

Science Fiction as Literature: Ursula Le Guin

Dr. Alan Haffa



What is Science Fiction

<http://www.magicdragon.com/UltimateSF/thisthat.html#sfdef>

- "By 'science fiction' I mean the Jules Verne, H.G. Wells and Edgar Allan Poe type of story -- a charming romance intermingled with scientific fact and prophetic vision." -- Hugo Gernsback, in "Amazing Stories" (April 1926)
- "Science fiction is that branch of literature that deals with human responses to changes in the level of science and technology." -- [Isaac Asimov](#), in "Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine" (Mar-Apr 1978)

Types of Science Fiction

- Prophecy and Extrapolation—set in near future they extrapolate from today's social and technological reality to envision the future
- Philosophical: Uses alternative reality (different worlds or times) to explore ideas.
- The Dispossessed is a Philosophical novel that explores various social arrangements as a way to reflect upon the positive and negative in Capitalism and Socialism
- Utopia and Dystopia

Typical Plot contrivances in Science Fiction

- Disasters: An asteroid about to destroy earth;
Nuclear Devastation;
- Alien Invasion: H.G. Wells, "*War of the Worlds*"
- Faster than light travel: allows for interstellar drama
- Time Travel: H.G. Wells "*The Time Machine*";
Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure; *Back to the Future*
- Alternate History: Philip Dick, *Man in the High Castle*, Germans and Japanese won WW II

Biography of Ursula Le Guin (1929-)

- Born in Berkeley, Ca
- Radcliffe BA; Columbia, MA
- Married in 1953; three children
- First published in 1960s
- Four Nebula Awards
- Five Hugo Awards



Major Works: Ursula K. Leguin

- *Earth Sea Trilogy*: Children's books; wizards and adventure in an archipelago; Taoist symbolism (good magic is in harmony with Nature)
- *Left Hand of Darkness* (1969; Hugo and Nebula Awards)
- *The Dispossessed* (1974) is a new attempt at utopia; attempts to depict an anarchist society, inspired by Paul Goodman. Contrasts two worlds: one an anarchist world (Anarres) and one a capitalist world (Urras); The anarchist world of Anarres emphasizes sharing, volunteerism, and tolerance, but it is poor and uncouth compared to its wealthier neighbor world.

Observations on LeGuin

- LeGuin takes advantage of SF's other worlds to imagine different types of social order;
- We all know that Gender has shaped our civilization; Le Guin is able to take advantage of the creative freedom offered by SF to imagine a world where Gender and Sex are different
- Other female SF writers will go further and imagine Matriarchal Societies (Pamela Sargent, *The Shore of Women*, 1986)

Left Hand of Darkness : How Gender Shapes Society

- The Ekumen is a collective of 83 worlds
- Genly Ai is sent as an ambassador to Hain, a planet where it is always winter; Gender there is non-specific; people assume a gender only once a month when they are fertile, and their gender varies depending upon their circumstances
- Perhaps as a result of this androgynous sexuality, Hain experiences no War; However, civilization progress is slower, perhaps as a result of less sexual frustration being redirected
- In place of sexual identity, shifrethgor, a practice of verbal argument, developed
- Hain is a world without our contrasts and dichotomies; Le Guin imagines a world where “Light is the left hand of Darkness...”

Plot Summary: The Dispossessed

- Life on Annares, Anarchist
- Urras: A-Io (capitalistic) and Thu (Totalitarian)
- Shevek separated from his wife and child
- Value of science in a subsistence economy
- The threat of his ideas of Simultaneity and Sequency
- Journey to Urras: Attempt to buy his ideas; Escape back with the help of Aliens who share his ideas with everyone

How to deal with Non-Conformers

- There are no prisons but there is social exile
- Shevek discovers that while there are no rules, if you don't do what society expects you will be shunned.
- Egoizing—putting yourself and your personal needs above society's would be seen as a vice

How “Government” works in an Anarchy

- Syndicates: groups of people who organize to perform some special project
- Federatives: Agencies that coordinate essential work like food production
- One must work but the work they do is “ostensibly” up to them
- You put in your name to the federative and they send you where someone with your skills are needed. You can go wherever you want of course
- Power is supposed to be decentralized, but even in Annares corruption destroys this principle

“Who does the dirty work?”

- On Urras a wealthy wife asks Shevek about life on Annares and “who does the dirty work?”
- Shevek: “Well, we all do them. But nobody has to do them for very long, unless he likes the work. One day in each decad the community management committee or the block committee or whoever needs you can ask you to join in such work; they make rotating lists. Then the disagreeable work postings, or dangerous ones like the mercury mines and mills, normally they’re for one half year only.”
- P. 120-121

Why do people do the dirty work?

- They find it a diversion from their everyday work
- It is part of being apart of their community
- “And then there is challenge. Here you think that the incentive to work is the finances, need for money or desire for profit, but where there’s no money the real motives are clearer, maybe. People like to do things. They like to do them well. People take the dangerous, hard jobs because they take pride in doing them, they can—egoize, we call it—show off?—to the weaker ones...A person likes to do what he is good at doing...But really it is a question of ends and means. After all, work is done for the work’s sake. It is the lasting pleasure of life. The private conscience knows that. And also the social conscience, the opinion of one’s neighbors...
- One’s own pleasure and the good opinion of their neighbor’s is the main reason people work on Annares

What if someone won't work at all?

