

= The Left Hand of Darkness =

The Left Hand of Darkness is a science fiction novel by Ursula K. Le Guin , published in 1969 . The novel became immensely popular ; in 1970 it won both the Hugo and Nebula Awards as the year 's " best novel " , and established Le Guin 's status as a major author of science fiction .

The novel follows the story of Genly Ai , a native of Terra , who is sent to the planet of Gethen as an envoy of the Ekumen , a loose confederation of planets . Ai 's mission is to persuade the nations of Gethen to join the Ekumen , but he is stymied by his lack of understanding of Gethenian culture . Individuals on Gethen are " ambisexual " , with no fixed gender identity . This fact has a strong influence on the culture of the planet , and creates a large barrier for Ai . Left Hand was among the first books published in the feminist science fiction genre and the most famous examination of androgyny in science fiction . A major theme of the novel is the effect of sex and gender on culture and society , in particular through the relationship between Ai and Estraven , a Gethenian politician who trusts and helps him . The novel touched off a feminist debate when it was first published , over depictions of the ambisexual Gethenians . The novel also addresses the theme of religion , by contrasting the two major faiths on Gethen , as well as exploring notions of loyalty and betrayal .

The novel is part of the Hainish Cycle , a series of novels and short stories by Le Guin set in the fictional Hainish universe , which she introduced in 1964 with " Dowry of the Angyar " . Among the Hainish novels , it was preceded in the sequence of writing by City of Illusions and followed by The Word for World is Forest , although Left Hand is the last work in the internal chronology of the Hainish cycle .

It has been reprinted more than 30 times , and received a highly positive response from reviewers . In addition to being voted the Hugo and Nebula awards by fans and writers , respectively , a 1975 poll in Locus magazine ranked Left Hand third behind Frank Herbert 's Dune and Arthur C. Clarke 's Childhood 's End . In 1987 , Locus ranked it second among science fiction novels after Dune . In an introduction to a critical anthology edited in 1987 , Harold Bloom stated ; " Le Guin , more than Tolkien , has raised fantasy into high literature , for our time " .

= = Background = =

Le Guin 's father Alfred Louis Kroeber was an anthropologist , and the experience that this gave Le Guin influenced all of her works . Many of the protagonists of Le Guin 's novels , such as The Left Hand of Darkness and Rocannon 's World are also anthropologists or social investigators of some kind . Le Guin uses the term Ekumen for her fictional alliance of worlds , a term which she got from her father , who derived it from the Greek Oikoumene to refer to Eurasian cultures that shared a common origin .

Le Guin 's interest in Taoism influenced much of her science fiction work . Douglas Barbour stated that the fiction of the Hainish Universe contain a theme of balance between light and darkness , a central theme of Taoism . She was also influenced by her early interest in mythology , and her exposure to cultural diversity as a child . Her protagonists are frequently interested in the cultures they are investigating , and are motivated to preserve them rather than conquer them . Authors that influenced Le Guin include Victor Hugo , Lev Tolstoy , Virginia Woolf , Italo Calvino , and Lao Tzu .

Le Guin identifies herself with feminism , and is interested in non @-@ violence and ecological awareness . She has participated in demonstrations against the Vietnam War and nuclear weapons . These sympathies can be seen in several of her works of fiction , including those in the Hainish universe . The novels of the Hainish universe frequently explore the effects of differing social and political systems , although she displays a preference for a " society that governs by consensus , a communal cooperation without external government . " Her fiction also frequently challenges accepted depictions of race and gender .

The original 1969 edition of The Left Hand of Darkness did not contain an introduction , but Le Guin wrote one for the 1976 edition after reflecting on her work . She states that science fiction is not extrapolative , because that is " too rationalist and simplistic . " Instead , she calls it a " thought experiment , " which presupposes some changes to the world , and explores their consequences . In

this case , her thought experiment explores a society without men or women , where individuals share the biological and emotional makeup of both sexes . Le Guin states that the purpose of the " thought experiment " was not to predict the future , but to " describe reality , the present world . " She has also said that the genre in general allows exploration of the " real " world through metaphors and complex stories , and that science fiction can use imaginary situations to comment on human behaviors and relationships .

