Exile, Communication and Unity in the Science Fiction of Ursula K. Le Guin

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Statement of Originality

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Abstract

This thesis examines the roles of exile and communication in the science fiction of Ursula K. Le Guin. Specifically, it examines the exile’s role in the progression from isolation towards unity that has been identified across Le Guin’s oeuvre, and the need for effective communication in maintaining this unity. The argument of this thesis is that the exile’s journey is, in all cases, fundamental to the eventual attainment of unity but that in order for unity to be realised, something must be sacrificed of the individual. The exile must always, therefore, pay a price for unity above and beyond the fact of their exile.

Other critics have written, separately, on the concepts of unity, exile and communication as they appear in Le Guin’s fiction. To my knowledge, however, these concepts have never been adequately linked together. Certainly, the concept of exile has not been studied in enough detail, considering its importance to Le Guin’s overarching vision. This thesis aims to rectify this lack by presenting a cogent literary analysis that locates these three concepts within Le Guin’s work and identifies the co-dependency that emerges from their interactions.
Introduction

A characteristic of Ursula K. Le Guin’s fiction that has been often remarked upon yet rarely discussed in depth is its abundance of exile-figures: characters that are separated by time, space or circumstance from their home. Nudelman (1975) effectively demonstrated the progression within much of Le Guin’s fiction, and particularly her earlier works, from fragmentation and separation towards unity or wholeness. This idea has been taken up and discussed further by other writers, yet absent from these discussions is an acknowledgment of the role played by the exile-figure in bringing about this unity. The argument of this thesis is that the experience of exile is fundamental to Le Guin’s conception of unity. The longing for home experienced by the exile mirrors the unnaturalness of the fragmentation experienced by the cultures and people through which he or she moves. By this understanding, unity is shown to be the ‘natural’ or ideal state to which all human endeavour, be it personal or political, must aspire, in the same way that a person in exile aspires to return home.

It is no accident that the conclusion of the exile’s journey is often concurrent with or a direct catalyst for the final attainment of this state. Estraven’s death on the ice in *The Left Hand of Darkness* fills Genly with the necessary resolve to finally complete his mission. It also directly makes his success possible by exposing the lies of the Orgota and the manipulations of Tibe, thus politically justifying Genly’s cause and freeing King Argaven from the restraints of his *shifgrethor* to officially welcome the Ekumen agents to Gethen. Similarly, in *The Dispossessed*, the moment that Shevek completes his theory of simultaneity - thus making possible the invention of the ansible, which functions within the Hainish novels as a concrete symbol of unity and open communication – he realises that there is “no more exile” (234) and finally escapes from his gilded cage to find solidarity and brotherhood with the lower classes of Urras, where before he had found only estrangement and isolation amongst the rich. He also begins to directly prepare to return to Anarres, thus bringing to an end his physical as well as his internal exile.

Both of these examples are also interesting in that they point to another peculiarity of Le Guin’s construction of exile. Despite the actions of these two exiles (Estraven and Shevek) making the achievement of unity possible, in both cases it comes at high personal cost. Karen Sinclair has written that Le Guin’s protagonists “suffer
heartily… they often sacrifice themselves or are sacrificed for their understanding. Yet often they represent the only hope” (52). Estraven dies in exile, giving his life so that Genly can bring his planet into the unity or oneness represented by the Ekumen; Shevek is caught up in a violent rally and forced to seek asylum in the Terran embassy. He eventually returns home, yet his experiences in exile have left him disillusioned concerning the possibility of true brotherhood beyond the ‘ambiguous utopia’ of Anarres - despite his having completed the theory that will eventually make this a real possibility.

If the plot of a ‘typical’ Le Guin novel moves in an outward spiral, as Nudelman and others have suggested, then the exile-figure is in many cases moving in the opposite direction along that same spiral. Usually by the end of the story, the world has opened up and reached a state of unity and social cohesion, yet in order for this to occur, the exile has had to wander for a while through a world in which he does not belong, and to extract some truth from his experience of exile that makes it possible for him to end the estrangement from fellow human beings that previously characterised the inhabitants of that world. Thus there is a tension between the social and the personal, a sense that in order to achieve social harmony, something must be sacrificed of the individual.

It is important to note that ‘exile’ in this sense need not always refer to those characters who, like Estraven, have been literally exiled from their homeland. It can just as easily refer to those characters who find themselves in a foreign environment (usually an alien planet) and for one reason or another have the way home blocked to them. Many of Le Guin’s characters are in fact made exiles by time. The ansible made possible by Shevek’s theory allows the instantaneous transmission of ideas across the vast distances of space, yet for the most part people themselves must take the long route. Le Guin’s use of time dilation and NAFAL (Nearly As Fast As Light) speed travel means that although the traveller may experience a journey as lasting no more than a few moments, actually several generations have passed while they were in transit. By the time they reach their destination, all of their family and everyone they knew have been dead for many years, in addition to any number of social and political changes that could have rendered their home planet unrecognisable to them. They are thus unable to return to their home as they knew it and are therefore another kind of exile.

As well as being directly involved in the movement towards unity, the exile-figure often plays a part in widening the possibilities of free and open communication, which is essential for the kind of unity with which Le Guin is concerned. This is most
explicit in *The Dispossessed*, where the ansible is one of the main symbols of the story, and is certainly portrayed as a worthy goal for Shevek to work towards. In the other Hainish stories the function of communication is perhaps less explicit, but is equally essential in order for unity – particularly such a dispersed and complex unity as the Ekumen – to function with any coherence.

