

Ursula le guin's "nine lives" as a feminist statement essay sample

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In the beginning of the 20th century, feminists movements started to arise, with the conviction of vindicate women in the social arrangement of that time, in order to get the same opportunities as men. Literature could not escape from this reality; as a result, women began to write about their situation. Ursula Le Guin's "Nine Lives", published in the 1960's, was one of the first attempts in science fiction literature to address the condition of women in the social arrangement. "Nine Lives" is set in Libra, a rocky planet which is far away from Earth, in the outer space, and in a distant future. Owen Pough and Alvaro Guillén Martín, the two main characters, are two astronauts in charge of exploring the planet searching for uranium. While being there, a ten-clone crew arrived to help in the searching.

The author presents the clone crew as five males and five females. Le Guin introduced them as being identical in both physical aspects and cognitive skills: "They were all tall, with bronze skin, black hair, high-bridged noses, epicanthic fold, the same face.", and "Given the same stimulus, the same problem, we're likely to be coming up with the same reactions and solutions at the same time.". However, in the development of the story, the author clearly supports the female gender. For instance: "Just delete the male gene from half of the cells and they revert to the basics, that is, the female."; or "...clones function best bisexually."

In the story, the female clone are presented with characteristics that differ enormously with those of women in the 60's: Independent, with the same

opportunities as men, with the same skills, and not being shameful of themselves as people. Ursula is contrasting the differences between these two types of women; in "Nine Lives" Le Guin suggests what women should be and behave. For example: "They woke and the girl sat up flushed and sleepy, with bare golden breasts. One of her sisters murmured something to her; she shot a glance at Pugh and disappeared in the sleeping bag, followed by a giant giggle,..." In the same paragraph: "Christ, we're used to having a room to ourselves. Hope you don't mind, Captain Pugh."..

By having both male and female clones living in the same environment, with no differences between them, she is saying that there should be no differences between men and women. Therefore, it should be said that the main conflict presented in the story regarding gender is that of the position and importance of women in the society, especially in the American society of the late 1960's. Le Guin is criticizing men's and society's behaviour towards women; the author wants them to think about women as what they are: people.

According to J. Chafetz (1999, p. 4) a gender theory specifically feminist should "...focus on the inequities, strains, and contradictions inherent in gender arrangements", and be "...a normative commitment that societies should develop equitable gender arrangements.". When reading "Nine Lives", we realize that Le Guin follows the two previously mentioned premises of a feminist theory: she focuses on the contradictions in gender arrangements, and tries to develop an equitable gender arrangement.

However, she does not state her point directly in the story; instead, as we

mentioned before, she presents the female characters with features totally opposed to those of women in the 60's.

Another concept dealt with in "Nine Lives" is that of humaneness.

Humaneness can be defined as "the quality of compassion or consideration for others (people or animals)" (Larousse Dictionary. 2004 p. 517). Now, with this concept clearly defined, some differences can be found in the text, regarding the behaviour of male and female characters. The male characters are portrayed in a deep way, with feelings, emotions, and sympathy towards the others male characters. E. g.: "..., then kneel by Pugh, who was just sitting up, and wiped at his cut cheekbone. "Owen, are you all right, are you going to be all right Owen?", and "Kaph looked at him and saw the thing he had never seen before: saw him: Owen Pugh, the other, the stranger who held his hand out in the dark."

However, when referring to the female characters, the male characters just see them as an object of desire, a sexual instrument, just a body. For example: "Martin looked bewilderedly at the long-limbed girls, and they smiled at him, three at once.". Also [Martin] "What if I proposition one of the girls?". Throughout the text there are no references to the thoughts, emotions or feelings of the female characters, totally opposed to the male characters's minds; the narrator has full access to their minds, indicating their thoughts, emotions, and feelings. E. g.: "Pugh was pleased. He had hoped Martin would want to go on working with him, but neither of them was used to talking much about their feelings, and he hesitated to ask."

