As Americans, we pride ourselves on our freedom of expression and press, but as time goes on we see more and more of those freedoms being limited by others. What we say and do is under constant judgement by our peers and our superiors. Many of our thoughts are silenced because of society’s taboos. Although no solution is clear, prominent author and poet Ursula K. Le Guin envisions, in her book *The Dispossessed (1974),* a planet calledAnarres, on which everyone’s needs are met through cooperation and no governmental coercion exists. Anarres has no concept of money or government; when its citizens need something, they can simply walk into a depository and take what is needed. On Anarres lives a somewhat misfit physicist named Shevek who grows up with the deeply engrained Anarresti values of mutual aid and free association. As Shevek prospers with his discoveries in physics, he decides to go to the capitalistic planet Urras to exchange ideas, but is faced with a clash of ideologies that fundamentally changes his view of reality. By comparing the realities of supposedly opposite settings, developing the character of a true revolutionary and using symbolism to draw parallels between fantasy and reality, Ursula K. Le Guin inspires her readers to believe in permanent revolution, teaching them that no matter the time or place, there must always be a fight to uphold the ideal.

Before we can truly understand Le Guin’s message, we must understand the world in which her story takes place. She begins the book describing two worlds, Urras and Anarres, as stark opposites. Urras is a civilization much like our Earth. It has nations of all types: A-Io is capitalistic, Thu is socialistic, and Benbili is always in a state of civil unrest. Anarres is the moon of Urras, settled by revolutionaries from A-Io a hundred and seventy years before this story takes place. Odo, the leader of these revolutionaries, wrote the theory for the Anarresti society while imprisoned for activism. The differences between the capitalistic A-Io and anarchist Anarres are seemingly black and white. On A-Io, individuals must work to survive, whereas on Anarres, work is voluntary and anyone is free to do anything they like as long as it does not hurt others. On A-Io, one can only obtain resources with money, but on Anarres, resources are shared. Anarresti children are taught the Odonian ideology: how one should help others and how one is free to associate with any group, while Urrasti children are taught, if they have the wealth for schooling, how to produce as much capital as possible.

While the beginning of the book suggests that these two settings are complete opposites, Le Guin reveals throughout the novel that they are not so different after all, and she does so through the main character, Shevek. Shevek is a somewhat misfit physicist who grew up with the Odonian ideals deeply engrained within him. A true thinker, he spends his life working in an abstract field called chronosophy, which combines two conflicting theories of time as well as ethics. His work brings him to Abbenay, the largest city on Anarres and his experiences there fundamentally change his view of reality. In Abbenay, Shevek joins the Institute of Physics and writes many groundbreaking theories but his coworker, Sabul, steals the credit. His work is looked down upon as something that has no real use and is pressured by everyone in the Institute to drop it. Living in a larger city, he is exposed to a larger number of people and hears their lamentations about where they were posted for work by the PDC, the organization that coordinates labor. Salas, a musician is constantly posted to outdoor labor despite his requests to join a music syndicate because the syndicates don’t like his style of composing. What worries him the most, however is the general reluctance to refuse a PDC assignment. Anyone can refuse a PDC assignment, but everyone feels as if there is a social pressure to accept the position, regardless of if they desire to do it. He sees this with his partner, Takver, as well. She was posted to work halfway across the planet from him and accepted out of social pressure. By giving examples of broken Odonian principle and narrating Shevek’s inner thoughts about how the Odonian ideal of free association, Le Guin shows the reader that the utopia she described earlier is only in theory, and that reality is much different. After establishing the conflict through narration and exemplification, Le Guin gets to the point: revolution is the only solution. Shevek decides that the only way to return Anarres back to the Odonian society it was supposed to be is by doing something that everyone disapproved of. Shevek decides to go to Urras and exchange ideas with the physicists of A-Io. The people of Urras, however, view him as a traitor, sharing with proprietarians. This brought massive debate and even mob action to the Anarresti people, but solidified the Odonian virtue that everyone is free.

While Le Guin’s message was apparent in her story set on Anarres, the beauty of the novel is how the same story is told while Shevek is on Urras. The novel’s chapters themselves are alternating in setting and time. In the even numbered chapters, the story takes place on Anarres, while the odd numbered chapters take place on Urras. Once on Urras, Shevek is attended to by Pae, showered with respect, covered by the newspapers, housed in the finest of hotels and is shown the marvels of Urrasti architecture and nature. However, Shevek is hidden away from the ugly. He is carefully kept from the residential and industrial areas, thus a poor man is never in sight. Shevek is like Gautama Buddha and Pae is like his father, afraid that the sight of a poor man would cause him to leave, rendering A-Io without the powerful theory Shevek is developing. Just as Buddha’s father had failed, Pae made the mistake of lowering his guard. Pae appointed a poor man from the industrial district named Efor to be Shevek’s manservant. Realizing the Iotic simply want his theories to use for their capitalistic agendas, Shevek escaped to meet the underprivileged of A-Io with the help of Efor. While Buddha left to find the solution to suffering, Shevek already knew they answer: Odonianism. Shevek staged a revolution in the industrial district of A-Io, inspiring the poor to revolt and fight for their rights. His speech captured the essence of Le Guin’s message, “You cannot buy the Revolution. You cannot make the Revolution. You can only be the Revolution. It is in your spirit, or it is nowhere.” By showing the revolution in both Anarres and Urras together, intertwined between chapters, Le Guin draws a clear parallel between them. She shows the reader that no matter where one lives, be it in a utopian idealistic society or in the poorest of areas in a capitalistic prison, revolution is necessary.

