“Truth Is a Matter of the Imagination”: Science and Fiction in Ursula K. Le Guin’s The Left Hand of Darkness

by

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A Thesis
presented to
The University of Guelph

In partial fulfilment of requirements
for the degree of
Master of Arts
in
English

Guelph, Ontario, Canada

ABSTRACT

“TRUTH IS A MATTER OF THE IMAGINATION”: SCIENCE AND FICTION IN URSULA K. LE GUIN’S THE LEFT HAND OF DARKNESS

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Ursula K. Le Guin’s The Left Hand of Darkness has been the most studied and analyzed of her early novels. The novel’s basic premise of a genderless alien society has been fertile ground for the analysis and conceptualization of gender and sexuality; however, little attention has been paid to the way Le Guin creates and explores different discourses and genres, such as myth and legend, within the novel. This project explores the role of discourse types in The Left Hand of Darkness; specifically, I am interested in how Le Guin’s invocation of various voices and narrative genres challenges the notion that science is a completely objective discipline, grounded in the Truth, and distinct from myth and other folkloric narratives. Rather than approaching these embedded narratives as archetypes, the novel allows us to re-imagine science itself as a form of narrative discourse or even as another form of fiction. Ultimately, I wish to show that Le Guin challenges the common conceptions of folklore, fiction, and science to suggest that each is a way to arrive at the Truth, adding new perspectives to the ongoing discussion of Le Guin’s work.
DEDICATION

FOR YOLANDA AND MIGUEL ÁNGEL
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Like the protagonist of *The Left Hand of Darkness*, I left my small corner of the world to go on an adventure to Canada in order to learn more about my discipline, as well as the culture and people there. However, what I learned had much more to do with myself than I ever hoped or expected. My year in Canada gave me a tremendous amount of knowledge and joy, but also brought a tremendous amount of hardship and sadness. Facing true isolation in an alien world is one of the most powerful experiences any human, or alien, can experience. It is also, like science fiction itself, deeply important and transformative. Still, to balance that big amount of isolation, I also found an overwhelming amount of love and kindness in Guelph. The incredible women whom I had the pleasure of meeting and working with in my journey (Carly, Courtney, Gen, Cary, Laura, Bri, Claire, Jessie, Yashvi, Abi, Emily, etc…, ) as well as our amazing teachers, Dr. Gregor Campbell, Dr. Julie Cairnie., Dr. Christine Bold, Dr. Ann Wilson, and of course, Olga Petrik (who saved my life more times than I can count), all made my stay in Guelph invaluable. Of course, this thesis would not have been possible without the help, guidance and infinite patience of Dr. Jennifer Schacker, whose wisdom never failed to inspire and comfort me. I also have to thank my parents for their never-ending love and support, as well as that of my whole family and friends. Also, I have to thank my science fiction mentor, Noemí Novell, for introducing me to this text and for her constant support and care, even from afar. This thesis is the result of a combination of all those feelings and ideas, as well as the many voices that are in it, explicitly or not. To all of those voices: Thank you.
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1 INTRODUCTION

*I maintain there is much more wonder in science than in pseudoscience. And in addition, to whatever measure this term has any meaning, science has the additional virtue, and it is not an inconsiderable one, of being true.*

—Carl Sagan

*Truth is a matter of the imagination.*

—Ursula K. Le Guin

This project explores the play of discourse types in Ursula K. Le Guin’s novel *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969). Specifically, I am interested in how Le Guin’s invocation of various discourses and narrative genres challenges the notion that science is a completely objective discipline, grounded in the Truth, and distinct from myth and other folkloric narratives. As we will see, Le Guin is interested in science fiction’s ability to phagocytize these different genres in an exploration of humanity and Otherness. Some scholarship on Le Guin has engaged with “myth,” a term that has often been used loosely to reference a variety of narratives embedded in the novel; however, it is important to note that *The Left Hand of Darkness* contains not only myth but also several other genres of narrative, such as legends, folk tales, and diary entries. Critics have also explored the novel’s central character of Genly Ai as a scientist and anthropologist, but little has been said about the tensions between mythic/folkloric and scientific discourses, which have a direct impact on how we understand alterity, as a whole and within the context of the novel. I believe that the novel does more than approach these narratives as archetypes; instead, it allows us to re-imagine science as a form of narrative discourse or even as another form of fiction. Furthermore, the implications of blending genres, and the tensions between them, have been overlooked
by most critics of the novel. This project thus seeks to add a new perspective to the still ongoing discussion of Le Guin’s work.

Yet, before I survey the scholarship on *The Left Hand of Darkness*, it is worthwhile to consider some of the aspects of Le Guin’s career that impact how the novel has been read and understood. Ursula K. Le Guin (1929-2018) was one of the most prominent authors of American Literature in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and certainly one of the most important representatives of science fiction and fantasy. Her writing includes poetry, essays, and children's books; this body of work influenced many fellow writers, popular and canonical alike, and it still garners critical attention worldwide. Within the science fiction genre, Le Guin was instrumental in bringing about the shift between the Golden Age of Science Fiction (the 1930s to 1950s) and what is now known as the New Wave of Science Fiction (1960s and 1970s). Adam Roberts suggests that during this era a “climate of political paranoia, with its fearful conformity and obsessive focusing on the Alien as Enemy, fed directly through into SF imaginations” (*Science Fiction* 80). After the devastation of the Second World War, science fiction writers began to view with skepticism the technological advancements that had been glorified by an earlier generation of authors. The anxieties of the post-war era became a matter of obsession for this new wave of SF writers: a hard scientific approach was left behind, and the social dimension of science fiction was prioritized. By this I mean that these new writers started to pay more attention to the individual and his/her/their relationship with the world. It is at this moment that the
theme of alterity becomes a major concern for most new authors such as Le Guin, whose texts frequently address this issue.

Furthermore, we must consider the fact that post-war science fiction was male-dominated, both in terms of the most prominent writers and the readership they targeted. As Donna R. White observes, “Science Fiction was perceived as a masculine genre that appealed specifically to adolescent males, and for many years women writers had resorted to pseudonyms and initials to get their work published” (50). It is in this environment that authors of color, as well as female authors, emerged and negotiated new ways of seeing and understanding the genre. These changes allowed writers to explore and challenge the former conceptions of the genre by abandoning the hard scientific logic and the focus on technological advancement made popular by authors like Isaac Asimov, to explore issues such as otherness, gender, and trauma, making way for the so-called “soft science fiction.” This term has been used to refer to the science fiction of the new wave, but those who have employed it differ in their interpretations. For instance, Helen Merrick, in The Routledge Companion to Science Fiction, says the term comes from “the influence of women in the genre” (108); Adam Roberts, in his History of Science Fiction, says that “it is the difference between the science in science fiction deriving from the rigid, Russellian notion (with correlative of ‘truth’ and ‘correctness’), and the science in science fiction deriving from the anarchical Feyerabendian sense of the term (with correlative of ‘imaginative intellectual play’ and ‘extrapolation’)” (15). Daniel Seed, in his short introduction to the genre, simply says that soft science fiction “deals with social issues” (50). All these definitions are important
to understand the genre and Le Guin’s particular style, but for my current purposes, I use this term only to identify a specific moment in science-fiction history.

Le Guin’s approach to science fiction is sometimes characterized as anthropological by authors like Leon Stover, who calls *The Left Hand of Darkness* “the most sophisticated and technically plausible work of anthropological science fiction, insofar as the relationship of culture and biology is concerned” (472). The extremely detailed and complex worlds Le Guin created in the Hainish Cycle, which includes novels and short stories such as *The Dispossessed* or *The Word for World is Forest*, remain some of the richest within the science fiction canon. As Warren G. Rochelle explains:

Hain, in this universe, is the hearth world of humanity, the original world on which humankind evolved over a million years ago. . .After many millennia, so many that most colonies have forgotten their origins, the Hainish set out to rediscover the colonies they abandoned. Le Guin’s novels and stories primarily take place in the time of rediscovery and afterwards, when the Ekumen, an interstellar alliance of human-settled worlds, is formed. (139)

Rochelle notes that Le Guin’s work exploits the speculative quality of science fiction and the genre’s “connection between literature and rhetoric” (2-3). For Le Guin, genre has an important rhetorical quality because it allows the exploration of human nature
through the analysis of imaginary worlds: “Science fiction becomes, for Le Guin, a tool, like any story, for human understanding” (Rochelle 2-3).

In fact, in Le Guin’s introduction to *The Left Hand of Darkness*, she defines science fiction as a “thought experiment,” as a genre whose nature allows an exploration of inherent human “truths” through the creation of scientifically plausible alternative worlds and realities (“Introduction” 1023). In this introduction, Le Guin indicates that certain truths can only be revealed through fiction, while these fictions become truths of their own, an idea that is central in the novel. She writes:

> Fiction writers, at least in their braver moments, do desire the truth: to know it, speak it, serve it. But they go about it in a peculiar and devious way, which consists in inventing persons, places, and events which never did and never will exist or occur . . . and then when they are done writing down this pack of lies, they say, There! That's the truth! (“Introduction” 1024)

This “verifiable place-event-phenomenon-behavior” estranges the reader but also makes the narrative seem plausible; one could consider this a fundamental element in science fiction. Darko Suvin coined the term novum to name this “point of difference,” which he explains as "the thing or things that differentiate the world portrayed in science fiction from the world we recognize around us; [it] is the crucial separator between SF and other forms of imaginative or fantastic literature” (6). To be effective, science fiction often uses elements from our empirical reality and a pseudo-scientific language to make the fictional world comprehensible and tangible for the reader. This is why the novum in science fiction cannot be supernatural, as Suvin points out: “it has to be convincingly
explained in concrete, even if imaginary, terms, that is, in terms of the specific time, place, agents, and cosmic social totality of each tale” (80). For the science-fictional world to be convincing it has to be logically explained and based on a logic of cause and consequence; it needs to be plausible. Science fiction sometimes appears to be predictive or simply extrapolative; however, it is still very much grounded in reality, as Le Guin herself notes: “I am not predicting, or prescribing. I am describing. I am describing certain aspects of psychological reality in the novelist’s way, which is by inventing elaborately circumstantial lies” (“Introduction” 1026). This ability to create plausible scenarios is precisely what gives the genre its pseudo-scientific quality. However, this may lead us to question the very logic behind a fictional genre, which is supposed to be based on scientific logic and facts, while also being fiction.

The very term “science fiction” may appear self-contradictory, and this is why several authors have chosen to disregard it in favour of others, such as “speculative fiction”; however, it is this very contradiction or apparent contradiction that seems to be of interest to Le Guin. In many of her stories, she demonstrates how both science and fiction are essential for a narrative to be truly effective. Le Guin herself recognizes the ways in which the work of the scientist and that of the fiction writer are closely related: “The scientist is another who prepares, who makes ready, working day and night, sleeping and awake, for inspiration. As Pythagoras knew, the god may speak in the forms of geometry as well as in the shapes of dreams; in the harmony of pure thought as well as in the harmony of sounds; in numbers as well as in words” (“Introduction” 1025). Here, the image she presents of Pythagoras is very romantic and emphasizes
the importance of sound and dreams as a part of his creative/scientific process. The novel itself reminds us that both scientists and writers use similar strategies to convey and explain their ideas. Also, the relationship of science fiction to science provokes a series of expectations and assumptions; for instance, it has perpetuated the idea that science fiction is better or more complex than other popular genres and forms of fantastical traditional narrative, simply because of its supposed approximation of scientific discourse. Suvin himself makes such a distinction when he writes that "Cognition differentiates [science fiction] not only from myth, but also from the folk (fairy) tale and the fantasy" (8). I believe that Le Guin challenges this notion and its underlying assumptions (or prejudices): as I will show, she does this by blending science fiction with seemingly dissimilar genres and traditions.

However, before discussing matters of genre, I must address the novel and its context. The Left Hand of Darkness (1969), one of the first novels of the Hainish Cycle, is among the most studied and analyzed of Le Guin’s novels, as Donna White notes: “The Left Hand of Darkness is one of the seminal texts of science fiction . . . Most of the scholarly commentary on Le Guin’s early science fiction revolves around Left Hand" (46). The novel’s basic premise of a genderless alien society has offered fertile ground for the analysis and conceptualization of gender and sexuality. For instance, Wendy Gay Pearson's analysis of the novel discusses race, gender, and sexuality from the point of view of feminism and post-colonialism. Kathy Rudy focuses her analysis on gender and reproduction while exploring the representation of motherhood in the novel. Barbara Brown, in turn, focuses on the androgyny present in the novel and on how the
reader, as well as the protagonist, make sense of the concept. As Adam Roberts says: “The Left Hand of Darkness is often discussed, and indeed taught, as a vehicle for thinking about gender; and it performs that function admirably. But there is much more to it than that. The truth is that Le Guin’s writing is always much more balanced than that; and indeed, that balance as such forms one of her major concerns” (The History 244-45). Although the novel was written in the late sixties, it remains relevant within and without the realm of science-fiction studies, beyond its exploration of gender. I believe the novel’s representation of alterity, modulated by Le Guin’s anthropologically inspired stories, marked an important change in the way science fiction portrayed and understood community and society and the role of the individual within it. All of these concerns, I believe, require a deeper analysis. In particular, I would like to direct attention to the way Le Guin creates and explores Hainish myth and other forms of traditional folkloric narratives, along with the scientific discourses of interstellar explorers.

