both Dr. Frankenstein and Dr. Moreau give birth to is that kind of oddly interesting monstrosity, the kind it is difficult to take one's eyes off of. Although *The Island of Doctor Moreau* touches important themes for Science Fiction, *The War of the Worlds* (1898), the most famous work of fiction by Wells, is, for some critics, his most relevant Science Fiction novel. The novum of this novel is one of the best known and used in Science Fiction novels, tv series and movies: aliens. The story takes place in Woking, an ordinary city in England until 'something' crashes into it, a spaceship from Mars full of aliens ready to conquer the Earth with war. Wells did not choose England casually, as in fact, at that time, thanks to its technological development the British Empire was the strongest Western leader both in politics and military. There is a similarity between the troupe of aliens conquering the Earth and England conquering countries less developed, they both use their technological superiority to defeat the other. In Wells' work, the aliens are beaten not because of human's force or sacrifice, but because of a bacterium which their bodies and immune systems cannot win over. What was Wells' intent in this novel? To show how destructive imperialism is, or to warn the British Empire that they could be defeated by another species (people from a different country)? Considering Wells' pacifism and the critical analysis that can be found within his novels, the first theory seems more appropriate. However, SF did not always criticize the evils of imperialism. On the contrary, during the period of the two World Wars, the main topics narrated in SF works were conflicts with other species and, more appropriately, space's conquest and human superiority.

Two other names that cannot be left out when talking about the growth of Science Fiction are Hugo Gernsback and John Campbell, both magazine editors who, according to Roberts (2000: 68), shared the belief that the genre, rather than just entertain, should also educate the reader. Gernsback founded the magazine *Amazing Stories* in 1926, with a bias for the scientific and rational part of the genre, therefore influencing the publication of works regarding Science Fiction. On the other hand, Campbell, editor of *Astounding Science Fiction* since 1937, thought that "SF should be about more than just machines and ideas, that the focus should rather be on the ways people responded to and were

shaped by those ideas.” (Roberts 2000: 68). This specific era of Science Fiction is called ‘Pulp’, because the main format in which these stories were published was that of the magazine, therefore on cheap paper. Texts were fast and clumsy and the favourite themes to uncover were alien invasion and human superiority. One interesting example is *Sixth Column* (1941), a novel by Robert A. Heinlein where he narrates an Asian invasion against the USA and constructs an “American-ness by demonising some notional scapegoat.” (Roberts 2000: 70).

As Marshall B. Tymn states in the article “Science Fiction: A Brief History and Review of Criticism” (1985), from 1938 to 1950 Science Fiction entered a phase called ‘Golden Age’ or, as Carl Freedman and other authors prefer to call it, the ‘Campbellian Golden Age’ (Freedman 2000: 22) in honour of John Campbell, who became a legend in his field and altered the genre’s format since becoming the magazine editor of *Astounding*. During this period the topics changed and, while during the pre-war period the genre revolved around scientific advances, people started to fear the consequences of technological improvement (Tymn 1985: 7), especially towards the 50’s when the New Wave of Science Fiction was around the corner with its social criticism, new ideology and environmental awareness. After the Second World War the United States of America was facing a great period of military and economic success and that in a way influenced Science Fiction authors; Isaac Asimov’s *Foundation* series (1951-53) is an example of optimism towards science (Roberts 2000: 79), thanks to which civilization can be restored and, even when encountering a monstrosity or the ‘other’, is safe. Other than Isaac Asimov many famous authors emerged during this era, for instance Philip K. Dick, who published his first work in 1951, even though matured and wrote his best-known works during the New Wave.

Science Fiction was not immune to the contemporary ideologies; the New Wave, a phase of this genre mentioned in the paragraph above, was largely influenced by the mid 50’s and 60’s national discussion on freedom and civil rights. The episode known to have been the “start” of the rights movement happened in 1955, when Rosa Parks was arrested; she refused to give up her seat in a city bus to a white citizen, denouncing racial segregation as an infringement of black citizen’s rights. Another important episode for the revolution were the sit-ins in colleges, which started a young revolution. It is called “young” because people participating were all students, both black and white (Foner

1998: 275-6). Although the revolution was not expected by the Government, Eric Foner claims that the premises were clear. From the migration of black people to the North to the rise of independent states in Africa, it was impossible not to notice that something was about to change within society. Black people were not the only ones to demand freedom, soon other minorities joined their fight, such as the students movement called the “New Left” and the “second wave” of feminism. All of these groups asked for freedom, but what did they actually mean by that?

“Freedom meant [...]: equality, power, recognition, rights, opportunities. It required eradicating a multitude of historic wrongs – segregation, disenfranchisement, exclusion from public facilities, confinement to low-wage menial jobs, harassment by the police, and the ever present threat of extralegal violence”.

(Foner 1998: 277)

Thanks to the New Left, who encouraged other minorities to fight against the Government’s racist, misogynistic and homophobic decisions, the United States of America was partially changed culturally and socially, gradually transforming itself into a freer country. Foner states that the major achievement was accomplished by women, who found themselves at the centre of the sexual revolution during the 1970s and obtained the right to divorce, to work in a profitable job and to reclaim their bodies (Foner 1998: 304-5).

This need for change and search for freedom, on the other hand, at the end of the 1950s were paralleled by a spreading of paranoid fears. People were led by the conservative right, led by Senator Joe McCarthy, to see the “other” as a menace and to engage in supporting American values. “McCarthy believed that agents from the old Soviet Union were infiltrating American society, and turning, as he saw it, ‘good’ American citizens into secret ‘evil’ communists” (Roberts 2000: 80). This ideological depiction of a danger menacing the US from the outside probably can explain why many Science Fiction authors started to write stories about alien invasions of America, making a parallelism between that and communists ‘invading’ the United States. Another important thing that changed differentiating this period from the other decades is the publication method, which was not in the form of magazine anymore; the novel took its place and the magazine

era came to an end leaving space for the paperback novel era. As we saw above, topics changed; not only the image of the 'alien' was probed in all its symbolic meanings but authors started to question themselves in the matter of social, environmental and gender issues. A great example is the novel *Dune* (1965), written by Frank Herbert, which has a large portion of its narration devoted to the 'Spice', a drug harvested in the desert of Arrakis by the natives Fremen. This novum, added to the imperialistic society portrayed in the book, could make the audience reflect on the exploitation of nature and how powerful the family ruling over this spice was, so much that many fights in the book are over this matter, just like many wars nowadays are over oil. This is just one example of environmental awareness starting to rise in Science Fiction works, however other crucial issues were dealt with: gender, women's role and race.

As I mentioned above, women started to fight for the right to decide about their bodies and their lives during the late 60s and beginning of the 70s and a second wave of feminism started. This phenomenon could also be seen in literature, where women writers started to emerge and be acknowledged within the Science Fiction genre. Feminist Science Fiction is a subgenre that cannot be separated from politics, since in addition to gender, it usually questions the patriarchal society as a whole and concerns environment issues, race, the self and the other. It is important to keep in mind that Science Fiction was hardly a genre open to female perspectives before the 70s; it was dominated by men, who mostly talked about human supremacy, aliens and space conquest. Females, in Science Fiction works written by men, were barely present, and if they were, they were reduced to side characters that embodied a stereotypical femininity. Obviously, politics was present in male Science Fiction as well, but the discussion revolved around war and the strength of mankind rather than around governmental and social issues, which have been largely dealt with by female writers. Lefanu calls "soft" SF, as opposed to the male-dominated "hard" SF, the subgenre concerning with ecology, psychology and anthropology, whose main authors are Ursula K. Le Guin and Vonda McIntyre (Lefanu 1988: 89). The example of soft SF she gives is *Dreamsnake* (1978) by McIntyre, set in a world destroyed by nuclear weapons. In this novel we find all the topics already mentioned in the previous paragraphs concerning male SF such as: technology, otherness, human intellect. What changes is the perspective in which these topics are developed; McIntyre does not celebrate technology

and human intellect, instead she portrays how dangerous and fatal technological advances could be if abused by mankind (Lefanu 1988: 88-89).

Ursula K. Le Guin is one of the most famous and important women writers, who shaped and paved the way for feminist Science Fiction, together with Marion Zimmer Bradley and Andre Norton (Roberts 2000: 93). I will deal with Le Guin's activism and works more in depth in Chapter 2, however it is crucial to discuss in this chapter, as I began to do in the paragraph above, how the perspective shifted from a male-centred point of view concerned with space invasion and wars against the other, to a female-centred point of view which was more interested in the relationship between people, the questioning of gender identities and environmental issues. Octavia Butler is especially known for her insightful treatment of the other, from the perspective of race. We can see how in her short story collection *Bloodchild* (1995) she deals with many topics, such as motherhood, family and slavery. In few pages she manages to narrate a heartbreaking coming-of-age story about a boy, Gan, whose life changes drastically one night. It is a story about the relationship between an alien form called Tlic and the human race, only that in this case the 'alien' is not what we would call "the monster"; humans are the 'other' in this story, they evacuated Earth and found home in this planet where they formed a sort of slave-master relationship with the living form present in that world: they have to bear the natives' children so that their species continues to grow and in exchange they can safely live there. What is interesting is that human males are the ones who can bear Tlic's children more successfully, and this is the fate of our main character. In this novel not only the role of gender and motherhood is being questioned, but what is more important is the relationship that can be formed between two different species; it is a relationship based on unconditional love, so strong that Gan is ready to die for T'Gatoi, the female alien whose children he will bear, to let her species continue.

James Tiptree Jr. is another important figure in feminist speculative writing; beginning to publish in 1968 using a man's pen name, her mask was taken off by Jeffrey Smith ten years later. Clearly this revelation made critics and authors question gender in writing: how could a woman write like a man? Is there really a difference between female and male writing? Sarah Lefanu states that "much of this successful fooling derives from the tough, cool, hard-boiled male narrators [...] who feature in many of Tiptree's stories" (Lefanu 1988: 106). She also underlines that women in her books are described through

means of objectification, successfully making the audience believe the writer was a man. The great difference between her stories and male authors' stories are the topics:

The question of the alienness of women to men and men to women is an important one in her work. The alienation of one sex from another stands as the paradigm, one to which she repeatedly returns, of other forms of difference, of the relation between self and Other.

(Lefanu 1988: 108)

When talking about contemporary speculative fiction and feminist theory, race cannot be left out of the discussion. Adam Roberts suggests that race has been central to Science Fiction since the topic of aliens has been introduced; the question of skin colour differences has been mentioned by authors while describing alien forms attempting to invade planet Earth, and for Roberts this is a clear example of race discussion (Roberts 2000: 132). Elisabeth Anne Leonard argues that novels written by African-American authors, although regarding scientific and fantastical matters, often are not labelled as Science Fiction or Fantasy but as African-American literature (Leonard 2003: 74). It is critical to point that out because black authors who write SF works are still left out of the genre and bound to one kind of literature only. This is one of the causes as why white authors are leading the genre: black authors are simply not acknowledged in this category.

Regarding the topics of race and history, Leonard focuses on a novel by an author I have already mentioned: Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (1979). Time travel is the novum employed in this work but it is clearly only a device that the author uses to write about slavery, relationships and today's society. The main character is Dana, a black woman married to Kevin, a white man. She has to go back in time to a plantation in Maryland in the early 1800 to rescue the son of the plantation owner each time he is in danger to secure her future: this man will be the father of one of her great grandmothers. Because of the colour of her skin, she is obviously treated like a slave and has to endure oppression while her husband, who will time-travel with her, acts like a slave-owner and does not see, or does not want to see, what cruelties and injustices black people have to suffer. The relationship between Dana and Kevin is not endangered by their racial differences in the present, despite their families are both against their marriage, however when they travel to the past Kevin changes and takes advantage of his skin colour privilege by ignoring

Dana's suffering. The implication, says Leonard, is that even when people have erased their colour barriers, when put in a racial system they will build those barriers again (Leonard 2003: 77).

In this chapter I discussed about the history of Science Fiction and how it changed from a male-dominated genre to a somewhat female-dominated one. I dealt with the unique perspective women gave to this genre and how they revitalized it by exploring new topics, conveniently not interesting for male authors before. Although white male authors have mostly dominated the genre, in my opinion nowadays the most interesting Science Fiction works are written by women; one example is Lidia Yuknavitch, famous for *The Book of Joan* (2017) where she uses science to explore topics regarding global warming, class, dictatorship, fanaticism and feminism. I have mentioned many women writers, both known and less known, who, in my opinion, are fundamental when talking about feminist SF. However, I did not mention many other authors who are equally as important as the ones I talked about. Therefore, it is crucial for me to point out that it was not my intention to rank them by choosing to include them or not in my discussion.

