# Joanna Russ When It Changed Afterword

I find it hard to say anything about this story. The first few paragraphs were dictated to me in a thoughtful, reasonable, whispering tone I had never heard before; and once the Daemon had vanished ─they always do─ I had to finish the thing by myself and in a voice not my own. The premise of the story needs either a book or silence. I'll try to compromise. It seems to me (in the words of the narrator) that sexual equality has not yet been established on Earth and that (in the words of GBS) the only argument that can be made against it is that it has never been tried. I have read SF stories about manless worlds before; they are either full of busty girls in wisps of chiffon who slink about writhing with lust (Keith Laumer wrote a charming, funny one called “The War with the Yukks”), or the women have set up a static, bee-like-society in imitation of some presumed primitive matriarchy. These stories are written by men. Why women who have been alone for generations should “instinctively” turn their sexual desires toward persons of whom they have only intellectual knowledge, or why female people are presumed to have an innate preference for Byzantine rigidity, I don't know. “Progress” is one of the scared cows of SF, so perhaps the latter just goes to show that although women can run a society by themselves, it isn't a good one. This is flattering to men, I suppose. Of SF attempts to depict real matriarchies (“He will be my concubine for tonight,” said the Empress of Zar coldly) it is better not to speak. I remember one very good post-bomb story by an English writer (another static society, with the Magna Mater literally and supernaturally in existence) but on the whole we had better just tiptoe past the subject. In my story I have used assumptions that seem to me obviously true. One of them is the idea that almost all the characterological sex differences we take for granted are in fact learned and not innate. I do not see how anyone can walk around with both eyes open and both halves of his/her brain functioning and not realize this. Still, the mythology persists in SF, as elsewhere, that women are naturally gentler than men, that they are naturally less creative than men, or less intelligent, or shrewder, or more cowardly, or more dependent, or more self-centered, or more self-sacrificing, or more materialistic, or shyer, or God knows what, whatever is most convenient at the moment. True, you can make people into anything. There are matrons of fifty so domesticated that any venture away from home is a continual flutter: where's the No Smoking sign, is it on, how do I fasten my seat belt, oh dear can you see the stewardess, she's serving the men first, they always do, isn't it awful. And what's so fascinating about all this was that the strong, competent “male” to whom such a lady in distress turned for help recently was Carol Emshwiller. Wowie, zowie, Mr. Wizard! This flutteriness is not “femininity” (something men are always so anxious women will lose) but pathology. It's men who get rapturous and yeasty about the wonderful mystery of Woman, lovely Woman (this is getting difficult to write as I keep imagining my reader to be the George-Georgina of the old circuses: half-bearded, half-permanent waved). There are few women who go around actually feeling: Oh, what a fascinating feminine mystery am I. This makes it clear enough, I think, which sex (in general) has the higher prestige, the more freedom, the more education, the more money, in Sartre's sense which is subject and which is object. Every role in life has its advantages and disadvantages, of course; a fiery feminist student here at Cornell recently told an audience that a man who acquires a wife acquires a “lifelong slave” (fierce look) while the audience justifiably giggled and I wondered how I'd ever been inveigled into speaking on a program with such a lack wit. I also believe, like the villain of my story, that human beings are born with instincts (though fuzzy ones) and that being physically weaker than men and having babies makes a difference. But it makes less and less of a difference now. Also, the patriarchal society must have considerable survival value. I suspect that it is actually more stable (and more rigid) than the primeval matriarchal societies hypothesized by some anthropologists. I wish somebody knew. To take only one topic: it seems clear that if there is to be a sexual double standard, it must be one we know and not the opposite; male potency is too biologically precious to repress. A society that made its well-bred men impotent, as Victorian ladies were made frigid, would rapidly become an unpeopled society. Such things ought to be speculated about. Meanwhile, my story. It did not come from this lecture, of course, but vice versa. I had read a very fine SF novel, Ursula Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*, in which all the characters are humanoid hermaphrodites, and was wondering at the obduracy of the English language, in which everybody is “he” or “she” and “it” is reserved for typewriters. But how can one call a hermaphrodite “he,” as Miss LeGuin does? I tried (in my head) changing all the masculine pronouns to feminine ones, and marveled at the difference. And then I wondered why Miss Le Guin's native “hero” is male in every important sexual encounter of his life except that with the human man in the book. Weeks later the Daemon suddenly whispered, “Katy drives like a maniac,” and I found myself on Whileaway, on a country road at night. I might add (for the benefit of both the bearded and unbearded sides of the reader's cerebrum) that I never write to shock. I consider that as immoral as writing to please. Katharina and Janet are respectable, decent, even conventional people, and if they shock you, just think what a copy of Playboy or Cosmopolitan would do to them. Resentment of the opposite sex (Cosmo is worse) is something they have yet to learn, thank God. Which is why I visit Whileaway although I do not live there because there are no men there. And if you wonder about my sincerity in saying that, George-Georgina, I must just give you up as hopeless.