

Lecture #13 Thurs 11 Mar 2010 *The Dispossessed*

NB: This will probably take more than one lecture period.

Ursula Kroeber LeGuin. Born in 1929 in Berkeley, California, daughter of writer Theodora Kroeber and anthropologist Alfred L. Kroeber. (Educated Radcliffe, Columbia) Lives in Portland, Oregon.

<http://www.ursulakleguin.com/>

Author of 20 novels. First novel, *Rocannon's World*, published 1966. *Left Hand of Darkness* won Nebula, Hugo awards Best Novel 1969. Total of 5 Hugos, 5 Nebulas, a National Book Award, nominated for a Pulitzer; and multiple other awards and nominations.

Other major works: The Earthsea Trilogy: *A Wizard of Earthsea* (1968); *The Tombs of Atuan* (1970); *The Farthest Shore* (1972); also, *The Lathe of Heaven* (1971).

The Dispossessed (published 1974) (LeGuin's 8th novel) won Nebula, Hugo awards Best Novel 1975.

LeGuin's work is primarily "soft" SF, with sociological/anthropological concerns. Frequent concern with sexuality and gender roles. E.g., The inhabitants of the planet Gethen in *The Left Hand of Darkness* are hermaphrodites who switch gender.

The Dispossessed is part of the Ekumen novels: A million years ago the Hain colonized several scattered planets, including Terra (Earth), Gethen/Winter (the setting of *The Left Hand of Darkness*), and Urras (*The Dispossessed*), after which the old Hainish empire collapsed. Now the Hain are going around reuniting their lost colonies. It is important to note that all travel between stars is slower-than-light, and hence takes decades.

Synopsis: The novel takes place on planet orbiting the star we know as Tau Ceti, 12 light years away from Earth ("Terra").. (Tau Ceti is very similar to our Sun, slightly smaller and cooler, but may be as old as 10 billion years old.) A double planetary system: Urras, a rich, eden-like world, and Anarres, a desolated but inhabitable moon.

The nations of Urras include A-Io, a capitalist ("propertarian") society roughly analogous to the U.S., Thu, an authoritarian socialist society much like the Soviet Union/China (though more like North Korea), and Benbilli, apparently like an unstable third-world country. 200 years prior to the novel, a radical named Odo, a combination of Marx, Martin Luther King Jr., and Susan B. Anthony, proposed *anarchy*, a nonauthoritarian, decentralized strain of communism. The Odonians were allowed to leave Urras and settle on Anarres.

170 years after the settlement of Anarres, a brilliant young physicist named Shevek develops a radical new theory of time. He decides to go back to Urras—which no one else ever has done—hoping to offer Odonian philosophy to the Urrasti. Repulsed by the greed and callousness of Iotic society, he flees his hosts and takes refuge with Terran and Hainish ambassadors, offering to all nations of both worlds—to all the universe—plans for an *ansible*, a machine for instantaneous communication between distant planets.

Analysis of *The Dispossessed*

* cyclic structure of the novel

* major metaphors: walls, letters, suffering, empty hands, circles vs. lines

* deconstruction of capitalism: economic and gender inequalities

* the science/philosophy of *The Dispossessed*: the search for meaning

Cyclic structure of the novel

The novel is told in alternating chapters. The penultimate chapter leads up to the first chapter—hence the novel has both sequence and simultaneity, as in Shevek's pseudoscientific theory.

Major metaphors

The novel has repeated images: walls (the opening image),

“There was a wall. It did not look important... Where it crossed the roadway... it degenerated into mere geometry, a line, the idea of boundary. But the ideal was real. It was important...” (Ch 1)

Aboard spaceship to Urras: “There were walls around all [Dr. Kimoe's] thoughts, and he seemed utterly unaware of them, though he was perpetually hiding behind them.” (Ch. 1)

“He had let a wall be built around him and had never noticed.” (Ch 7)

“There were no more abysses, no more walls.” (Ch. 9)

“The Terrans had been intellectual imperialists, jealous wall builders.” (Ch 9)

Letters (communication): Ch 7: Shevek receives anonymous letters about the political situation. Vea “had twice written him invitations to dinner parties, in a bold childish hand, on thick, sweet-scented paper.” (Ch. 7)

Pain/suffering: The novel revolves around the politics of suffering: capitalism vs. communism

“It begins in shared pain.” (Ch 2) “It is pain that brings men together.” (Ch 5)

“Even pain counts.” (Ch 10)

Circles/lines – important for Shevek's theory

Ch 2: “You *can* go home again, the General Temporal Theory asserts, as long as you understand that home is a place where you have never been.”