More recently, Le Guin seemed to move towards ending exile in the Hainish universe, through three stories found in the collection *A Fisherman of the Inland Sea*. Her invented churten theory allows for characters to travel instantly, without interval, to any point in space. Yet this solution is not without complications, as we shall see later, and these stories in fact in no way diminish the importance of exile and belonging to an overall understanding of Le Guin’s fiction. Rather than ending the possibility of exile, as Shevek hoped to do through simultaneity theory, the churten theory and its after-effects only confirm the importance of the longer journey, and “Another Story OR A Fisherman of the Inland Sea” seems especially to cement the role of the exile in the Hainish universe and the importance of his longing for home as it relates to the stitching together of disparate fragments into a single whole.
The Left Hand of Darkness

In *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) there are two distinct exile-figures. Genly Ai, who delivers the bulk of the novel’s narration, is First Mobile of the Ekumen to the planet Gethen - populated solely by a society of androgyne. Almost a full century passed on Earth while he was in transit between Terra, Hain, and Gethen, making him an exile by time. The other exile, Therem Harth rem ir Estraven, begins the novel as Prime Minister of Karhide, one of the two dominant nations of Gethen and the one to which Genly Ai had first announced himself. Early in the action, Estraven is banished by King Argaven and spends the rest of the novel in exile. He is replaced as Prime Minister by Lord Tibe, the king’s cousin, who is attempting to reform Karhide out of its dispersed feudalism and to turn it into a more centralised nation that is capable of being mobilised for war: a completely new concept on Gethen.

A discouraged Genly leaves Karhide for the rival nation of Orgoreyn. Mistrusting Estraven and his sincere attempts to help, Genly ignores his warnings and initially prefers Orgoreyn to Karhide, until he is arrested by secret police and taken to a forced labour camp. Estraven rescues him from the camp and they travel together for eighty-one days across the Gobrin ice sheet back into Karhide. Their difficult journey on the ice forms the emotional and thematic core of the novel, contrasting the corruption and bombast of the two nation states against the quiet strangeness of two exiles alone.

Estraven is arguably the more interesting exile-figure, for it is largely due to his actions in exile and his eventual self-sacrifice that Genly Ai’s mission is eventually successful. Yet it is significant that Genly is also depicted as exiled, for the realisation of their shared estrangement from their homes is one of the instrumental factors in the love and acceptance that grows between Estraven and Genly in their trek across the Gobrin ice - a realisation that Estraven records in his journal:

Long since in Erhenrang he had explained to me how time is shortened inside the ships that go almost as fast as starlight between the stars, but I had not laid this fact down against the length of a man’s life, or the lives he leaves behind him on his own world. While he lived a few hours in one of those unimaginable ships going from one planet to another, everyone he had left behind him at home grew old and died, and their children grew old… I said at last, ‘I thought myself an exile.’ (LHD 181)
As Estraven recognises here, Genly is perhaps even more of an exile than Estraven. Not only is he unable to return home but his home as he knew it no longer exists for him. Genly’s reply adds another layer to this consideration of exile: “You for my sake – I for yours” (LHD 181). In saying this, Genly acknowledges that Estraven was exiled largely due to his support for Genly’s cause. More importantly, this statement shows that, in Genly’s mind at least, his choice to go into exile is justified by the possibility of bringing Gethen into the Ekumen, and more than justified: it is necessary in bringing this about. Frank Dietz has commented on this, writing that “the severe exile, the most extreme isolation… leads to a communication which… will cause the planet Gethen to join the Ekumen” (110). The immense self-sacrifice inherent in Genly’s decision to literally leave his world behind in order to bring another fragmented planet into the unity of the Ekumen reinforces the importance of unity as a goal to which humanity should aspire.

John Huntington has written directly concerning the conflict between public and private life in *The Left Hand of Darkness* - exemplified by the contrast of scenes in Karhide/Orgoreyn against scenes on the Gobrin ice - and the price that Le Guin’s characters often pay for the attainment of unity: “public action demands the sacrifice of a private bond. The success of the heroic quest entails personal loss” (268). This is true of both Genly and Estraven: Genly pays with grief and shame, and Estraven pays with his life. The fact that both are exiles does not enter into Huntington’s analysis, though he does identify a movement in two directions: “in the love story Ai begins suspicious of Estraven and learns to trust him; in the political story he begins naively trusting both King Argaven and the Commensals of Orgoreyn and learns to suspect them and be cunning” (269). So as his reliance on, and trust of political or collective entities lessens, Genly learns to rely instead on close personal relationships, on the trust and love that develops between himself and Estraven. Shevek, in *The Dispossessed*, also acknowledges the futility of valuing external, arbitrary power structures over individual autonomy and personal relationships, recognising that “the individual cannot bargain with the state” (227) and that

Sacrifice might be demanded of the individual, but never compromise: for, though only the society could give security and stability, only the individual, the person, had the power of moral choice – the power of change, the essential function of life. The Odonian society was conceived as a permanent revolution,
and revolution begins in the thinking mind. (TD 276)

So the exile cannot expect to belong as part of any group or political entity, but must instead reach out on a smaller scale, as an individual, and by bridging the distance separating him from the Other, break down the walls that have kept them in isolation. This is acknowledged, and justified, by Genly in *The Left Hand of Darkness*: “Alone, I cannot change your world. But I can be changed by it. Alone, I must listen, as well as speak. Alone, the relationship I finally make… is not impersonal… Not We and They; not I and It; but I and Thou” (LHD 211). One individual’s exile is thus shown to be a valuable, perhaps inevitable, precursor to the forming of close personal relationships that eclipse ethnic and social barriers, like that between Genly and Estraven. Dietz writes of their relationship that “it is only after both Ai and Estraven have been gone into exile that true communication becomes possible. The experience of exile strips everything away, until… pure humanity emerges” (110). It is these close personal relationships on a human scale - removed from politics and power games - that allow for communication between individuals. This, in turn, leads to the end of exile, by equipping the exile-figure with the necessary tools to see past the artificial groupings imposed by society and the state into the true, diverse unity here represented by the Ekumen. This, Nudelman writes, is “a unity of a peculiar kind – not the sum of its parts but rather a common factor, an essential constant derived from them” (243); a “harmonious whole preserving the individuality of its component parts” (249). True unity then, is only possible when it develops organically out of - and not in spite of – individual differences. This is exemplified by the love between Genly and Estraven, which is made possible only when Genly is able to look past the artificial categories of man, woman, and alien, which had up until this point prevented him from accepting Estraven as worthy of trust, or even perhaps from accepting him as a complete human being:

And I saw then again, and for good, what I had always been afraid to see, and had pretended not to see in him: that he was a woman as well as a man. Any need to explain the sources of that fear vanished with the fear; what I was left with was, at last, acceptance of him as he was. Until then I had rejected him, refused him his own reality. (LHD 202)
The great gender divide, ever-present as a complicating factor that underlies all of Genly’s interactions with the Gethenians, is here identified as perhaps the chief isolating influence. Karen Sinclair has commented on the significance of this moment, rightly asserting that “the bond that unites [Genly and Estraven] is one of differences, not of likenesses” (59). As long as Genly attempts to see the Gethenians in terms of their likeness to himself, he can see only half of them, and is unable to accept them as fully human. By continuing to play power games, forcing them into gender roles that have no meaning and do not fit, Genly would remain an exile and an outsider among the inhabitants of Winter, unable to affect any sort of lasting unity with them, or to build any relationship on a foundation of trust and understanding. Exile is undoubtedly important in the movement towards unity. However, in order for unity to finally be achieved, all exile must eventually end. Thus, Genly’s final acceptance of Estraven is pivotal: it is the moment when Genly ceases to be an exile on Gethen.

Estraven gives further clarity to this, writing in his journal that “here on the ice each of us is singular, isolate… We are equals at last, equal, alien, alone” (LHD 189). What emerges from this is that Genly’s earlier refusal to trust Estraven was a result of not only the gender divide, but also of their surroundings - of the controlling influence of social structures that organise people into groups or categories and often prevent them from meeting as individuals.

Removed from these pressures, on the Gobrin ice, neither Genly nor Estraven feel themselves to be exiles, for there is nothing left to mark them as alien. They are simply two people alone. Sinclair, writing of the novel, finds that “a recognition of solitariness underlies all unity” (59). The character’s mutual recognition of one another’s solitariness thus lays the groundwork for the final bridge between their cultures, by which Gethen will join the Ekumen.

An ideal society must be rooted in a mutual understanding and acceptance of individual differences. If a society is to have any hope of attaining the specific kind of dispersed unity that Le Guin’s societies are so often striving towards, then it must encourage rather than restrict individual initiative, and allow people the freedom to fulfil what Shevek would call their ‘cellular function’.

Society, with its promises and pitfalls, is a perennial concern of Le Guin. It typically shows up in her writing in one of two ways. There are the loose knit, anarchic, functioning units as typified by Anarres; by the traditional institution of the Hearth in rural Karhide (though certainly not by its increasingly mobilising and restrictive central
government); by the valley of the Kesh in her novel *Always Coming Home*; by the inhabitants of Eleven-Soro in “Solitude”, and by the Ekumen itself. Then there are the tightly organised, often totalitarian and/or capitalist, arbitrary arrangements of power: the state. Urras in *The Dispossessed*; Orgoreyn and (to a far lesser, though increasingly prevalent extent) Karhide, in *The Left Hand of Darkness*; the Terran invaders in *The Word for World is Forest*; and many more. The two social groups are distinct from one another primarily in their interpretation of unity. The first, anarchic, society views itself as being made up of individuals, whereas the capitalist/totalitarian society views itself as being made up of consumers, or subjects, whose individual freedom has been yoked to the best interests of those in power.

The Ekumen itself stands as a constant symbol of the ideal society. Its unity emerges out of the diversity of its parts, the celebration of individual differences. Nudelman accurately described it as a “unity retaining variety” (248). However, it has very little physical presence in much of Le Guin’s work. It is, as Nudelman found, never clearly defined and seems to have been left intentionally ambiguous in terms of its organisation and history (242). Genly describes it as being more of a “body mystical” than a “body politic” (LHD 211). The Ekumen seems to typically function as a concrete but removed symbol of the principle of unity, a promise of how things might be rather than a reflection of their present reality - it is up to the individual planets to recreate this ideal on a smaller scale.

The importance of communication to unity is obliquely referenced throughout *The Left Hand of Darkness*. The form of the novel serves to highlight and reinforce this idea. It is written as though it were a collection of reports from the Ekumen’s archives. This is immediately made apparent to the reader through bracketing paragraphs that introduce each new perspective (e.g. “From the Archives of Hain” [1]; “From a sound-tape collection of North Karhidish ‘hearth tales’” [18]), as well as the first line of the novel, the oft-quoted “I’ll make my report as if I told a story, for I was taught as a child on my homeworld that Truth is a matter of the imagination” (1). This same device is reproduced in “Solitude” and again in “Another Story”, which playfully makes the link explicit in its very first line: “I shall make my report as if I told a story, this having been the tradition for some time now” (*Fisherman* 159).

One of the more interesting things about the narrative structure of *The Left Hand of Darkness* is the bridging chapters that relate Gethenian myths and history or Ekumenical reports on some aspect of Gethenian culture or biology. More than merely
adding flavour and depth to the novel, these chapters serve to bring the reader into the world in a manner that is denied to Genly, taking them ‘out of exile’ so to speak, and into a privileged position of insider knowledge. Despite the bulk of the narration being from Genly’s point of view, the reader is never made to share his ignorance. This curious framing of events so as to give the reader privileged access must be seen as a deliberate move, not only by Le Guin, but also by whoever compiled the reports – this is usually assumed to have been Genly, although there is no textual evidence to support this. It highlights the value of effective communication by opening more channels of communication with the reader than are accessible to Genly, and showing firsthand the difference that this can make to our comprehension of the novel as a complete whole.