The novel begins when Genly Ai, the main narrator and an Envoy of the Ekumen, begins the report of his travel to the alien world of Gethen, or Winter. He establishes that he is offering his own account, but also including a variety of traditional narratives or hearth-tales\(^1\) ones that have great significance to the events being recounted. Ai’s role as an Envoy will be to convince the Gethenians to join the League of Worlds. In

\[^{1}\text{As I mentioned earlier, many critics use the term “myth” as a blanket term for all the genres contained in the novel. To avoid this confusion, I will use the term hearth-tale, which is what Le Guin calls her invented Hainish folktales—unless I am discussing a specific example of another genre (such as myth, more narrowly defined).}\]
Gethen, Ai will have to struggle with his own preconceptions and ideas about society, community, and gender, to try to understand the Gethenians; and he will get himself involved in a series of political conflicts between the two Gethenian countries, Karhide and Orgoreyn. To obtain his goal, Ai will get the help of Estraven, the prime minister of Karhide. Estraven will later be condemned as a traitor and exiled from the country, because of his decision to help Ai. Ai will also include fragments of Estraven's journal in his report, making Estraven the novel's secondary narrator. Ai and Estraven can also be considered the novel's two main protagonists. In fact, as the story progresses, the relationship between the two will become the pivotal issue of the novel. Ai's decision to combine and include several genres and narratives suggests that he believes that both the “facts” and the “stories” are necessary to come to a real understanding of the Gethenians—or any civilization, for that matter. It is this abiding interest in the reliability of scientific discourse juxtaposed against the (perceived) unreliability of fiction, along with the importance of storytelling in general, that I seek to explore in the pages that follow.

In the first chapter of this thesis, I will address the basic structure of the novel and show how Le Guin presents its main themes and concerns from the very beginning. Here, I will explore the many ways in which the novel addresses story-making as a mode of shaping and understanding reality, and I will show how Ai introduces, but also combines, science and fiction (in the form of different genres) in the course of his narration. In Chapter 2, I will discuss the tensions between science and fiction within the genre. As James Bittner notes, Le Guin uses story “as a tool for discovery and
exploration, for describing reality and for synthesizing answers to the great philosophical question which embraces all others . . . Who am I?” (xii). Recent studies of myth and science have an interesting resonance with Le Guin’s perspective on mythic narrative as a thought experiment from which we derive and justify certain perceptions of the world. For example, folklorist Gregory Schrempp has argued that contemporary popular science writing repeatedly “fall[s] back on or reinvent[s] in sly and subtle variation the anthropocentrically motivated devices of traditional mythologies” (Ancient Mythology 4). Schrempp's analysis of mythic undercurrents in popular science-writing offer a productive framework for the study of Le Guin's science fiction, which will lead me to explore the different ways myth and other forms of traditional narratives have been theorized, both cross-culturally and specifically, in analyses of this novel. To date, the analyses of myth in The Left Hand of Darkness have relied primarily on the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss, Joseph Campbell, and Carl Jung, with the archetypal theories espoused by Campbell and Jung being the ones most frequently evoked by science fiction scholars. For example, Rochelle quotes Campbell's belief that all myths (and several other forms of traditional narrative) contain the same universal archetypes:

The human psyche is essentially the same all over the world. . . . Out of this common ground have come what Jung has called the archetypes which are the common ideas of myth . . . All over the world and at different times of human history, these archetypes or elementary ideas, have appeared in different
costumes. The differences in the costumes are the results of environmental and historical conditions. (Campbell qt. in Rochelle 20)

I would like to draw on contemporary studies of myth and folk narrative, shifting the discussion away from archetypes and more towards a “reflexive theory” in which myth is not only based on making sense of a presumably universal symbolism, but can also be considered a social, cultural, and intellectual tool, akin to science, used to try to make sense of physical realities in culturally-specific ways.

In Chapter 3, this juxtaposition of genres and voices will take me to an exploration of one of the most important ideas in the text: alterity. Chapter 3 will be devoted to the novel’s treatment of Otherness, which I believe to be the main concern and focus of the novel. Le Guin’s analysis of the acceptance of Otherness as a fundamental requirement for the evolution and betterment of the human race is the culmination of all the elements contained in the text: the complex structure, the plot, the collection of tales, etc. Ai’s experience as a foreigner and scientist challenges his understanding of gender, love, and companionship. Finally, I will elaborate on the importance of this analysis in the context of the current studies of genre, and particularly with a reflection on science fiction as a genre that exists, evolves, and thrives because of its apparently paradoxical nature.
2 Chapter 1: The Structure of *The Left Hand of Darkness*

My main objective in this chapter is to explore the tensions between a variety of discourse types in the novel. Several critics, such as Warren Rochelle, Jeanne Walker, and even Le Guin herself, have suggested that the different types of stories and genres within *The Left Hand of Darkness* do not simply work as models of the main narrative but also serve as symbols, or archetypes that “are shared by all of us; they are genuinely collective” (Le Guin, “Myth and Archetype” 64). Such claims draw on Carl Jung’s understanding of archetypes and his notion of collective knowledge. I would like to explore an alternative reading, focusing on the ways in which the novel invites us to compare the tales embedded in the novel with the pseudo-scientific discourse of the main narrative. To do so means engaging with the novel’s complex structure, and that is where we begin.

*The Left Hand of Darkness* opens with a label that thrusts us into a fictive universe: “From the Archives of Hain. Transcript of Ansible Document 01-01101-934-2-Gethen: To the Stabile on Ollul: Report from Genly Ai, First Mobile on Gethen/Winter, Hainish Cycle 93, Ekumenical Year 1490-97” (*LHD* 389). These first three lines create a sense of estrangement: as readers, we know that the text is set in a different place and time. As Edward James and Farah Mendlesohn define it, “Cognitive estrangement is the sense that something in the fictive world is dissonant with the reader’s experienced world” (5). This notion was first introduced by Darko Suvin, who argued “for an understanding of SF as the literature of cognitive estrangement. This definition seems to
possess the unique advantage of rendering justice to a literary tradition that is coherent through the ages and within itself, yet distinct from nonfictional utopianism, from naturalistic literature, and from other non-naturalistic fiction” (4). Importantly, cognitive estrangement can only work if it uses referents from the reader’s empirical reality. It has to be alien enough to estrange us but not so strange that the reader will feel completely alienated. Le Guin understands this process and subverts it somehow to make the alienation more evident, as I will explain further into this chapter.

The separation between the empirical reality of the reader and the diegesis² is important because the dissonance between the (science) fictional and the empirical world is what allows the critical analysis of the text. Words like “Gethen”, “Hain”, “Ekumenical”, and “Ansible” strike us as unfamiliar and alien; however, we recognize the tone and the general structure as that of a “scientific” report or, for those more familiar with science fiction tropes, a coded transmission of some sort. What we do know is that we are looking at a text by someone called Genly Ai, and we can recognize the markers of a report, a piece of writing that may convey a certain sense of objectivity and reliability. These markers include the particular archive in which the text is contained, a serial number, the time, the place, and a general description of the

² Commonly rendered in English as “diegesis,” Gérard Genette adapted this French term from a concept introduced by Etienne Souriau in “La Structure de l’univers filmique et le vocabulaire de la filmologie” (1948): “[diégèse] is the spatiotemporal world designated by the narrative” (Genette, Palimpsests 295); “the diégèse is therefore not the story but the universe in which the story takes place—universe in the somewhat limited (and wholly relative) sense in which we say that Stendhal is not in the same universe as Fabrice” (Genette, Narrative Discourse 17-18).
writer/narrator. The fact that the text is presented as a report already creates a series of expectations for the reader and introduces a sense of scientific reliability; the text, at this point, seems to follow a “scientific logic” by the use of pseudo-scientific speech, characteristic of the genre, which produces the illusion that the narrator is objective. In these three brief lines, the author has already established the estrangement necessary for the science fiction reader to compare the dissonances between the reality of the text and his/her/their own. There is a sense in which Ai is engaged in a conversation about genre while motivating the reader to question the reliability and apparent objectivity of his report.

The report begins with Genly Ai’s observations about the nature of truth and storytelling: “I’ll make my report as if I told a story” (LHD 389). Ai’s first self-reflexive comment may condition the reading of the text as that of a “scientific” report; however, he complicates matters by challenging the notion of the “report” as an apparently objective and reliable piece of writing, for he is writing it “as if [he] told a story.” By using the conditional form, Ai suggests that he is separating himself from the traditional generic structure of the report to privilege that of oral storytelling —without saying that his report is fictional. Here, he begins to blur the lines between genres and traditions; additionally, he suggests that the form of the report, however objective it may seem, is also limited to individual and subjective perceptions. The term “story” also has an

3 Several authors, like John Pennington and Le Guin herself, have commented on the importance of pronouns in the novel. However, since I will not explore the issue for this thesis, I have chosen to keep the pronouns as they are in the novel.
important semantic charge, for it carries within it a series of possible interpretations: “‘Story’ means many different things, not the least important of which are ‘a report of facts’ and ‘a lie’” (Bittner 110). A story can be considered a report of sorts, but at the same time, it is difficult to separate the notion of story from that of fiction. Thus, the words that Ai uses blur distinctions: his narration can be considered true, false, or more relevantly, both. In fact, as we will see, the text refers—sometimes directly, sometimes indirectly— to terms such as story, myth, legend, report, or truth, to force the reader to question them.

Additionally, we must consider that Ai’s framework for this genre-blending is his childhood, presented as distant in terms of both time and space: “I was taught as a child on my homeworld that Truth is a matter of the imagination” (389). This quote invites the reader to question the reliability of everything that precedes it while emphasizing the imaginative aspect involved in the act of storytelling, whether a text be presented as a scientific report or as a form of fiction. For Bittner, this curious remark by Genly Ai suggests that the report “proceeds towards its goal, Truth, by invention rather than discovery, for storytelling is obviously inventive. He wants to offer facts set in a story so that they produce a vision” (5). On one level, Ai is utilizing the strategies of storytelling to make the report vivid. For the report to be truly effective, Ai needs to use both scientific, "objective" facts, as well as fiction and creativity, establishing a tension between these discourses and showing how they implicitly depend on each other.

Additionally, the notion of Truth is introduced by Ai to echo that of science. As Carl Sagan notes in the quote that serves as an epigraph for this thesis, science is often
distinguished from other forms of storytelling in that it seeks "Truth" — as an idea that is fixed, unquestionable, and logically explained. Bittner suggests that Truth can be reached via different methods, “invention rather than discovery” (5), and makes a clear distinction between invention and discovery as if these processes were completely separate from each other. Ai, on the other hand, suggests that Truth can only be achieved through the imaginative process that Bittner notes is implied in storytelling but also in Ai’s discoveries. Ai roots this knowledge to his “homeworld,” even (or especially) as he attempts to document his time in another world. This decision emphasizes the importance of culture as well as the didactic, ludic, and instructive nature of stories. Whatever the reader is about to read is meant to instruct and reveal something “essential” about the Gethenian culture and this seems to be something that Le Guin herself suggests when talking about myth, in particular. She argues that “the roots of myth, are in our unconscious, that vast dim region of the psyche and perhaps beyond the psyche, which Jung calls ‘collective’ because it is similar in all of us, just as our bodies are similar” (“Myth and Archetype” 65). This, however, is something that the text puts into question later, as we will see.

In the opening passages of the novel, Ai also emphasizes the importance of childhood. Many critics have regarded the creation of fantasy worlds as something fundamentally “childlike”; for her part, Le Guin argues that “fiction is made out of the writer's experience, his whole life from infancy on” (qt. in Selinger 5). This is particularly important because it is during childhood that we begin to form our notions of language, gender, and sexuality, all of which are important issues in the novel. Bernard Selinger
draws on Jacques Lacan to remind us that "the child's first discovery of sexual difference comes around the same time that it's discovering language. This is because it begins to realize that its relations of difference and similarity to the other speaking subjects around it constitute its own identity as a subject of a certain gender" (17). Ai seems to be inviting us to read the text precisely as if we were children being told a story, an idea that is later reinforced at the end of the novel when he narrates Estraven’s story to his orphan child. Along with Ai, the readers will have to question how many of their own preconceptions they are imposing when trying to comprehend Gethenian anatomy, culture, costumes, and so on. Thus, the same process that we learned to make sense of and justify dominant conceptions and practices is the one that allows the reader of the novel to deconstruct these very notions.

Ultimately, the reader's position as both listening child and self-aware, self-critical investigator points towards the way we understand and identify genres, particularly science fiction. Alastair Fowler observes that acquiring generic competence requires a certain playfulness and a willingness to be disoriented: “As every parent knows, children may not even be prepared to listen to a story unless it is recognizably a game . . . . Somewhat later, when our memories begin, we may remember being confused by riddles, say, or puzzled by the whole notion of parody not from inadequate knowledge of the original, merely, but because the procedure itself was baffling” (44). Generic competence, then, may appear to be intuitive, but it is the result of a process of learning that begins in childhood and which, when challenged or changed, can become “baffling” once again. Jacques Derrida says that genre classifications have sometimes been
approached as “natural” and universal, when in fact, as the reference to childhood shows, they are socially constructed and learned: “These forms have been treated as natural and let us bear in mind the entire semantic scale of this difficult word whose span is so far-ranging and open-ended that it extends as far as the expression ‘natural language’” (60). By combining fictional and scientific discourses, Ai implicitly challenges our understanding of genres (and genders) as fixed and identifiable categories. This underscores the fact that understandings of gender and discourse (the social uses of language) are imparted to us from childhood, and this is exactly why there is so much criticism focused on this type of fluidity. However, for this thesis, I want to focus on the fluidity of genres and the elements we look for when trying to recognize them. Even when we cannot name the elements contained in the process of identifying a certain genre, there are notions that readers who share a similar background can detect and decode.

Ai proceeds to discuss the nature of facts, which he links to the skilfulness of storytelling, an issue of style rather than content alone: “The soundest fact may fail or prevail in the style of its telling” (389). Here, once again, Ai brings our attention to the subjectivity of all types of narration, and he uses a simile to convey this very idea: “Like that singular organic jewel of our seas, which grows brighter as one woman wears it and, worn by another, dulls and goes to dust. Facts are no more solid, coherent, round and real than pearls are. But both are sensitive” (389). To Ai’s understanding, facts, like pearls, are not entirely “solid, coherent and round” because we recount them from different perspectives or contexts. Because of this, it is important to note the poetic
tone of this particular fragment, which is reminiscent of the traditions of Petrarchan sonnets and gives the report a lyrical quality. Genly Ai suggests that facts are not only subjected to other perspectives but dependent on their context to shine. This context is, at the same time, subjective, since a concept such as beauty or femininity is not objective or quantifiable.

