

A wonderful day in
the haberhood:
exploring the power
of the individual



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BUSTER**

In *The Lathe of Heaven*, Ursula K. Le Guin utilizes the unique power struggle between George Orr and Dr. Haber to assert that a single person is not capable of addressing all negative aspects of a society. Many individuals may argue that those who have both power and altruistic intentions have the ability to improve society on the whole, but the consequences of Haber's actions show us otherwise. While it could be perceived that Dr. Haber has good intentions, that he desires power solely to improve the world for everyone, he seems to entirely overestimate the amount of good that a single person can create. He continually applies his ideals of altruism to the unique situation in which Orr's effective dreaming has placed him—a situation in which normal logic does not apply. Haber sees Orr's dreaming as a power to be controlled, but he seems to forget that the dreams are not entirely controllable: when Haber attempts to do this through hypnotic suggestions, Orr reminds him that “ he do[es]n't choose” how to handle situations, but instead “ follow[s]” (Le Guin 125). Thus, Haber isn't only flawed in his perceptions of power, but also in the methods through which an individual can exercise this power.

From the start, Haber lived by the philosophy that the individual is responsible for creating meaningful change in society throughout his career. We learned this early on when he told Orr that “[a] person is defined solely by the extent of his influence over other people” and claimed that “ morality is an utterly meaningless term unless defined as the good one does to others,” demonstrating his firm belief in the duty of the individual (Le Guin 53). Early on in his relationship with Haber, Orr recognizes the negative results of Haber's logic, urging him to “[s]top using [his] dreams to improve

things” because “[i]t’s wrong” (Le Guin 81). But Haber, determined to use this power that he’s discovered as a means of improving the world, refuses to acknowledge the negative consequences of his actions, despite warnings from Orr. He believes that the end justifies the means and makes this clear to Orr when he asks if “ man’s very purpose on earth” is “ to do things, change things, run things, make a better world?” (Le Guin 82). Haber’s reluctance to accept Orr’s warnings demonstrates his tendency to overestimate the power an individual should hold. Not only does he believe that an individual has the ability to effect positive change for society at large, but that it is their duty to attempt this at all costs. Despite these intentions, many of his attempts to create a better life for all humans result in death, turmoil, and devastating changes to society. Thus, it would be logical to assert that this goal is just not feasible, no matter how altruistic one’s intentions, as any single person is incapable of improving everyone’s life at once.

While it’s true that Haber was unable to see his vision come to fruition, one could argue that the reason Haber did not achieve his goal was not because it is impossible for someone to accomplish it, but simply because the way that he went about it was wrong. Haber himself attempts to assert this when he infers that “ Orr’s irresponsibility was the cause of the death of many innocent people” (Le Guin 118). In this, Haber creates doubt by blaming Orr for what has happened, which leads readers to an important consideration. Is Haber creating chaos in his attempts to harness Orr’s powers for good, or is Orr creating chaos by resisting Haber’s attempts to use his effective dreaming in a more controlled setting? Le Guin seems to place the blame on

Haber, who arrives at the conclusion that “[h]e had been too protective, too easy on Orr” (118) when Orr tells him about the uncontrolled effective dream that led to the Alien invasion, and that it was ultimately Haber’s own inattentiveness that led to chaos. In fact, when Le Guin, from Haber’s perspective, writes, “ he must face up to what he had done,” (118) she does not make it clear who Haber is referring to. Is he telling us that Orr must own up to being irresponsible enough to have an uncontrolled dream, or that it is he who must face up for allowing Orr the opportunity to do it? The fact that Le Guin leaves this thought up to the reader’s interpretation implies that she is indicting both Orr and Haber for their contributions to the negative outcomes of the dream, however different those contributions might be.