Odo's epitaph: “To be whole is to be part; true voyage is return.”

“..as surely as future becomes the past, the past becomes the future.”

Deconstruction of capitalism

In novel, A-Io = America, Thu = Soviet Union/China, Anarres = anarchic paradise that does not exist.

Shevek's adventures on Urras parody capitalism in the US: “A psychopathy on Anarres was rational behavior on Urras.” (Ch 9)

Economic inequalities between ruling proprietarians and the workers;

assumptions about gender roles; many of the statements made in A-Io about women reflect recent attitudes towards women in US: “... ‘what women call thinking is done with the uterus.’” (Ch 3). 19th century opinion: math diverted blood to brain and shriveled a woman's ovaries.

late 19th/early 20th: use women for dull, repetitive tasks to free men for “real thinking,” e.g. in astronomy. Henrietta Leavitt (discovered period-luminosity relation in Cepheid variables) + many others

On Urras, men = scientists Vea: “Men always have theories, and things always have to fit them.” (Ch 7)

On the other hand, LeGuin does not glamorise her egalitarian society; she points out social pressures in Odonian society: “Don’t egoize!” & playwright Tirin’s troubles.

Science in *The Dispossessed* and the search for meaning

Shevek’s thoughts are closer to philosophy than what we would recognize as physics.

Unlike *Timescape*, it comes close to technobabble. “...the Saeba variables and the theory of infinite velocities and complex cause...” (Ch 9)

How science “works”

Failure of pure argument: ‘Oh, you can prove anything with the Analogy [a rhetorical method on Anarres] and you know it!’ (Ch. 2)

Stereotype of emotionless science: “A scientist can pretend that his work isn’t himself, it’s merely the impersonal truth.” (Ch. 10)

Politics/negotiation and science: “So they had bargained, he and Sabul, bargained like profiteers.... Shevek’s career... depended on the continuance of a..profit contract.an exploitive relationship.” (Ch 4)

Against authoritarian discourse: “Kids learn to parrot Odo’s words as if they were laws—the ultimate blasphemy!” (Ch 6)

Science as “truth”: If a book were written all in numbers, it would be true (Ch 2)

“Scientific truth will out, you can’t hide the sun under a stone.”(Ch 5)

Science as limited to material truths: “Even Ainsstein [Einstein] the originator of the theory [relativity] had felt compelled to give warning that his physics embraced no mode but the physical and should not be taken as implying the metaphysical, the philosophical, or the ethical.” (Ch 9)

Like Benford, LeGuin rejects quantum mechanics, in the service of bringing meaning back to the universe.

“...the magnificent incoherence of quantum theory with its high technological yields, at last concentrating on the technological mode so exclusively as to arrive at a dead end, a catastrophic failure of imagination.” (Ch 9)

Einstein’s refusal to accept indeterminacy (quantum mechanics) is described as both incorrect and correct.

Shevek wants to believe, after all his travails, that “The thing about working with time, instead of against it...is that it is not wasted. Even pain counts.” (Ch 10)

Like Benford, LeGuin also sees causality and sequentiality must change in order to preserve meaning in the face of physics:

“There’s a connection. But I don’t know what it is, it’s not causal.” (Ch 6)

“Sequency...speaks only of the arrow of time—never of the circle of time.” (Ch 7)

“..our sense of time involves our ability to separate cause and effect, means and end.” (Ch 7)

“You think Anarres is a future that cannot be reached, as your past cannot be changed.”
(Ch 11)

LeGuin’s theme: Everything is connected, the universe is not reduced to a sequence of random events, nor is it reduced to a simplistic mechanical chain of cause-and-effect

With his general temporal theory, Shevek claims he can build an *ansible*, a device for instantaneous communication between planets. He does not claim transience (faster-than-light travel) (an example of *limitation of science*)

However there is no scene of experimental proof of this. LeGuin diverges from Benford, who knows experiment is crucial. Shevek merely asserts he knows how to build an ansible.

Questions to think about:

Timescape illustrates that scientists do not always argue rationally or with cold logic; that personality and ego intrude. What about *The Dispossessed*? Are those scientists there cool and impersonal?

LeGuin is a feminist writer, and yet she made the protagonist of *The Dispossessed* male. Why do you think that is?