Readers are quickly invited to question what was established just a few lines before: our expectations of the text, facts, science, and fiction are challenged, as is Ai’s reliability as a narrator. He reveals that his narration is not only subjective but also not entirely his own: “The story is not all mine, nor told by me alone. Indeed I am not sure whose story it is; you can judge better” (389). It is important to note that Ai is addressing the reader directly. This element seems out of place in a text that is supposed to be “objective.” Ai’s tone tends to be very personal and subjective, particularly at the beginning of the novel, when he has control over most of the narrative. As the novel progresses, we discover the range of voices that Ai has interwoven: those of Estraven, a Gethenian; other reports from earlier envoys to the planet; and a variety of (created) traditional narratives whose Gethenian oral storytellers remain anonymous. The forms of Gethenian folklore featured in Ai’s report include legends and myths that have great significance to the events Ai recounts, but they also disrupt and complicate the flow of the main narrative.

Ai understands that for his report to truly convey the complexities of Gethenian culture, he needs to add voices besides his own, while also reporting his experience to the Ekumen. Importantly, we must note that Ai is primarily a representative of the
Ekumen, and his fellow members constitute the audience to whom he addresses his writing/storytelling. This is important because his report is no longer just a report made in the interest of science: it has political implications as well. As Bittner notes:

Since Ai has been trained by the Ekumen, it is only fitting that he should use the same methods to make a report (rapport in French) that the Ekumen uses to gather 83 worlds and 3,000 anthrotypic peoples into harmony. The Ekumen knows that an individual’s perception of reality is constituted and conditioned by the configurations and patterns of values in his native culture, and that truths are relative. (110)

His role as an envoy and a member of the Ekumen complicates matters for Ai, since he will have to adopt different roles at different times, and struggle to be objective. In the end, Ai asks the reader to "judge" or choose the facts he/she/they like best, indicating that the truth can only be revealed by the subjective perceptions of the readers, who are left to decide what they prefer. When we are reminded that Ai’s storytelling is an official report to a pseudo-colonial organization, those judgments emerge as something more than personal choices: they promise to have tangible consequences for the society under scrutiny. At the same time, Ai indicates that the report and everything contained in it remains true: “it is all one, and if at moments the facts seem to alter with an altered voice, why then you can choose the fact you like best; yet none of them are false, and it is all one story” (LHD 389). Even when the narration may seem fragmented and inconsistent, Ai suggests an underlying unity.
Thus, the choice to combine different genres and voices within the structure of a scientific report establishes Le Guin’s interest in the reliability of scientific discourse against the (perceived) unreliability of fiction, along with the importance of storytelling in general. It is within this frame that Le Guin presents the hearth tales, myths, and legends of the Gethenians, adding a variety of voices to the narration. This multiplicity of voices and perspectives is what Mikhail Bakhtin calls heteroglossia, and he identifies it as a defining characteristic of novels. He writes, “The novel orchestrates all its themes, the totality of the world of objects and ideas depicted and expressed in it, by means of the social diversity of speech types and by the differing individual voices that flourish under such conditions” (263). Ai’s attempt to tell his story will be slow and challenging since he feels compelled to consider multiple perspectives and narratives. We can see how the importance of the encounter with the other is already announced at the beginning of the novel: without even having mentioned the matter of genre, Ai is already introducing several of the dualities explored in the novel.

Along these lines, we must consider Ai’s use of pronouns. As I will explore, Ai has a difficulty making sense of Gethenian physiology and conceptions of gender. Ai uses pronouns based on the characteristics he considers male or female, from his own socio-cultural perspective. The issue of pronouns is something that critics have not overlooked and it is an aspect of this novel that has been widely criticized. Le Guin defended her decision to maintain “him” as the pronoun of choice for almost all the characters in the text until 1987, when she revised her 1976 essay “Is Gender Necessary?” In the Redux, she admits: “If I had realized how the pronouns I used
shaped, directed, controlled my own thinking, I might have been ‘cleverer’” (1042). For the purposes of this thesis, however, I will use the pronouns that are originally suggested in the novel because I wish to show how Ai’s mind (like Le Guin’s own) conditions his understanding of the world, and this is necessarily reflected in his writing. I believe the use of pronouns (like many of Ai’s other preconceptions) is an element presented to the reader so he/she/they can question and challenge it.

Despite his best attempts, Ai is not, and cannot be, entirely truthful or objective. Nonetheless, he is still what Martin Bickman calls “the structuring consciousness” of the entire novel (42) — the architect. Despite having access to different perspectives, the reader cannot escape Ai’s design. The text is both scientific and fictional, true and false, objective and subjective; yet, despite this chaotic appearance, there is a logic behind this fragmentation. For Bickman, “The complex patterning of the book is not so much a way to tell the story as it is the story itself. The opening paragraphs suggest the main lines of this patterning: apparent dualities are placed in a harmonious, complementary relationship without collapsing important distinctions between them” (42-3). The way these other genres are inserted may seem random; however, there is a patterning that gives the text coherence. In its apparent arbitrariness, there is also order, as I illustrate in Figure 1, where I use colour-coding to show how the different voices coexist and overlap within the novel.
By tracing the narrative voices of the novel’s chapters, including the unspecified narrators of traditional stories, it becomes evident that Genly Ai narrates half of them, but his narration is never continuous until the final chapters. There are important alternations between Ai’s narration and that of other voices. Estraven’s narrative is discernible in these shifting perspectives, and after every second or third chapter Ai inserts a hearth tale or myth or, in the case of Chapter 7, a field report from an earlier investigator. The pattern is not precisely symmetrical, but we can see in the chart that several structural and thematic connections can be established between chapters, particularly in the first half of the book, in which Ai’s voice is the most dominant. In addition, we can see how Ai’s narration serves as a sort of base or frame to support the other stories; however, they are positioned in a way in which one is given more relevance than the other.

The novel repeatedly shifts from one period of time to another, from one perspective to the next, almost without any warning, yet there is a balance and an order.
that Le Guin expects the reader to perceive. By focusing on issues of voice and temporality, we can see the importance Le Guin gives to the traditional narratives compared to the reports. For example, the exile and treason of the character of Getheren, in the North Karhidish “hearth-tale” in Chapter 2, anticipates Estraven’s exile from Karhide in Chapter 3, as well as his escape in Chapter 6. This makes it difficult to distinguish between the novel’s unfolding plot and the folkloric narratives—even when their status as (invented) traditional narratives is announced at the beginning of each chapter. As Bernard Selinger notes, “One often finds oneself feeling that an event or image or idea recalled is from one of the narrative chapters when it is actually from one of the myths or tales. In one sense the tale acts as signposts to the regular narrative, if we learn how to read them” (52).

As I pointed out, critics have often categorized all the embedded traditional narratives as myths, despite the stories' generic differences, and believe that these stories work primarily as archetypes. For example, Jeanne Walker says that the “myths” both anticipate and act as ideal models for the “historical” events in Le Guin’s fiction (180). Yet, as Walker also notices, characters in the novel’s main narrative sometimes act in ways that contrast with or are opposite to comparable events in the tales, giving the sense that actions and events are being repeated but also transformed or reversed. For example, in Chapter 2 of the novel, in a story labeled as a hearth-tale, Getheren is exiled because he refuses to follow the social norms of the community. He and his brother vow kemmer, a period of heat in the sexual cycle where individual Gethenians adopt either male or female sexual characteristics. Kemmer between siblings is
accepted but frowned upon. As Walker observes, their “crime is loving one another so excessively that they exclude the community.” She continues: “Because they swear permanent vows to one another, their love is defined by law as a crime. Lifelong incest is prohibited, but not for the biologically based reason that incest results in weakened offspring (on Getheren brothers are permitted to produce offspring). Rather, lifelong vows of sexual loyalty between brothers are prohibited because they prevent vows with others outside the family” (182). The moment the siblings conceive a child, they are forced to separate. As a result, the sibling who carried the child (Hode) commits suicide. This is considered yet another anti-community act, for dying alone is the ultimate act of selfishness in Gethenian culture. Getheren, then, is forced to leave and goes out into the Ice by himself, rejecting his name and his community.

In the main narrative, Estraven will go into his own exile, not because he acted against his community, but because he was trying to reconcile and bring unity to the two nations. Travelling across icy terrain, he will not be isolated; in fact, his shared experience with Ai represents the ultimate act of communion, as Walker notes:

The exile Estraven, who bears responsibility for initiating not only his own but his country’s exchange with the stranger, dies like the exile Getheren, who bears responsibility for refusing to exchange. Ironically, the penalty for initiating exchange and for refusing to exchange is the same. This is because too much exchange with “strangers” - those outside the community - produces the same outcome as too little exchange within the community. (185)
Estraven’s experiences echo and subvert the traditional tale: he embodies the main character, since his actions are considered treasonous. This is further confirmed in the relationship with Genly Ai, who becomes closer to him as the novel progresses: Ai and Estraven start to resemble each other even more until they finally unite, symbolically, the moment that they share mind speech, an advanced form of telepathy which Ai, like all Envoys of the Ekumen, dominate. It is the union of their minds that marks the climax of the novel. It consolidates their union and reinforces the idea that the characters are, in many ways, the same.

The complex resonance of the Gethenian hearth-tales with the novel’s primary narrative is especially evident in Chapter 9 of the novel, titled “Estraven the Traitor,” an East Karhidish tale that is conveniently placed at the novel’s mid-point. The title itself is ambiguous because the three main characters of the hearth-tale share a name with Therem of Estre (also known as Estraven), the novel’s second protagonist. In the East Karhidish tale, Prince Arek of Estre (who is also called Estraven) falls through the ice while skating, and has to find shelter. He finds an old cabin, and there he is helped by a stranger who turns out to be the prince of a rival country, Therem of Stock. They spend a couple of nights together and vow kemmer to each other. By this point in the novel, the reader has a basic understanding of Gethenian sexuality from the embedded report of the first investigator to Gethen, which comprises Chapter 7 of the novel. In the hearth-tale, prince Estraven is found and killed by a group of men from Stok after his sexual interlude with Therem. Therem leaves Stock and goes to a neighbouring kingdom in disguise to find Estraven's father. There he gives the king the child he and
Estraven conceived together, named Therem of Estre. The elder Therem tells the king that the youngster is Arek’s son and heir. Years later, the new prince Estraven is attacked by his jealous brothers in the lake. He is able to fight back but finds himself wounded and unprotected. However, he discovers the old cabin in which he was conceived, where he is helped and cured by Therem of Stock. Because of this act of kindness, Estraven swears to end the feud between the kingdoms, a pacifist act that ironically earns him the name Estraven the Traitor.

This tale parallels the story of the main protagonist—beyond their shared names. For example, the encounter of the princes foreshadows the encounter between Ai and Estraven in the last part of the novel. Estraven is also compared to the legendary Therem of Estre since he embodies the union between two Gethenian nations and, like Arek, Estraven will have to die to be able to reconcile Karhide and Orgoreyn (the two main Gethenian nations, discussed in Chapter 3 of this thesis; see Figure 4). The issue of whether Estraven is a traitor is also comparable to the issues raised in the hearth tale, where the act of reconciling the two nations is seen as an act of betrayal. Similarly, Estraven will die as a traitor to his nation for his attempt to bring peace through an alliance with the Ekumen. Treason, in this context, is mostly constructed by the dominant cultural values and narrative traditions a society maintains. Furthermore, it is important to notice how the text appears to have a certain cyclical structure since, in the hearth tale, the new prince Estraven repeats the actions of his father, but also reverses them. In this sense, Arek and Therem’s union brings death, and then, from that death comes life and union again. Similarly, Estraven will both repeat and reverse the actions
of his fictional counterparts and, in fact, the novel will end at the beginning of another story, that of Estraven’s son.

Thus, *The Left Hand of Darkness* repeatedly oscillates between literal and metaphorical images and meanings: “Weaving through the thesis-antithesis-synthesis structure . . . is the alternation and interpenetration of fact and myth, the literal and the figurative” (Bickman 46). Estraven is both literally and symbolically the protagonist of these other tales since he faces a similar conflict to that of his fictional counterparts, Getheren (the protagonist of the first hearth-tale) and the legendary Estraven (prince of Estre). Still, his motives are in the service of his nation, his decisions are radical but selfless and the more we get to know him, the easier it is to see the relationship he shares with these other characters and with Ai, as well. The structure of the text mimics the connection between Ai and Estraven. Bittner has mapped this out (see Figure 2), foregrounding the fact that the narration is initiated by Ai, who “is the structuring consciousness of the story” (Bickman 42). In Chapter 6, readers access the first fragment of Estraven’s journal. At this point, Ai does not trust Estraven and is deeply prejudiced against him. The two will not meet again until the second part of the novel, after Ai presents the tale of “Estraven the Traitor.” It is at this moment that their paths
finally in Orgoreyn. After this, Estraven's interventions will become more frequent and
the narration will become one chronological account narrated from two points of view.

Bittner’s chart helps us see more clearly how the structure and order of the different chapters echo the narrative itself. Chapters and stories overlap as Ai begins to connect and understand Estraven, as well as his actions. This chart also highlights how Le Guin carefully organized the chapters in terms of narrative point of view so they could complement and balance each other (as I showed more clearly in Figure 1). Le Guin could have simply separated the different genres into different sections, but she chooses to juxtapose them, creating thematic connections that the reader can identify. It is this arrangement that ultimately allows us to question both the resonances between genres as well as the connections between different voices. These elements of narrative complexity can be approached in terms of alterity, as Jeanne Walker notes: “Although the history is told by specific perceivers, it is told by two distinct voices: an ‘alien’ and a ‘traitor’. . . This corresponds to the collective voice which the myths in the novel assume” (186). Like Bakhtin’s notion of heteroglossia, the interconnection of these voices is a defining characteristic of the novel. Le Guin’s voices blend in such a way that the arrangement stands out making the reader see heteroglossia not only as a fundamental element of narrative, but something that is ambiguous and fluid.