= = Setting = =

The Left Hand of Darkness is set in the fictional Hainish universe , which Le Guin introduced in her first novel Rocannon 's World , published in 1966 . In this alternative history , human beings did not evolve on earth , but on Hain . The people of Hain colonized many neighboring planetary systems , including Terra ( Earth ) and Gethen , possibly a million years before the setting of the novels . Some of the groups that " seeded " each planet were the subjects of genetic experiments , including on Gethen . The planets subsequently lost contact with each other , for reasons that Le Guin does not explain . Le Guin does not narrate the entire history of the Hainish universe at once , instead letting readers piece it together from various works . Although it was the last to be written , The Dispossessed lies earliest in the internal chronology , while Left Hand is last .

The novels and other fictional works set in the Hainish universe recount the efforts to re @-@ establish a galactic civilization . Explorers from Hain as well as other planets use interstellar ships traveling nearly as fast as light . These take years to travel between planetary systems , although the journey is shortened for the travelers due to relativistic time dilation , as well as through instantaneous interstellar communication using the ansible , introduced in The Dispossessed . This galactic civilization is known as the " League of All Worlds " in works set earlier in the chronology of the series , and has been reconstructed as the " Ekumen " by the time the events in The Left Hand of Darkness take place . During the events of Left Hand , the Ekumen is a union of 83 worlds , with some common laws . At least two " thought experiments " are used in each novel . The first is the idea that all humanoid species had a common origin ; they are all depicted as descendents of the original Hainish colonizers . The second idea is unique to each novel .

The Left Hand of Darkness takes place many centuries in the future ? no date is given in the book itself . Reviewers have suggested the year 4870 AD , based on extrapolation of events in other works , and commentary on her writing by Le Guin . The protagonist of the novel , the envoy Genly Ai , is on a planet called Winter ( " Gethen " in the language of its own people ) to convince the citizens to join the Ekumen . Winter is , as its name indicates , a planet that is always cold .

The inhabitants of Gethen are sequentially hermaphroditic humans ; for twenty @-@ four days ( somer ) of each twenty @-@ six @-@ day lunar cycle , they are sexually latent androgynes . They only adopt sexual attributes once a month , during a period of sexual receptiveness and high fertility , called kemmer . During kemmer they become sexually male or female , with no predisposition towards either , although which sex they adopt can depend on context and relationships . Throughout the novel Gethenians are described as " he " , whatever their role in kemmer . This absence of fixed gender characteristics led Le Guin to portray Gethen as a society without war , and also without sexuality as a continuous factor in social relationships . On Gethen , every individual takes part in the " burden and privilege " of raising children , and rape and seduction are virtually absent .

= = Plot summary = =

The protagonist of the novel is Genly Ai , a male Terran native , who is sent to invite Gethen to join the Ekumen , the coalition of humanoid worlds . Ai travels to Gethen on a ship which remains in orbit around the planet with Ai 's companions , who are in stasis ; Ai himself is sent to the planet 's surface alone , as the " first mobile . " Like all envoys of the Ekumen , he can " mindspeak " ? a form of quasi @-@ telepathic speech , which Gethenians are capable of , but for which they have lost the ability . He lands in the Gethenian kingdom of Karhide , and spends two years attempting to

persuade the members of its government of the value of joining the Ekumen . Karhide is one of two major nations on Gethen , the other being Orgoreyn .