These mythological sections typically come at a time in the narrative when their content is able to better illuminate some recent or imminent plot point, or to shed greater light on a concept or idea Genly remains largely in the dark about. Thus the chapter ‘The Nineteenth Day’, a historical myth concerning a Karhidish lord whose death was ambiguously - though accurately - predicted by the Foretellers, is positioned immediately before Genly meets members of that pseudo-religious order for the first time. It communicates to the reader a deeper understanding of the nature and accuracy of the foretellers’ predictions, while Genly is left in the dark, essentially approaching them blind.

Similarly, the chapter ‘Estraven the Traitor’ tells of a significant event in the history of Estraven’s family, as well as shedding some light on Estraven’s own past, which echoes that of his namesake-ancestor in that he too had been in love with his sibling, Arek, but rather than swearing kemmering – which, between siblings, is one of the few sexual taboos on Gethen – he chose to leave his ancestral home, Estre, while Arek was pregnant with their child. Estraven later writes that “I was born to live in exile… my one way home was by way of dying” (LHD 59), demonstrating his integrity and how seriously he takes his decision. The historical tale also serves to foreshadow Estraven being wrongly called a traitor, indeed, the name ‘Estraven the Traitor’ is explicitly recalled in the final chapter of the novel by Sorve, the child of Estraven and Arek. Coming as it does immediately between two conversations by Genly and Estraven in which the former is extremely suspicious and mistrusting of the latter - this chapter, along with the earlier chapter narrated by Estraven, adds a new layer to Estraven’s character for the reader, while further illustrating the perceptual error that Genly is making by seeing only half of Estraven’s character.
Another part of the novel where the reader is privileged over Genly is his arrival in Orgoreyn. Having begun to form a more comprehensive understanding of Karhidish culture, and to feel almost at ease (though never comfortable) in Erhenrang; Genly is once again a stranger in an unfamiliar land when he gets to Orgoreyn. In a way, he is doubly exiled at this point, but the reader is initially less of an outsider than they were while Genly was in Karhide, having already been introduced to Orgoreyn through an earlier chapter narrated by Estraven. The reader knows far better than Genly the political manoeuvrings and repressions that characterise the Orgota.

All of this serves to give the reader a more nuanced perspective of events than Genly’s. More information is communicated to the reader, placing them in a position from which they can begin to independently evaluate Gethenian cultural values and traditions, while Genly remains an outsider, still struggling to learn in whom to place his trust and unable to overcome his exile, which is maintained in part by his failure to transcend the barriers of culture, tradition and gender that mark him as a stranger on Gethen.

The imagined existence of the story as a physical document within its own world ties into the wider importance of communication in forming and maintaining unity. It is interesting that *The Dispossessed* is not written in report form, despite being explicitly concerned with this indispensable function of communication. In plot terms, this is probably because the Ekumen was only made possible by Shevek’s simultaneity theory and as such could not be reported to at the time of *The Dispossessed*. However, it also serves to highlight the importance of communication to unity (the Ekumen simply could not exist without the ansible) as well as the importance of unity in promoting and disseminating communication (the ‘reports’ of *The Left Hand of Darkness*, “Solitude”, and “Another Story” would likewise not exist without the Ekumen). So if Le Guin’s vision of unity is of a unity made up of smaller individual parts, then communication - and the reports from exiles who leave their worlds to open fresh channels of communication with alien cultures - serves to link these parts, joining them into a single unified entity - becoming the “wide, thin, fine network” (Solitude 133) that makes community possible, even across the vast distances that separate Le Guin’s worlds.
“Solitude”

The short story “Solitude” (1994, collected in The Birthday of the World) is unusual in that it does not initially appear to fit Le Guin’s usual pattern of a progression towards unity. It seems, rather, to move in the opposite direction, into fragmented isolation. Perhaps this is why there has been very little scholarly interest in the story, despite its being set in the Hainish universe and containing much to do with exile, loneliness and community. The bulk of “Solitude” takes place on Eleven-Soro, a planet that once had “the greatest cities ever built on any world” (137). Sometime in distant history, though, complications arising from overpopulation brought this to an end. The scattered inhabitants of the planet have since turned introversion and isolation into a way of life. The women and children live in scattered ‘auntrings’, described as “dispersed villages” (120), and male children are, as soon as they reach adolescence, permanently exiled to live and die in the wilderness - a life of constant fighting, tests of manhood, and roving gangs. When a woman wants to conceive, she goes ‘scouting’, typically getting pregnant from one of the ‘settled men’ who live as hermits in the area outside of an auntring.

Adults never enter one another’s homes, and most conversations are impersonal. In short, there is very little here that is usually meant by community or culture, at least to an outsider. An early observer from the Ekumen remarked in his report that “…the only community activity of the Sorovians is throwing rocks at men” (120).

The story is narrated by Serenity, whose mother – a Mobile of the Ekumen – correctly determined that the only way to learn anything substantial about the remnants of culture on the planet would be to have been raised in it: “There’s no way… for an adult to learn anything. They don’t ask questions, they don’t answer questions. Whatever they learn, they learn when they’re children” (121). Young Sorovians receive an education from the aunts of their ring, yet the aunts neither educate nor communicate meaningfully with one another. For an adult and an outsider - lacking the necessary education and cultural awareness - there is simply no way in. Knowing all of this, their mother decided to take Serenity and her brother, Borny, and raise them on Eleven-Soro.