The novel’s final sequence of chapters includes the travel of the characters through the ice, and here the narrative voices begin to overlap. The final three chapters will be narrated by Ai; however, his voice has now merged with that of Estraven and the unspecified narrators of the folkloric narratives. Together, these multiple voices work to tell a single story, as Ai announced at the beginning of the novel. The novel requires an
active reader, one who now “must work backward and forward among the chapters to understand the ‘one story’ Ai is telling” (Cummins 81). In this sense, the reader’s experience of the novel—with its potentially disorienting mixture of voices and perspectives—mimics Ai’s journey of discovery. The estrangement that is established at the beginning of the text is also reversed: the alien world has become familiar. That is why, at the end of the novel, there is no more need to add more Gethenian traditional narratives.

The final chapter of the novel, “A Fool’s Errand,” ends on a similar note to that of Chapter 1. Genly Ai visits Estre, Estraven’s home, and meets his friend’s father and son. His primary objective is to tell them the story of Estraven: “‘I was with your son in the months before his death,’” he tells them. “‘I was with him when he died. I’ve brought you the journals he kept. And if there’s anything I can tell you of those days—.’” The Left Hand of Darkness thus ends as it began, with the telling of a story. Ai’s efforts at storytelling at the end of the novel address both the concerns of the old and the young: “‘I should like to hear that tale, my Lord Envoy,’ said old Esvans, very calm. But the boy, Therem’s son, said stammering, ‘Will you tell us how he died? Will you tell us about the other worlds out among the stars— the other kinds of men, the other lives?’” (608). This final comment might leave the novel with what seems like an incomplete ending; yet, it bookends the beginning, mirroring it both structurally and thematically. Tellingly, Estraven’s son wishes to learn not only about his father, but also about “‘other worlds among the stars.’” These last passages suggest that Le Guin’s conclusion to her
thought experiment is that stories are not only a tool but also a fundamental part of being human.

More importantly, we can see how the impetus to learn about the other is shared by all the characters and could be seen as a force driving any reader to the novel in the first place. This is something to which I will return in Chapter 3; however, what I wish to point out here is that *The Left Hand of Darkness* is designed and organized to defy expectations, to question our understanding of concepts like storytelling, myth, science, fiction, and Truth. Most critics have focused on what is (or was at the time Le Guin was writing) the most radical proposition of the novel: that of gender fluidity. I have suggested that there is another important proposition, one that has not been explored sufficiently. The novel engages with the apparent tension between science, scientific discourse, and fiction, particularly forms of oral traditional story—what numerous scholars have called "myth," in the broadest sense of the term. To explore this tension, we must first try to define these central concepts of science, folklore, and myth, and it is to this topic that I now turn.
3 Chapter 2: Science, Fiction, and Science Fiction

In Chapter 1, I explored some of the ways in which the narrative structure of *The Left Hand of Darkness* invites engagement with notions of storytelling and genres. How Genly Ai decides to present and organize the tales evinces his conviction that, to have a more complete understanding of the story, the reader needs to be exposed to several genres and perspectives —beyond the conventional form of the report. This creates an apparent tension between discourses and genres that are usually considered mutually exclusive: those of science and those of fiction, especially oral traditional forms that become part of Le Guin's world-building. Indeed, some scholarship has engaged with "myth" in the novel, and some has explored Ai's role as a scientist and anthropologist, but little has been said about the tensions between mythic and scientific discourses. However, before we can discuss the tensions in the novel we first must define the terms.

In a survey of contemporary approaches to oral traditions, the anthropologist Ruth Finnegan cites the definition of “folklore” created by UNESCO:

Folklore (or traditional and popular culture) is the totality of tradition-based creations of a cultural community, expressed by a group of individuals and recognized as reflecting the expectations of a community in so far as they reflect its cultural and social identity . . . . Its forms include, among others, language, literature, music, dance, games, mythology, rituals, customs, handicrafts, architecture and other arts. (qt.in Finnegan 12)
In this definition, myth is a form of folklore, a genre of folk narrative. Interestingly enough, many of the terms used in the UNESCO definition of Folklore echo (directly or indirectly) Ai’s introductory speech from *The Left Hand of Darkness*:

I’ll make my report as if I told a story, for I was taught as a child in my homeworld that *Truth* is a matter of the *imagination*. The soundest *fact* may fail or prevail in the style of its *telling*: like that singular organic jewel of our seas, which grows brighter as one woman wears it and, worn by another, dulls and goes to dust. (389, emphasis added)

When Ai introduces the notions of fiction versus the apparent scientific reliability of reports, when he talks poetically about facts and pearls, he anticipates that all genres, themes, stories, and characters will reflect these struggles between what are essentially two different ways to arrive at the Truth. As I showed in Chapter 1, the conceptions of tradition, orality, community, identity, and art that we see in these first lines weave their way through this text to the extent that they become essential in the novel.

By this point, I have mentioned some of the ways critics have approached the oral traditional stories in *The Left Hand of Darkness* as myth, but we can see that the invented Gethenian traditional stories in the novel represent some distinct genres of folk narrative and not all of them function as myths. Drawing on contemporary myth theory and contemporary folklore theory points us in a different direction than previous studies of myth in Le Guin’s work. To begin, however, I want to make a brief description of the genres we can find in the novel using William Bascom’s definitions of myth, legend, and folktale. Bascom notes that all of these genres belong to what he calls “Prose
Narrative,” and this distinguishes them from “proverbs, riddles, ballads, poems, tongue-twisters, and other forms of verbal art on the basis of strictly formal characteristics” (3).

He then lists the main characteristics of each genre, which I quote at length:

1. Folktales are prose narratives which are regarded as fiction. They are not considered as dogma or history, they may or may not have happened, and they are not to be taken seriously. Nevertheless, although it is often said that they are told only for amusement, they have other important functions, as the class of moral folktales should have suggested. Folktales may be set at any time and any place, and in this sense they are almost timeless and placeless.

2. Myths are prose narratives which, in the society in which they are told, are considered to be truthful accounts of what happened in the remote past. They are accepted on faith; they are taught to be believed; and they can be cited as authority in answer to ignorance, doubt, or disbelief. Myths are the embodiment of dogma; they are usually sacred, and they are often associated with theology and ritual.

3. Legends are prose narratives which, like myths, are regarded as true by the narrator and his audience, but they are set in a period considered less remote, when the world was much as it is today. Legends are more often secular than sacred, and their principal characters are human. They tell of migrations, wars and victories, deeds of past heroes, chiefs, and kings, and succession in ruling dynasties. In this they are often the counterpart in verbal tradition of written
history, but they also include local tales of buried treasure, ghosts, fairies, and saints. (Bascom 4-5)

I use Bascom’s definitions here because they allow me to point out the classic (though somewhat outdated) understandings of these genres; however, it is important to consider that the study and categorization of these “prose narratives” in various cultural contexts is much more complex than this thesis can explore. What I wish to emphasize is that these terms change depending on the context in which they are debated. For instance, Ruth Finnegan says that the term ‘folklore’ “sometimes has the broad sense of all forms of ‘orally transmitted tradition,’ including material culture, but its most common referent is to verbal forms such as stories, songs or proverbs, with special emphasis on the collection or analysis of texts” (11). In turn, Richard Bauman emphasizes that the "interest in folklore that burgeoned in the nineteenth century was part of the intellectual effort of that watershed era to comprehend the fundamental changes represented by the advent of modernity. The legacy of this effort still colors the popular but distorted conception of folklore as folly, superstition, and falsehood" (31). These scholars, however, all recognize that these concepts are ones of general interest and that they are open to debate, a quality that Le Guin cleverly exploits.

The genre distinctions central to folk narrative scholarship may not seem particularly relevant to an analysis of Le Guin’s novel, but as Bascom notices, “myths, legends, and folktales differ in their settings in time and place, in their principal characters and, more importantly, in the beliefs and attitudes associated with them” (7). This is of capital importance to Ai, though he never explicitly says so. He is careful to record, describe
and cite the origin of each story, if not the oral narrators. Furthermore, we should keep in mind that Ai also faces a challenge in terms of deciding how to name, categorize, and describe each traditional Gethenian tale, since he can only cite these sources as an anthropologist would: as an outsider trying to make sense of the traditions and beliefs of this new world, documented by earlier envoys. In order to classify each tale embedded in the novel, Figure 3 charts the chapter, its title, and the description Ai gives to each one of them. Ai’s framing notes at the beginning of chapters condition the reading of the discourse that follows, even when that discourse is not framed as anonymous and traditional.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHAPTER</th>
<th>DESCRIPTION</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. A Parade in Erhenrang</td>
<td>“From the Archives of Hain. Transcript of Ansible Document 01-01101-934-2-Gethen: To the Stabile on Ollul: Report from Genly Ai, First Mobile on Gethen/Winter, Hainish Cycle 93, Ekumenical Year 1490-97” (15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. The Place Inside the Blizzard</td>
<td>“From a sound-tape collection of North Karhidish ‘hearth-tales’ in the archives of the College of Historians in Erhenrang, narrator unknown, recorded during the reign of Argaven VIII” (39)</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. The Mad King</td>
<td>Ai’s report continues.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. The Nineteenth Day</td>
<td>“An East Karhidish story, as told in Gorinhering Hearth by Tobord Chorhawa, and recorded by G. A., 93/1492” (62)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. The Domestication of Hunch</td>
<td>Ai’s report continues.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. One Way into Orgoreyn</td>
<td>Estraven’s record begins.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. The Question of Sex</td>
<td>“From field notes of Ong Tot Oppong, Investigator, of the first Ekumenical landing party on Gethen/Winter, Cycle 93 E.Y. 1448” (117)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Another Way into Orgoreyn</td>
<td>Ai’s report continues.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Estraven the Traitor</td>
<td>“An East Karhidish tale, as told in Gorinhering by Tobord Chorhawa and recorded by G.A. The story is well known in various versions, and a ‘habben’ play based on it is in the repertory of traveling players east of the Kargav” (155)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Conversations in Mishnory</td>
<td>Ai’s report continues. He talks to Estraven.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Soliloquies in Mishnory</td>
<td>Estraven’s record continues.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 1: Source notes attached to chapters of *Left Hand of Darkness*.

As we saw in the first chapter of this thesis, Le Guin carefully intertwines the various “fictions” with Ai’s “report,” which he begins with reflection on the importance of stories. In fact, Ai’s narration resembles the style of oral storytelling so much that it is easy to
forget that Ai is writing a report. Chapter 2 of the novel, “The Place inside the Blizzard,”
continues the narrative pattern and tone of Chapter 1, although it opens with a label that
indicates the origin of the tale: “From a sound-tape collection of North Karhidish ‘hearth-
tales’ in the archives of the College of Historians in Erhenrang, narrator unknown,
recorded during the reign of Argaven VIII” (404). This description emphasizes the oral
nature of the tale and ties it to notions of tradition and antiquity, but also traditions of
scholarly documentation and archiving. This tale, as well as the one in Chapter 9,
“Estraven the Traitor,” are closest to Bascom’s definition of legend, since “they tell of
migrations, wars and victories, deeds of past heroes, chiefs, and kings, and succession
in ruling dynasties” (4). Once again, Le Guin is careful when choosing the position of
each chapter: not only does she connect Chapters 1, 2 and 3 thematically and
stylistically, but she also connects Chapter 2 with Chapters 19 and 20 by using the
same folk narrative genre (legend), as well as similar characters and themes.

Interestingly, only one of the traditional narratives in the novel is labeled explicitly
as myth: Chapter 17, “An Orgota Creation Myth.” Chapter 12 may have the elements to
be considered and categorized as a myth, but Le Guin only describes it as a “Saying.”
However, it is “considered to be [a] truthful [account] of what happened in the remote
past” (Bascom 4), since it was “composed in North Orgoreyn about 900 years ago” and
is part of what Ai calls “a Canon,” which allows me to label it as a myth. This tale starts
with the following statement:

*Meshe is the Center of Time*. That moment of his life when he saw all things
clearly came when he had lived on earth thirty years, and after it he lived on
earth again thirty years, so that the Seeing befell in the center of his life. And all
the ages up until the Seeing were as long as the ages will be after the Seeing,
which befell in the Center of Time. *And in the Center there is no time past and
no time to come.* In all time past it is. In all time to come it is. It has not been nor
yet will it be. It is. It is all. (*LHD* 506, emphasis added)

Although it is not clearly religious, this story does give the reader a sense that it is
somehow “associated with theology and ritual” (Bascom 4), since Meshe seems to be a
deity. Furthermore, Ai adds an annotation to the tale, right after the line: “The stars that
flee and take away their light all were present in his eye, and all their light shone
presently.” His note reads: “This is a mystical expression of one of the theories used to
support the expanding-universe hypothesis, first proposed by the Mathematical School
of Sith over four thousand years ago” (*LHD* 507). This small addition shows that Ai —
inserting himself as editor and explicator — believes that Gethenians see this tale as
one that could “be cited as authority in answer to ignorance, doubt, or disbelief”
(Bascom 4), while it also reminds us that Ai is an outsider and a person of science.
Unlike the legends, this tale does not anticipate the events taking place in the main
narration, but it provides context (in this case, information specifically about the
Handdarata). This contextual information is fundamental to understanding the political
tensions of this particular region of Gethen, as well as Ai’s persecution and later
imprisonment.