The novel begins the day before an audience that Ai has obtained with Argaven Harge , the king of Karhide . Ai manages this through the help of Estraven , the prime minister , who seems to believe in Ai 's mission ; however , the night before the audience , Estraven tells Ai that he can no longer support Ai 's cause with the king . Ai begins to doubt Estraven 's loyalty because of his strange mannerisms , which Ai finds effeminate and ambiguous . The behavior of people in Karhide is dictated by shifgrethor , an intricate set of unspoken social rules and formal courtesy , which Ai does not understand , contributing to his distrust of Estraven . The next day , as he prepares to meet the King , Ai learns that Estraven has been accused of treason , and exiled from the country . The pretext for Estraven 's exile was his handling of a border dispute with the neighboring country of Orgoreyn , in which Estraven was seen as being too conciliatory . Ai meets with the king , who rejects his offer to join the Ekumen . Discouraged , Ai decides to travel through Karhide , as the spring has just begun , rendering the interior of the country accessible .

Ai travels to a fastness , a dwelling of people of the Handarrata , one of two major Gethenian religions . He pays the fastness for a foretelling , an art practiced to prove the uselessness of knowing the right answer to the wrong question . Ai decides to pursue his mission in Orgoreyn . He asks if Gethen / Winter will be a member of the Ekumen in five years , expecting that the foretellers will give him an ambiguous response ; however , he is answered " yes " . This leads him to muse that the Gethenians have " trained hunch to run in harness . " After several months of travelling through Karhide , Ai decides to pursue his mission in Orgoreyn , to which he has received an invitation .

Ai reaches the Orgota capital of Mishnory , where he finds that the Orgota politicians are initially far more direct with him . He is given comfortable quarters , and is allowed to present his invitation to the council that rules Orgoreyn . Three members of the council , Shusgis , Obsle , and Yegey , are particularly supportive of him . These three are members of an " Open Trade " faction , which wants to end the conflict with Karhide . Estraven , who was banished from Karhide , is found working with these council members , and tells Ai that he was responsible for Ai 's invitation to Orgoreyn . Despite the support , Ai feels uneasy ; Estraven warns him not to trust the Orgota leaders , and he hears rumors of the " Sarf , " or secret police , that truly control Orgoreyn . He ignores both his feeling and the warning , and is once again blindsided ; he is arrested unexpectedly one night , interrogated , and then sent to a far @-@ northern work camp to meet his death by cold , labor , and sterilizing drugs .

To Ai 's great surprise , Estraven ? whom Ai still distrusts ? goes to great lengths to save him . Estraven poses as a prison guard and breaks Ai out of the farm , using his training with the Handarrata to induce dothe , or berserker strength to aid him in the process . Estraven spends the last of his money on supplies , and the pair begin an 80 @-@ day trek across the Gobrin ice sheet back to Karhide , because Estraven believes that the very appearance of Ai in Karhide will force its acceptance of the Ekumen treaty . Over the journey Ai and Estraven learn to trust and accept one another 's differences . Ai is eventually successful in teaching Estraven mindspeech ; Estraven hears Ai speaking in his mind with the voice of his dead sibling Arek , demonstrating the close connection that the two have developed . When they reach Karhide , Estraven tries to return to the land border with Orgoreyn , because he is still exiled from Karhide , but is killed by border guards , who capture Ai . As Estraven predicted , Ai 's presence in Karhide , and the fallout of Estraven 's death , triggers the collapse of governments in both Karhide and Orgoreyn . Soon after , Karhide agrees to join the Ekumen , followed shortly by Orgoreyn , completing Ai 's mission .

= = Primary characters = =

= = = Genly Ai = = =

Genly Ai is the protagonist of the novel ; a male native of Terra , or Earth , who is sent to Gethen by

the Ekumen as a " first mobile " or envoy . He is called " Genry " by the Karhidiers , who have trouble pronouncing the letter " L. " He is described as rather taller and darker than the average Gethenian . Although curious and sensitive to Gethenian culture in many ways , he struggles at first to trust the ambisexual Gethenians . His own masculine mannerisms , learned on Terra , also prove to be a barrier to communication . At the beginning of the book , he has been on Gethen for one year , trying to gain an audience with the king , and persuade the Karhidish government to believe his story . He arrives equipped with basic information about the language and culture from a team of investigators who had come before him .