Through Serenity’s narration we are given a glimpse of a fairly complex, if somewhat limited society, one that values the internal over the external. Le Guin wrote in the foreword to The Birthday of the World that “whatever caused the population crash in Solitude – probably the population itself – it was long ago and is not the concern of
the story, which is about survival, loyalty, and introversion” (xi). The Sorovians’ fragmented society can thus also be seen as a refinement of Le Guin’s frequent valorisation of the individual spirit over the state.

To the Sorovians, social bonds as we understand them are largely regarded as magic. Any person who misuses this ‘magic’ to gain or maintain power or influence over others is regarded as a dark magician. When Serenity’s mother, dismayed by the increasingly Sorovian attitudes of her children and the impending exile of Borny, decides to take them all back to the ship, Serenity is appalled and terrified: “I drew away from her. I had never been afraid of her before: she had never used magic on me. A mother has great power, but there is nothing unnatural in it, unless it is used against the child’s soul” (129). This kind of ‘unnatural’ magic is shown again in an argument between Serenity and her mother on the Hainish ship. Serenity wants to go back to Soro and claims that her mother has no power over her. Her mother says “I agree. I have no power over you. But I have certain rights; the right of loyalty; of love”, to which Serenity replies that “nothing is right that puts me in your power” (138). Rather than being an inhuman rejection of parental love and authority (for Serenity loves and respects her mother very much, having earlier referred to the mother’s power over the child as ‘sacred’), this exchange should be seen, instead, as a rejection of social institutions that diminish or restrict independent thought and freedom of action. Serenity complies with her mother and returns to the ship, but she does so at the cost of her ‘soul’. Neither of them is happy, and Serenity eventually makes the decision to return to Soro, where she can continue learning “to be a person” (135) in solitude.

The Sorovian concept of the soul, referred to at several points in the story, seems to relate more to independence, privacy, and completeness of being than to any religious interpretation of a literal soul. To educate a child is to make that child’s soul. After childhood a person becomes responsible for continuing to make their own soul, moving towards a state of total independence bordering on isolation, and it becomes practically impossible to seek help from other adults in this. The sole exception to this is at the singing circles, where stories are passed down by the older aunts and “women make each other’s souls, learning how to make their children’s souls” (144). Hence Serenity’s fear when she is back on the Hainish ship prior to having completed her education, surrounded by strangers and with no real privacy: “How could I make my soul? I could barely cling to it” (142). Serenity also speaks in similar terms of learning to be a person and learning “to be in the world” (130). Both seem to refer, in the same way as the soul,
to the development of this total independence.

Despite initially appearing ultra-fragmented and isolated, Sorovian society is actually Le Guin’s most powerful depiction yet of the specific kind of unity towards which all of her characters and worlds aspire. It is the perfect example of the paradoxical, Ekumenical ideal of a unity made up of smaller disunities. There is a constant conflict between the terms ‘people’ and ‘persons’ recurring throughout the story. Serenity repeatedly emphasises that, “I had no people. I was a person” (137), and tells her mother that, “I have no people… I don’t belong to people. I am trying to be a person. Why do you want to take me away from my soul?” (135). This clearly expresses Le Guin’s ideal of a unity that preserves the variety and uniqueness of all its parts, as exemplified by the Ekumen. The Sorovians acknowledge no social bonds - they are persons rather than a people - yet despite their isolation from one another as individuals, there is a functioning society, “…a kind of community, a wide, thin, fine network of delicate and certain intention and restraint: a social order” (133). This social order fulfils the function of any healthy society in keeping the ‘persons’ of Soro safe and informed, yet it stops short of directly interfering with their lives or their individual freedom. It is social order without governance - a harmonious system in which unity is achieved by the freedom of act and expression afforded to each of its parts.

“Solitude” also differentiates itself from the majority of Le Guin’s other works by deliberately making the question of exile more ambiguous. The only time that Serenity feels herself to be an exile is during her unhappy stay on the Hainish ship. When her mother eventually agrees to leave Serenity on Soro, she doubtless feels as though she is resigning her daughter to a life of exile. By contrast, Serenity feels that she is finally going home. There is similarly no indication that the Sorovian boys who are sent away at maturity ever view themselves as exiles, despite their being forbidden to return to their childhood homes. This is not to say that their violent lives are depicted as being positive in any way, only that it is part of the cultural assumptions of the Sorovians concerning manhood that men and women must live in isolation. It is not, however, imbalanced, as it is in another of Le Guin’s short stories appearing in the same collection, “The matter of Seggri”, in which men are subjugated and controlled completely by women, kept alive purely for breeding purposes. Each man and each woman in “Solitude” is ultimately answerable only to themselves.

In the gender relations of the Sorovians, another major thread of Le Guin’s writing can be seen: Taoist dualism. The symbol of *yin* and *yang*, explicitly drawn from
in *The Left Hand of Darkness* to illustrate Gethenian duality, is used here as a guiding principle of which Sorovian society can be seen as symbolic. Woman and man, *yin* and *yang*, are seemingly opposing forces whose interrelations nevertheless create the kind of self-sustaining, oppositional unity that is so favoured by Le Guin. The conclusion of the story, which is centred around Serenity having grown up, now having a son and a daughter of her own, confirms her acceptance of this dualism as necessary:

> When my daughter was born, that was my heart’s desire and the fulfilment of my soul. When my son was born… I knew there is no fulfilment. He will grow towards manhood, and go, and fight and endure, and live or die as a man must. My daughter… will grow to womanhood and go or stay as she chooses. I will live alone. This is as it should be, and my desire. (151)

Here Serenity acknowledges the difficulties that will be faced by her son and deems them acceptable, even desirable, confirming for both of her children the right to total individual freedom within the limits of their dualistic cultural assumptions. She continues:

> But I am of two worlds; I am a person of this world, and a woman of my mother’s people. I owe my knowledge to the children of her people… To the children I say: Listen! Avoid Magic! Be aware! (151).