Although Le Guin’s utopian fantasy may seem far from reach, her world may not be so different from ours. While not apparent on the surface, there are symbols in her story that draw strong parallels to her 1970’s America. Shevek himself is a symbol that the revolution is possible. To the poor Urrasti oppressed by their governments, the hope that a revolution may succeed is grim, but the existence of Shevek and Anarres is proof that it is possible. This image is meant to closely resemble America. Much like Anarres, America was the product of a people fleeing their oppressive governments, fighting for their rights. Much like Anarres, the rest of the world looks to America as a symbol of hope and as proof that freedom is in fact possible. By doing this, Le Guin makes a point to the reader, that we as Americans must incite revolution, within ourselves and within others. Just like Anarres, we are not perfect. We are not the completely free society that our founders envisioned, but each one of us must commit to a permanent revolution to make our country as close to the ideal as possible. Although we aren’t perfect, we have more freedoms than many, and Le Guin argues that we must stand as a beacon of hope for those fighting for their own rights. Another important symbol in the novel is the “wall.” In fact, the very first line mentions this wall, “There was a wall. It did not look important…An adult could look right over it, and even a child could climb it…But the idea was real. It was important. For seven generations there had been nothing in the world more important than that wall.” The wall represents many things in this book, both physical and mental. The physical wall on Anarres symbolizes the hatred between the Annaresti and the Urrasti. Surrounding the space port on Anarres, it blocks the Urrasti from coming to Anarres, and blocks the Annaresti from going back to Urras. The fact that there is a wall on Anarres, however, is indicative of the failing Odonian virtues, for a wall blocks one’s freedom. At the same time, the term “wall” was used by Le Guin to describe something that restricted free thought, such as the Anarresti social customs. This wall is featured in a nightmare that young Shevek had when his travels are stopped by an endless wall. It was also used by a friend of Shevek to describe Sabul and the bureaucracy that prevented Shevek from publishing his works as his own. Le Guin makes it clear that walls are the root of unhappiness. Shevek makes it clear that his primary goal is to spark revolution when he tells his partner in his last conversation with her, “I’m going to go fulfill my proper function in the social organism. I’m going to go unbuild walls.” The wall may even be an allusion to the Berlin wall, which was looked down upon by Americans as oppressive. By using symbols in the novel to draw parallels between her fantasy utopia and our very own reality, Le Guin passes an impactful message about the responsibilities of individual Americans.

Le Guin’s novel is more than just a fun story—it’s a social commentary about the rapid change occurring around the world during the sixties and seventies. In his 2009 article “On Failure and Revolution in Utopian Fiction and Science Fiction of the 1960s and 1970s,” Darren Jorgensen writes, “Le Guin’s point is that…a post-revolutionary society, as the old Soviet Union and China have taught us, is not the same thing as the activity of revolution itself.” Pulling from the real-world examples of “communism gone awry,” Le Guin correlates the problems of Anarres with problems we’ve already seen happen. Not only that, but the sixties and seventies were filled with revolution from minority groups. A History article puts it perfectly, “Women, African Americans, Native Americans, gays and lesbians and other marginalized people continued their fight for equality, and many Americans joined the protest against the ongoing war in Vietnam.” Le Guin’s choice of utopia is also not arbitrary. Le Guin took an interest in Taoism and even did a translation of Lao Tzu’s Tao Te Ching according to Ligaya Mishan’s 2009 article “First Contact: A Talk with Ursula K. Le Guin.” One central tenet of Taoism is simplicity—the idea that “having unnecessary things actually inhibits our doing and our being,” as explained in “Asian Simplicity” by Gene Sager. Odonianism has the same principle, as Le Guin tells us in the novel, “’Excess is excrement,’ Odo wrote in the Analogy. ‘Excrement retained in the body is a poison.’” Le Guin not only created an enthralling novel, but was very careful as to what each detail signified.

Personally, I found this novel incredibly fascinating. While at first, it seemed like a story that would explore the dynamics of a hypothetical anarchist society, it soon became a story about the perseverance of freedom. It became a story that was important. As Gerald Jonas said in his 1975 review of the novel, “[The novel] is a seamless creation: everything is made up, nothing seems arbitrary.” The culture of both worlds, the language, the society all blend together perfectly, as if they really exist. The parallelism between the two worlds was subtle at first, but soon became crystal clear, making the story much deeper than I expected. Sometimes however, the theoretical physics went over my head. Discussions about Simultaneity versus Sequency, the General Temporal Theorem, and how those theories worked made some sections very hard to understand. I would suggest spending more time to put those things in laymen’s terms. The subject seems very interesting, and would be a new topic many readers could learn about. The rhetoric, however, isn’t the only impressive thing about the novel. Le Guin’s knowledge of anarchist theory is clearly seen in the novel as Lewis Call praises her in “Postmodern Anarchism in the Novels of Ursula K. Le Guin,” “She introduces the anarchist vision to an audience of science fiction readers who might never pick up a volume of Kropotkin. She moves anarchism (ever so slightly) into the mainstream of intellectual discourse.”

All in all, Ursula K. Le Guin’s *The Dispossessed* was an incredible novel to read. It brought upon deep thought within the reader about how our society functions and what our individual responsibility to our society should be. By telling two sides of the same story in two completely opposite settings, Le Guin teaches the reader than revolution exists everywhere, always. By developing the character of Shevek, she gives us a role model—someone who is a true Odonian. Le Guin’s symbolism distinctly connects her hypothetical creations to our everyday life, instilling a sense of duty within every reader. In our fast-paced culture today, we must not forget to continue scrutinize our peers and leaders, fight for our ideals, and in the end keep the revolution alive.