In Karhide , the king is reluctant to accept his diplomatic mission . In Orgoreyn , Ai is seemingly accepted more easily by the political leaders , yet Ai is arrested , stripped of his clothes , drugged , and sent to a work camp . Rescued by Estraven , the deposed Prime Minister of Karhide , Genly realizes that cultural differences ? specifically shifgrethor , gender roles and Gethenian sexuality ? had kept him from understanding their relationship previously . During their 81 @-@ day journey across the frozen land to return to Karhide , Ai learns to understand and love Estraven .

= = = Estraven = = =

Therem Harth rem ir Estraven is a Gethenian from the Domain of Estre in Kerm Land , at the southern end of the Karhidish half of the continent . He is the Prime Minister of Karhide at the very beginning of the novel , until he is exiled from Karhide after attempting to assuage the Sinnoth Valley dispute with Orgoreyn . Estraven is one of the few Gethenians who believes Ai , and attempts to help him from the beginning . However , Ai 's lack of understanding of shifgrethor leads to severe misunderstanding between them . Estraven is said to have made a taboo kemmering vow to his brother , Arek Harth rem ir Estraven , while they were both young . Convention required that they separated after they had produced a child together ; however , because of the first vow , the vow he makes with Ashe Foreth , which also is broken before the events in Left Hand , is called a " false vow , a second vow " . In contrast to Ai , Estraven is shown with both stereotypically male and female qualities , and is used to demonstrate that they are both necessary for survival .

= = = Argaven = = =

Argaven Harge XV is the king of Karhide during the events of the novel . He is described both by his subjects and by Estraven as being " mad . " He has sired seven children , but has yet to bear " an heir of the body , king son " . During the events of the novel he becomes pregnant but loses the child before it is born , triggering speculation as to which of his sired children will be named his heir . His behavior towards Ai is consistently paranoid ; although he grants Ai an audience , he refuses to believe his story , and declines the offer to join the Ekumen . The tenure of his prime ministers tends to be short , with both Estraven and Tibe rising and falling from power during the two Gethenian years that the novel spans . Argaven eventually agrees to join the Ekumen due to the political fallout of Estraven 's death and Ai 's escape from Orgoreyn .

= = = Tibe = = =

Pemmer Harge rem ir Tibe is Argaven Harge 's cousin . Tibe becomes the prime minister of Karhide when Estraven is exiled at the beginning of the novel , and becomes the regent for a brief while when Argaven is pregnant . In contrast to Estraven , he seems intent on starting a war with Orgoreyn over the Sinoth valley dispute ; in addition to taking aggressive actions at the border , he regularly makes belligerent speeches on the radio . He is strongly opposed to Ai 's mission . He orders Estraven to be killed at the border at the end of the novel , as a last act of defiance , knowing that Estraven and Ai 's presence in Karhide means his own downfall ; he resigns immediately after Estraven 's death .

= = = Obsle , Yegey , and Shusgis = = =

Obsle , Yegey , and Shusgis are Commensals , three of the thirty @-@ three councilmen that rule Orgoreyn . Obsle and Yegey are members of the " Open Trade " faction , who wish to normalize relations with Karhide . Obsle is the commensal of the Sekeve District , and was once the head of the Orgota Naval Trade Commission in Erhenrang , where he became acquainted with Estraven . Estraven describes him as the nearest thing to an honest person among the politicians of Orgoreyn . Yegey is the commensal who first finds Estraven during his exile , and who gives Estraven a job and a place to live in Mishnory . Shusgis is the commensal who hosts Genly Ai after Ai 's arrival in Mishnory , and is a member of the opposing faction , which supports the Sarf , the Orgota secret police . Although Obsle and Yegey support Ai 's mission , they see him more as a means of increasing their own influence within the council ; thus they eventually betray him to the Sarf , in order to save themselves . Their Open Trade faction takes control of the council after Ai 's presence in Karhide becomes known at the end of the novel .

