

Winter and warmth in ursula le guin's the left hand of darkness



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

In Ursula Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*, protagonists Estraven and Genly Ai embark on a bleak journey across the Gobrin Glacier only to discover that they will fail without the balance of light and shadows. In response to Estraven falling into a crevasse neither character could see, Genly Ai draws a yin-yang sign and says to him, "light is the left hand of darkness...how did it go? Light, dark. Fear, courage. Cold, warmth. Female, male. It is yourself, Therem. Both and one" (Le Guin, 267). Although their journey depends on the combination of darkness and light in order to see on the ice, the novel makes use of each of the contradictions he mentions and their codependence on one another. The contradiction of coldness and warmth appears almost instantly since the planet Genly Ai visits, Gethen, is just steps away from being a frozen wasteland. However, the weather in Gethen and its opposing warmth between characters prove significant beyond the story's setting. Indeed, there is much significance to the ideas of warmth and coolness to the plot beyond temperature and setting in *The Left Hand of Darkness*.

Warmth has a wide range of meanings in literature, and its meaning changes throughout *The Left Hand of Darkness* as the plot develops. When he arrives in Gethen, Genly Ai participates in a celebratory parade only to find himself uncomfortable and hot. Moments later, Genly Ai notices his instant distrust for Prime Minister Estraven, saying "I don't trust Estraven, whose motives are forever obscure; I don't like him; yet I feel and respond to his authority as surely as I do to the warmth of the sun" (Le Guin, 7). This situation causes the reader to associate heat with the discomfort of a character, which proves true throughout the rest of the novel. However, for Genly Ai, this discomfort

becomes a symbol of the value of certain relationships. For instance, throughout their journey, Estraven prepares to go into kemmer, the state of sexual readiness or being "in heat." Just prior to Estraven mentioning this, Genly Ai repeatedly mentions the "heart of warmth" that surrounds them when they are together (241). He also discusses how Estraven used the warmth of his hands and his breath to thaw Genly Ai's frozen eye. Then, after warmth is mentioned several times, Estraven admits to Genly Ai that he has been avoiding him since he is in kemmer, and they agree it is best that they do not have sex. When Genly Ai explains that their love is based on difference and that having sex would only cause them to be alienated for their differences, he is reiterating the fact that the discomfort he would find in feeling Estraven's intimate "warmth" is a sign of how much he values their relationship. The dualism of warmth and coolness deepens the relationships between characters and therefore the plot since it relies on the reader's own digging. Although the reader must seek out warmth and its significance to the novel, iciness and viciousness are everywhere.

After their uncomfortable conversation by the fireplace and Genly Ai's revelation that he has been cold since he arrived, Estraven asks Genly Ai what the Ekumen, a United Nations-type organization, calls Gethen, to which Genly Ai replies "Winter" (Le Guin, 20). At this point, the discomfort does not belong to the characters, but to the reader: the Genly Ai and the Gethenians are skeptical of each other, but Estraven's revelation that he has fallen out of favor with the king and cannot help Genly Ai makes the reader fear what is in store for them. After this point, both Genly Ai and Estraven are dealing with a bitter government and the bitter cold. Although the warmest parts of their

journey are uncomfortable, the coldest parts are the most uncomfortable; for instance, when Genly Ai is at the Kundershaden Prison, the prisoners huddle together to protect themselves not only from the cold, but also from the guards. While the uncomfortable heat proves to have a deeper meaning and to not be completely good or bad, coldness fails to do this--the cruel weather and the cruel government force Genly Ai and the Gethenians to seek warmth within each other, forging relationships.

This reading of the novel is similar to that of David Lake in his essay "Le Guin's Twofold Vision: Contrary Image-Sets in *The Left Hand of Darkness*." An early response to Le Guin's novel, this essay focuses on the novel's symbols of dualism, which Lake refers to as the "cold team" and the "warm team." The cold team, which consists of qualities such as coldness, lightness, whiteness, and iciness, is known for "rationalism, certain knowledge, tyranny, isolation, betrayal, death" (Lake, 156). The warm team, meanwhile, consists of darkness, redness, earth, and blood, and is known for "intuition, ignorance, freedom, relationship, fidelity, life" (156). Lake argues that it is important to note that neither group is riddled with inherently positive or negative qualities, but instead, they are reflections of one another--however, there is little evidence to support any positivity associated with the cold. Lake takes this argument a step further, claiming that the city of Orgoreyn is portrayed as a member of the cold team and the city of Karhide a member of the warm team. At a glance, Orgoreyn seems much more friendly and welcoming than Karhide, but a closer examination reveals that the valuable discomfort in Karhide is merely masked by its rigid social structure and the cruelty in Orgoreyn is hidden by its false friendliness and claims of equality.

The characters' key qualities, such as discomfort in love, are revealed to the reader by being a part of the warm team or cool team, the dark team or light team, the awkward team or angry team, and the Karhide team or the Orgoreyn team.

Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* is a novel composed of contradictions, and it relies heavily on their symbolism and the reader's interpretation. As the title suggests, the novel is set in a realm of light and ice, the opposite of darkness, but the characters' struggle to move between the two spheres brings the setting to life. As Genly Ai tells Estraven, life is reliant on contradictions--no matter the value of either side. Although warmth proves more valuable at certain times, the characters prove that they cannot survive without the balance of the two teams

Works Cited

Lake, David J. "Le Guin's Twofold Vision: Contrary Image-Sets in 'The Left Hand of Darkness' (Vision Contrastée Chez Le Guin: Les Oppositions d'Images Dans 'La Main Gauche De La Nuit')." *Science Fiction Studies*, vol. 8, no. 2, 1981, pp. 156-164. Le Guin, Ursula K. *The Left Hand of Darkness*. New York: Ace, 1969. Print.