1.3 New Media and SF: movies, tv series and video games

Although Science Fiction in literature continues to be a prolific genre, with new books and authors entering the scene, media such as movies, tv series and video games are probably the ones that nowadays are spreading its popularity in the mainstream audience. Movie franchises such as Ridley Scott's *Alien* (1977), James Cameron's *Terminator* (1984) and Andy and Larry Wachowski's *Matrix* (1999) have filled cinemas for decades with their sequels and prequels.

Mark Bould states that during the 1950s SF movies had a proper boom in the US; all Hollywood's studios were dipping into the genre, were them major or independent studios (Bould 2003: 100). During the 1960s, Hollywood focused more on comedies rather than on action movies and SF movies, leaving space for other countries to produce blockbusters of the genre. Japanese studios, for instance, developed the kind of genre called monster movie, with its pioneer being *Gojira* (1954), better-known to the Western audience as *Godzilla*, directed by Ishirō Honda. This franchise achieved such a great success in the US that in 2014 the major Warner Bros. decided to reboot it with the movie *Godzilla* (2014) directed by Gareth Edwards, which earned great success, leading to the

release of sequels and the creation of the Warner Bros.'s Monster Universe. The novum employed in this franchise is that of the exploitation of nuclear power by humankind, which resulted in the birth of the monster Godzilla, a beast whose main aim is to erase humankind and its creations.

One of the best-known SF franchises is *Alien*, with its three sequels and two prequels. The story revolves around two main characters: Xenomorphs, an alien species whose origins are unknown to mankind and whose nature is that of an apex predator, and the astronaut Ellen Ripley played by Sigourney Weaver. This franchise was not only important to SF genre, but also developed the character of the “final girl”, common in slasher movies, meaning that the last and only character to survive is a woman. It is interesting to me how the topics of motherhood and childbirth are portrayed throughout the series, being more in depth analysed by the second film. In *Aliens* (1986), the first sequel, we see a sort of fight between two mother figures: the xenomorph and Ripley, who is in charge of taking care of a little orphan girl. Within this duel many people could identify two faces of motherhood: the monstrous one and the human one, which could refer to the different experiences women go through after giving birth. However, in my opinion, the director decided to show us the maternal and loving side of the alien: how she wanted to protect her progeny and got angered by Ripley killing her babies. It is almost as if the director wanted the audience to empathize with the “monster”, which opposes to the role the alien had in the first movie, where it was only an insensitive predator. This new side of the character could have been developed due to the fact that the director changed between the two films, as it was James Cameron that directed *Aliens* instead of Ridley Scott. So, while in the first film the main topics were the fight against the unknown and the mere survival of the final girl, in the second one, the relationship between human and alien is the main subject. This decision made the director explore different ways in which the genre and its topics can be employed.

When discussing SF movies, it is important to include the director David Cronenberg, who, with his horror-sf, made technological improvement the worst fear for many film audiences. In my opinion, one of his best works is *The Fly* (1986), a body-horror movie that combines technology, human frailties and love in one cinematic movie. The protagonist is a scientist, one of the most employed main characters in SF as we saw above, who finds a way to tele transport objects from point A to point B thanks to a sort

of metal cabin and the help of an AI. Things start to take a weird turn when he tries to use the cabin to transport himself, not realizing he let a fly in the room with him. As a result, he manages to travel from a cabin to the other, but his and the fly's DNA merge together. As the movie continues, we gradually see the strange changes the scientist goes through, from being a simple human to becoming stronger and healthier to, at the end, transforming himself into a fly-human hybrid. It is not the only movie in which Cronenberg portrays human inability to stop at its limits, another example is the more recent *Crimes of the Future* (2022) where technological development is mixed with a discussion on medicine, sexual desire, environmental issues and human's fascination towards the uncanny.

Not only movies gained great success, tv series also reached the attention of the mainstream audience, starting from the most famous one: *Star Trek* (1966-69). Bould states that "since 1990, the primary site of popular sf has been TV" (Bould 2003: 102); series like *The X-Files* (1993-2018), *Futurama* (1999-2013; 2023-present), *Doctor Who* (1963-1989; 2005-present) are all great examples of the achievements obtained by sci-fi tv series throughout the 90s and 2000s. This trend continues nowadays with products like *Black Mirror* (2011-present), *Love, Death & Robots* (2019-present), *Rick and Morty* (2013-present), which use Science Fiction topics both to criticize human nature and the exploitation of technology, as well as to entertain with comedic stories.

While talking about new media and SF I have to mention video games, which in the past decades have enlarged their community becoming probably one the most used media by the youngest generation. Space, aliens, unknown viruses, hybrids, high-tech weapons are just some of the topics that are covered within famous video games franchises. A great success has been achieved by the title *Alien: Isolation* (2014), a survival horror set between the first two Alien movies. The main character is Amanda Ripley, daughter of Ellen Ripley, who is searching for her mother in the famous spaceship in which Ripley's crew died in the first film of the franchise. Obviously, what she finds is not what she had hoped for, and the dangers she has to face are unimaginable. It is undeniable that a great deal of successful SF video games revolves around space and aliens. Another famous title within the gamers' community is *Dead Space* (2008), again a survival horror set in a spaceship haunted by human-made hybrid monsters. However, other topics are covered within this media; a recent example is the video game *Stray* (2022) in which the player controls a robotic cat in the streets of a cyberpunk city, or *The Last of Us* (2013) where

Science Fiction and the danger of an unknown virus are used to talk about the relationship between a man who lost his daughter and an orphan girl, developing the father-daughter bond while trying to survive a virus that turns people into zombies. This video game specifically has gained so much success that HBO adapted it into a tv series, which premiered in 2023 and received numerous Emmy nominations, a significant honour as it symbolizes the positive recognition from critics and industry professionals.

To conclude, the success obtained by SF products within the mainstream audience is a clear sign of how insightful and entertaining the genre is, and how it is not confined to literature only.

2. URSULA KROEBER LE GUIN: WOMAN, WRITER AND ACTIVIST

2.1 Upbringing and personal life

Ursula Kroeber Le Guin, often mentioned as Ursula K. Le Guin, was a feminist writer, known to the mainstream audience as the author of the *Earthsea trilogy* (1968-2001) and *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969). Born on October 21 1929 in California, she was the daughter of Alfred L. and Theodora Kroeber, both anthropologists. Thanks to their studies and passion for cultures, they influenced the way Le Guin saw the cultural alterity and was encouraged to empathize with different people and cultures. Her father, Alfred L. Kroeber, contributed significantly to the development of professional anthropology in USA and was internationally known for his studies among North American natives (Reid 1997: 1). He surrounded himself of many important people: writers, anthropologists and scientists, one example being the infamous Robert Oppenheimer. Their house was always filled with intellectuals, were them Kroeber's colleagues or friends. "There were lots of visitors, lots of talk and arguments and discussion about everything, lots of books around, lots of music and story-telling", quotes Vonda McIntyre in the Web-site created around Le Guin's figure, describing how the author's redwood house in Berkeley looked. The most important visitor, however, was not a literate or scholar, instead a member of the extinguished Yahi tribe. Ishi, that was his name, was brought to the Berkeley Museum, where Kroeber worked, and was taken care of by the Kroeber family. It is undeniable that this encounter was fundamental in shaping Le Guin's thoughts on the other and on minority cultures. Ishi was a crucial member of their family, and his friendship with Le Guin's parents and herself was not due to their scientific interest, instead it was real and affectionate. Theodora Kroeber wrote his biography, *Ishi in Two Worlds: A Biography of the Last Wild Indian in North America* (1961), in which she also described the conditions in which he was found: dehydrated and malnourished. She narrated his life and his world, reconstructing a, by then dead, culture from the memories of Ishi. It was probably by watching her mother imaginatively recreating the native's world, that Le Guin gained interest in this form of narration (Bernardo 2006: 2). In addition to her parents, she included her aunt and her brothers when talking about the people who shaped and influenced her. It was one of her brothers that taught her to write when she was five; it is interesting that all of her brothers were quite fascinated by the magazine *Amazing Stories*, where Le Guin submitted her first work when she was 12, but was not accepted (Bernardo

2006: 3). Mentioned in the Web-site is also her parent's summer house in Napa Valley, often filled with family friends. During the second World War, however, those summers became lonely; her brothers were recruited and went to war, and because she was caged in that solitude "I started making my soul".

As far as her education is concerned, she attended Radcliffe College and specialized in Italian literature and Renaissance French literature. Following her father's advice to pursue a profitable career, she obtained her master's degree in French and Renaissance literature in 1952 at University of Columbia, with the goal to teach. She started her doctorate but actually "never finished her doctoral thesis on the Jean Lemaire de Belges" (Reid 1997: 6). However, it was thanks to her doctoral studies that she took a trip to France and there met her soon to be husband Charles A. Le Guin.

Ursula and Charles Le Guin married in 1953 in Paris. From 1954 to 1955 she taught French while her husband was working on his doctoral thesis, which he completed in 1956 at the University of Idaho. They had three children: the older in 1957, Elizabeth; Caroline, two years later, in 1959; and Theodore, in 1964. Elizabeth is now a cellist, while Caroline is a community college English teacher (Reid 1997: 6). Her relationship with Charles Le Guin was quite unique during those years. In fact, despite the 50s and 60s being led by patriarchal ideologies, the power they held was equal inside their house. He supported her in her writing career, occasionally taking care of the children when she needed space to finish what she was working on at that moment (Reid 1997: 7).

Even though her family was never religious, she was interested in Taoism, a Chinese philosophy which revolves around the harmony one should have with nature and their own soul. Her father's favorite book was the *Tao Te Ching*, in which are described concepts like the fight between light and dark, meditation and how to respect the rhythm of nature. The teachings of this doctrine can be found in the characters of her books: the heroes are often exploring a new world rather than conquering it, and are many times fighting against duality. For example, in *The Left Hand of Darkness*, of which I will talk more in depth in the third chapter, the main hero has to face a world in which sexual duality of his native country does not exist and as a consequence people are also fluid in terms of gender and cultural identity and even ethics. In other terms, there is not black and white, evil or good. Her characters are rarely only evil or good, they have layers.

Given all this information regarding her upbringing and personal life, we could say that it was impossible for her not to become the voice of the Other in Science Fiction. She put all of herself into what she wrote: from her parents' teachings to emphasize with the different, to the role of the mother she had to take on and all the aspects of womanhood. Everything she went through can be seen in her works. Regarding her writing career, her father was probably the most important person in her life, who shaped her thoughts with his interest towards other cultures and religions. However, as I said above, it was more likely thanks to her mother that she found out about worldbuilding and her passion to invent new worlds.

Ursula Kroeber Le Guin died in January 2018 in her home.

2.2 Essays, novels and children literature: Le Guin's diverse expression of her art

Ursula K. Le Guin was a prolific writer. During her life she did not published only novels, but also experimented artistically. She wrote poetry, short stories, even screenplays. As Le Guin said in her 2006 interview, held by Susan Bernardo and transcribed in her book *Ursula K. Le Guin: A Critical Companion* (2006), she did not want her work to be referred to as science fiction, she preferred to refer to it as simply fiction, more in general to be able to comprehend all her art with the same term. She received many awards for her works. To mention some of her honors, she received a Nebula Award for *The Dispossessed*, *The Left Hand of Darkness* and *Tehanu*; a Hugo Award for *The Dispossessed*, *The Left Hand of Darkness* and *Buffalo Gals*. She was also "knighted a Grand Master by the Science Fiction Writer's Association in 2003" (Bernardo 2006: 5) becoming the second woman to be acknowledged in the association.

Although she experimented a lot with her writing, I would like to start by discussing about her novels, which are the format of the most famous works she wrote. First of all, she became known as a writer during the New Wave in the 1960s, when soft science fiction was leading the genre. Her first three novels begin the cycle of the Ekumen or Hainish sequence/cycle. In this sequence she narrates about the Ekumen, an organization that sends envoys to different planets to learn about their cultures and establish communication and diplomatic relationships. The Ekumen uses technologically advanced devices to communicate with the other planets; one of them is the ansible, a device that enables immediate communication across the galaxy. Within this galaxy we read about

different cultures and civilizations, which are the offspring of the Hain, the original race and creator of all the others. While it is not simple to chronologically put the novels of the Hainish sequence in order, many critics mention the main texts in this specific order: *The Word for World Is Forest* (1972), *The Dispossessed* (1974), *Rocannon's World* (1966) and *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969). I will deal with *The Dispossessed* and *The Left Hand of Darkness* in Chapter 3.