This acknowledges a dualism within Serenity herself, in addition to the larger dualist unity of Eleven-Soro. Despite choosing a life of solitude and partial isolation, she feels a sense of responsibility to the Ekumen. This sense of responsibility seems to have developed from the time that she spent aboard the Ekumenical ship. On the ship Serenity did not speak in the Sorovian language and “refused to tell the stories or sing to the people… It was the only way I had to be silent” (137). This made her mother furious and prompted her to tell Serenity that “you owe your knowledge to our people” (137). Serenity “did not answer, because all that I had to say was that they were not my people, that I had no people” (137). As her time on the ship stretched on, however, Serenity began to gain a wider perspective of where she belonged in relation to the Ekumen and to her own home world. While on the ship, Serenity read the history of Soro - an objective history divorced from the Sorovians’ instructional tales of the ‘Before Time’ - and felt ashamed of it. Still, she interprets it in Sorovian terms: “If they knew the stories
I knew about the Before Time, they would understand how magic turns on itself, and that it must be so” (137). So although she continues to remain a Sorovian, Serenity’s time in exile gave her a sense of responsibility to the Ekumen. This is confirmed by the existence of the story itself. In writing this report to the Ekumen, Serenity is fulfilling what her mother saw as her duty to her people and, by implication, is admitting that perhaps they are her people too. She is reaching out from her exile specifically to open a channel of communication, thus setting herself up as a potential bridge between worlds, and including Eleven-Soro in the unity of the Ekumen.
The Dispossessed

Often hailed as Le Guin’s masterpiece, *The Dispossessed* (1974) tells the story of Shevek, a physicist from the anarchist colony of Anarres, who travels to the sister planet of Urras both to formulate his unified theory of time and to attempt to foster understanding and acceptance between the two planets. Anarres had been colonised 170 years ago at the time of *The Dispossessed*, given by the nations of Urras to the followers of Odonianism: a revolutionary anarchist movement that was becoming a threat to the predominantly capitalist states of Urras. By the time of *The Dispossessed*, the revolutionary spirit of Anarres has become susceptible to power structures and shows increasing evidence of bureaucratisation - the guiding principles of Odo having solidified over time into rigid dogma. This is encountered by Shevek and his friends in several contexts, and typically manifests itself as an unwillingness to confront or condone new ways of thinking or of doing things. This petty small-mindedness is personified in the character of Sabul, who attempts to first steal credit for, and then to suppress Shevek’s work, all the while claiming - perhaps even to himself - that he does so out of purely Odonian sentiment.

Themes of exile and community are prevalent throughout the novel. The entire population of Anarres are descended from exiled revolutionaries, and Shevek himself voluntarily takes himself into exile when he sets off for Urras with the understanding that he is unlikely to be allowed home again. The structure of the novel moves simultaneously in two directions - towards and away from Urras – in chapters alternating between Shevek’s present story on Urras and a biographical account of his life back on Anarres.

It is also more explicitly concerned with communication than Le Guin’s other novels. Peter Brigg found that communication in *The Dispossessed* is “symbolized by the *ansible* which will emerge from [Shevek’s] General Temporal Theory. [Shevek] wants to overcome the differences between men so that ideas and aid can flow freely, bringing benefits for all” (41; italics in original). By having the ansible as a concrete symbol of both communication and unity, *The Dispossessed* is able to look at how each of these two concepts is essential to the other’s existence and to show, through Shevek, the role of the exile in bringing the two concepts together.

Much of the novel’s power comes from the constant tension between what John
Huntington calls the public and private worlds (271). On both planets, Shevek is the focus of mounting antagonism from the established order. On Anarres he is under constant, increasing pressure to conform to the rigid, dogmatic Odonianism that has no room for his work. This culminates, in the first chapter of the novel, with a failed attempt on his life as he boards the spaceship that will take him into his exile on Urras. His treatment on Urras differs in that he is encouraged to work, yet he is unable to be comfortable there, and comes to realise that the Urrasti want his theory primarily in order to gain power for themselves alone, whereas he sees it as a means to achieving a measure of harmony and cooperation across all planets and cultures.

As he continues to resist the public imperatives, pressures and constraints oppressing him on both planets, Shevek is forced into increasingly radical positions, culminating in his departure from Anarres and in his speaking at a revolutionary rally on Urras. Huntington writes that for Le Guin “the private world can flourish only when the public world is benign… when the public world becomes oppressive the private world must give way” (270). This is a constant threat that Shevek faces. If he were to conform to the wishes of the PDC (Production and Distribution Coordination – the bureaucracy that effectively governs Anarres) on Anarres or the rich elite on Urras, his private world would have to bend to external demands and could no longer be private. It is the strength of Shevek’s character that allows him to respond ever more radically and subversively against the status quo in order to preserve his individual imperatives from external control. He recognises this, acknowledging that he “had learned something about his own will, these last four years. In its frustration he had learned its strength. No social or ethical imperative equalled it” (275).

This is reinforced towards the end of the novel by the Terran ambassador, Keng: “Keng’s calmness was a much more forced, willed affair than it had been at the beginning of their talk. The strength of Shevek’s personality, unchecked by any self-consciousness or consideration of self-defence, was formidable. She was shaken by him, and looked at him with a certain awe” (286). The conversation between Keng and Shevek is one of the most important parts of *The Dispossessed*, with Keng acting as a thematic spokesman - explicitly evaluating and discussing some of the novels key ideas. Shevek tells her about his theory and the ansible, describing it as a ‘very simple matter’. Her response confirms the significance of his work:

Do you know, Shevek, I think your very simple matter might change the lives of
all the billions of people in the nine Known Worlds? It would make a league of worlds possible. A federation. We have been held apart by the years, the decades between leaving and arriving, between question and response. It’s as if you had invented human speech! We can talk – at last we can talk together. (285-86).