By having portrayed the female characters in a superficial way, with no access to their minds from the narrator, and the "distant" behaviour towards them from the male characters, Le Guin makes a clear allusion to the subordination of women in the society. According to O. Neira (1981, p. 84) "La mayoría de los papeles asignados culturalmente a la mujer están concebidos de modo que contrasten con la superioridad del varón." (1). Mrs. Ursula criticizes this male chauvinist society arrangement. Nonetheless, as with the previous point, Le Guin does not state her point directly, but, instead, she recreates in the text the characteristics in which women lived in 1960's American society.

The way the language is used in the story is an important issue. It serves to show the reader Le Guin's point of view regarding gender arrangements, and the position of women in society. The narrator displays an utopic relationship between men and women, where there are no differences among them, except for their biological sex. Both males and females act as one unit, with no discrimination from his/her counterpart; instead, they complement each other. For instance: "They all got up within one minute except for one pair, a boy and a girl, who lay snugly tangled and still sleeping in one bag." Further on: "The twins braced for the stop at one moment, each with a slight protective gesture to the other.". Also: "Whatever he did, any member of it would always receive the support and approval of his peers, his other selves. Nobody else was needed."

The differentiation presented between man and woman in our world, in terms of gender arrangements, is not applied to the male-female clone

relationship; on the contrary, the female clone have the same opportunities as the male clone, and there is no presence of a hierarchical organization. Furthermore, the narrator highlights the physical beauty of women, their delicacy, in order to enhance their importance. E. g.: "..., from which another man emerged with the same neat twist and jump, followed by a young woman who emerged with the same neat twist, ornamented by a wriggle, and the jump.". Also: " Their smile was gentler than that of the boys, but no less radiantly self-possessed." Finally: " The girl's voice was definitely a bit higher and softer."

All of the clone are named Jhon Chow, except for their middle names, which are different. These names are Aleph, Kaph, Yod, Gimel, Samedth, for the male clone, and Sadhe, Daleth, Zayin, Beth, and Resh, for the female clone. These names are some of the constituent letters of the hebrew alphabet. E. Jerezano (s. f.) states that these hebrew letters have a meaning by themselves. For example, the letter Aleph means " individualization", while the letter Kaph means " to accept" or " to adapt". These letters, Jerezano continues, and their connotations complement each other, in order to form one unit. Thus, one can affirm that Le Guin uses deliberately this allusion to the hebrew alphabet to demonstrate the unity men and women should have; despite the fact that men and women are differenciated by their sex, this should be the only difference among them.

When describing the characteristics of the 1950's and 1960's society in terms of the men's behaviour towards women's feelings and emotions, M. Evans (2001. p. 50) says that " women's issues seemed to them [men] "

special", "sectarian", while issues that concerned men were "human", "universal". The subordination of the female gender has been a constant issue in the western society, affecting women in their lives. Therefore, "Nine Lives" reaches a central problem for all women, without distinctions of race or economical status.

A woman who reads "Nine Lives" will feel identified with the relationship between the female and the male, whether this identification is with the utopian relationship between them, or the shallow look they receive from men when it comes to their needs, desires, and feelings. It does not matter where the reader lives, since, as stated before, this subordination is a persistent affair in our modern society.

Consequently, a Venezuelan reader will be easily related to this situation, because, as G. Rosciano (1991, p. 108) describes, the Venezuelan society is "un mundo machista donde las mujeres sufren una situación intolerante, no solamente por pobres sino por mujeres." (2). The Venezuelan women have suffered, as well as other women from around the World, from the male chauvinist conception of society for centuries. Despite the fact that they are getting more opportunities in our modern society, there is still an underlying notion which sees and values a woman just for their reproductive role.

Numerous feminist implications can be found in "Nine Lives". Looking back to the past, the treatment women have received from men, and society in general, is unfair; therefore, Le Guin tries to raise awareness of this situation in the readers, by criticizing the reproductive role society has assigned to

women, and, also, by offering a different scenario, one in which women are equal with men. Consequently, "Nine Lives" should be considered as one of the most important stories with feminists implications.

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Notes

(1): "The majority of the culturally assigned roles to women are conceived in a way that contrast with the male superiority"

(2): "A male chauvinist world where women suffer an intolerable situation, not only for being poor but for being woman"

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