The first book in which the Ekumen is mentioned is *Rocannon's World*. The main character is Rocannon, an ethnographer sent by the Ekumen to the planet Fomalhaut II to study its natives, the Liuar. He gets stranded there with no ways of getting back home due to an attack by the Fiia, a more technologically developed society, that destroys his ship and kills his colleagues. The novel narrates the journey of Rocannon and his three Liuar friends to find the Fiia fortress, determined to destroy the enemy and alert other planets of the danger. It is a novel that revolves around many anthropological themes, such as communication, intercultural relationships, but also the consequences of using technological superiority against less developed civilizations. Another theme that is found in this story is the balance between humans and nature, in fact Liuars are able to use telepathy and are in complete harmony with their surroundings, a topic close to Le Guin's interest in Taoism. At the end of the novel, because of the relationship Rocannon gained while traveling with his companions, he learns how to perform telepathy. This event could be interpreted in at least two ways: Liuars, grateful for Rocannon's help, could have gifted him this ability, or the fact that Rocannon learnt about their culture and embraced it resulted in him being able to communicate with them in their special way, through telepathy. This novel works as a stand-alone, however it is collected in the omnibus *Worlds of Exile and Illusion* (1996) with the novels *Planet of Exile* (1966) and *City of Illusions* (1967). It is in *City of Illusions* that we meet for the first time the Shing, "a group whose telepathic abilities is comparable to the mind speech of *Rocannon's World*" (Bernardo 2006: 18). The Shing is the main threat and the most powerful and dangerous enemy against which the Ekumen has to fight. These three novels are connected by their topics, which range from anthropological matters to technological development. Mind speech is often mentioned in all three books, as is war. Although in each novel there are different enemies, the Ekumen is getting ready to fight against one in particular, the Shing. These works are "stories merging the British New Wave, American genre imagery and

Le Guin's anthropological interests into tales of loss, companionship, isolation, redemption and love" (Bernardo 2006: 16).

Another novel included in the Hainish sequence is *The Word for World Is Forest*. Written a few years after her best-selling novel *The Left Hand of Darkness* and during the years of the Vietnam war, it raises questions about colonization, imperialism and ecological matters. While reading this story, the audience may identify two clear sides: good and evil, which fight one another throughout the whole novel. The good side is depicted by the natives, called Athsheans, a nonaggressive civilization who lives in harmony with nature and whose members, every two hours, fall into a dream state. The main character on this side is Selver, one of the few Athsheans who can translate his dreams into reality. The evil side is represented by the Terrans, who colonized the planet exploiting its resources, enslaving its inhabitants and destroying their environment. Captain Davidson is the main character on this side, determined to tame Athsheans' culture and to use their resources to supply Earth, which lacks in natural reserves (Reid 1997: 59). Ruthless and cruel, he enslaves and rapes many native women, one of them being Selver's wife, who, as a result of the act, dies. This tragedy not only affects Selver but all his community, in fact, Selver's dreams start to develop into murderous and aggressive illusions, leading the Athsheans to attack the colonists. A culture who did not know war and aggression is now stained with the blood of the ones they killed. Selver cannot feel anything else but shame and remorse. His powerful dreams guided the rebellion. One of the casualties is Lyubov, the only Terran who did not fall prey to evil and was friendly with Selver. It is interesting to note that the female Russian name ЛЮБОВЬ (Lyubov) is translated as Love in English. Le Guin could have chosen this name to hint at the character's generous, kind and thoughtful soul. The war against the colonists is victorious as the Terrans will never set foot again on their land. However, the Athsheans will forever be changed by this event. Although this novel is clearly critical against colonialism and environmental exploitation, and Le Guin takes an aggressive position against the Vietnam War by portraying a hurtful tragedy and the changes a population can go through when led to war, Reid states that: "Because it polarizes good and evil so definitely, it is a simpler book than *The Left Hand of Darkness* and *The Dispossessed*" (Reid: 59). I understand Reid's point as Le Guin apparently draws a line that separates evil and good. However, while Terrans never redeemed themselves except for Lyubov, I

think that the Athsheans' change from a peaceful population to an aggressive one is an example of how good can turn into evil, even when the reasons behind the aggressiveness are understandable and valid. One of the main questions this book rises is if it is worth to end years of suppression with war, sacrifices and homicides. This matter is probably tormenting Selver's mind. We can only imagine what his answer would be.

Moving on from the Hainish Cycle, another important series of books in Le Guin's career is the Earthsea Cycle, which includes: *A Wizard of Earthsea* (1968), *The Tombs of Atuan* (1970), *The Farthest Shore* (1972), *Tehanu: The Last Book of Earthsea* (1990), *Tales from Earthsea* (2001) and *The Other Wind* (2001). As we can see, after the third book of this series she stopped for almost 20 years, only to put her hands back on it in 1990, stating it was the last one. However, having still something to say about this world, she published a collection of short stories and a novel in 2001. By writing these stories and legends, she furthermore explores the world of Earthsea. On 2006 the Japanese director Goro Miyazaki launched the film *Gedo Senki*, which is literally translated into *Ged's War Chronicles*. However, it was translated in English as *Tales from Earthsea*, to more clearly link this product to Le Guin's tales' collection. The director took inspiration from the first four books of the Earthsea Cycle. Although Le Guin is mostly known for her sci-fi works, this successful saga is labelled as fantasy, meaning that the construction of an alternative world where reality does not interfere is present (Bernardo 2006: 87). Instead of technology and the future, it deals with magic and, most commonly, the past. Her fantasy however is not traditional, she did not follow the laws of the genre that readers were used to. First of all, she created a world in which almost everyone, including the main character, is black, uncommon in fantasy books of that time. Furthermore, in her second book, she covers the development of a female character, making *The Tombs of Atuan* one of the few fantasy books which, in the 1900s, dealt with femininity and womanhood.

A Wizard of Earthsea solely focuses on the character of Ged, a wizard of the region Hardic, an area populated by wizards, which is in complete opposition with the region Kargish, whose inhabitants are seen as barbarians by Hardics. It is a coming-of-age book whose central focus is Ged and his development. The story begins when he is just a child. The reader travels along with him in the journey of his teenage years until he reaches the age of 18. In two occasions Ged misuses magic misled by his ego. In the first case he is

challenged by a girl to cast a spell of transformation, Ged accepts and uses the forbidden book of Ogion, his master, to cast it. However, he immediately feels that the book is starting to gain power over him but, thanks to Ogion's help, the order is finally restored (Bernardo 2006: 98). The second time he creates a greater disaster. Challenged by one of his colleagues in the wizardly School of Roke, he summons a dead spirit. Because of this spell he unleashes a creature, or monster, called gebbeth that will torment him for the remaining of the book. After this accident Ged runs away from his mistakes, escaping from Roak once he graduates. However, the gebbeth does not stop its pursuing and follows him wherever he goes, tormenting him. It is only when Ogion suggests to chase after the creature and not let it chase him that Ged takes courage. He hunts down the shadow creature and, at the end of the book, finally wins over it. It is thanks to his older master that Ged prevails over his fears and pride. This coming-of-age novel deals with the psychological development of a young wizard, who has to face his fears and his pride to restore balance on the world. The stakes in this book are high, like in most of fantasy books, and the main character is, again like in most fantasy books, a young male character with incredible powers that he does not really know how to manage. In fact, as Bernardo says:

Ged's struggle with the idea of power is not just about his ego, though that element is prominent when he accepts Jasper's challenge. Rather, his ego gets in the way of his reaching a better, fuller understanding of the nature of power itself.

(Bernardo: 105)

However, the major change Le Guin does to this genre is the color of Ged's skin: black. Although for some people, mostly white people, this could be irrelevant, representation of minorities is important and political.

During her whole career life, Le Guin has been an advocate for minorities through the pages of her books and the features of her characters. Another example is the second book of the Earthsea Cycle, *The Tombs of Atuan*. As I mentioned above, this fantasy book is quite peculiar as it revolves around a female character: Arha/Tenar. Female main characters were not common in successful fantasy novels, for instance *Lord of the Rings* (1955), *The Witcher* (1986), although it has a major female character who plays an

important role in the story, or the more recent *Harry Potter* (1997). In *The Tombs of Atuan* faith is questioned, especially Arha's belief. Chosen by the Nameless Ones to be a sorceress at the Tombs, she has to leave her family and join the group of sorceresses with whom she will spend her childhood and teenage years. While the first portion of the novel narrates her life in the Tombs, the second part of the novel deals with her encounter with Ged. By talking with him she begins to question her beliefs; she has many doubts on her faith and Ged helps her understand that there are too many cultures, populations and cities to just be stuck in that place forever. Afraid of the consequences of her friendship with Ged, of the loss of her faith and new knowledge of undiscovered populations and lands, she decides to run away with the wizard (Bernardo 2006: 110). Tenar has lost everything for the Nameless Ones, even her name which was changed to Arha when she was taken from her family. To ultimately escape from the faith's prison, she has to regain ownership of herself and her identity. But once freed from this oppression, where will she go? Is there a place for her in this world? An interesting insight on Tenar's character and this dilemma is made by Elizabeth Cummins, who states that:

Evidence in the Earthsea trilogy indicates that Tenar cannot immediately go back and become a peasant wife and mother, nor does she have the credentials to be a "princess"; she cannot become a wizard or a king. But Tenar is more of a revolutionary than either Ged or Arren. Whereas Ged and Arren mature so as to assume socially-approved roles, she has had to rebel against a society which nurtured her. Le Guin [...] created a strong woman and then was unable to imagine an appropriate place for her in the hierarchical, male world.

(Cummins 1990: 156)

Although revolutionary in her times, Le Guin was still living in a patriarchal society and probably did not see the limitations of her female character when writing her story.

In the last book of the trilogy, *The Farthest Shore*, Ged is an old Archmage of Roke. Nevertheless, this novel still portrays a coming-of-age story with the other main character: the prince Arren. In the world of Earthsea many disorders and killings are taking place, which the Archmages cannot understand the source of. Ged, wiser and braver, begins a journey to find out what is happening. With him he takes Arren, a young prince of Enlad, a region in Earthsea. Much important in this novel is the concept of balance, essential in

Earthsea, and especially at risk now. Ged, in a conversation with Arren about immortality and the desire of it, explains balance with these words: “There are two, Arren, two that make one: the world and the shadow, the light and the dark. The two poles of the Balance. Life rises out of death; death rises out of life; [...] What then is life without death?” (Le Guin 2018: 479). We find out that a mage who wanted to embrace the power of immortality travelled to the land of the dead, causing a breach between the two worlds. Ged almost sacrifices himself to close the “door” that links Earthsea to the realm of the dead. It is thanks to this journey that Arren grows as a person and embraces his strengths and weaknesses. Because of his courage he manages to get both him and Ged out of the Dry Land, another way to call the afterlife. When they come back from the land of the dead a revelation awaits Arren: he is to be the king of Earthsea.

In *Tehanu* Le Guin goes back to talk about her female character Tenar, now a widow and a mother, and a new female character, Therru. Therru was found by Tenar after she was brutally abused by her father, who left her with a disfigured face. We meet Ged again, who is now powerless. Again, we have a young character undergoing personal development. However, Le Guin also describes the development of two old characters: Teran and Ged. Teran has to learn how to live by herself after her husband’s death and her children have grown up; while Ged approaches for the first time a life without any power, thinking back at how many opportunities he did not catch because of his devotion to magic, a major one being love. Also, he is obviously scarred by his journey in the afterlife. Alice Mills states that the novel explores “what at first seems a personal, private, unique third death endured by Ged when he returns to the world of the living” (Mills 2009: 101). Therru undergoes the greatest development. At the beginning of the novel, she is obviously emotionally and physically traumatized. As the narration proceeds, Therru learns how to confide in other people and how to trust them again. The theme of violence and child abuse is quite important in this novel, and the author does not wish to protect the reader when she describes the horrible actions of Therru’s father. Child abuse is still a matter not discussed enough, especially when the abuser is a member of the victim’s family as in this case. To put a female abused and disfigured character at the center of her fantasy novel was, in my opinion, revolutionary.

In the last book, *The Other Wind*, the author takes us back to the land of the dead, where Aldar, the main character of the novel, is in search of his dead wife. *Tehanu* also

comes back and at the end of the novel reaches her maximum potential by transforming herself into a full dragon. It was hinted in the fourth book that she was a human-dragon hybrid. With this last book, Le Guin finishes one of the most successful fantasy series of all time, one that undoubtedly inspired many authors to write about magic, wizardly schools and a journey to restore balance between good and evil.