This emphasises once more just how indispensable communication is to lasting unity. The League of Worlds (which later becomes the Ekumen) has, until the invention of the ansible, been an unrealistic dream - for without channels of swift and open communication, there can be no exchange, and therefore no true unity, between the different planets, and they could be a ‘League’ in name only. Shevek, though, is unwilling to share Keng’s easy optimism, asking her “And what will you say?” (285). His time on Urras has left him cynical about the benefits of unity and exchange with other cultures. His outburst at this point is significant enough to warrant being reproduced in its entirety:

I thought it would be better, not to hold apart behind a wall, but to be a society among the others, a world among the others, giving and taking. But there I was wrong – I was absolutely wrong… because there is nothing, nothing on Urras that we Anarresti need! We left with empty hands, a hundred and seventy years ago, and we were right. We took nothing. Because there is nothing here but States and their weapons, the rich and their lies, and the poor and their misery. There is no way to act rightly, with a clear heart, on Urras. There is nothing you can do that profit does not enter in, and fear of loss, and the wish for power. You cannot say good morning without knowing which of you is “superior” to the other, or trying to prove it. You cannot act like a brother to other people, you must manipulate them, or command them, or obey them, or trick them. You cannot touch another person, yet they will not leave you alone. There is no freedom, it is a box – Urras is a box, a package, with all the beautiful wrapping of blue sky and meadows and forests and great cities. And you open the box, and what is inside it? A black cellar full of dust, and a dead man. A man whose hand was shot off because he held it out to others. I have been in hell at last… It is Urras; Hell is Urras. (286).

This outburst is Le Guin’s ultimate rejection of the kind of society epitomised by Urras. It recasts and reinterprets earlier images from Shevek’s time on Urras, such as the gift-
wrapped box and the dead man. The image of the “black cellar full of dust, and a dead man” also recalls *The Left Hand of Darkness*. When Genly crosses the border into Orgoreyn he is caught up in a ‘foray’ and spends the night being held with other refugees in a “vast stone semi-cellar with one door locked on us from outside, and no window” (LHD 88). Later, when Genly has been arrested by the Orgota and is being taken to the forced labour camp in a truck with other live prisoners and a corpse, he reflects that “I knew now the sign I had been given, my first night in this country. I had ignored that black cellar and gone looking for the substance of Orgoreyn above ground, in daylight. No wonder nothing had seemed real” (LHD 136). The image of the ‘black cellar’ is used to explicitly link Urras with Orgoreyn; and Le Guin, through Shevek, is rejecting them both.

Through its intense, visceral catharsis, Shevek’s outburst also links back to his first absolute rejection of Urras, after another key scene: Vea’s party - at which Shevek had gotten drunk for the first time, attempted to force himself on Vea, the “body-profiteer to end them all” (180), and been sick - later realising that “it was not only the alcohol that he had tried to vomit up; it was all the bread he had eaten on Urras” (227).

The rejection is, however, complicated by Keng’s assertion that, for her, Urras is a kind of paradise. This is an intentional contrast of Shevek’s moral absolutism against a more relativistic, compromising outlook, and though this conflict is not explicitly resolved, it seems certain that the reader is supposed to side with Shevek - particularly in light of the recent events at the rally, the ‘black cellar full of dust’, and the dead man. It is an indictment of Western capitalist society and, by having Keng defend it, is also an indictment of any moral stance that permits the existence of a ‘paradise’ or utopia that is built on the suffering or oppression of others. This recalls another of Le Guin’s short stories, “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas” (1973; collected in *The Wind’s Twelve Quarters*), which describes a near perfect utopian society in which each citizen is aware that their perfect happiness is dependent on the constant suffering and abject misery of a single child, but only a few of them – the ones who walk away – judge this price to be too high.

In this case, Shevek has the moral fortitude to ‘walk away’ from Urras. Rather than remaining to watch the League of Worlds come into being as a direct result of his efforts, Shevek chooses to return to Anarres, telling Keng that “we cannot come to you. We can only wait for you to come to us” (289).

Shevek’s strength of will, coupled with his unshakable belief in what is morally
right and in the supremacy of openness and truth, leaves him unable to make any moral or ethical compromises. For Shevek - as for Odo - the means are the end. His refusal to compromise makes him, for most of the novel, a pariah on both planets, unable to exist as a ‘healthy cell’ in either society. Yet rather than giving in and conforming to the social pressures, Shevek sees in his Simultaneity theory another, far more elegant and beneficial way to end not only his exile, but all exile, and pursues it with a single-minded determination. In order to do so he must necessarily move further into exile - first in his flight to Urras, and later in his rejection of the Urrasti elite - but this is justified and even necessary if he is to complete his theory without betraying his ideals.

A childhood friend of Shevek, Tirin, functions as a counterbalance and an example perhaps of how Shevek might have ended up if he had not been equipped with the mental fortitude and moral conviction that allows him to resist and challenge the embedded cultural assumptions of first one, and then two entire planets in his pursuit of scientific truth and social unity.

Like Shevek, Tirin refuses to accept the infringements of social pressure on his personal freedom. Rebellion is more ingrained with him - even in his youth he was questioning of social conventions and suspicious of the information they are given about Urras. By contrast, Shevek doesn’t begin to rebel consciously until he is much older, and spends his childhood and youth almost priggishly content with the PDC’s management, happy to accept the common view of the Urrasti as being propertarian degenerates (although, in Shevek’s defence, this perception is largely confirmed by his later experiences on Urras). In this sense then, Tirin can be seen as the ‘pure’ anarchist. He was unwilling to accept any of society’s rules, at a time when Shevek and most other Anarresti would deny that these rules existed, happily parroting the Odonian dogma of total freedom of choice even as the PDC worked surreptitiously to limit and restrict their choices. Shevek acknowledges this towards the end of the novel: “[Tirin] never could build walls. He was a natural rebel. He was a natural Odonian – a real one! He was a free man, and the rest of us, his brothers, drove him insane in punishment for his first free act” (273).