- “Well, he moves on. The others get tired of him, you know. They make fun of him, or they get rough with him, beat him up; in a small community they might agree to take his name off the meals listing, so he has to cook and eat all by himself; that is humiliating. So he moves on...Nuchnibi, they're called.

Sabul

- Leader of the Scientist syndicate
- In order to do science Shevek must join this syndicate.
- In order to publish the leader of the syndicate must co-publish. Technically, this is not the case, but practically it is.
- Shortage of Paper
- Practical research valued over theoretical; so allies are needed

Deal with Sabul like a Capitalist Profiteer

- “So they had bargained, he and Sabul, bargained like profiteers. It had not been a battle, but a sale. You give me this and I’ll give you that. Refuse me and I’ll refuse you. Sold? Sold! Shevek’s career, like the existence of his society, depended on the continuance of a fundamental, un-admitted profit contract. Not a relationship of mutual aid and solidarity, but an exploitative relationship; not organic, but mechanical. Can true function arise from basic dysfunction?”

Justice or Violence?

- If Shevek goes to Urras and tries to come back he will “meet with justice.”
- His comrade in Syndicate of Initiative says: “You don’t mean justice, you mean punishment. Do you think they’re the same thing?”
- Rulag, who opposes the Opening: “He means violence, and if this is violence, you will have caused it. You and your Syndicate. And you will have deserved it.”

Philosophy of Odo

- Quoted by a member of Miner syndicate when debating the Opening of Contact with Urras: “For we each of us deserve everything, every luxury that was piled in the tombs of the dead kings, and we each of us deserve nothing, not a mouthful of bread in hunger. Have we not eaten while another starved? Will you punish us for that? Will you reward us for the virtue of starving while others ate? No man earns punishment, no man earns reward. Free your mind of the idea of *deserving*, the idea of *earning*, and you will begin to be able to think.”

Freedom or Safety?

- Shevek: “what we’re after is to remind ourselves that we didn’t come to Annares for safety, but for freedom. If we must all agree, all work together, we’re no better than a machine. If an individual can’t work in solidarity with his fellows, it’s his duty to work alone. His duty and his right. We have been denying people that right. We’ve been saying, more and more often, you must work with the others, you must accept the rule of the majority. But any rule is tyranny. The duty of the individual is to accept no rule, to the initiator of his own acts, to be responsible.” p. 288

Freedom on Annares is Limited by the Environmental Conditions of Existence

- The need to dig trenches for irrigation or to harvest crops is more immediate than theoretical physics
- So a physicist like Shevek finds it difficult to do his work and society, not the government per se, expects him to do physical labor in order to help everyone survive
- Peer pressure versus the “command economy” of the USSR keeps order and limits freedom.

Annares contrasted with Urras

- “You Urrasti have enough. Enough air, enough rain, grass, oceans, food, music, buildings, factories, machines, books, clothes, history. You are rich, you own. We are poor, we lack...Everything is beautiful here. Only not the faces...We have nothing but that, nothing but each other. Here you see the jewels, there you see the eyes. And in the eyes you see the splendor, the splendor of the human spirit. Because our men and women are free—possessing nothing, they are free. And you the possessors are possessed. You are all in jail. Each alone, solitary, with a heap of what he owns. You live in prison, die in prison. It is all I can see in your eyes...” p. 184

Women as property? Prostitutes?

- While out with Veia, a wife of another scientist
- “He had not enough money to pay for the dinner, but Veia made no offer to share the cost, merely suggesting that he write a check, which he did. They then took a hired car to Veia’s apartment; she also let him pay the driver. Could it be, he wondered, that Veia was actually a prostitute...? But Veia was not poor; “her” party...”her” cook, “her” maid, and “her” caterer...
- All the expensive clothes, jewelry, and make-up seem to him like the trappings of a prostitute. She appears bought and owned and like a desired object that is possessed, she must be beautiful.

Monogamy and Anarchy

- Veia likes the idea of anarchy as freedom from rules, morality, and religion
- Shevek is thrilling to her as a “free thinker”
- But when he makes a pass at her she is upset at her “reputation” and repulses him.
- In contrast, sex on Annares is not about promiscuity, per se. It happens but there is monogamy and Odo promoted monogamy.
- “An Odonian undertook monogamy just as he might undertake a joint enterprise in production, a ballet or a soap works. Partnership was a voluntarily constituted institution and a function. It had no sanction but that of private conscience.”

Social Evolution

- Evolution is not about the survival of the fittest individual—but of the species.
- The fittest species is the one that cooperates best
- Being social and ethical is an evolutionary advantage
- (177)

Speech to Revolutionaries

- Shevek escapes the university and finds a group of union protestors and anarchists
- He speaks: “We have nothing but our freedom. We have nothing to give you but your own freedom. We have no law but the single principle of mutual aid between individuals. We have no government but the single principle of free association. We have no states, no nations, no presidents, no premiers, no chiefs, no generals, no bosses, no bankers, no soldiers, no wars. Nor do we have much else. We are sharers, not owners...None of us is rich. None of us is powerful.” 241

Conclusions

- SF gives fictional writers the freedom to imagine societies and worlds that are radically different from our reality
- In imagining these worlds, SF writers are typically most concerned with critiquing aspects of our own civilization.
- SF writers help us begin to assimilate new technology and help us to imagine normally unimagined ways to structure society
- Ursula Le Guin has shown us the mechanisms of an Anarchist society as well as the dangers of centralized bureaucracy on the one hand, and the cultural and moral bankruptcy of uncontrolled capitalism on the other.