Similarly, Chapter 17 (“An Orgota Creation Myth”) starts with some quasi-
anthropological notes about the story, evoking a scholarly voice before launching into a
telling of the tale: “The origins of this myth are prehistorical; it has been recorded in many forms. This very primitive version is from a pre-Yomesh written text found in the Isenpeth Cave Shrine of the Gobrin Hinterlands.” This note is important because it creates a scholarly frame for the reader’s experience of the story. It also roots the tale in tradition and the past. As Richard Bauman notes: “To view an item of folklore as traditional is to see it as having temporal continuity, rooted in the past but persisting into the present in the manner of a natural object” (31-32). The story’s beginning is also very traditional since it is a sort of pastiche of The Bible: “In the beginning there was nothing but ice and the sun” (LHD 562). A reader familiar with Judeo-Christian mythology will be familiar with this kind of opening formula, one that begins an origin story, considered a sacred truth. This is relevant since, as Bascom notes, “Myths are the embodiment of dogma; they are usually sacred; and they are often associated with theology and ritual” (4). Furthermore, the fact that the written text of this myth was “discovered” in a cave additionally roots it to the notions detailed by Bascom. The presence of myth in the novel is also relevant because, The Left Hand of Darkness is ultimately a story about beginnings: the beginning of the relationship between two planets, two governments, and two people, and one that resonates with Ai and Estraven’s encounter in the Ice, which is, not by accident, almost at the end of the novel. As with the examples discussed earlier, this continuity in the present is important since the story’s telling is predicated on its continuing relevance. In this case, traditional stories embedded in the novel’s main plotline must be seen in the context of what is happening to the protagonists and vice versa.
Interestingly, there is only one tale that truly fits Bascom’s definition of folk-tale, Chapter 4, “The Nineteenth Day,” which Ai simply describes as a “story.” This particular tale anticipates the events in the novel since it describes a ritual/ceremony (foretelling), very similar to the ancient oracles, that Ai himself will undergo in the following chapter. This story has a cautionary quality: it is a short story about a man who wishes to know the day of his death. When he does not receive the answer he expected, he goes mad and eventually dies as foretold. Bascom mentions that these folktales are not to be “considered as dogma or history, they may or may not have happened, and they are not to be taken seriously. Nevertheless, although it is often said that they are told only for amusement, they have other important functions, as the class of moral folktales should have suggested” (4). Bascom’s rather cavalier claim that folktales “are not to be taken seriously” has been radically re-evaluated by contemporary folklorists. In the context of the novel, we are expected to take “The Nineteenth Day” as seriously as any of the tales in the text. I do believe, however, that the moral dimension of the tale makes it just slightly different from the other tales. In the novel, one of the Handdara monks explains that the purpose of the tale is: “To exhibit the perfect uselessness of knowing the answer to the wrong question . . . ‘The unknown,’ said Faxe’s soft voice in the forest, ‘the unforetold, and the unproven that is what life is based on,’” showing the didactic and moralistic quality of this text. Still, I want to emphasize that these definitions are only a glimpse into what myth theorist have analyzed; however, I want to point out that definitions are fluent and because of this, it is not always easy to classify tales. Le Guin uses this to her advantage, making the reader question generic
Thus, there are several generic elements in the tales that are likely to be immediately recognizable to the reader and that Le Guin can easily replicate from these vernacular sources. As Bittner notes, the myth in Chapter 17 is inserted “at the climax of the story that tells of Gethen’s relationship with the Ekumen, and this position is not random” (68). This is the point at which the voices of Ai and Estraven have already intersected. The chapter containing this myth is placed between one of Estraven’s diary entries and one of the sections narrated by Ai. It is not situated at the beginning, but as the novel starts to build towards its climax, as Ai and Estraven begin their journey through the Ice and start their friendship. It could be said that the novel contains at least two beginnings: the first one, when Ai begins his report, the Ekumenical Year 1409-97; and the second, as he begins his relationship with Estraven near the novel’s midpoint. Le Guin’s use of time in the novel is not linear; it is more of a circle or a snake that bites its tail. For Le Guin, beginnings happen all the time: life is an ongoing chain of beginnings and ends.4 The myth in chapter seventeen itself portrays this notion since it is a story about beginnings, but also a story about violence and the masculine forces behind it. As Rebecca Adams observes, “Le Guin’s Orgota Creation myth, the feminine ‘myth’ of non-violent cultural foundation remains at the level of image, while the masculine myth of violent cultural foundation supersedes it and moves into narrative because it is capable of articulation in language” (43). The beginning of Ai and

4 This is evident in some other of Le Guin’s texts. A good example is The Dispossessed, which also has an unusual scheme. The chapters oscillate between present and past, but also connect with each other thematically. With this, Le Guin suggests that time is both linear and circular, a notion that is also at the heart of the novel’s main conflict.
Estraven’s friendship, placed strategically next to this chapter, is about the opposite: how genuine “human” connection can only result in peace.

Here, I would like to deviate briefly to consider the notion of mythic time that I mentioned in Chapter 1 of this thesis. According to Eric Hirsch, in his study of the Fuyuge tribe of Papua-New Guinea, “what goes on ‘inside’ of myths is systematically connected to what occurs ‘outside’: how the intimate features of landscape form a kind of prism through which wider influences might be understood . . . Each narrative portrays features of landscape that simultaneously disclose a unique presence of time. This ‘time’ is different from the progress-orientated ‘time’ of government or missionaries” (153). Mythic time challenges us to reconsider dominant Western conceptions of time; as Hirsch suggests, time does not have to be understood in the linear and future-oriented manner to which we might be accustomed. Instead, the conception of time Hirsch considers is one “in which social-event processes achieve a resolution in their meaning within the contours of the ‘now’ disclosed —that is, the image (and illusion) of simultaneity. This is the ‘time’ disclosed in dreams, myths, rituals, exchanges and other stylized forms that render ‘the present’ apparent or obvious” (153). Myths, present and past, are not only connected but also overlap, creating “the image (and illusion) of simultaneity,” challenging the notion that the tales “anticipate” each other.

Non-linearity is a quality used by Le Guin in the novel, even in the sections that are not folkloric. For instance, Chapter 5 is the continuation of Ai’s report, and it ends when he meets Estraven’s former partner. Chapter 6 shifts to the first entry of Estraven’s diary. However, unlike the other sources Ai uses, Estraven’s record is never
introduced by a note. In fact, for the reader it would be almost impossible to distinguish one voice from the other were it not for the fact that Estraven talks about Ai, which reveals that the narrative voice has changed. Similarly, Le Guin intentionally uses the transition between Chapters 8 and 9 to meld voices to challenge the reader’s notion of time. Chapter 8 ends with a small conversation between Ai and Estraven during their first meeting after Estraven was forced into exile. In Chapter 9, Ai introduces the tale “Estraven the Traitor,” and even though we are told the origin of the tale, it is still very hard to make sense of the characters—specifically, the fact that the Estraven of the legend is not the one from the main storyline. Le Guin includes an articulation of this alternative sensibility within the myth itself: “in the Center there is no time past and no time to come.” In this sense, the general feel of the novel is that all stories, despite their origin, take place in the same time and space; everything, from the characters to the events and themes, is connected. As Hirsch concludes: “Landscape, myth and time are . . . ineluctably connected. But how so and in what ways is always a question of ethnographic elucidation, all the more so in a world of contested techniques and visions of power” (163). To recast Hirsch's observations, Le Guin develops a complicated arrangement of chapters and a combination of stories, and this allows her “not so much [to] obliterate time but [to] disclose the presence of time” versus the "passage of time" (Hirsch 153). Le Guin makes the reader aware of the fact that notions of time as fixed, linear, or sequential, are only cultural constructs.

In contrast to the acceptance of fluidity suggested by these chapters, cultural difference was represented in much more judgmental terms in the chapter immediately
preceding them. Chapter 7, “The Question of Sex,” is described as the field notes of an “Investigator” who explored the planet before Ai’s arrival as an envoy. As with Ai’s comments in Chapter 1 of the novel, the note at the beginning of the chapter conditions the reading: “From field notes of Ong Tot Oppong, Investigator, of the first Ekumenical landing party on Gethen/Winter, Cycle 93 E.Y. 1448” (453). As in Ai’s introduction to his report, we find the markers of a scientific study; but Ai’s predecessor, Oppong, writes in a style that is considerably less lyrical. Reflecting on the evolution of Gethenian ambisexuality, this early investigator writes:

It seems likely that they were an experiment. The thought is unpleasant. But now that there is evidence to indicate that the Terran Colony was an experiment, the planting of one Hainish Normal group on a world with its own proto-hominid autochthones, the possibility cannot be ignored. Human genetic manipulation was certainly practiced by the Colonizers; nothing else explains the hilfs of S or the degenerate winged hominids of Rokanan; will anything else explain Gethenian sexual physiology? Accident, possibly; natural selection, hardly. Their ambisexuality has little or no adaptive value. (453)

One of the main functions of this chapter for the reader of The Left Hand of Darkness is to explain Gethenian morphology and sexual characteristics, but the chapter also contextualizes Ai’s own inherent biases. Oppong’s “report” may appear to be objective, but she views the people she studies through the lens of her own cultural and biological norms. She thinks of Gethenian morphology as an “unpleasant” experiment of the Hainish people, mostly because their morphology has been “manipulated” and serves no “adaptive value.” Importantly, the Hainish people are the
ancestors of both Gethenians and Ai’s people, a fact that both races seem to overlook when describing each other as perversions. The notion of "normal" activated by each envoy comes from the writer's perspective, something that the reader must be aware of—since the Gethenians repeatedly refer to Ai as a "pervert" and themselves as "humans." This is evident in the meeting between Ai and the King, when the latter asks, incredulously, "So all of them, out on these other planets, are in permanent kemmer? A society of perverts? So Lord Tibe put it; I thought he was joking. Well, it may be the fact, but it's a disgusting idea, Mr. Ai, and I don't see why human beings here on earth should want or tolerate any dealings with creatures so monstrously different" (414-15). What is normal to one group is a perversion to the other; as in the beginning, the apparent objectivity of the text collapses. This chapter shows why Ai struggles so much to come to terms and truly understand Gethenians: his initial perspective, as a human, as a male, and as an envoy, is in direct conflict with that of the people of Gethen. However, Chapter 7 is meant to explain the origin of the Gethenians, making it akin to mythic stories of origins, despite its framing as scientific report. Like a myth, this tale from an earlier envoy is included with the general intention of revealing something about the civilization being described, as well as that of the writer. What, then, makes these genres so different?

While few of the embedded tales in the novel are myths, myth theory is a useful tool for explaining the function of Le Guin's invented folk narratives. The term "myth" has several definitions and none seems to be entirely complete. For example, scholar Robert Segal says that myth as a single or universal idea cannot be defined, for it
depends entirely on cultural context and the critical approach one uses: “A theory which contends that myth arises and functions to explain natural processes will likely restrict myth to societies supposedly bereft of science. By contrast, a theory which contends that myth arises and functions to unify society may well deem myth acceptable and perhaps even indispensable to all societies” (3-4). Depending on cultural reference and critical approach, scholars will consider myth as a proto-science, early science, anti-science, or something different altogether. As such, it is hard to determine the characteristics of myth itself; however, we can distil certain of its general characteristics, mostly based on audience expectations. Segal, for instance, suggests that the main characteristic of myth is that it is essentially a story. This is something that may appear self-evident, but as he points out, myth can also be interpreted as a credo or belief. Folklorist and myth scholar Gregory Schrempp provides a fuller definition:

The terms “myth” and “mythology” often designate stories of supernatural beings or heroes set in ancient times and telling of cosmos- and society-shaping deeds and events: the origin of the seasons, the reasons why we must die or that we are incapable of understanding the speech of animals, or the founding of basic social mores and taboos. A number of connotations of myth stem from patterns or structures of coherence that typically arise in such mythological stories or that form the backdrop—the worldview—of such stories. (Ancient Mythology 15, emphasis added)

Schrempp thus shifts the definition of myth away from Bascom’s “truthful accounts of what happened in the remote past” (4) to focus on the revelation of something that is
“essential” to the community they belong to; furthermore, they expose the basic beliefs and worldview of a given society.

The commonplace association of myth with “falsehood” also has a parallel in the colloquial uses of the word “folklore.” There is still a “popular but distorted conception of folklore as folly, superstition, and falsehood” (Bauman 31). Schrempp elaborates on this, identifying four distinct ways in which myth and science are currently conceptualized. First, he points to the idea that science and myth are completely distinct concepts that are the opposite of one another. This is the sort of theory people think of when they hear that science is intended to “debunk myth,” which is connected to the idea of myth as falsehood or lie. Schrempp also acknowledges perspectives that see myth and science as “two distinct kinds of knowledge both of which are legitimate and necessary for human life.” He looks at “a continuum model,” where we could situate theories that consider myth as a form of pseudo-science or as a necessary moment in the development of scientific thought. Finally, he describes a “reflexive model” in which both myth and science “exist in a mutually constitutive relationship” (“Folklore and Science” 192), and it is here that I think we can find Le Guin. As discussed in the previous chapter, the unusual organization and structure of the novel repeatedly blurs the lines between “myth” and science.

This very general notion is one shared by many critics, like Jung, Campbell, and Le Guin herself, who suggest the archetypes in any mythical or folkloric tale can be found across all countries and traditions. I believe there is an alternative to this view. *The Left Hand of Darkness* can also be seen through the scope of a theory of myth that respects cultural differences.
Scholars who have analyzed the interpolated tales in *The Left Hand of Darkness* have mostly done so through the lens of structuralism, the perspective that dominated myth studies in the 1960s and 1970s, and they have mostly focused on the symbolic qualities of those stories. Walker, for instance, says that, “The myths both anticipate and act as ideal models for the 'historical' events in Le Guin's fiction” (180). There are limitations to this sort of analysis. First, it seems to assume that myths reveal “fundamental” ideas about human nature. Secondly, this approach to invented traditional narratives in the novel works by understanding myths as models of the events of the main narrative, yet we cannot overlook the fact that these events are also contained in fiction, thus suggesting that the symbolic quality of the novel can only be that—symbolic. It is at this point that Le Guin’s own understanding of myth comes in handy. She argues against “the reductive scientistic mentality of the first half of the twentieth century and still accepted by many,” arguing instead that “the rational and explanatory is only one function of the myth. Myth is an expression of the several ways the human being, body/psyche, perceives, understands and relates to the world. Like science, it is a product of a basic human mode of apprehension” (“Myth and Archetype” 61-62). Le Guin states that myths are usually analyzed through their symbolic qualities. Students are always expected to find and decode them in a text: “What are the symbolic qualities of the text? What is it that the author tried to convey?” (61), as if art’s only true purpose were located in the intellectual process of coding and decoding symbols to come to an understanding of the world or ourselves. That is not so, says Le Guin, “for humans also feel, cry, laugh, are afraid, have a need for love and even pain. Then, it is
only logical to assume that we read and create stories for much more than the intellectual pleasure of decoding symbols” (63-63).