= = Reception = =

The Left Hand of Darkness received overwhelmingly positive critical responses when it was published . It won both the Nebula Award , given by the Science Fiction Writers of America , and the Hugo Award , determined by science fiction fans . In 1987 , Locus ranked it number two among " All @-@ Time Best SF Novels " , based on a poll of subscribers . By 2014 , the novel had sold more than a million copies in English alone . The Paris Review stated that " No single work did more to upend the genre 's conventions than The Left Hand of Darkness . "

Algis Budrys praised the novel as " a narrative so fully realized , so compellingly told , so masterfully executed . " He found the book " a novel written by a magnificent writer , a totally compelling tale of human peril and striving under circumstances in which human love , and a number of other human qualities , can be depicted in a fresh context . " Budrys would later describe Left Hand as an influence upon his own writing . Darko Suvin , one of the first academics to study science fiction , wrote that Left Hand was the " most memorable novel of the year . "

Harold Bloom listed The Left Hand of Darkness in The Western Canon ( 1994 ) as one of the books in his conception of artistic works that been important and influential in influencing Western culture. saying that " Le Guin , more than Tolkien , has raised fantasy into high literature , for our time " . Bloom said in 1987 that Left Hand was Le Guin 's " finest work to date , " and that critics had generally undervalued the book . Charlotte Spivack stated that Left Hand established Le Guin 's status as a major science @-@ fiction writer .

Suzanne Reid wrote that at the time the novel was written , Le Guin 's ideas of androgyny were unique not only to science fiction , but to literature in general . Donna White stated that Left Hand was one of the seminal works of science fiction , as important as Frankenstein , by Mary Shelley , which is often described as the very first science fiction novel . Left Hand has been a focus of literary critique of Le Guin 's work , along with her Earthsea fiction and utopian fiction . The novel was also a personal milestone for Le Guin , with critics calling it her " first contribution to feminism . " It was one of her most popular books for many years after its publication .

The novel was at the center of a feminist debate when it was published in 1969 . Alexei Panshin objected to the use of masculine " he / him / his " gender pronouns to describes its androgynous characters . Other feminists maintained that the novel did not go far enough in its exploration of gender . Criticism was also directed at the portrayal of androgynous characters in the " masculine " roles of politicians and statesmen but not in family roles . Sarah LeFanu , for example , wrote that Le Guin turned her back on an opportunity for experimentation . She stated that " these male heroes with their crises of identity , caught in the stranglehold of liberal individualism , act as a dead weight at the center of the novel . " Le Guin , who identifies as a feminist , responded to these criticisms in her essay " Is Gender Necessary ? " as well as by switching masculine pronouns for feminine ones in a later reprinting of Winter 's King , an unconnected short story set on Gethen . In her responses , Le Guin admitted to failing to depict androgynes in stereotypically feminine roles , but said that she considered and decided against inventing gender @-@ neutral pronouns , because they would

mangle the language of the novel .

= = Themes = =

= = = Hainish universe themes = = =

Le Guin 's works set in the Hainish universe explore the idea of human expansion , similar to the future history novels of other science @-@ fiction authors such as Isaac Asimov . These novels , such as *The Dispossessed* , *Left Hand* , and *The Word for World is Forest* also frequently explore the effects of differing social and political systems . Le Guin believed that contemporary society suffered from a high degree of alienation and division , and her depictions of encounters between races , such as in *The Left Hand of Darkness* sought to explore the possibility of an " improved mode of human relationships , " based on " integration and integrity . " *The Left Hand of Darkness* explores this theme through the relationship between Genly Ai and Estraven ; Ai initially distrusts Estraven , but eventually comes to love and trust him . Le Guin 's later Hainish novels also challenge contemporary ideas about gender , ethnic differences , the value of ownership , and human beings ' relationship to the natural world .

