

Jason the theme of gender is heavily explored.



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MLiterary Themes GenderFluidity vs Essentialism In "The Left Hand of Darkness" In Ursula's K. Le Guin's science fiction novel entitled "The Left Hand of Darkness" published in 1969, the story is set in a utopian society in which the theme of gender is heavily explored. The main character, Genly Ai, is an alien envoy from a confederation of 83 loose planets who have joined forces to create the society known as "The Ekumen". Genly Ai is sent out to recruit new planets such as the planet of Gethen, to facilitate and improve his growing intergalactic civilization, however he seems to struggle with persuading them to join because of his poor understanding of different cultures.

The Gethenians, part of Gethen, are ambisexual creatures with no fixed genders. So, what exactly does this story have to say about gender, sex and sexuality? Le Guin uses the difference between humans and the Gethenians in her novel to illustrate how society could exist without set sexual norms, as well as how social and political affairs can be separated from the identity of an individual. In Ursula K. Le Guin's novel, readers will understand that Genly Ai is a masculine character that struggles with gender roles within Gethenian territory. At the beginning of the story, he is conflicted with trying to adapt to the gethenian lifestyle and he is displeased with his attempts as he refers to gethenians as males. "A man wants her femininity appreciated however indirect and subtle the indications of regard and appreciation.

" (Le Guin 77) Ursula K. Le Guin suggests that it wasn't until Genly Ai has met Lord Estraven that he was truly able to experience gender change and to

realize what it means to be Gethenian. Genly Ai has a hard time understanding why the inhabitants of Gethen are androgynous, and even with the fact that he has inhabited the land known as "Winter" for almost 2 years, he still sees Gethenians as a masculine place. Estraven had invited Genly Ai for supper in which Genly sat down and thought to himself: "Though I had been nearly two years on Winter, I was still far from being able to see the people of the planet through their own eyes. I tried to, but my efforts took the form of self-consciously seeing a Gethenian first as a man, then as a woman, forcing him into these categories so irrelevant to his nature and so essential on my own." (Le Guin 12) The author integrates this concept into her novel to demonstrate how possessing feminine or masculine traits does not foreshadow the life that they will choose to follow. Ursula K. Le Guin explains that there will be a society in which their gender roles or sex are not attributed to certain types of characteristic traits, and they might take up any form they desire. She focuses on the notion that Gender is not the predominant concept in the story.

The author states that people take for granted that men can accomplish the same things women can. During the late 1960's, the year the book was published, the feminist movement began to rise drastically as women were limited in almost every aspect in life. Women were restricted to getting married, staying at home to either complete house chores or to babysit children. This relates to the concept of Gender Essentialism, where a fixed gender is defined by the characteristic traits or views that they adapt. So, in short, think of sexism. In the story however, it is stated that: "The fact that everyone between seventeen and thirty-five or so is liable to be " tied down

to childbearing”, implies that no one is quite so thoroughly tied down here as women, elsewhere are likely to be psychologically. Burden and privileges are shared out equally, therefore nobody here is quite so free as a free male anywhere else.” (Le Guin Ch7 Parag12) Ursula K.

Le Guin had questioned the importance of Gender roles during the time of her publication, whether or not it was psychological, if we are all gendered at birth, assuming we have to be a girl or a boy and incorporating traits that are deemed by society to be feminine or masculine. The author explains that the book was simply just a thought experiment. “ What happens if we take away gender from the people?” During an ongoing arranged journey into the east, Genly Ai refers to his” landlady as a voluble man. “(Le Guin 49) Ursula K Le Guin elaborates that she can perceive different kinds of professions for 2 different genders.

Sex and gender do not define the specific roles of man and woman in society within the story. They are both public and at the same time, very personal. By definition, “ Gender” describes: the characteristic traits that a society or culture may deem as masculine or feminine. Sex on the other hand refers to: the biological differences in chromosomes, hormonal profiles as well as internal and external sex organs or reproductive systems. In Ursula K.

Le Guin novel, she has created a unique sexual cycle called “ Kemmer”, in which Gethenians come out of their period of androgyny and can choose to become either male or female, inheriting their respective traits and biological organs. The Gethenian kemmer cycle lasts 6 days and after that they return to their neutral and genderless state. On the Gobrain Ice, Estraven

recites a passage from the Handdara scripture to Genly Ai." 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." (Le Guin 252). Ursula K. Le Guin pulls out the concept of Duality in which both gender roles complement and bring out the best in each other as well as the idea that one cannot live without the other.

The light and darkness represent the balance between contrasting forces between the known and the unknown, very similar to the idea of Ying and Yang inside Taoism. In short, the kemmer cycle can also relate to the idea of gender fluidity in which humans can adapt and change their different types of gender traits. The novel respects feminine equality so much so that, during a conversation with Estraven, Genly Ai is surprised at the fact that "Equality is not the general rule, then? Are they mentally inferior?" (Le Guin 196) The author claims that a world inhabited by ambisexual beings must bring with it also the concept of equality as well as equal opportunity.

In conclusion, by comparing the main similarities and differences between Gender and sex, as well as understanding the core principles of Essentialism and Gender fluidity, Ursula K. Le Guin uses the difference between humans and the Gethenians in her novel to illustrate how society could exist without set sexual norms.

And although this novel has sparked a lot of controversy, it has opened our eyes to the preconceived notions about what Gender and sex is all about.