Le Guin is also famous for her short stories. *The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas* (1973), for which she received a Hugo Award for Best Short Story in 1975, is one of her most well-known short stories. The narration is set in Omelas, a fictional city where anarchy reigns. Everyone lives in harmony and happiness, there are no social classes or any form of authority. The narrator is an outsider who gets in touch with this population during the summer festivities, a joyful moment. The turning point is when the narrator introduces a specific character, a little child.

Do you believe? Do you accept the festival, the city, the joy? No? Then let me describe one more thing.

In a basement under one of the beautiful public buildings of Omelas [...] there is a room. [...] In the room a child is sitting. It could be a boy or a girl. It looks about six, but actually is nearly ten. [...] sometimes the door rattles terribly and opens, and a person, or several people, are there. [...] They all know it [the child] is there, all the people of Omelas.

(Le Guin 1975: 5-6)

The narrator furthermore tells us that the inhabitants of Omelas know that their happiness, their eternal joy depends solely on the pain of this little child. They do not want to free the child, to preserve their state. Some people, however, after seeing the child escape from Omelas. These are the people referred to in the title, the ones that walk away. The narrator does not know how to describe the place where they are headed to, but those people seem to know where they are going (Le Guin 1975: 7). This short story raises many questions. Where are these people going? Why is no one capable of empathy? Why is only one child being held captive? There are no correct answers to these questions, actually there are no answers. Le Guin presents the relationship between the people of Omelas and the child like a game. Every game has its rules. "Those are the terms. To exchange all the goodness and grace of every life in Omelas for that single, small

improvement: to throw away the happiness of thousands for the chance of the happiness of one” (Le Guin 1975: 6). Although Omelas is a made-up place, it does not differ from the world in which we live in. Many are enslaved and abused for the benefit of others, the little child in the room could be interpreted as all the ones being exploited for the happiness of privileged people. This is, however, just an interpretation, which people can agree with or not.

When talking about Le Guin’s career it is important to include her essays. *The Language of the Night* (1979) is an essays’ collection in which are included introductions to her most famous books, for instance *The Left Hand of Darkness* and *Rocannon’s World*, but also her thoughts on themes like gender, feminism, general fiction and science fiction. In one of these essays, “Talking About Writing”, she answers the most common question she gets asked. How do I become a writer? Her answer is rather simple, or so it seems. “You write” (Le Guin 1992: 198). It is an answer that, as she states, irritates people. But there are no spells, magic tricks or rules in writing. There is no secret, only skill, which can be mastered only with practice and training (Le Guin 1989: 193). She states that many critics have tried to give rules to writing, for example asserting that a writer should never start their novel with a dialogue if they want to captivate their audience. However, she promptly gives an example of one of the most successful novels starting with a dialogue, in a foreign language: *Война и миръ* (*War and Peace*, 1869) by Lev Tolstoy (Le Guin 1992: 199). She demonstrates her passion for Russian authors in other essays contained in *The Language of the Night*. For instance, in the essay “Science Fiction and Mrs. Brown”, she expresses her respect and devotion to a writer whom she considers as the author of the first true science fiction novel: Yevgeny Zamyatin (Le Guin 1992: 101). His novel *Мы* (*We*, 1924) can be described as “a subtle, brilliant and powerful book; emotionally stunning, and technically, in its use of the metaphorical range of science fiction, still far in advance of most books written since” (Le Guin: 1992: 101). Another famous collection of critical essays and reviews is *Dancing at the Edge of the World: Thoughts on Words, Women, Places* (1989), where she again focuses her attention on matters dear to her, like writing and feminism.

To conclude this section on Ursula K. Le Guin’s works, I want to include her children literature, often taken for granted. *Catwings* (1988-1999) is a fantasy series of illustrated books, written by Le Guin for children and illustrated by S.D. Schindler. It follows the

adventures of four flying cats in a big city full of dangers. This work not only highlights her precious sympathy for children, but also her capability to address different kinds of audience. From the little children of *Catwings*, to the young adults of the *Earthsea Cycle* and the adults of the *Hainish Cycle*, she knows how to meet people's needs and interests, however different they might be because of their age.

2.3 Peace, feminism and environment in Le Guin's activism

Ursula K. Le Guin was not only known as a successful and prolific author, but also as an activist, marching side by side with women and environmental activists. In an interview held by William Walsh in 1995, she mentions how hard it was for her to write as a woman at the beginning of her career. As I mentioned in Chapter 1, SF was not a genre open to female perspectives, nor was Fantasy. As Le Guin states in the interview, "The canon was so male dominated and male writing was considered the only kind of writing, and women were only "good writers" as long as they imitated men" (Walsh 1995: 200). She had to imitate how men wrote, she barely wrote about female main characters in her early works, to adapt, to please the audience. "I am a female writer. I finally learned how to say that when I was in my fifties" (Walsh 1995: 200). She not only expressed her feminist sympathies in her essays and interviews; she was a member of the National Organization for Women (NOW) and the National Abortion Rights Action Leagues (Reid 1997: 10). During the 1960s, 70s and 80s the Second Wave Feminism was raging, and so were Le Guin's works. It was during this time that she began to write as a woman and about womanhood. She published *The Tombs of Atuan*, which, as mentioned above, is one of the first fantasy books with a female main character. She also published *The Dispossessed* which, although through the eyes of a male character, presents some interesting perspectives on feminism, patriarchal society and machismo. As I see it, editors and readers still have problems with women authors, or with books written about women. It is a known fact that the author of *Harry Potter* (1997-2007), even if in the mid-90s, was suggested adopting a masculine name to be published. Female literature is still now regarded as a sub-genre, something men cannot approach and learn from because only relevant for women. Not only literature, every form of art made by female artists has to speak only to women, which I think is unfair and untrue. Only when there will be no difference between female writers and male writers, the categorization of female literature

as a sub-genre will disappear. The same issue was addressed by Le Guin, who expressed her thoughts with the following words:

What interests men is what will interest the novel reader. That was the assumption. Thus, men are at the center of the book. This is something we have not really changed. If men are at the center of the book it's considered to be of general interest to the reader. If women are at the center of the book, it is considered to be of interest to women. [...] There's a false rule. If it's about men everybody wants it; if it's about women it's only for women.

(Walsh 1995: 201)

Although held almost 30 years ago, this interview deals with contemporary issues. Moreover, Le Guin is well known for the creation of the Ghetenians, an androgynous population present in her most famous book *The Left Hand of Darkness*. The matters of gender and feminism are quite important in this novel, but I will discuss them in Chapter 3.

Le Guin was concerned not only about feminist matters; she also embraced non-violence and ecological movements. In the author's introduction of *The Word for World is Forest*, she mentions her participation in non-violent manifestations against the testing of the atomic bomb and the war in Viet Nam during the sixties (Le Guin 2015: 7).

I don't know how many times I walked down Alder Street in the rain, feeling useless, foolish, and obstinate, along with ten or twenty or a hundred other foolish and obstinate souls. [...] there was a peace movement, and I was in it.

(Le Guin 2015: 7)

In *The Word for World is Forest* her criticism against war and exploitation of nature is central. The parallelism between Americans' exploitation of Viet Nam and the Terrans' disruptive aggression against Athsheans is obvious. It is clear which was Le Guin's intention with this novel, that could be described as an "allegorical commentary on the horrible impact of the military conflict on the people and land in Vietnam" (Reid 1997: 11). Her political views are also present in *The Eye of the Heron* (1978), where she questions tyrannical authority and encourages civil disobedience against it (Boreen; Raymond 2006: 70).

To conclude, it is undeniable that Ursula K. Le Guin, with her works and participation in many movements, was an activist. She wrote about minorities, marginalized and oppressed people and cultures. Her thoughts on gender, anarchy and pacifism were revolutionary and are still now read, studied and mentioned during feminist, non-violent and environmental discussions.

3. RELATIONSHIPS, GENDER AND ANARCHY IN *THE LEFT HAND OF DARKNESS* AND *THE DISPOSSESSED*

3.1 Genly Ai, Dr. Shevek and the characters of Le Guin's novels

In *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), the main character is Genly Ai, an envoy sent by the Ekumen with the aim to achieve diplomatic relationships with Gethen. When we first meet Genly, he has already spent two years on this alien planet. However, he is not less estranged by it. It is made clear early in the book that Genly Ai's narration is not unbiased and the envoy is "far from being a neutral investigator" (Fayad 1997: 62). Already by the first page of the novel, Le Guin makes sure that the audience is aware of the unreliability of the narrator. As he says himself in the opening of the novel:

I'll make my report as if I told a story, for I was taught as a child on my homeworld that Truth is a matter of the imagination. The soundest fact may fail or prevail in the style of its telling [...] the story is not all mine, nor told by me alone [...] 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 is false, and it is all one story.

(Le Guin 2018: 1)

This does not mean that Genly is a liar, or that we should not trust him. However, being on a planet with completely different gender norms from what he is used to, it is inevitable that he tries to describe what he sees as best as possible, but limited to his knowledge. One clear example is how he describes people living on Gethen as men, when they actually do not have an assigned gender. It is also interesting to note, as he mentions in the paragraph above, that he is not the only narrative voice in this novel. Other than his report, which he describes as a story to make the reader aware of his objective limitations, he uses other envoy's reports. One example is in chapter eight, where, to better describe kemmer and gender norms on Gethen, he adds the report of the first envoy sent on Gethen.

Genly Ai is curious, open-minded and determined to accomplish his duty. He tries to convince the King of Karhide, one of Gethen's main nations, to join the Ekumen. However, his closeness with the once Prime Minister Therem Estraven, exiled from Karhide, puts in danger years of negotiations. After King Argaven Harge XV declines Genly's offer to join the Ekumen, the envoy travels from Karhide to Orgoreyn, another

dominant nation in Gethen. Here, he is heartily welcomed by Orgoreyn's representatives, who seem more open to an agreement with the Ekumen. Although warned by Estraven to distrust Orgorets because of their insincerity, Genly does not follow his/her¹ advice and continues his stay in Orgoreyn. This decision soon turns out to be disastrous: Genly is kidnapped and imprisoned at Pulefen. In this labor camp, he is "drugged and worked to near death, weakened by cold and lack of adequate food" (Reid 1997: 52). Estraven, aware that the Orgorets are capable of such cruelties, rescues Genly and with him begins a journey through the Gobrin Glacier. It is during these 80 days that the relationship between Genly and Estraven develops, and the protagonist's perception of Karhide's traitor changes. The bond between these two members of different cultures is the heart of the book, which revolves as much around gender as around the perception of the other, fidelity and trust. Genly Ai, until this journey with Estraven, never fully trusted her/him. The androgyny of the Ghetenians seemed to bother him more when it was about Estraven, who at first was perceived by the Terran as a man, and only in specific situations as a woman. The two genders never blended in Genly's mind: Genly perceived Estraven as a man when acting with pride; as a woman when busy with housekeeping. Only in the last chapters, during their journey, he begins to understand her/him and to embrace what he sees as duality as a whole. In Chapter Eighteen this sudden change of mind is described by Genly's flow of thoughts.

And I saw then again, and for good, what I had always been afraid to see, and had pretended not to see in him: that he was a woman as well as a man. Any need to explain the source of that fear vanished with the fear; 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.

(Le Guin 2018: 209)

It is on Gobrin Ice that Genly finally faces Estraven's differences and embraces them. In fact, this setting could also be described as a "transitional space for Genly, who must now communicate with Estraven, a person he has not fully trusted and to whom he must

¹ Given Ghetenians' androgyny, I will refer to its inhabitants as both female and male. To avoid misunderstandings, I will not use they/them, but instead s/he and his/her.

now entrust his life” (Bernardo 2006: 26). While both in exile and on a hostile land, they find comfort only in each other. This need for affection, love even, is at the center of their friendship. While Estraven have always trusted the Terran, embraced the Ekumen’s belief and tried to help the envoy in his mission, Genly has been reluctant and has avoided her/him as much as possible. Their friendship deepens when Genly teaches Estraven mindspeech. Mindspeech can be seen in this novel as a cultural gift, but also as an act of love (Barrow 1987: 93). A new intimacy is born between the two. Mindspeech is also dangerous: it can reveal hidden fears. During their conversations, we learn more about Estraven’s dead sibling and lover: Arek. Love and partnership between siblings are not forbidden in Gethen. However, to vow kemmering, that is “essentially a monogamous marriage” (Bernardo 2006: 28), is prohibited. Estraven and Arek vowed kemmering to each other. During mindspeech, Estraven hears Genly talk in Arek’s voice. This event obviously scares her/him. ““You called me – It was my brother. It was his voice I heard. He’s dead. [...] This is more terrible than I had thought”” (Le Guin 2018: 213). Since they are both truly naked and vulnerable during mindspeech, their friendship improves. The final act by Estraven, which suggests her/his devotion to Genly’s purpose, is death. S/he distracts Karhide’s border guards to give Genly time to cross the border. Her/his sacrifice proves to be crucial for the diplomatic relationship between the Ekumen and Gethen. The text, however, seems to suggest that Estraven committed suicide, a taboo in Gethen’s culture, to connect again with Arek, also suicidal. This idea is supported by Estraven’s last words to Genly before dying.