= = = Sex and gender = = =

A prominent theme in the novel are social relations in a society where gender is irrelevant ; in Le Guin 's words , she " eliminated gender , to find out what was left . " In her 1976 essay " Is Gender necessary ? " Le Guin wrote that the theme of gender was only secondary to the novel 's primary theme of loyalty and betrayal . However , Le Guin revisited this essay in 1988 , and stated that gender was actually central to the novel ; her earlier essay had described gender as a peripheral theme because of the defensiveness she felt over using masculine pronouns for her characters .

The novel also follows changes in the character of Genly Ai , whose behavior shifts away from " masculine " behavior , and grows more androgynous over the course of the novel . He becomes more patient and caring , and less rigidly rationalist . Ai struggles to form a bond with Estraven through much of the novel , and finally breaks down the barrier between them during their journey on the ice , when he recognizes and accepts Estraven 's dual sexuality . Their understanding of each other 's sexuality helps them achieve a more trusting relationship . The new intimacy they share is shown when Ai teaches Estraven to mindspeak , and Estraven hears Ai speaking with the voice of Estraven 's dead sibling Arek .

Feminist theorists criticized the novel for what they saw as a homophobic depiction of the relationship between Estraven and Ai . Both are presented as superficially masculine throughout the novel , but they never physically explore the attraction between them . Estraven 's death at the end was seen as giving the message that " death is the price that must be paid for forbidden love . " In a 1986 essay , Le Guin acknowledged and apologized for the fact that *Left Hand* had presented heterosexuality as the norm on Gethen .

The androgynous nature of the inhabitants of Gethen is used to examine gender relations in human society . On Gethen , the permanently male Genly Ai is an oddity , and is seen as a " pervert " by the natives ; according to reviewers , this is Le Guin 's way of gently critiquing masculinity . Additionally , Le Guin seems to suggest that the absence of gender divisions leads to a society without the constriction of gender roles . The Gethenians are also not inclined to go to war , which reviewers have linked to their lack of sexual aggressiveness , derived from their ambisexuality . Harold Bloom states that " Androgyny is clearly neither a political nor a sexual ideal " in the book , but that " ... ambisexuality is a more imaginative condition than our bisexuality . ... the Gethenians know more than either men or women . " Bloom adds that this is the major difference between Estraven and Ai , and allows Estraven the freedom to carry out actions that Ai cannot ; Estraven " is better able to love , and freed therefore to sacrifice . "

## == Religion ==

The book features two major religions : the Handdara , an informal system reminiscent of Taoism and Buddhism , and the Yomeshta or Meshe 's cult , a close @-@ to @-@ monotheistic religion based on the idea of absolute knowledge of the entirety of time attained in one visionary instant by Meshe , who was originally a Foreteller of the Handdara , when attempting to answer the question : " What is the meaning of life ? " The Handdara is the more ancient , and dominant in Karhide , while Yomesh is the official religion in Orgoreyn . The differences between them underlie political distinctions between the countries and cultural distinctions between their inhabitants . Estraven is revealed to be an adept of the Handdara .

Le Guin 's interest in Taoism influenced much of her science fiction work . Douglas Barbour said that the fiction of the Hainish Universe contain a theme of balance between light and darkness , a central theme of Taoism . The title of *Left Hand* derives from the first line of a lay traditional to the fictional planet of Gethen ;

Light is the left hand of darkness , and darkness the right hand of light . Two are one , life and death , lying together like lovers in kemmer , like hands joined together , like the end and the way .

Suzanne Reid states that this presentation of light and dark was in strong contrast to many western cultural assumptions , which believe in strongly contrasted opposites . She states that Le Guin 's characters have a tendency to adapt to the rhythms of nature rather than trying to conquer them , an attitude which can also be traced to Taoism . The Handarrata represent the Taoist sense of unity ; believers try to find insight by reaching the " untrance " , a balance between knowing and unknowing , and focusing and unfocusing .