Where Haber contributes to the devastation by eagerly utilizing Orr’s effective dreams, Orr himself contributes through his hesitance to allow Haber to control them. He is unconvinced that Haber possesses the ability to play God by manipulating his dreams in hopes of creating a better world. He continuously communicates this perspective to Haber, urging him that “[t]he world is, no matter how [they] think it ought to be” and that “[he] h[as] to let it be” (Le Guin 140). Haber maintains that if you decide to let things be, you are essentially deciding not to help people when you could. He compares the situation to being confronted with a woman dying of a snakebite, and asks Orr if “[he would] withhold [the serum] because ‘ this is the way it is’” rather than saving her life (Le Guin (140). Orr refuses to give him an answer, as he believes that the two situations are not comparable. He later reflects that the “ analogy with snakebite serum was false” because it dealt with only two individuals (Le Guin 155). The conclusion that Orr comes to here could imply

one of two things. We could argue that Orr refutes Haber's analogy because he does not want to be held to the responsibility that his effective dreams have bestowed upon him; however, it seems to me that there is more than only the unwillingness to wield power behind his hesitance. When Le Guin writes that Orr believes "[Haber] sees the world only as a means to his end," (156) she demonstrates the level of understanding that Orr possesses—he is hesitant not because he knows he could achieve Haber's goals of bettering the world if he accepted his power, but because he knows that if he tries to do so, it will only result in turmoil.

We also see Le Guin highlight Haber's understanding of the potential for his success or failure in his response to Orr's assessment of the snakebite analogy. Haber agrees with Orr's claims that "[he] do[esn't] know whether what [he's] doing is good or evil or both" (Le Guin 140) and asserts that "[he] do[esn't] know, about eight-five percent of the time, what the hell [he's] doing with [Orr's] screwball brain" but despite this, urges Orr to "get on with it" (Le Guin 140). By showing us that Haber is aware of his ignorance when it comes to fixing the world's problems, Le Guin further demonstrates his obliviousness regarding his ability to do so. He believes that if one has the power to help others, they should try to do so, whether or not they know how to effectively get the job done. Orr recognizes this and grows frustrated as he learns that Haber "can't see anything except his mind - his ideas of what ought to be" (Le Guin 101). Haber's willingness to admit he doesn't know what he's doing shows us that he has some idea of how virtually impossible his goal is to meet, but we see his judgment continually clouded by these ideas of what he thinks the world should be. Eventually, we see him

become so convinced of his abilities to do good in the world that he loses any sense of self-doubt when he tells Orr “[t]here is nothing to fear” and claims that “[he] know[s], scientifically and morally, what [he’s] doing and how to do it” (Le Guin 150), an assertion that directly contradicts what he himself proclaimed just a short time ago.

An argument to be made here is that Haber’s determination is not clouding his judgment, but enhancing it. At one point, Orr and Haber discuss whether or not the hallmark of life is change or stillness, and both make convincing arguments. While Haber’s belief is that “ life—evolution—the whole universe of space/time, matter/energy—existence itself—is essentially change,” Orr argues that change “ is one aspect of it” and that “ the other is stillness” (Le Guin 139). But Haber does not want to hear it, and goes on a tirade about his perspectives on the way the world works, arguing, “‘the more things go on moving ... the less balance there is—and the more life’” (Le Guin 139). Haber’s point that we must continue to take action in our lives dissents from the assertion that a single person cannot act in everyone’s best interest at the same time. Haber emphasizes his stance that “ life itself is a huge gamble against the odds” and that we “ can’t try to live safely” (Le Guin 139). Perhaps the way that we effect positive change for everyone is to act imperfectly. If we live without taking chances, always opting for the safe choices, we could potentially impede our chances of succeeding in creating a utopia.

What Le Guin attempts to make clear, however, is that the circumstances in The Lathe of Heaven are not those of the world we know. Haber’s logic might work well in our world, where one should be compelled to take whatever

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action they can to help others, no matter what risks—for themselves or for others—that they must take to do so. But in this world, the effective dreaming is something we cannot compare to an existing force in the world with which we are familiar. It is in fact something outside of the realm of typical human ability—Orr describes it as “ play[ing] God with masses of people” (Le Guin 155). Because of this, “ it doesn’t work to try to stand outside things and run them that way ... it goes against life” (Le Guin 140). In order for Haber’s logic to apply, “[he] ha[s] to know what [he’s] doing,” (Le Guin 155) which is simply impossible for any human, no matter what powers they might possess. When you have the ability to make such drastic changes in the world, “ just believing you’re right and your motives are good isn’t enough,” (Le Guin 155) and this is the position we find Haber in. He doesn’t understand that there is a certain point at which his power might exceed his ability, and only yearns for more power to complete his mission, “ like Alexander the Great, needing new worlds to conquer” (Le Guin 160). While someone in our world would not have nearly the same potential for either large-scale destruction or improvement, in Orr’s world, these possibilities are endless; thus, we cannot effectively apply Haber’s thinking to the universe in the novel.