I (Genly Ai) took his head in my arms and spoke to him, but he never answered me; only in a way he answered my love for him, crying out through the silent wreck and tumult of his mind as consciousness lapsed, in the unspoken tongue, once, clearly, “*Arek!*” Then no more. I held him, crouching there in the snow, while he died.

(Le Guin 2018: 238)

S/he calls for her/his sibling before dying, as if expecting to see her/him in the afterlife. The friendship between Estraven and Genly Ai will become a tale, one of the legends children will listen to. In the last chapter, Genly Ai meets Estraven’s son, Sorve. The novel concludes with Sorve asking the Terran to narrate the journey in Goblin Ice, how

Estraven died, and to talk about the other worlds, the other kinds of men (Le Guin 2018: 252). I would say that the diplomatic relationship between Ghetenians and Terrans could only happen because of the friendship between Estraven and Genly Ai. A friendship, a partnership, that made history in Gethen.

In *The Dispossessed* (1974) the main character is Shevek, a talented physicist. Unlike Genly Ai, we follow Shevek since he is a little child in Anarres, his home planet. Le Guin chose an interesting way to structure her novel: odd chapters are the ones set on Urras, while the even chapters are set on Anarres. It is interesting how Le Guin separates rigidly these two planets even in the structure of her novel. Although they are described as sister-planets, they could not be more different. While Anarres, Shevek's home planet, has an anarchist political system, Urras has a consumerist and oligarchic one. They do not only differ in their political systems. In fact, on Anarres people are equally treated, there is no distinction between women or men. The categorization of poor people and rich people is not present, since they all have the same amount of everything: same portion of food, same clothes. Urras, on the other hand, being a consumerism society, centre itself on the value of money. Rich and noble people lead the planet, exploiting poor people and marginalized individuals. Chapters are not in chronological order, but rather the even chapters end before Shevek's departure from Anarres; and the odd chapters begin when Shevek reaches Urras. Both in Anarres and in Urras, most of the time Shevek experiences loneliness. He has minor romantic relationships throughout his life, until he meets Takver, who will become the love of his life and the mother of his two daughters. Although his relationship with Takver is important to the narration, the moments in which he is alone or with hostile characters are those more crucial to his development. Shevek's figure and personality is based on Le Guin's "childhood memories of Robert Oppenheimer, the renowned physicist, who visited her home and participated in the intellectual discussions" (Reid 1997: 62). Idealist and determined, his aim is similar to Genly's: unity. He wants the two sister-planets Urras and Anarres to finally cooperate, and the inhabitants to embrace each other's differences. Although Le Guin does not focus much attention on his childhood, Shevek experiences many events that will eventually shape him during his teen years and adulthood. First of all, he is often called out for being egoistic and individualistic, absolutely forbidden in Anarres, where they live in an antimaterialistic and communal society, similar to the Kibbutz's society in Israel, described as "a venture

and experiment in utopia” (Near 2011: 69). The second event worth mentioning happened during his school years. He was playing with his classmates when one of them suggested playing like Urrasti do: guards and prisoner. One of them volunteered to be the prisoner. They found a cabin to lock him up; at first, they let him stay there for a few hours, but given that he was not moved by this, they decided to lock him up for 30 hours. When they went back to the cabin, what awaited them scarred Shevek for life: they found their schoolmate covered in his feces and in vomit. After this event, we discover that him and his friends never went back to that place, nor talked about what had happened there.

Nobody said anything much. When they had crawled out from under the building and were heading around to the dormitory, Kadagv asked, “How long was it?” “About thirty hours, counting the first four.” “Pretty long,” Kadagv said without conviction. [...] None of the five boys ever went back to the prison under the learning centre. None of them ever mentioned the episode.

(Le Guin 2015: 40)

This event disturbed the young Shevek, so much that even in his adulthood he will often remember it, especially when on Urras. The feeling of unlimited power he had over his friend scared Shevek, making him question about human’s morality and how such power could manipulate a righteous person’s mind. On a planet where everyone is equal, being this powerful over someone else was new to Shevek, and he felt disgusted by himself, regretting his actions. The only way to erase this memory was to never talk about it anymore, like as if it never happened. However, as I said above, this event never leaves his memories. Especially on Urras, where he experiences this treatment himself when “imprisoned” by Urrasti scientists, he recalls this event.

While attending college, he becomes more and more interested in the concepts of time and cycle. Shevek’s life-work as a physicist is *The General Temporal Theory*, a study that will make him famous not on Anarres, where they do not really care about his work, but on Urras, where he is invited to study in the most excellent university. His research is quite important because it is “supposed to revolutionize traditional physics just as Relativity reshaped Newtonian mechanics” (Klarer 1992: 108). He begins working on it while still on Anarres, when working under Sabul, a renowned physicist at the famous

University of Abbenay. However, their relationship is hardly amicable. Shevek soon discovers that Sabul took credit for one of Shevek's papers, while also translating many books and articles from Ioti, a language spoken on Urras, taking credits for them. Shevek cannot rebel against him since he is the only link between Shevek's theories and Urras' physicists. Shevek is able to publish his first work on simultaneity only by allowing Sabul to take credit for it. After a heated discussion with Takver, she manages to convince him to share credits with Sabul, but Shevek is still conflicted: "It doesn't matter what name is on the book. People will know. The truth is the book." "I am the book" (Le Guin 2015: 240). This contrast with Sabul is one of the main events that will make Shevek doubt the ethics of his culture, where no one should stand out from others or steal from them. On Anarres, another important character is Bedap, one of his childhood friends. He meets him again after many years and has a homosexual relationship with him. Bedap is especially important in Shevek's development because, as someone against the politics on Anarres, he can see all the flaws in this type of society, without being conveniently blind, and insinuates the first doubts in Shevek's mind. He informs him about one of their childhood friends, Tirin, now stuck in a mental hospital because of his theater shows, which were apparently critical towards Anarres' beliefs.

"Brother," he said, "you are self-righteous. You always were. Look outside your own damned pure conscience for once! I come to you and whisper because I know I can trust you, damn you! Who else can I talk to? Do I want to end up like Tirin?" "Like Tirin?" Shevek was startled into raising his voice. Bedap hushed him with a gesture towards the wall. "What's wrong with Tirin? Where is he?" "In the Asylum on Segvina Island."

(Le Guin 2015: 169)

On Urras, his relationships are not less conflictual. He is at first received as a prophet, someone to look after and to cover in luxuries. But, when he does not publish anything on Simultaneity, the real intentions of the Urrasti are made known. In particular, it is Saio Pae who wants to use him only for his discoveries and is ready to dispose of Shevek when he turns out to be unproductive. Shevek spends many months on this planet, so many that he slowly changes, becoming accustomed to the luxuries and the social life, filled with alcohol and meaningless discussions. On one evening, Vea, an Urrasti rich woman,

throws a party. Shevek is invited and, although at first not sure, he participates. After too many glasses of wine his mind is clouded and, when alone in Ve'a's room with her, he sexually harasses her. Coming from a place where non-consensual intercourse is strictly forbidden, Shevek is moved by this event, ashamed of himself. Also, he is aware that he cheated on Takver, his wife. This event is particularly critical to the narration because it shows how a culture filled with excesses and luxuries can manipulate the most righteous person. From this point on, Shevek changes drastically his idea of Urras and its inhabitants. At first, Shevek thought that Urrasti scientists were covering him in luxuries and comfort for his only benefit. He was sure that their intentions were good, and that they were only helping him get accustomed to their new culture. It is after Ve'a's party that Shevek finally understands how rotten is Urras' culture. In particular, he finally realizes that he was only being used and manipulated for his discoveries. Thanks to Enfor, his servant, he escapes the "prison" in which he was trapped and visits the Old Town, a place completely different from what he was used to see on Urras. There, he takes part in a revolution led by anarchists like him, who see him as a messiah, a new hope.

Both in *The Left Hand of Darkness* and in *The Dispossessed*, Le Guin focuses her attention on intercultural relationships. These are particularly important in developing the main character. Although Shevek travels alone, instead of with a partner like in Genly's case, his journey is filled with many encounters, that change and question his view on the world. Moreover, in both novels, the protagonist's aim is to achieve diplomatic union between two opposite cultures. Genly Ai and Shevek are explorers, envoys with a specific goal. They are also seen as different and alien, treated as outcasts by some and as prophets by others.

3.2 Gender, feminism and patriarchy on Gethen and Anarres/Urras

As many literary critics state, there are few works that revolve around gender as important as Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* (Roberts 2000: 106). Gethenians are not actually androgenous, like many people think. For almost all their life they do not have an assigned sex. They become women or men only during kemmer. Kemmer is Le Guin's great invention, which could be compared to the animal's estrous cycle. During this period Gethenians take the form of men or women, they need a partner and are encouraged to have sexual intercourse with them. In Chapter Seven, Le Guin's explains

kemmer through the description of a female explorer, the first Ekumenical envoy sent on Gethen.

For 21 or 22 days the individual is *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. In this first phase of kemmer he remains completely androgynous. [...] When the individual finds a partner in kemmer, hormonal secretion is further stimulated until in one partner either a male or female hormonal dominance is established. [...] Normal individuals have no predisposition to either sexual role in kemmer; they do not know whether they will be the male or the female, and have no choice in the matter. [...] If conception has not taken place, the individual returns to the *somer* phase within few hours.

(Le Guin 2018: 74-75)

The abolition of gender dualism has many implications in Le Guin's novel. One of the most important implications is that on Gethen there is no division into weak and strong, whereas weakness is linked to femininity and strength to masculinity in Genly's society, which resembles ours. In Gethen there is no war, may this be because there are no men? Machismo is not present because men are not present, therefore war does not take place. However, they do not restrain themselves from killing one another, but they do not engage hundreds of men. They fight and kill, but they do not start wars. That could also be because of the rigid and unforgiving climate on Gethen. Conflicts are obviously present on Gethen, but as Genly Ai states "nothing led to war", however they were capable of "quarrels, murders, feuds, forays, vendettas, assassinations, tortures and abominations" (Le Guin 2018: 40). In Chapter Seven, the explorer compares war to rape. "Did they (the Ancient Hainish) consider war to be purely masculine displacement-activity, a vast Rape, and therefore in their experiment eliminate the masculinity that rapes and the femininity that is raped?" (Le Guin 2018: 78). The comparison with rape is interesting because, as a matter of fact, rape does not exist either in Gethen. In "Is Gender Necessary? Redux" (1987) Le Guin discusses about her famous novel's themes. When talking about the absence of rape she states that, because Gethenians cannot be raped since they need mutual consent to take part in sexual intercourse, they are also more open-minded towards

sex, which is not a taboo or a cause of shame and embarrassment (Le Guin 1989: 15). What I find most interesting in the novel is how Genly approaches this new reality, a world without gender. At first, he is unable to see Gethenians as genderless, assigning a female or male role to each person he encounters (Fayad 1997: 62). He is biased to see strong and determined people as men, like the King of Karhide, who since s/he is in a position of power is referred to as he; while people showing weakness and affection are considered women. During his journey with Estraven, thanks to the emotional relationship they gain through mindspeech, he is finally able to perceive the Gethenian politician for who s/he is: a man as well as a woman. Not only Genly Ai changes his view on gender, he also undergoes a personal development overcoming his biased perception of gender roles. “Ai evolves from his initial position of seeking his mirror-image, the image of sameness, into one that accepts the other as other, able finally to see his relationship with Estraven as the meeting of two aliens” (Fayad 1997: 71). Fayad furthermore states that Genly becomes androgynous himself, changing drastically his former opinion on the other, clearly shaped by his upbringing in a gender binary society. His transformation can be clearly seen when he is rescued by the Ekumen and is rejoined with his colleagues. He is not used to gender dualism anymore.

But they all looked strange to me, men and women, well as I knew them. Their voices sounded strange: too deep, too shrill. They were like a troupe of great, strange animals, of two different species; great apes with intelligent eyes, all of them in rut, in kemmer...