Le Guin suggests that myths represent one of the many ways we understand and relate to the world. What then can we conclude about her own created myths? In Chapter 17, of *The Left Hand of Darkness*, the myth contains motifs that are easily recognizable within Western tradition, like the formula, “In the beginning,” or the simplicity and terseness of the tale’s syntax. However, some elements are unique to Karhide, such as the emphasis on the creative and maternal power of ice, or ice as the element from which life originates:

In the beginning there was nothing but ice and the sun. Over many years the sun shining melted a great crevasse in the ice. In the sides of this crevasse were great shapes of ice, and there was no bottom to it. Drops of water melted from the ice-shapes in the sides of the chasm and fell down and down. One of the ice-shapes said, ‘I bleed’. Another of the ice-shapes said, ‘I weep’. A third one said, ‘I sweat’ (*LHD* 562).

Thematically, this myth is also a warning of the destructive powers of violence, and it suggests that our shadow is a reminder of conflict since it is a representation of the death that follows all living beings:

The first to wake up was Edondurath. So tall was he that when he stood up his head split the sky, and snow fell down. He saw the others stirring and awakening, and was afraid of them when they moved, so he killed one after another with a blow of his fist . . . Edondurath built a house of the frozen bodies
of his brothers, and waited there inside that house for that last one to come back. Each day one of the corpses would speak, saying, “Does he burn? Does he burn?” All the other corpses would say with frozen tongues, “No, no.” Then Edondurath entered kemmer as he slept, and moved and spoke aloud in dreams, and when he woke the corpses were all saying, “He burns! He burns!”

(LHD 562-563)

This warning against the destructive effects of violence speaks, on many levels, about the worldview of the Gethenians, but as Le Guin suggests, the myth cannot be analyzed as a mere symbol, for the tale also contains pain, death, life, fear, and blood, elements that make the story relevant and connect the experiences of the Orgota with those of Ai and the reader—experiences, Le Guin hopes, anyone can relate to and understand, at least from a Western point of view.

Here it is important to remember that Le Guin's understanding of myth is influenced by Carl Jung’s archetypes and, particularly, the notion of the collective unconscious. Le Guin believes there are elements in myth, fiction and popular culture that are shared collectively by all individuals regardless of their origin. This is clear in The Language of the Night: Essays on Fantasy and Science Fiction (1979), where she uses the example of Superman and other commonly known figures in English-language popular culture whose origins can be traced to myth. She writes,

Beyond and beneath the great living mythologies of religion and power there is another region into which science fiction enters. I would call it the area of Submyth: by which I mean those images, figures and motifs which have no
religious resonance and no intellectual or aesthetic value, but which are vigorously alive and powerful so that they cannot be dismissed as mere stereotypes. They are shared by all of us; they are genuinely collective. ("Myth and Archetype" 64)

Here, Le Guin thinks of popular genres and images as having roots in myth, and even if those elements are removed from their "religious resonance" and "aesthetic value" they still evoke an image or an idea that the reader can easily identify. The prefix “sub” further reveals that Le Guin does not diminish myth, but thinks of it as a superior genre because of its ability to evoke images and symbols of such power and resonance that they have become “collective.” She then adds that the only way a writer can successfully reproduce these shared elements is to resort to “the irreducibly personal—the self. To reach the others, artists go into the self” (66). It seems that what Le Guin considers to be collective is mostly limited to Western/American popular culture, and does not necessarily reflect every experience, within or without Western culture. I do agree that several elements in popular culture do have their root in myths, though I would not go as far as to say that myth is necessarily a better tool to arrive at the truth, particularly when we consider Le Guin’s work that depends so much on pseudo-scientific notions. In this sense, Le Guin’s novel resonates with Schrempp’s approach to myth as a “reflexive model” since, as we have seen all the elements of the novel, folkloric or not, coexist and support one another.
What happens, then, with the pseudo-scientific elements in the novel, and what is their connection to myth?\(^6\) The first thing we can note in the definitions of science is that they are usually contrasted or placed in opposition to those of myth. If myth represents falsehood, science represents truth; if myth uses speculation and fantasy, science uses facts and logic; if myth is fiction (a lie), science is truth. Yet, we have seen that no definition adequately or completely defines myth, cross-culturally; they all are “half-truths.” The same is true for science. Although many critics still understand myth and science as opposites, the two share many strategies and ways of proceeding. For instance, Steven Segal notes that “elements at odds with modern science are either removed or, more cleverly, reinterpreted as in fact modern and scientific. Myth is credible scientifically because it is science—modern science . . . what thus remains in myth is true because scientific” (12). Though Segal seems to go to the radical extreme and suggests that myth is a form of science or proto-science (the second mode Schrempp describes, “a continuum model”), what stands out in his analysis is that he constructs a notion of myth that he provides with scientific qualities. However, for my current purposes, I am more interested in the opposite proposition: that science shares the spirit and uses several strategies of myth.

Along these lines, Schrempp turns to an analysis of “popular science writing,” understood as “non-fiction works written by accredited specialists with the aim of

\(^6\) Again, I am aware that not all the tales in the novel can be considered myths, but I will use the term as critics have, to demonstrate the instability of the term and its connection to the concept of science.
presenting scientific theories and findings, and/or general views about the nature and present state of science, in an accessible and appealing way” (*Ancient Mythology* 12). His approach is particularly useful because his discussion of popular science writing, as a genre mostly concerned with the scientific method and facts, emphasizes the many strategies authors use that are derived from fiction and myth. For instance, many of the authors whose popular science writing Schrempp analyzes draw on religious discourse and “try to read specific moral lessons in the structure of the cosmos” (*Ancient Mythology* 230). For example, when analyzing Carl Sagan’s *Pale Blue Dot* (1994), in which Sagan makes an analysis based on the famous photography taken by *Voyager 1*, Schrempp notes the fact that Sagan uses the image to convey an almost religious aura to his reflections on human existence. As Schrempp recounts: “The pale blue Earth dot of the *Voyager* photograph sits in the centre of a shaft of soft luminescence, reminiscent of the heavenly beacon motif found on greeting . . . Mirroring the spatial exchange through which, by standing on the moon, we see Earth objectively (as a thing in motion) for the first time, the distant cosmic source of Sagan’s moral punditry lends to it a God’s-eye omniscience, a kind of objectivity heretofore unavailable to mere mortals” (*Ancient Mythology* 208-9). The religious tone of Sagan’s writing, as described by Schrempp, is both reminiscent of Genly Ai’s poetic turns-of-phrase in his “reports” and a strategy that Sagan used in his famous TV series *Cosmos*. In *Cosmos*, the images used as a background of the show represent the enormity of the universe, compared to our short human existence. Sagan creates a “Cosmic Calendar” through which he extrapolates (in a very science-fictional way), the entire existence of the universe in a single year. In
this sense, Schrempp notes, there “is great variation in the ways that popular science writers deal with religion; they sidestep, wax vague or ethereal, use innuendo, claim non-interference or even broad convergence of scientific findings with religious and/or scriptural ideas, or occasionally blatantly call for the abandonment of certain religious ideas or even religion in general” (Ancient Mythology 224). Jennifer Simkins also shares this notion: “Definitions that regard science as a strictly materialist discourse fail to account for the vast number of scientific thinkers, mathematicians and natural philosophers who have incorporated spiritual notions into their hypotheses” (14).

The scientific method requires a certain level of speculation, a kind of imaginative projection. As Schrempp notes, in order to attract their public, popular science authors frequently use narrative devices that are directly or indirectly linked to myth: “Narrative is an indispensable and basic—perhaps the most basic—vehicle of persuasion. To the extent that popular science writers attempt to infuse science with art, moral values, and/or narrative persuasion, such writers open the door for science to metamorphose into myth” (Ancient Mythology 15). Thus, we can see how science draws on repertoires of stories and poetic devices, which are neither timeless nor universal, in order to make science approachable, relatable, and “real.”

Science fiction engages and troubles a comparable dichotomy in which science and fiction coexist and depend on one another; however, unlike popular science writing, it signals its status as fiction. Nevertheless, popular science writers need both to take advantage of and strive to eliminate “contradictory impulses”: they feel compelled, “on one hand, to leave myth behind; on the other, to strive toward its power, scope, and
appeal. In the struggle between these impulses, we catch a unique glimpse of what humans ‘really want’ from the cosmos” (Ancient Mythology 33). For my current purposes, Schrempp’s analysis resonates with the idea that is clearly expressed in the quote by Sagan in the epigraph to this thesis: “I maintain there is much more wonder in science than in pseudoscience. And, in addition to whatever measure this term has any meaning, science has the additional virtue, and it is not an inconsiderable one, of being true” (9). Sagan’s comment implies that “pseudoscience” (such as myth and science fiction) is false, a notion that is deeply connected to dominant Western understandings of myth.

Le Guin disagrees, and suggests that myths often contain truths; it is this that makes myths relevant in the present. When looking at Chapter 7 of The Left Hand of Darkness, for example, we see that the intradiegetic author, the first investigator, is not only influenced by her perceptions and biases but also uses speculation to arrive at her “scientific” conclusion: “There is evidence to indicate that the Terran Colony was an experiment, the planting of one Hainish Normal group on a world with its own proto-hominid autochthones, the possibility cannot be ignored” (LHD 453). The Investigator’s theory, despite being supported by evidence, is just a possibility, one that can only be reached from a human framework and assumes an understanding of the other which she does not possess (as evinced later by Ai’s comments).

Science fiction, then, recognizes that its “scientific” elements are also fiction. As Bittner notes, “Science fiction, through its estrangement techniques, reminds us that our world, our empirical environment, is not eternally fixed by unalterable scientific law” (20).
Texts like *The Left Hand of Darkness* make evident that “facts” are always seen through and shaped by the lens of our specific cultural paradigms. In many ways, scientific theories occur when a group of individuals agree on a specific paradigm: “As Thomas Kuhn has shown in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, a scientist’s empirical world is constituted by the paradigms he and his colleagues accept, and these paradigms operate only until they are replaced by new paradigms” (Bittner 20). These notions have shaped the understanding of our physical world; however, this is not necessarily reflected linearly through time, as if the progression of human thought has kept on increasing and improving. Science fiction reveals that this is not necessarily true, particularly if the paradigms that sustain the theories are questioned.

For Schrempp, the thread that connects science with fiction, and science fiction with popular science writing, is what he calls the “anthropocentric bias” (*Ancient Mythology* 24). These disciplines and practices center around human experience and wish to answer the same fundamental question: “our endeavor to answer the great philosophical question which embraces all others [...] who are we?” (Bittner xi). Of course, this is not particular to these popular genres; in fact, one could argue that this is the drive behind most Western art and science. However, I wish to note the obsession with which science fiction engages in this process of trying to make sense of humanity through the creation of fictional, yet plausible, scenarios.

This also explains what I think is at the core of *The Left Hand of Darkness* and, according to critics like Adam Roberts, at the center of all science fiction: the Other, or more specifically, what the possibility of the encounter with the Other reveals about
humanity. As Schrempp notes, “As long as there is anything like the enterprise of science, it will construct itself in opposition to a projected ‘other,’ whether that is called folk or something else” (Ancient Mythology 29). In this sense, we can see the commonality that Le Guin appeals to, but I believe it is not one of collective knowledge, but a shared interest in trying to make sense of ourselves and the world around us. This is, ultimately, what the novel is all about: “Like physicists, Le Guin asks questions of nature—the primary question being ‘who are we?’—as she experiments with one of the most elaborate tools human beings have developed, the story, not so much to get an answer as to provoke an Aufhebung that brings into view the first contours of a new and better asking” (Bittner 83). The implication, then, is that scientific discourse and fiction (whether “literature” or traditional narratives) are very similar, though these discursive modes are traditionally conceived as opposites. As Schrempp points out, “there is still an idea that ‘folklore’ epitomizes popular but unexamined ideas about the nature of things, while science denotes research aimed at developing rigorously substantiated explanations; scientific explanation, due to its very nature seeks to displace folkloric explanation, at least as far as literally intended descriptions of the natural world are concerned” (“Folklore and Science” 192).

Le Guin challenges Western conceptions of myth and science to suggest that they are comparable attempts at explaining ourselves, nature, and the reality that we live in: “The story itself is a mediation between the two modes of knowing, the metalanguage that can synthesize seemingly irreconcilable opposites into complementary aspects of the whole. . . ‘The way of art,’ says Le Guin, ‘is … to keep
open the tenuous, difficult, essential connections between the two extremes” (Bittner 65). This connection is ultimately allowed and made evident by Ai’s role as an envoy, but mostly by the many voices that are included in the text. Going back to Bakhtin, “The novel orchestrates all its themes, the totality of the world of objects and ideas depicted and expressed in it, by means of the social diversity of speech types and by the differing individual voices that flourish under such conditions” (263). The reader of The Left Hand of Darkness can only understand the text as a whole because of all the voices and themes contained in it, and even though this is characteristic of the genre of the novel, as Bakhtin notes, Le Guin’s arrangement of these several voices forces the reader to notice them. For instance, in Chapter 18, once the characters are traveling together in the Ice, Ai says: “I told [Estraven] that I was not forbidden, but not expected, to use paraverbal speech on a non-Ally planet, and asked him to keep what he learned from his own people... He assented, and kept his word. He never said or wrote anything concerning our silent conversations” (568). These lines indicate that there are omissions in Estraven’s report; however, in this same chapter, Ai fills those holes with his narration, which in turn references the hearth-tales either directly or thematically. As we saw previously, at this point in the novel the narrations by each of the two main characters overlap with that of the hearth tales, so the reader is obligated to consider all of them.