The Yomesh cult is the official religion of Orgoreyn , and worships light . Critics such as David Lake have found parallels between the Yomesh cult and Christianity , such as the presence of saints and angels , and the use of a dating system based on the death of the prophet . Le Guin portrays the Yomesh religion as influencing the Orgota society , which Lake interprets as a critique of the influence of Christianity upon Western society . In comparison to the religion of Karhide , the Yomesh religion focuses more on enlightenment and positive , obvious statements . Le Guin suggests that this focus on positives leads to the Orgota being not entirely honest , and that a balance between enlightenment and darkness is necessary for truth .

## == Loyalty and betrayal ==

Loyalty , fidelity , and betrayal are significant themes in the book , explored against the background of both planetary and interplanetary relations . Genly Ai is sent to Gethen as an envoy of the Ekumen , whose mission is to convince the various Gethenian nations that their identities will not be destroyed when they integrate with the Ekumen . At the same time , the planetary conflict between Karhide and Orgoreyn is shown as increasing nationalism , making it hard for those in each country to view themselves as citizens of the planet .

This conflict is demonstrated by the varying loyalties of the main characters . Genly Ai tells Argaven after Estraven 's death that Estraven served mankind as a whole , just as Ai did . During the border dispute with Orgoreyn , Estraven tries to end the dispute by moving Karhidish farmers out of the disputed territory . Estraven believes that by preventing war he was saving Karhidish lives and being loyal to his country , while King Argaven sees it as a betrayal . At the end of the novel Ai calls his ship down to formalize Gethen 's joining the Ekumen , and feels conflicted while doing so because he had promised Estraven that he would clear Estraven 's name before calling his ship down . This demonstrates Le Guin 's portrayal of loyalty and betrayal as complementary rather than contradictory , because in joining Gethen with the Ekumen Ai was fulfilling the larger purpose that he shared with Estraven . Donna White wrote that many of Le Guin 's novels depict a struggle between personal loyalties and public duties , best exemplified in *Left Hand* , where Ai is bound by a personal bond to Estraven , but must subordinate that to his mission for the Ekumen and humanity .

The theme of loyalty and trust is related to the novel 's other major theme of gender . Ai has considerable difficulty in completing his mission because of his prejudice against the ambisexual

Gethenians and his inability to establish a personal bond with them . Ai 's preconceived ideas of how men should behave prevents him from trusting Estraven when the two meet ; Ai labels Estraven " womanly " and distrusts him because Estraven exhibits both male and female characteristics . Estraven also faces difficulties communicating with Ai , who does not understand shifgrethor , the Gethenians ' indirect way of giving and receiving advice . A related theme that runs through Le Guin 's work is that of being rooted or rootless in society , explored through the experiences of lone individuals on alien planets .

= = = Shifgrethor and communication = = =

Shifgrethor is a fictional concept in the Hainish universe , first introduced in *The Left Hand of Darkness* . It is first mentioned by Genly Ai , when he thinks to himself " ... shifgrethor ? prestige , face , place , the pride @-@ relationship , the untranslatable and all @-@ important principle of social authority in Karhide and all civilizations of Gethen . " It derives from an old Gethenian word for shadow . George Slusser describes shifgrethor as " this status is not rank , but its opposite , the ability to maintain equality in any relationship , and to do so by respecting the person of the other . " According to University of West Georgia Professor Carrie B. McWhorter , shifgrethor can be defined simply as " a sense of honor and respect that provides the Gethenians with a way to save face in a time of crisis . "

Ai initially refuses to see a connection between his sexuality and his mode of consciousness , preventing from truly understanding the Gethenians ; thus he is unable to persuade them of the importance of his mission . Ai 's failure to understand shifgrethor and to trust Estraven 's motives leads him to misunderstand much of the advice that Estraven gives him . As Ai 's relationship to Estraven changes , their communication also changes ; they are both more willing to acknowledge mistakes , and make fewer assertions . Eventually , the two are able to converse directly with mindspeech , but only after Ai is able to understand Estraven 's motivations , and no longer requires direct communication .