(Le Guin 2018: 248)

Although not the focal points, feminist ideas and criticism against patriarchal societies can be found in *The Dispossessed* as well. The sister-planets Anarres and Urras are different for multiple reasons. One important factor that differentiates the two planets is the role of women in their societies. On Anarres, men and women are equal, no one is seen as stronger or smarter, they are all equally capable. Contrariwise, on Urras, Shevek encounters a patriarchal society. Odonianism is the movement at the core of Anarres' idealism, whose leader was Odo, a woman who rejected the luxurious life on Urras after seeing how the poor were treated so that the rich could continue living unbothered. Like the characters that are mentioned in the title of the Le Guin's short story “The Ones Who

Walk Away from Omelas” (1973), Odo empathized with the poor, the sick and the exploited people. She walked away and founded a society completely new, anarchic, on Anarres (Reid 1997: 60). The anarchic and communist ideas of Odonians are reflected in their gender views and assumptions: since everyone is equal on Anarres, patriarchy is not embraced. Completely different is the role of women on Urras. Shevek is quite surprised when he notices that there are no female scientists, or female politicians. When questioning why female scientists are not present on Urras, Saio Pae answers: “Can’t do maths; no head for abstract thought; don’t belong. You know how it is, what women call thinking is done with the uterus! Of course, there’s always a few exceptions, God-awful brainy women with vaginal atrophy” (Le Guin 2015: 73). Urrasti perception of women is furthermore made clear when, during a conversation between Shevek and Atro, an Urrasti man, the latter states that “the trouble with Odonianism, you know, my dear fellow, is that it’s womanish. It simply doesn’t include the virile side of life” (Le Guin 2015: 286). As in every patriarchal society, “women are confined to their traditional roles as mothers and sexual objects” (Klarer 1992: 117). Patriarchy is so rooted that even women have come to embrace it. Vea, in a conversation with Shevek, seems content although she knows she is seen as inferior, and unable to work. Ultimately, another important factor that differentiates Urras from Anarres is sex. On Anarres sex is not a taboo, rape is extremely rare and partnership is often not monogamous. Shevek is an example of this freedom; he has a brief homosexual relationship with Bedap, although he considers himself as heterosexual (Le Guin 2015: 172).

Although *The Left Hand of Darkness* is a great novel that questions gender bias, it is not flawless, or immune to criticism. “It is not that there are no men on Gethen; it is, rather, as Joanna Russ and others have pointed out, that there are no women” (Lefanu 1988: 137). This criticism is often launched to Le Guin’s most famous novel by many feminist scholars. In 1976, in her essay *Is Gender Necessary?* Le Guin claims that she “refused to mangle English by inventing a pronoun for ‘he/she” (Le Guin 1989: 16). However, when in 1987 she revisited this essay, she added that she still disliked “invented pronouns, but I now dislike them less than the so-called generic pronoun he/him/his, which does in fact exclude women from discourse” (Le Guin 1989: 16). In *The Left Hand of Darkness*, even when Gethenians are not in kemmer they are referred to as men, so it is only fair that critics underline this issue. It is important, however, that Le Guin

understood the flaws of her work, and changed her mind on some decisions she made. “If I had realized how the pronouns I used shaped, directed, controlled my own thinking, I might have been ‘cleverer’” (Le Guin 1989: 17). As she states in the interview with Walsh, she underestimated herself and her novel, she did not understand how radical it was to write about a genderless planet during the Second wave of feminism. For her it was a “thought experiment. What if?” (Walsh 1995: 204).

Feminist ideas are present in all of Le Guin’s works, and are particularly made clear in *The Left Hand of Darkness* and *The Dispossessed*. Along with the Second wave of feminism, she became interested in themes such as gender identity, sexuality and society (Le Guin 1989: 8). Her views on these themes are highlighted in her two most successful novels, where she not only questions sexuality and gender, but also authority.

3.3 Questioning authority by portraying different political systems

While Le Guin’s thought experiment in *The Left Hand of Darkness* was Gethen’s genderless inhabitants, in *The Dispossessed* we could say it was the anarchic communism of Anarres’ culture. This novel is probably Le Guin’s best exploration of the concept of authority, and “it reveals the author’s broad and sympathetic understanding of anarchist theory” (Urbanowicz 1978: 110). On Anarres, 170 years before the novel’s action takes place, Odo established a communist society. People here are all equal. They receive the same instruction; they can decide to work or not, and they can choose where to work as well. “Postings” are the work places where the “central computerized planning organization” (Reid 1997: 62) sends the inhabitants on rotation. No one has to do the same job over and over, in fact, every 40 days, they get reassigned to another posting. Property does not exist, so that even children are not a possession of their parents, but instead taken care of by all society members. This planet should be considered as a utopia, where everyone lives satisfied and differences are not being made. However, after 170 years since its creation, Odonians have lost some of their core principles. First of all, instead of cooperating with other populations, they grew to hate Urras, the sister-planet. When Shevek and the syndicate he is part of propose to invite a Urrasti to Anarres, Rulag, a politician and also Shevek’s mother, is completely against it. “Once one opens the wall even the slightest bit, she believes, it is only a matter of time until a fleet of Urrasti armed spaceships arrives to put an end to the Promise of Anarres” (Jaekle 2009: 85). They fear

invasion so much, they even built a wall, which is the first thing Le Guin describes at the beginning of the novel.

For seven generations there had been nothing in the world more important than that wall. Like all walls it was ambiguous, two-faced. What was inside it and what was outside it depended upon which side of it you were on. [...] It was in fact a quarantine.

(Le Guin 2015: 1)

Another flaw in this anarchic society, as Daniel P. Jaeckle states, is that of “ostracism for unconventional behavior” (Jaeckle 2009: 86). In fact, it seems that rather than being free to choose for themselves, Anarrestis are under a lot of external pressure. They feel it is their duty to take all the postings, never refuse a job or ask for a change, although they should have the right to do so. Shevek begins to understand all these contradictions of his society first when Bedap, his childhood friend, informs him of the treatment reserved to Tirin; and second, when his daughter, Sadik, finally reveals all the things her peers say about her and her father, calling them traitors. There are no written laws on Anarres; however, people follow social laws that are as strict as formal ones. Despite being called a traitor, Shevek decides to travel to Urras. His hope is to restore Anarres’ society and, hopefully, bring Odonianism on Urras as well.

Shevek’s decision to go to Urras to complete his studies on Simultaneity is also supported by the Anarres’ inability to give him the proper resources to complete his work. Urras could be compared to our present world. Government is led by rich and noble people living in luxurious cities; while poor people and outcasts are isolated in gloomy towns. On this planet, Shevek comes to meet the capitalistic society of A-Io. Excess, luxury and power overwhelm him so much that, with the help of his servant Efor, he escapes from the room where Urrasti were keeping him and visits the places they were trying to keep him away from: the poor streets in Nio Esseia. It is only then clear why Urrasti politicians and scientists were trying to isolate him from the poor: in the Old Town in Nio Esseia a revolution is about to take place. The revolution is held by Urrasti Odonians, who treat Shevek as a messiah, as a new Odo. After taking part in the peaceful movement, and escaping from the police’s brutal and violent response to it, he finds refuge in the Hainish embassy. Understanding that his work on Simultaneity could be dangerous

in the hands of Urras' power-seeking government, he gifts it to the Terran Keng. This study will help the Hainish government to create the ansible, a powerful device able to connect long-distanced planets in communication, used also by Genly in *The Left Hand of Darkness*.

Although it shows all its flaws, this novel portrays Anarres' anarchism as preferable to Urras' capitalism. Le Guin does not fail to describe all the dangers of anarchism, through an objective point of view. Because of this, the novel "stands as one of the most remarkable studies of anarchism within fiction" (Jaekle 2009: 93).

The political duality of Anarres and Urras is, in part, present also in *The Left Hand of Darkness*. This novel is internationally known for Le Guin's revolutionary view on gender. However, politics take a central part of this novel as well. The political differences between Karhide and Orgoreyn are crucial in the development of Genly's story as much as his perception of gender. On Gethen they "appear to be anarcho-pacifists" (Call 2007: 93). There has never been a proper war and, as I explained above, this could be due to the absence of a dominant masculinity. Like Le Guin wrote in "Is Gender Necessary? Redux", "the 'female principle' has historically been anarchic; that is, anarchy has historically been identified as female" (Le Guin 1989: 11-12). Although both belonging to Gethen, Karhide and Orgoreyn have two different ways to approach politics. Therefore, they have different ways to respond to Genly Ai's offer. While Karhide seems driven by what they call 'shifgrethor', courtesy, Orgoreyn is more logical and strategic. In my opinion, these two regions of Gethen could be compared to the two planets Anarres and Urras. Karhide and Anarres share the same inability to evolve and progress; on the other hand, Orgoreyn and Urras are both ambiguous, their authority is not transparent and they use the main character for their own purposes. Just like Shevek was showered in luxuries and comforts on Urras, so is Genly Ai when he enters Orgoreyn. However, Orgoreyn's opinion of him is made clear when he is arrested and imprisoned in Pulefen Farm. Here, Genly is able to see the dark side of this 'perfect' society.

At Pulefen Farm we were, as I said, underfed for the work we did, and our clothing, particularly our footgear, was completely inadequate for that winter climate. The guards, most of them probationary prisoners, were not much better off. The intent of the place and its regime was punitive, but not

destructive, and I think it might have been endurable, without the druggings and the examinations. [...] The principle of the Farm was work or die.

(Le Guin 2018: 149-150)

As Shevek discovers the true character of Urras by visiting the Old Town, so Genly acknowledges the evil side of the Orgoreyn's politics, which are clearly xenophobic. The second important character in this novel is Estraven, a politician. S/he believes that Karhide must accept the Ekumen's diplomatic offer and, throughout the novel, helps Genly in achieving this goal. Estraven is an important political character, not only because s/he saves Genly from Pulefen Farm and travels with him to reach the Karhide border, but also because s/he is ready to trade her/his life and reputation for Genly's cause (Getz 1988: 212). Estraven's suicide is the most radical and political act described in this novel. Estraven gave her/his life so that the diplomatic relationship between Karhide and the Ekumen could be concluded.

In *The Left Hand of Darkness* and *The Dispossessed*, Le Guin has shared her thoughts on gender, authority and intercultural relationships. Her views on feminist topics were so revolutionary, it can be stated that her fiction "predates recent theoretical developments in feminist scholarship" (Klarer 1992: 119). In addition, her approach on anarchism was ahead of her time, so much that Lewis Call describes it as an "anarchism for the twenty-first century" (Call 2007: 91). Le Guin received many honors for her two best known novels. For *The Left Hand of Darkness*, she received the Nebula Award in 1969, the Hugo Award in 1970 and the Retrospective Otherwise Award in 1995; *The Dispossessed* earned her the Nebula Award in 1974, the Jupiter Award, the Locus Award and, finally, the Hugo Award all in 1975.

CONCLUSIONS

As my work has tried to show, Ursula K. Le Guin was one of the most important SF writers of the 20th century. Thanks to her parents, who taught her how to approach otherness without fearing it, she became an advocate for all the outcasts in the world. She revolutionized not only Science Fiction, but also Fantasy. By staging a black character as the main protagonist in *A Wizard of Earthsea*, and then a female main character in *Tehanu*, she challenged the traditional characteristics of the genre. She raised awareness about human rights by portraying the exploitation of poor people in “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas”, where the little child trapped in the room could be a metaphor for all the people economically disadvantaged that are used by rich people for their benefit. Not only was she an activist for human rights, she also participated in environmental and peace movements. Le Guin expressed her ideas about these themes clearly in *The Word for World is Forest*, where she not only condemned wars against less developed populations, but also denounced the exploitation of resources often carried out by powerful governments over other nations. In this novel, she expressed her thoughts on the war in Viet Nam, raising awareness on how wars, especially on less technologically developed countries, devastate their cultures and environment. Her critical essays on writing are still praised and studied. It is important to note that she was also critical of her own writing. Her essay “Is Gender Necessary? Redux” is a great example of how she took criticism and used it to develop herself into a better writer, woman and activist.