Finally, we must consider the fact that Genly Ai’s official role as envoy resembles that of an anthropologist or ethnologist. He is not sent to make a study of the indigenous people; that task was assigned to those who came before him. Nevertheless, to be
successful in his quest, Ai needs to understand how Gethenians behave, act, and think. Adopting an ethnographic stance becomes particularly helpful, then, because it allows him to present himself as an expert and an observer, a figure of authority, but also as an everyman. Ai’s “I” is faced with the difficult task of understanding and writing about “the other.” In this way, he may be a prime example of the typical Le Guin hero, someone who is “a visitor to a world other than his own . . . As a student of an alien society, he has responsibilities to his own culture and to the culture he visits; he must sympathize with and participate deeply in both, for it is by the experience and analysis of their differences that he hopes to arrive at a deeper understanding of the nature and possibilities of mind and of social organization” (Huntington 267). Like the reader, Ai has a “divided allegiance,” one that he has to breach to achieve his goal. As John Huntington notes, “In his role of scientist, the anthropologist expects cultural division and has been trained to explore it; but as an individual, he finds his personal attachments exist to an important degree independent of and at times in conflict with his social duty” (268). It is this attachment to Estraven that ultimately allows Ai to achieve his goal of integrating Gethen to the Ekumen. Without him, Ai would have never escaped Orgoreyn, where he was arrested and imprisoned, and he would have never survived the travel through the Ice and reached Karhide. Once Ai is back in the city, he is received as a hero, and is able to make contact with his ship to begin negotiations between Gethen and the Ekumen. However, his success also comes at the cost of Estraven’s sacrifice, making the integration of Gethen to the Ekumen an ideal that Ai no longer shares with his fellow Terrans. Thus, I believe that the ultimate goal of the novel
is not the confrontation of paradigms only for the sake of deconstructing them, but a lesson in the importance of “heteroglossia” to better understand the Other and, in the process, ourselves. I believe this is the driving force in science fiction and will be the subject of the final chapter.
4 Chapter 3: The Other and Ai

Adam Roberts has suggested that the most important function the science fiction’s novum has is to represent the encounter with otherness. He writes, “Encountering the other forces us to encounter ourselves, the way it can reveal things about ourselves which are intensely uncomfortable” (25-27). Science fiction then is a genre that looks to cause discomfort and alienation, so it can then breach that gap, allowing the readers to see themselves from a different perspective. This is a matter that is present in all literature, but it is fundamental to science fiction. The encounter with the other is what allows a deep analysis of human nature, which many critics and writers regard as the genre’s ultimate goal. According to Luz Aurora Pimentel, “when narrating the other, I narrate him from his perspective without having to lose mine; when I read this other I, I appropriate it; the other I resonates as mine would” (102; my translation). This appropriation of the narrated I (or Ai, in this case) allows readers to analyze themselves from a different perspective. In the earlier stages of science fiction, the other was usually represented as a threat; however, as the genre evolved we see that the other is never simply just that, but a representation of our fears as well as ourselves. The encounter with aliens or androids, iconic yet unstable figures in science fiction, allows readers to establish a distance—which may or may not be breached—between themselves and the Other to analyze society, politics, or basic human nature. As Pimentel notes, “to answer ‘who?’ is to tell the story of a lifetime” (100; my translation). Nudelman uses a similar description for Le Guin’s novel, seeing the hero’s quest as one that seeks “unification with ‘the other’. The way to ‘I’ lies through ‘not-I’ through the
realization of his own unity with others and of his opposition to everything that is 'not-I', in other words through Culture. The plot repeats the establishing of Culture, the formation of a human collective” (249).

I would add that Le Guin displaces the attention usually focused on the individual and puts the emphasis on collectivity and heteroglossia. This is why opposites, or concepts which we deem as opposites, are so helpful to Le Guin because by forcing these opposite voices to face each other and converse, the Truth she wants the reader to understand is revealed, even if these different voices are fictions. As Le Guin points out in the introduction to the novel:

Fiction writers, at least in their braver moments, do desire the truth: to know it, speak it, serve it. But they go about it in a peculiar and devious way, which consists in inventing persons, places, and events which never did and never will exist or occur, and telling about these fictions in detail and at length and with a great deal of emotion, and then when they are done writing down this pack of lies, they say, There! That’s the truth! (“Introduction” 1024)

It seems that, to Le Guin, science fiction’s very nature is paradoxical, since it seeks to reveal a truth using “lies” or fiction. This is evident in much of her work; for instance, in “The Word for World is Forest” (1972), the inhabitants of Athshe, the Athsheans, have unique concepts of dream and reality. For them, the realm of dreams is another world, different from the one we call reality, but it is also real. They understand that fact and fiction, reality and dream, are opposites, but they need each other to exist. In *The Left Hand of Darkness*, one of the most powerful binary oppositions challenged by the novel
is that of myth and science. In The Dispossessed, the conflict revolves around socialism and capitalism, as well as permanence and change. Le Guin explores both systems as complementary but indicates that the ultimate success of a society lies in Anarchy.

For a society to be successful there has to be constant criticism of its structures of power. Le Guin evokes oppositions primarily to trouble and subvert them, and this is why in The Left Hand of Darkness she often emphasizes the Gethenian obsession with dualities. It is important to note that the binary thinking in Gethenian society is not based on gender but on other factors such as knowledge, religion, and sex; still, Le Guin makes these elements evident to the readers so they are forced to consider the dualities that permeate Western culture. This is further emphasized by the presence of different voices, which add different perspectives. In this sense, to convey the whole truth of his journey, Genly Ai has to use other narratives than his own. Ultimately, Ai can only succeed thanks to the sense of community that he is forced to develop: as Elizabeth Cummins notes unless Ai “can overcome his prejudice against the ambisexual Gethenians and unless he can understand the alienation the Gethenians feel when confronted with the Ekumen, he cannot establish a personal bond of trust and fidelity with them” (75). Such a bond may be necessary for Ai as an envoy, but it also requires this as a process that is completed through the understanding of cultural difference, as Rafail Nudleman notes: “The way to mankind's unity can only lead through the involvement of an even greater number of ‘others’ in man's ‘I’, through an increasing extension of the boundaries of ‘own’” (249).
As we have seen, Gregory Schrempp highlights the anthropocentric impulse underpinning both popular science writing and myth, and this is very evident and important in science fiction. Ultimately, we write about the Other because we want to learn about ourselves. This is why Ai’s perceptions are so limited. This may appear self-evident, but it also caused Le Guin many problems when *The Left Hand of Darkness* was first published. Several critics disapproved of Le Guin’s disregard of varied sexualities for the Hainish people. When in Kemmer, Getthenian couples adopt either female or male characteristics, making all relationships essentially heterosexual. Le Guin later expressed regret about this artistic choice, but clarified that in Getthenian society there is no need to establish categories for sexual orientation, because there is no understanding of gender. She explains, “One can send an imaginary, but conventional, indeed rather stuffy, young man from Earth into an imaginary culture which is totally free of sex roles because there is no, absolutely no, physiological sex distinction. I eliminated gender to find out what was left. Whatever was left would be, presumably, simply human” (“Is Gender” 1036). This is not to defend Le Guin, but it shows how a social experiment that originates from a simple hypothesis—“if we were socially ambisexual, if men and women were completely and genuinely equal in their social roles, equal legally and economically, equal in freedom, in responsibility, and in self-esteem, then society would be a very different thing” (“Is Gender” 1043)—can reveal much about our prejudices and assumptions of gender and sexuality. In the end, *The Left Hand of Darkness* is not intended to suggest that gender categories are useless, or fluid, or suggest that we will be better off without them in the future. Instead,
Le Guin’s aim seems to be the exploration of how gender was understood and how we understand it now—an issue so relevant that, almost fifty years later, it remains a subject of discussion within and without the context of Le Guin’s work.

In the novel, the first indication of the importance of the encounter with the Other is close to the beginning, when a Gethenian describes the ritual taking place in Karhide to Ai: “Wiping sweat from his dark forehead the man-man I must say, having said he and his—the man answers, ‘Very-long-ago a keystone was always set in with a mortar of ground bones mixed with blood. Human bones, human blood. Without the bloodbond the arch would fall, you see. We use the blood of animals, these days’” (LHD 392). Here there are several aspects worth noting. First, it is difficult for Ai to come to terms with Gethenian physiology. He calls the Gethenian a “man-man” and we can see that, once again, Ai has a hard time assigning pronouns. This nomenclature is the one that the first investigators used to identify Gethenians who were in kemmer. (This is further explained in Chapter 7 of the novel, discussed in the second chapter of this thesis.) It is at this point in the novel that Ai will be the most isolated and, as we have seen, his perceptions were the only ones offered to the reader at this early stage. These perceptions, however, are completely subjective.

Ai has to describe the Gethenians in terms he can understand and explain. He tends to describe characters as male, particularly those who hold positions of power; in fact, in the early stages of the novel he will reserve the female descriptions for moments when he is upset or bothered by the vulnerability of the Gethenians. For example:
My landlady, a voluble man, arranged my journey into the East. He was, as I said, voluble, and having discovered that I had no shifgrethor\(^7\) took every chance to give me advice, though even he disguised it with it’s and as-ifs. He was the superintendent of my island; I thought of him as my landlady, for he had fat buttocks that wagged as he walked, and a soft fat face, and a prying, spying, ignoble, kindly nature. (\textit{LHD} 423)

Here, we can see Ai’s biased view. He thinks of the “landlady” as a woman because of physical appearance, which he deems female, and because of his “prying spying, ignoble, kindly nature,” characteristics he immediately connects with women. However, Ai insists on using the pronoun he, further emphasizing his confusion and frustration. It is important to note that, although Ai has been in Gethen for two years, the novel’s narration begins not at the moment of his arrival, but at the beginning of his transformation. This shows that cross-cultural understanding does not come from knowledge and reason alone, but as Le Guin says, from “the irreducibly personal—the self” (“Myth and Archetype” 66). For Ai to succeed, he must be moved to action, he must leave his characteristic isolation and he has to take his time to live and be among the people of Gethen to understand them. Ai has to change otherwise he cannot succeed or even survive in Gethen.

\(^7\) According to the novel \textit{shifgrethor} is “prestige, face, place, the pride-relationship, the untranslatable and all-important principle of social authority in Karhide and all civilizations of Gethen” (\textit{LHD} 398).
Encounters with the Other, along with the inability to truly and completely understand them, becomes an issue early on, but it also reflects something about Ai himself, as we see in his description of Estraven: “He often speaks, frank yet cautious, ironic, as if always aware that I see and judge as an alien: a singular awareness in one of so isolate a race and so high a rank. He is one of the most powerful men in the country; I am not sure of the proper historical equivalent of his position, vizier or prime minister or councillor” (LHD 392, emphasis added). It is interesting to note that in this first description of Estraven, the “alien” is Ai. He often describes himself as the alien and the Gethenians as humans who look down on him and call him a pervert for being in “permanent kemmer” (LHD 414). His otherness is mostly physiological: his sexual organs are always present, unlike those of the Gethenians, which manifest during kemmer. As Cummins notes about Le Guin’s characters, “Encountering strange cultures, they find themselves being called ‘alien’, or even ‘pervert’. The protagonists must re-examine their own sense of humanness, world and home and are forced to recognize that these aliens are also human” (13). This allows two things to happen: first, it destabilizes the expectations of the reader, who looks to be estranged but instead is aligned with Ai in the position of the Other from the very start. Secondly, it indicates something that the structure of the text already suggests: the connection between Ai and Estraven, or more specifically, the fact that they are in many respects the same character. As Bernard Selinger argues, “Ai and Estraven serve almost identical functions in the plot of the novel; each is an instrument of the other . . . As the narrative progresses, it becomes increasingly obvious that the two are one” (56). As I discussed
in Chapter 1, this is reflected not only in the interactions between these two characters but also suggested in the themes of several of the other folk stories embedded in the structure of the novel itself, where the narrations of Ai and Estraven slowly begin to collapse and blend.

A good example of how Le Guin plays with expectations can be seen in the ceremony that takes place at the beginning of the novel (the inauguration of a bridge): “Death walks behind the king. Behind death come the students of the Artisan Schools, the Colleges, the Trades, and the King’s Hearths, long lines of children and young people in white and red and gold and green; and finally a number of soft-running, slow, dark cars end the parade” (LHD 390). Here, we are tempted to read the line “Death walks behind the King” metaphorically (and it is, in many ways), but we see that Death literally walks behind him as a costumed figure in the procession followed by “The students of the Artisan Schools, the Colleges, the Trades, and the King’s Hearths” (LHD 390). Death, or this representation of Death, is equally metaphorical and literal, real and not. Representation, metaphor, and “reality” are the same from the start, as Ai predicted. He will return to this image towards the end of the novel when he uses the image now metaphorically: “Therefore for the first time it came plainly to me that, my friend being dead, I must accomplish the thing he died for. I must set the keystone in the arch” (600). By referencing a ritual ceremony, Ai demonstrates interest in cultural symbolism and tradition and makes these central to the discourse of the report. This blending of discourses characterizes both characters: Ai, the alien scientist; Estraven, the human anthropologist; and vice versa. What this scene anticipates is that the union
between Ai and Estraven in structural, narrative, metaphorical, and spiritual terms is also the union between science and fiction.

While the novel achieves a kind of structural coherence by returning to tropes introduced early on, the narrative core of Ai’s journey focuses on his increasing isolation. Ai’s isolation plays an important part in his transformation. As George Slusser observes, “The theme of roots and rootlessness is central to Le Guin’s work” (qt. in White 57), and this is certainly true in *The Left Hand of Darkness*. This allows the transition from the form of the report to that of personal narrative. Le Guin emphasizes the importance of knowing multiple perspectives before attempting to understand the Other, —in this case, the Gethenians; however, Ai does not arrive at this understanding willingly. As we see, it is not contact alone with another culture that forces Ai to try to understand them, but necessity. This is something that, as an envoy, he understands and shares with Estaven at the climax of the novel, when they are fighting to survive the cold: “Alone, I cannot change your world. But I can be changed by it. Alone, I must listen, as well as speak. Alone, the relationship I finally make, if I make one, is not impersonal and not only political: it is individual, it is personal, it is both more and less than political. Not We and They; not I and It; but I and Thou. Not political, not pragmatic, but mystical” (*LHD* 578).