= = Style and structure = =

The novel is framed as part of the report that Ai sends back to the Ekumen after his time on Gethen , and as such , suggests that Ai is selecting and ordering the material . Ai narrates ten chapters in the first person ; the rest are made up of extracts from Estraven 's personal diary and ethnological reports from an earlier observer from the Ekumen , interspersed with Gethenian myths and legends . The novel begins with the following statement from Ai , explaining the need for multiple voices in the novel :

I 'll make my report as if I told a story , for I was taught as a child on my homeworld that Truth is a matter of the imagination . The soundest fact may fail or prevail in the style of its telling : 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 .

The story is not all mine , nor told by me alone . Indeed I am not sure whose story it is ; you can judge better . But it is all one , and if at moments the facts seem to alter with an altered voice , why then you can choose the fact that you like the best ; yet none of them are false , and it is all one story .

The myths and legends serve to explain specific features about Gethenian culture , as well as larger philosophical aspects of society . Many of the tales used in the novel immediately precede chapters describing Ai 's experience with a similar situation . For instance , a story about the dangers of foretelling is presented before Ai 's own experience witnessing a foretelling . Other stories include a discussion of the legend of the " place inside the storm " ; another discusses the roots of the Yomeshta cult ; a third is an ancient Orgota creation myth ; a fourth is a story of one of Estraven 's ancestors , which discusses what a traitor is . The presence of myths and legends has also been cited by reviewers who state that Le Guin 's work , particularly *Left Hand* , is similar to



allegory in many ways . These include the presence of a guide ( Estraven ) for the protagonist ( Ai ) , and the use of myths and legends to provide a backdrop for the story .

The heterogeneous structure of the novel has been described as " distinctly post @-@ modern " , and was unusual for the time of its publication , in marked contrast to ( primarily male @-@ authored ) traditional science fiction , which was straightforward and linear . In 1999 , literary scholar Donna White wrote that the unorthodox structure of the novel made it initially confusing to reviewers , before it was interpreted as an attempt to follow the trajectory of Ai 's changing views . Also in contrast to what was typical for male authors of the period , Le Guin narrated the action in the novel through the personal relationships she depicted .

Ai 's first @-@ person narration reflects his slowly developing view , and the reader 's knowledge and understanding of the Gethens evolves with Ai 's awareness . He begins in naivety , gradually discovering his profound errors in judgement . In this sense , the novel can be thought of as a Bildungsroman , or coming of age story . Since the novel is presented as Ai 's journey of transformation , Ai 's position as the narrator increases the credibility of the story . The narration is complemented by her writing style , described by a reviewer as " precise , dialectical ? always evocative in its restrained pathos " which is " exquisitely fitted to her powers of invention . "

= = Adaptations = =

In December 2004 , Phobos Entertainment acquired media rights to the novel and announced plans for a feature film and video game based on it . In 2013 , the Portland Playhouse and Hand2Mouth Theatre produced a stage adaptation of The Left Hand of Darkness in Portland , Oregon . On 12 April and 19 April 2015 , BBC Radio 4 broadcast a two @-@ part adaptation of the novel , starring Kobna Holdbrook @-@ Smith as Genly Ai , Lesley Sharp as Estraven , Toby Jones as Argaven , Ruth Gemmell as Ashe , Louise Brealey as Tibe and Gaum , Stephen Critchlow as Shusgis , and David Acton as Obsle . The radio drama was adapted by Judith Adams and directed by Allegra McIlroy . The adaptation was created and aired as part of a thematic month centered on the life and works of Ursula Le Guin , in honor of her 85th birthday .