Although all her works present her ideas, *The Left Hand of Darkness* and *The Dispossessed* are notoriously described as her best Science Fiction novels, and the ones where her thoughts are conveyed most efficiently. I analyzed three main topics she touched in her novels: relationships, especially intercultural, gender and feminism, and authority. I found that, in both novels, Le Guin portrayed intercultural relationships as a tool that helps her main characters to grow and develop. In *The Left Hand of Darkness* this is made clear because of the relationship between Genly Ai and Estraven. Their journey in the punishing Gobrin Ice connects the two characters in a more intimate way. Genly Ai is then able to see Estraven not as an alien, but instead as a friend, or even as a lover. Thanks to mindspeech, Genly Ai opens himself to Estraven and finds comfort in her/him. In *The Dispossessed*, this topic could seem less prevalent to the narration, in fact Shevek does not have a partner in his journey. However, I would argue that all the changes

Shevek goes through regarding his personal beliefs are connected to the people he meets. His relationships on Anarres reveal to him all the flaws in his society, while the people he encounters on Urras are essential for the development of his character and they ultimately lead him to his final revolutionary act of giving his discovery to the Hainish government. Le Guin also touches important themes regarding feminism and gender studies. *The Left Hand of Darkness* is internationally known as Le Guin's thought experiment on a genderless society. However, even in *The Dispossessed* we can find many themes regarding feminism, such as, for instance, the different perception of women's role in the societies of the two planets. Her feminist ideas can be also related to her view of authority. On Gethen, she portrays a world where gender is not present, and this world is also peaceful. As she describes in her novel, it could be that by eliminating the dominant masculine figure, Gethen also erased the need to conquer and enslave. Le Guin's takes on authority and anarchism are transparent in *The Dispossessed*, where she describes the anarchic society of Anarres, which was created by Odo, a female revolutionist.

By analyzing Le Guin's life and her two main novels, it cannot be denied that she was not only important in literature, but also significant within society. Her views on feminism, authority and the other were ahead of her time, so much that her novels are still now studied and appreciated all over the world for her stimulating thoughts on these themes.

REFERENCES

Primary sources

- Le Guin, Ursula K. *Dancing at the Edge of the World: Thoughts on Words, Women, Places*, 1989. New York, NY: Grove Press.
- . *The Books of Earthsea: The Complete Illustrated Edition*, 2018. London: Gollancz.
- . *The Dispossessed*, 2015. London: Gollancz.
- . *The Left Hand of Darkness*, 2018. London: Gollancz.
- . *The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas*, 2017. Harper Perennial.
- . *The Word for World Is Forest*, 2015. London: Gollancz.
- Le Guin, Ursula K., and Susan Wood. *The Language of the Night: Essays on Fantasy and Science Fiction*, 1992. 1st U.S. ed. New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers.

Secondary sources

- Barrow, Craig, and Diana Barrow. “‘The Left Hand of Darkness’: Feminism for Men.” *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature* 20, no. 1 (1987): 83–96.
- Bernardo, Susan M., and Graham J. Murphy. *Ursula K. Le Guin: A Critical Companion*, 2006. Critical Companions to Popular Contemporary Writers. Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press.
- Boreen, Jean, and Sandra Raymond. “How Tashjian and Le Guin Encourage Social Activism in Young Adults.” *The English Journal* 95, no. 3 (2006): 69–73.
- Bould, Mark. “Film and Television.” In *The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction*, edited by Edward James, 79–95. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.
- Brantlinger, Patrick. “The Gothic Origins of Science Fiction.” *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 14, no. 1 (1980): 30–43.
- Call, Lewis. “Postmodern Anarchism in the Novels of Ursula K. Le Guin.” *SubStance* 36,

no. 2 (2007): 87–105.

Cummins, Elizabeth. “The Land-Lady’s Homebirth: Revisiting Ursula K. Le Guin’s Worlds (La Terre-Naissance de La Femme-Terre: Parcourir à Nouveau Les Mondes d’Ursula K. Le Guin).” *Science Fiction Studies* 17, no. 2 (1990): 153–66.

Fayad, Mona. “Aliens, Androgynes, and Anthropology: Le Guin’s Critique of Representation in ‘The Left Hand of Darkness.’” *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal* 30, no. 3 (1997): 59–73.

Foner, Eric. *The Story of American Freedom*, 1998. New York London: W.W. Norton.

Freedman, Carl Howard. *Critical Theory and Science Fiction*, 2000. Hanover: Wesleyan University Press: University Press of New England.

Getz, John. “A Peace-Studies Approach to ‘The Left Hand of Darkness.’” *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature* 21, no. 2/3 (1988): 203–14.

Jaekle, Daniel P. “Embodied Anarchy in Ursula K. Le Guin’s *The Dispossessed*.” *Utopian Studies* 20, no. 1 (2009): 75–95.

Klarer, Mario. “Gender and the ‘Simultaneity Principle’: Ursula Le Guin’s ‘The Dispossessed.’” *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature* 25, no. 2 (1992): 107–21.

Lefanu, Sarah. *Feminism and Science Fiction*, 1989. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Leonard, Elisabeth Anne. “Race and Ethnicity in Science Fiction.” In *The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction*, edited by Edward James, 253–63. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

McIntyre, Vonda, and Ursula K. Le Guin. “Ursula on Ursula.” *Ursula K. Le Guin* (Web Site). Accessed September 1, 2023. <https://www.ursulakleguin.com/ursula-onursula>.

Mills, Alice. “Forms of Death in Philip Pullman’s *His Dark Materials*, Ursula Le Guin’s *Earthsea*, and Garth Nix’s *Old Kingdom Novels*.” *Literature & Aesthetics* 19, no. 2 (2009).

- Near, Henry. "Utopian and Post-Utopian Thought: The Kibbutz Model." In *Where Community Happens: The Kibbutz and the Philosophy of Communalism*, 69–100. Peter Lang AG, 2011.
- Reid, Suzanne Elizabeth. *Presenting Ursula K. Le Guin*, 1997. Twayne's United States Authors Series. New York London Mexico City New Delhi [etc.]: Twayne publ. Prentice Hall international.
- Roberts, Adam. *Science Fiction*, 2003. Repr. The New Critical Idiom. London: Routledge.
- Suvin, Darko. *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre*, 1979. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Tymn, Marshall B. "Science Fiction: A Brief History and Review of Criticism." *American Studies International* 23, no. 1 (1985): 41–66.
- Urbanowicz, Victor. "Personal and Political in 'The Dispossessed.'" *Science Fiction Studies* 5, no. 2 (1978): 110–17.
- Walsh, William, and Ursula K. Le Guin. "I Am a Woman Writer; I Am a Western Writer: An Interview with Ursula Le Guin." *The Kenyon Review* 17, no. 3/4 (1995): 192–205.

SUMMARY IN ITALIAN

L'elaborato analizza la storia della fantascienza e l'importanza che la voce delle donne ha avuto nello sviluppare temi inesplorati in precedenza nel genere. In particolare, ho approfondito la figura di Ursula Kroeber Le Guin come donna, attivista e scrittrice. Per fare ciò, ho esaminato in modo approfondito i suoi due romanzi di fantascienza più acclamati sia dai lettori del genere che dalla critica: *La mano sinistra del buio* (*The Left Hand of Darkness*, 1969) e *I reietti dell'altro pianeta* (*The Dispossessed*, 1974). I temi che ho analizzato nello studio di questi due romanzi sono: le relazioni interculturali, il femminismo e l'autorità. Gli scrittori di fantascienza sono numerosi, come i temi che essi trattano e hanno trattato nel tempo, tanto che è facile focalizzare l'attenzione solo sugli autori maschili e di spicco come Frank Herbert, Isaac Asimov e Philip K. Dick. Per questo, e per la mia personale passione per il genere, ho deciso di dedicare la mia tesi triennale allo studio e analisi della fantascienza femminista e rivoluzionaria di Ursula K. Le Guin, un'autrice che, per quanto famosa, viene spesso messa in ombra dai colleghi uomini.

Il primo capitolo si apre con un approfondimento sul genere della fantascienza, in particolare sulla difficoltà nel dare una specifica definizione ad esso. Facendo riferimento ai critici letterari Adam Roberts, Carl Freedman e Darko Suvin, ho cercato di organizzare le varie interpretazioni del genere. Secondo la visione di Freedman, non è il genere che definisce un testo quanto le tendenze presenti all'interno di esso. Le tendenze possono essere di tipo fantascientifico, romantico, fantasy, etc. Perciò non è difficile trovare all'interno di un libro fantasy delle caratteristiche appartenenti al genere rosa, per esempio. La sua, potremmo dire, è una visione molto elastica. Darko Suvin offre quella che, fino ad ora, è l'interpretazione più utilizzata e approvata dal resto della critica letteraria. La fantascienza, secondo Suvin, deve avere due caratteristiche fondamentali: essere cognitivamente estraniante per il lettore e presentare un *novum* centrale alla narrazione, ovvero un'innovazione tecnologica o non che non involve il sovrannaturale. Adam Roberts aggiunge che la fantascienza è un genere simbolista, nel senso che il *novum* descritto da Suvin altro non è che una manifestazione simbolica che connette il mondo fantascientifico alla nostra realtà.

Successivamente, all'interno del primo capitolo, ho cercato di descrivere nel modo più dettagliato possibile la storia della fantascienza come genere letterario, partendo da *Frankenstein* (1818) e concludendo con le scrittrici donne contemporanee. Riguardo alla nascita del genere ci sono diverse opinioni. Brian Aldiss sostiene che il genere fantascientifico è nato con *Frankenstein* di Mary Shelley, collegandolo quindi al genere gotico. I temi riguardanti lo scienziato pazzo, la creazione di un mostro e il rapporto con la diversità sono centrali all'interno di questo romanzo, come lo sono all'interno del genere fantascientifico. Nonostante questa osservazione, altri critici non sono d'accordo con Aldiss. Adam Roberts indica la nascita del genere nel XIX secolo e nelle opere di Jules Verne e H G Wells. L'opera principale di Jules Verne è *Viaggio al centro della terra* (*Voyage au centre de la Terre*, 1863), dove l'autore narra le avventure del protagonista nell'esplorazione del centro della terra. Nelle sue opere, Verne focalizza la sua attenzione nel raccontare viaggi, scoperte scientifiche e tecnologiche. H G Wells, invece, nelle sue opere narra degli straordinari e bizzarri incontri con la diversità. Un esempio è *L'isola del dottor Moreau* (*The Island of Doctor Moreau*, 1896), dove i temi sono simili a quelli di *Frankenstein*. Infatti uno dei personaggi è uno scienziato brillante che, nel tentativo di creare il perfetto esemplare umano, crea invece un mostro. È però *La guerra dei mondi* (*The War of the Worlds*, 1898) che viene considerata la sua opera di fantascienza più famosa e importante. È proprio in questa opera che troviamo il *novum* maggiormente usato in questo genere: gli alieni.

Altri due nomi importanti per la storia della fantascienza sono Hugo Gernsback e John Campbell, entrambi editori di riviste rivolte ai lettori del genere. Nel 1926, Gernsback fondò *Amazing Stories* con l'intento di pubblicare le opere più scientifiche e razionali del genere. Nel 1937, Campbell fondò *Astounding Science Fiction*. Questi anni vengono chiamati "Pulp era", in quanto il format principale in cui venivano pubblicate le opere fantascientifiche era quello del magazine. In onore di John Campbell viene chiamata la Golden Age era, ovvero il periodo tra il 1938 e il 1950, dove gli autori si concentravano maggiormente sui pericoli delle nuove tecnologie e le conseguenze che potevano portare l'uso di queste. Dagli anni '50 inizia la New Wave, una fase del genere fortemente influenzata dalla politica americana contemporanea. Le minoranze iniziarono a richiedere diritti, ad aspirare alla libertà e al cambiamento. Gli anni '60 e '70 vennero dominati dalla seconda ondata del femminismo. Grazie alla lotta portata avanti dalle attiviste

femministe, anche le autrici della fantascienza iniziarono a crearsi un loro spazio all'interno del genere. I temi cambiarono nuovamente e le autrici femministe portarono nuovi spunti di riflessioni al genere iniziando a parlare di problemi ambientali, sociali e politici. Questa versione della fantascienza viene chiamata dai critici Soft SF, in opposizione alla Hard SF dominata dagli uomini. Le autrici che ho nominato in questo capitolo riguardante la Soft SF sono Ursula K. Le Guin, Vonda McIntyre, Octavia Butler, James Tiptree Jr. e Lidia Yuknavitch. Queste sono solo alcune delle autrici più importanti nella storia della fantascienza femminista, ma non sono ovviamente le uniche.