This is additionally connected to the geography of the planet itself (see Figure 4). As the first investigator notes in Chapter 7,

The weather on Winter is so relentless, so near the limit of tolerability even to them with all their cold-adaptations, that perhaps they use their fighting spirit
fighting the cold. The marginal peoples, the races that just get by, are rarely the warriors. And in the end, the dominant factor in Gethenian life is not sex or any other human being: it is their environment, their cold world. Here man has no cruelest enemy even than himself. (*LHD* 458)

Ai's exposure to the environment of the planet forces him to abandon his isolation and depend on Estraven. Only at this point, can he establish this personal and "mystical" connection and he begins to understand Estraven and his intentions, along with his vision of a united Gethen. This is relevant because, as I have said, Ai's true journey does not start at the beginning of his arrival in Winter; in fact, when the novel begins, Ai has already spent a certain amount of time with the Gethenians, living amongst them and learning their culture. As Selinger says, "The novel has barely begun before we encounter boundaries. ‘The palace of Erhenrang is an inner-city, a walled wilderness . . . Over it all rise the grim, red, elaborate walls of the Royal House’ . . . It becomes quite apparent that Genly Ai's experience on the planet has to do with barriers and boundaries" (52-3). Once again, space plays an important part in the novel. In this case, the palace walls are a reflection of the King himself, a solitary and paranoid person, hiding behind the walls of his palace. However, as Selinger notes, it also has to do with Ai's experience and, at this point in particular, with his inability to see beyond the borders and boundaries he has constructed between himself and the Gehtenians. Thus, the novel begins at this point because once Estraven is forced to go into exile, Ai becomes a pawn in a political game he does not fully understand. His connection with Estraven makes him dangerous, and so, to avoid conflict, he decides to go out of the
city, into the Ice. This will be the first time he will truly have to face the cold, and he will become completely dependent on the kindness of the locals to survive. It is also at this point that he inserts the first hearth-tale, “The Place inside the Blizzard”.

It is important to point out how much the setting of the tale has an impact on how we understand the story. Because of the cold, Gethenians live in very isolated houses and seem to be private people. Besides, the distances between villages are enormous, and once out of the subterranean cities, there is almost no one Ai can talk to. These elements are all present in “The Place inside the Blizzard” where we see, for the first time, the importance that ice and cold have in Gethenian culture when Getheren goes into the Ice:

For two days he walked northward on the Ice. He had no food with him, nor shelter but his coat. On the Ice nothing grows and no beasts run. It was the month of Susmy and the first great snows were falling those days and nights. He went alone through the storm. On the second day he knew he was growing weaker. On the second night he must lie down and sleep a while. On the third morning waking he saw that his hands were frostbitten, and found that his feet were too, though he could not unfasten his boots to look at them, having no use left of his hands. (LHD 405)

This tale, beyond its metaphorical meaning, is also a powerful representation of the crudeness of the landscape, which Ai is about to experience. Once again, the placement of this hearth-tale is no accident, for it precedes Ai’s trip into the colder
regions of Gethen, and it anticipates Chapter 15, “To the Ice,” when he and Estraven go through the Ice escaping Orgoreyn persecution.

Figure 3: Le Guin’s mapping of the different regions in Gethen.

Isolation represents an obstacle, but it is precisely what drives the plot forward: “Each of Le Guin’s protagonists, then, although cut-off from his or her respective society and often cherishing that isolation or separation, manifests itself in a striving for union with some personal, private other” (Selinger 151). The novel seems to indicate that community is a process that occurs through the understanding of culture, but that such an understanding can only come at a price—pain: “Nothing is more personal, more unshareable, than pain; the worst thing about suffering is that you suffer alone. Yet,
those who have not suffered, or will not admit that they suffer, are those who are cut off in cold isolation from their fellow men. Pain, the loneliest experience, gives rise to sympathy, to love: the bridge between self and other, the means of communion” (“Myth and Archetype” 66). Ai needs to suffer in the process of his transformation, and, in the end, he has to face the loss of his narrative counterpart.

Finally, this all leads to the tragic end of the novel, when Estraven dies. This separation, though shocking, is foreshadowed in the hearth-tales. For instance, in the “The Place inside the Blizzard,” the protagonist's brother and lover kills himself, which forces the protagonist to go into exile. Before dying, he narrates his journey into the Ice, and it is one that resembles Estraven's journey. Similarly, the hearth tale of “Estraven the Traitor” recounts the union of two nations as a consequence of the death and sacrifice of one of the protagonists. After Estraven's death at the end of the novel, Ai has been transformed and we can see the result of merging the voices of the protagonists, as Ai contemplates the possibility that Estraven may have committed suicide. He realizes that such an act is incomprehensible to Gethenians, not an option, “It is the abdication from option, the act of betrayal itself. To a Karhider reading our canons, the crime of Judas lies not in his betrayal of Christ but in the act that, sealing despair, denies the chance of forgiveness, change, life: his suicide” (598). This is not the first time in the novel suicide is mentioned; however, it is the first time that Ai contemplates and explores the notion from the Gethenian point of view without the aid of a hearth-tale. The pain he expresses for having lost his friend also shows that he has achieved his purpose as an envoy. The knowledge and cultural understanding that Ai
shows at the end of the novel is much deeper than that possessed at the beginning—a knowledge that the reader now shares. In the quote above, Ai is still making an important distinction between “these people” and “us,” but he is also able to draw a parallel with the Bible, specifically to the figure of Judas. With this mythical reference, he can consider how Gethenians would interpret it, trying to adopt their vision.

At the end of the novel, the panorama we have of Gethen is much clearer, and yet, it remains incomplete. Ai can understand Gethenians almost perfectly, and now, he is the Other, in relation to his own people. This is clear when Ai receives his fellow human Envoys. The first person to come out of the ship is Lang Heo Hew, a female passenger who:

Took my right hand in the fashion of my people, looking into my face. “Oh Genly,” she said, “I didn’t know you!” It was strange to hear a woman’s voice, after so long. The others came out of the ship, on my advice: evidence of any mistrust at this point would humiliate the Karhidish escort, impugning their shifgrethor. Out they came, and met the Karhiders with a beautiful courtesy. But they all looked strange to me, men and women, well as I knew them. (LHD 605)

Ai’s discomfort is evident and it mimics the one he felt at the beginning of the novel, though this time he reacts to the unfamiliarity of other humans; his understanding of shifgrethor, and Gethenian culture in general, has changed. This puts him in a strange in-betweenness; he is not Gethenian, but he is not human either. It is precisely this indeterminacy that Le Guin aims for. She recognizes that in the Other, we will find ourselves, and yet we cannot truly become "them." It is, from this perspective, in this
constant tension between Ai and Them, science and fiction, where the true human endeavor lies. This is an endeavour that is meant to be repeated, like Ai’s story, though in different terms, and by different agents, who are incidentally, the same. As Le Guin herself points out, “Our curse is alienation, the separation of yang from yin [and the moralization of yang as good, of yin as bad]. Instead of a search for balance and integration, there is a struggle for dominance” (“Is Gender” 1043). At the end of the novel, Ai will try to correct his mistakes by perpetuating and continuing the Gethenian tradition, sharing Estraven’s notes and his story with his son. He calls this task “a fool’s errand,” but it seems to be Le Guin’s final lesson to the reader:

‘The king will recant. Therem was no traitor. What does it matter what fools call him?’ The old lord nodded slowly, smoothly. ‘It matters,’ he said. ‘You crossed the Gobrin Ice together,’ Sorve demanded, ‘you and he?’ ‘We did.’ ‘I should like to hear that tale, my Lord Envoy,’ said old Esvans, very calm. But the boy, Therem’s son, said stammering, ‘Will you tell us how he died? Will you tell us about the other worlds out among the stars—the other kinds of men, the other lives?’ (LHD 608)

Stories, regardless of their origin, whether they are framed culturally as fiction or not, matter because they are valuable devices that allow us to reveal something about ourselves. Le Guin shows that this is a tool that we all need, or at least, one that we can all share, regardless of how the world changes.
5 Conclusions: The Other and Ai

In this thesis, I examined the structure of Le Guin’s most iconic novel to show how she overlaps different genres to engage in a conversation about the dichotomy between science and fiction. In the end, what this allows is another way of approaching the notion of the Other, which is so important to science fiction. By analyzing the structure, themes and particular characteristics of *The Left Hand of Darkness* I hope to have shown that the novel has more to offer than an opportunity to discuss the ever-changing issues of gender and sexuality. I wanted to highlight another of the many dualities Le Guin hides within the novel, that between science and myth/folklore/literature, to show how Le Guin’s work remains relevant. These dichotomies are ever-changing and in our current post-post-modern world, I believe it is worthwhile to go back to the dialogues Le Guin established between these ideas, since the boundaries between what is real or not, what is science and what is fiction, are more fickle than ever.

Finally, let us go back to the matter of science versus fiction and the two epigraphs of this thesis. What I hoped was perceived as two distinct points of view, those of Le Guin and Sagan, should be considered complementary notions. I believe both writers understand that truth is something that cannot simply be revealed, but that it requires a process, an experiment; however, the process itself does not necessarily have to be scientific. What I wanted to show is not that one epistemological model, scientific or not, is more accurate or a better way to reveal the truth, but that truth itself is not something stable or fixed; this, however, does not make it less true. Science fiction, as a genre that represents these contradictions, allowed Le Guin to explore the many dualities and
concepts she presents in her novel in a way that hadn’t been explored before within the genre. As Bickman notes, such insights are embodied in Le Guin’s fiction because she transmits her ideas not only through the use of a narrative or story, but also by using and subverting time and linearity, and by combining voices, genres, genders, science, and folklore. Other science fiction writers: “have created artistic visions that demonstrate our common-sense view of the world is merely an artificial construct, created primarily by language and other cultural preconceptions. Le Guin herself has spoken explicitly about this situation but, more importantly, embodies these insights in her fiction” (Bickman 4). The fact that multiple genres can coexist in a single text and cohere as a single story is due to the “paradoxical” nature of science fiction, which allows it to play with the boundaries of what is real and what is fictional. In this sense, Le Guin’s novel shows that the apparently “hard” scientific logic of science fiction does not have to be hard or even scientific; it just has to appear to be so: “There! That’s the Truth” (“Introduction” 1024).

One can see Le Guin’s body of science fictional stories, particularly those of the Hainish Cycle, as a clear extension of Le Guin’s ideas on literature, science, politics, and, particularly, humanity. In this she seems to deviate from science fiction writers for whom the "Alien, the Extra-Terrestrial, the other, remains most often an enemy” (Klein 313). One can see how Le Guin deviates from the idea of the inevitability (and fear) of plurality, in her insistence on unity, but unity that also respects and preserves the singularities of every culture. Le Guin insists on empathy and kindness over violence, and mostly she asks for balance. Still, it is important to question the fact that Le Guin
bases her notions of myth on authors that also believe in universality, but who often do not see beyond Western culture and standards. In this, Le Guin does not seem to deviate from pre-established notions of myth, even when she does subvert and question many traditionally Western and masculine concepts such as the traditional form of the Utopia: “[It] has been euclidean, it has been European, and it has been masculine . . . Utopia has been yang. In one way or another, from Plato on, utopia has been the big yang motorcycle trip. Bright, dry, clear, strong, firm, active, aggressive, lineal, progressive, creative, expanding, advancing and hot” (Le Guin qt. in Rochelle 79).
Nonetheless, even if her utopias are subversive and break from the authors of the golden era, she uses the same framework they use to present her stories. *The Left Hand of Darkness* can be read in a way that recognizes that boundaries between cultures exist, and that, even when we try to apprehend and understand the other, we will always be limited by our particular framework. The text emphasizes the importance of collectivity, but also the need for heteroglossia in narrative.

I want to address two more questions: Can science fiction be considered myth? And is science another form of fiction? First, some authors have suggested that science fiction can be considered myth. *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* states that one of the main functions of myth is to “express collective attitudes to fundamental matters of life, death, divinity, and existence” (Baldick 217). This perspective suggests that conceptions of myth may change and evolve through time, but myth’s general structure and intention remain the same. Drawing on Baldick’s definition, Herco Steyn argues, in his thesis *Protean Deities: Classical Mythology in John Keats’s “Hyperion Poems” and*
Dan Simmons’s Hyperion and The Fall of Hyperion, which we can analyze the changes in popular genres like science fiction to see how our own beliefs and perceptions have changed throughout history. Science fiction and myth may share an impulse to express "collective attitudes," but there are many important generic differences between them. We can, however, see how science fiction and popular science draw strategies and elements from myth to convey similar ideas.

Le Guin herself addresses this question: "Science fiction is the mythology of the modern world." It is a good slogan and a useful one when you are faced with people ignorant and contemptuous of science fiction, for it makes them stop and think. But like all slogans, it is a half-truth; when used carelessly, as a whole truth, it can cause all kinds of confusion" (“Myth and Archetype” 61). As usual, Le Guin presents us with a paradox: Science fiction is myth, but it is not, just as science is myth and myth is science. Similarly, I do not think we can say that science is a form of myth per se, since it also has characteristics of its own that make it distinct from fiction; however, it does use elements from fiction to create its own narratives. Ultimately, I believe that, though these are important questions, they are not necessarily the right ones. In terms of genre, one can structurally see the similarities, differences, and overall purposes of all genres, but what matters, in the end, is how these tools are used to convey ideas, and how these ideas affect our way of understanding the world.

8 Once again we see that many authors who work with myth have accepted Jung’s notion of collective knowledge as a given.
Finally, this thesis has explored a perspective that can be added to the many that have been written about this particular novel, but mostly I hope to make the reader see that texts are not immutable or timeless. Like genres, they change through time. That is the case of science fiction, which, like myth, has had to evolve in order to keep itself alive and relevant, like a parasite. This is one of the things that make the genre so attractive, since it renews itself by using everything it has available, bringing new life to old concepts. Then, though many narratives in science fiction have moved from the novel to different formats, such as television and videogames, we can still see many elements that were brought about by authors like Le Guin, and that remain relevant to science fiction writers today. However, we cannot venture into exploring these new frontiers without going back to the icons of the genre and decide what is worth saving and what must be left behind. In the case of Le Guin, I think there is still much to preserve and learn from her work, at least until we can no longer connect with, see, understand, or believe the Truths that she imagined for us.
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