Per chiudere questo capitolo ho parlato della fantascienza nei nuovi media, ovvero al cinema, in tv e nei videogiochi. Ho menzionato alcuni dei film più importanti nella storia del cinema fantascientifico, come per esempio *Alien* (1977) di Ridley Scott, *La Mosca* (The Fly, 1986) di David Cronenberg e *Godzilla* (Gojira, 1954) di Ishirō Honda. Per quanto riguarda le serie televisive, ho menzionato *Star Trek* (1966-69), una delle serie tv di fantascienza più famose e conosciute internazionalmente insieme a *The X Files* (1993-2018) e *Doctor Who* (1963-1989; 2005-present). Ma anche le più recenti *Black Mirror* (2011-present) e *Love, Death & Robots* (2019-present). Ho concluso questo approfondimento parlando dei videogiochi di fantascienza, che negli ultimi decenni sono diventati sempre più acclamati dai videogiocatori. *Dead Space* (2008), *Stray* (2022) e *The Last of Us* (2013) sono solo alcuni dei videogiochi più famosi degli ultimi anni, che si avvalgono dei temi fantascientifici per raccontare le loro storie.

Il secondo capitolo l'ho dedicato alla figura di Ursula K. Le Guin. Nata il 21 ottobre del 1929, la sua educazione familiare è stata fondamentale per la sua crescita. Il padre antropologo Alfred L. Kroeber le insegnò come rapportarsi alla diversità senza averne paura, ma empatizzando con essa; mentre la madre Theodora Kroeber avvicinò la figlia al mondo della scrittura e del world-building, presente nel suo romanzo più famoso *Ishi un uomo tra due mondi* (Ishi in Two Worlds: A Biography of the Last Wild Indian in North America, 1961), dove la scrittrice ricostruì grazie ai racconti del nativo Ishi il suo mondo ormai estinto. Per quanto riguarda la sua istruzione, Le Guin si è specializzata in Letteratura Italiana e Letteratura Francese del Rinascimento al Radcliffe College e ha ottenuto il diploma di laurea magistrale in Letteratura Francese e del Rinascimento nel 1952 all'Università della Columbia. A Parigi conobbe Charles Le Guin, che sposò nel 1953, sempre nella città francese. Insieme ebbero tre figli: Elizabeth, Caroline e

Theodore. Pur non essendo religiosa, Le Guin era molto affascinata dal Taoismo, una filosofia cinese incentrata sulla meditazione, l'armonia tra uomo, natura e spirito. Gli insegnamenti di questa dottrina possono essere facilmente trovati all'interno dei romanzi di Le Guin, dove spesso i personaggi principali lottano per ricostituire l'armonia nel loro mondo e nella loro psiche.

Le Guin è nota soprattutto per i suoi romanzi di fantascienza, ma non scrisse solo opere di questo genere. Il ciclo di Earthsea è una serie di romanzi young-adult fantasy che l'hanno resa famosa per i temi trattati e i personaggi descritti, che si discostano dai tipici personaggi di storie fantasy come *Il Signore degli Anelli* (Lord of the Rings, 1955) o il più recente *Harry Potter* (1997). In questo ciclo di romanzi l'autrice racconta principalmente la storia di Ged, Tenar e Therru. Il suo fantasy è rivoluzionario proprio perché i suoi personaggi sono unici. Un particolare molto interessante è che Ged non è caucasico, a differenza dei protagonisti della maggior parte dei fantasy di successo. Inoltre, nel secondo libro della serie, Le Guin concentra la sua attenzione sul personaggio femminile Tenar, anche qui stravolgendo quella che era una regola non scritta del genere, ovvero di narrare i racconti di uomini e ragazzi, non di sacerdotesse. Ma è in *Tehanu* che Le Guin decide di mettere al centro un personaggio che potremmo definire emarginato: una bambina vittima di violenza e sfigurata. Questa serie di romanzi è stata sicuramente di ispirazione per moltissimi altri autori di fantasy e non, basti pensare che è proprio in quest'opera che viene sviluppata l'idea di una scuola di magia e del viaggio del protagonista per restaurare l'armonia tra bene e male. Quest'opera è l'esempio perfetto che fa di Le Guin l'autrice delle minoranze e degli esclusi, ma non è l'unica. Oltre ai romanzi, Le Guin è famosa per le sue storie brevi. Una delle più acclamate è *Quelli che si allontanano da Omelas* (The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas, 1973). In quest'opera Le Guin descrive un villaggio dove tutti vivono in serenità, senza alcuna malattia o dolore, a scapito però di un bambino rinchiuso all'interno di una stanza lugubre, malnutrito e incatenato. Nessuno prova a salvare questo bambino perché è dalla sua sofferenza che dipendono tutte le gioie del villaggio. Spesso le persone vanno a vedere questo bambino, alcuni non provano nessuna emozione forte sapendo che tutto ciò accade per rendere la loro vita più facile, ma alcuni di loro non riescono a sopportare il peso della consapevolezza e scappano da Omelas. Ci sono varie interpretazioni di quest'opera, una di queste potrebbe essere che Le Guin volesse fare un parallelo tra la situazione del

bambino e quella che vivono le persone sfruttate nei paesi meno sviluppati. Importanti nello studio della figura di Ursula K. Le Guin come scrittrice sono i suoi saggi. In questo capitolo ho menzionato *Il linguaggio della notte* (The Language of the Night, 1979) e *Danzando al confine del mondo* (Dancing at the Edge of the World, 1989), dove sono raccolti vari essays scritti da Le Guin su tematiche di varia natura, come il genere, il femminismo, la fantascienza e la letteratura in generale. Ho concluso questa discussione sulle sue opere con la sua letteratura per bambini e ragazzi, in particolare ho menzionato *Catwings* (1988-99) una serie di libri scritta da Le Guin con illustrazioni di S.D. Schindler, non ancora tradotta in Italia.

L'ultima parte di questo capitolo l'ho dedicata al lavoro di attivista svolto da Le Guin a supporto della lotta femminista e dei movimenti pacifisti e ambientalisti. Simbolico è il libro *Il mondo della foresta* (The Word for World is Forest, 1972), nel quale Le Guin non nasconde la sua critica verso il governo statunitense e la guerra in Viet Nam, descrivendo come un governo tecnologicamente più avanzato possa distruggere l'ambiente e la cultura di una popolazione che non possiede i mezzi per difendersi. È nei suoi due romanzi principali *La mano sinistra del buio* (The Left Hand of Darkness, 1969) e *I reietti dell'altro pianeta* (The Dispossessed, 1974) che Le Guin esplora più approfonditamente le tematiche più care al femminismo, come il ruolo della donna nella società, il genere e i difetti del patriarcato.

Nel terzo e ultimo capitolo ho analizzato in modo più approfondito i suoi due romanzi di fantascienza più acclamati e conosciuti, già menzionati in precedenza: *La mano sinistra del buio* e *I reietti dell'altro pianeta*. Nello studio di questi due romanzi mi sono concentrata su tre tematiche: le relazioni, il genere e l'anarchia. Ne *La mano sinistra del buio* la relazione interculturale è più evidenziata. Infatti, all'interno del romanzo, seguiamo Genly Ai e l'evoluzione della sua relazione con il nuovo mondo e con il getheniano Estraven. Ne *I reietti dell'altro pianeta* questa tematica potrebbe sembrare meno evidente, nonostante ciò sostengo che anche in questo romanzo il rapporto interculturale sia fondamentale soprattutto nell'evoluzione del personaggio del Dr. Shevek. Anche se quest'ultimo viaggia da solo, tutti gli incontri che farà nel suo pianeta Anarres e in quello di Urras saranno di vitale importanza per la sua decisione finale. Entrambi i personaggi principali sono degli inviati e il loro scopo principale è quello di appianare le differenze e creare legami diplomatici.

I temi del genere, del femminismo e del patriarcato sono di spicco in entrambi i romanzi. *La mano sinistra del buio* viene spesso citato come il romanzo sulla popolazione senza genere, o con genere non binario. Le Guin ha creato una popolazione senza diversità di genere, senza una mascolinità che opprime una femminilità. Questo romanzo è molto importante per gli studi femministi ancora adesso, poiché riflette su una società dove il patriarcato non esiste, come non esistono lo stupro e la guerra. *I reietti dell'altro pianeta* non è stato tanto rivoluzionario per gli studi di genere come il romanzo precedentemente citato, ma anche qui Le Guin si sofferma sul ruolo della donna nelle due società di Anarres e Urras. Anche se non centrale per la narrazione, la sua non troppo velata critica al patriarcato presente su Urras è un esempio di come, in tutti i suoi romanzi, l'autrice abbia voluto parlare del ruolo delle donne e di come vengano spesso oppresse. È utile ricordare che questi romanzi sono stati scritti all'apice della seconda ondata del femminismo, un movimento che stava molto a cuore a Le Guin, e che l'ha avvicinata a queste tematiche centrali.

L'ultimo tema trattato è quello dell'autorità e dell'anarchia. Questo tema viene principalmente trattato in *I reietti dell'altro pianeta*, dove Le Guin descrive la società anarchica di Anarres. In questo pianeta tutti sono uguali e non ci sono distinzioni tra uomini e donne. La sua è un'anarchia femminile, infatti è stata proprio Odo, una donna rivoluzionaria, ad aver creato questa società su Anarres scappando da Urras. Ne *La mano sinistra del buio* il sistema politico è altrettanto importante. Ho identificato delle analogie tra Anarres e Karhide, e Urras e Orgoreyn. Anche in questo romanzo, infatti, troviamo due diversi sistemi politici in contrapposizione l'uno all'altro. Karhide ha una politica più ingenua mentre in Orgoreyn questa è strategica. In Orgoreyn, come su Urras, il protagonista viene manipolato per poi essere, nel caso di Genly, addirittura imprigionato. Un'altra analogia che faccio nel capitolo è tra la Old Town di Urras e la Pulufen Farm in Orgoreyn. Questi due luoghi sono importanti per la narrazione e per lo sviluppo del personaggio principale in quanto, in entrambi i casi, è proprio qui che i personaggi capiscono qual è la vera faccia di queste società in apparenza perfette e ricche, ovvero luoghi dove gli esiliati e gli emarginati vengono utilizzati dalle autorità, oppure reclusi.

Grazie all'analisi della figura di Le Guin e di questi due romanzi ho voluto sottolineare l'importanza che ha avuto questa autrice all'interno del genere della fantascienza femminista, ma anche all'interno della società.

RINGRAZIAMENTI

Il ringraziamento più grande va ai miei genitori, Alessandra e Roberto. Senza il vostro supporto non sarei mai riuscita ad arrivare fino a qui. Grazie per essermi sempre stati accanto e avermi supportata in tutte le mie scelte, soprattutto per avermi consolata quando il mio umore era a terra. Siete sempre stati accanto a me nonostante tutto, e questo non lo darò mai per scontato. In particolare, voglio dedicare questo traguardo a mia madre, che non ha mai potuto realizzare il suo sogno di laurearsi. Un ringraziamento speciale va a mio fratello Matteo che, nonostante veda meno da quando non condividiamo più lo stesso tetto, si è sempre preoccupato per me e che spero di aver reso fiero. Ringrazio anche Arianna, che si è sempre dimostrata felice dei miei risultati e mio nipote Francesco, che mi ha tenuto compagnia mentre scrivevo la mia tesi o preparavo gli esami. Grazie per aver reso questo percorso meno difficile.

Voglio ringraziare tutti i miei familiari che mi sono stati vicini. I miei nonni Francesco, Paola e Adelina che si sono sempre interessati a me in questi tre anni e che spero di aver reso fieri. Sono grata di aver potuto oltrepassare questo traguardo insieme a voi. Ringrazio anche i miei zii Daniela, Gianni, Michela e Stefano e i miei cugini Silvia, Giulia, Andrea ed Elisa, che sono sempre stati felici dei miei risultati. In particolare voglio ringraziare mia cugina Silvia per avermi supportata nelle mie scelte accademiche e non, offrendomi i suoi consigli che ho sempre trovato preziosi.

Un ringraziamento importante va alla mia relatrice Anna Scacchi, che ringrazio per essere stata presente e avermi guidata durante la scrittura della tesi.

Ringrazio tutti i miei amici per essermi stati accanto. Un ringraziamento speciale va a Silvia e Alberto, che mi hanno tenuto compagnia nello studio durante le sessioni. Ringrazio Sara e Victoria, con cui ho condiviso questo percorso di studio e senza le quali sarebbe sicuramente risultato meno divertente. Ringrazio Luca, uno dei miei migliori amici, per avermi sempre fatta ridere anche nei momenti più difficili. E ringrazio Elena, ormai una sorella per me, per avermi accompagnata in questa esperienza a Padova sia nello studio che nella vita di tutti i giorni. Grazie per aver reso le mie giornate meno vuote.

Per ultimo, ma sicuramente non meno importante, ringrazio Daniele. Grazie per essermi sempre stato accanto e avermi supportata durante questi tre anni. In mezzo alle difficoltà sei stato la mia roccia.