When the society that he had rejected in turn rejected him, Tirin was not strong enough to continue in his defiant role, yet neither could he entirely capitulate. He became a broken man, feverishly rewriting the satirical play that got him ostracised in the first place, constantly on the move, in and out of asylums. His instinctive and ‘natural’ anarchic defiance is thus shown to have been insufficient. To act against
opposition from an entire society, to accept being ostracised and exiled as the necessary price, requires a stronger mind and firm convictions - exemplified by Shevek himself. Shevek perhaps touches on this when he reflects that Anarres has gotten to the point where “the social conscience completely dominates the individual conscience instead of striking a balance with it. We don’t cooperate, we obey” (273; italics in original).

Tirin is a clear example of somebody who allows the social conscience to dominate his individual conscience, who “fear[s his] neighbour’s opinion more than [he respects his] own freedom” (273). Community has a high value to him. He is unable to deal with its rejection and breaks as a result. Shevek, on the other hand, places a higher value on his own individual conscience than on the social. Although he values the Odonian ideals of community and brotherhood, he recognises that in their current form they are corrupt, and sees it as his duty to restore the true freedom for which his society was founded. “His sense of primary responsibility towards his work did not cut him off from his fellows, from his society, as he had thought. It engaged him with them absolutely” (276). This engagement, however, comes from an honest recognition of society’s faults, and a refusal to let these faults corrupt his right to freedom. Unlike Tirin - who was involuntarily driven into exile - Shevek chooses his exile, realising that in order to mend his society he must necessarily remove himself from it.

Shevek acknowledges that Tirin was always “extremely vulnerable” (273) to society’s judgment and identifies another of the key differences between them: “A scientist can pretend that his work isn’t himself, it’s merely the impersonal Truth. An artist can’t hide behind the Truth. He can’t hide anywhere” (274). Shevek’s scientific mindset is discussed by Karen Sinclair, who has written that it is his “detached point of view” that makes Shevek “an outsider in his own culture” (51), and that his “dedication to his work places him beyond the reach of political rhetoric… [and] transforms him into a critical observer” (61). Tirin, although a critical observer, lacked this ‘detached point of view’ that allows Shevek to persist in the face of censure and persecution.

Ultimately, Tirin was never truly free, because he was never able to act independently. His rebellion would always be contingent on society’s tolerance, and so could never be a successful rebellion. In this it is starkly differentiated from the rebellious actions of Shevek and his Syndicate of Initiative, which faces a great deal of social censure and condemnation, yet continues nonetheless in its mission to correct those aspects of Annaresti society that have stagnated. So unlike the extroverted Tirin, who draws his wellbeing from society’s acceptance of him, introverted Shevek is able
to continue in the face of rejection. It is not his social conscience but his individual conscience that leads Shevek into exile, chasing the means to end all exile.
The Churten Stories: “The Shobies’ Story”, “Dancing to Ganam” and “Another Story OR A Fisherman of the Inland Sea”

Over the first half of the 1990s, Le Guin published three closely related short stories centred on a fictional theory and subsequent technology that she christened churten. This is a method (derived from “the revision of Shevekian temporalism” [Fisherman 83]) that theoretically allows for the instantaneous transportation of matter to any point in the universe, regardless of distance, through a process known as transilience. These stories were “The Shobies’ Story” (1990), “Dancing to Ganam” (1993) and “Another Story OR A Fisherman of the Inland Sea” (1994; henceforth shortened to “Another Story”). All are found in the collection, A Fisherman of the Inland Sea.

Churten technology promises to end exile by allowing instantaneous transportation, bringing an end to the NAFAL journeys and attendant time dilation that account for the physical exile of characters like Genly Ai – but, as Mike Cadden observed, “we as readers should be suspicious of anything that makes journey unnecessary in Le Guin's fiction” (347) and in fact the churten stories introduce a new kind of exile to the Hainish universe. Cadden went on to write that “those who churten, who arrive necessarily alone and without moving, become hopelessly disoriented and isolated” (347). Indeed, the churten experience in each of the stories transpires as an extremely disorienting breakdown of reality and of linear time. The characters are - to a greater or lesser extent for each story – isolated in their own perceptions, exiled from the everyday world of shared experience into the extreme solipsism of their subjective experience. They can only be brought out of this exile by a willingness to communicate, to accept the perspectives of others, and – through open and honest communication with one another - to rebuild the unity that they have lost.

“The Shobies’ Story” and “Dancing to Ganam” follow the earliest manned test runs of spaceships equipped with the churten ‘drive’. In “The Shobies’ Story” a varied crew of ten – made up of people from Terra, Anarres, Gethen, and Hain, and including three children – make the attempt in the spaceship, The Shoby. Although they achieve transilience and seem to arrive at their destination, something goes wrong and they find themselves each isolated within their own subjectivities, facing “a kind of chaos of dissolution, a death by unreality” (AS 191). Each of them perceives events entirely
differently from the others, and it is only by recounting their individual experiences and bringing them all together into one unified account – a story – that they are able to avert this ‘chaos experience’ and return to sequential time.

“Dancing to Ganam” shares some thematic similarities with “The Shobies’ Story”. Le Guin acknowledged this, writing that “Dancing to Ganam” “continues with the theme of unreliable narration or differing witness, with a hi-tech hubristic hero at its eccentric center” (Fisherman 9). Indeed, the dissolution into chaos is less immediately obvious in “Dancing to Ganam”, for the staggering, crazed ego of one man - Commander Dalzul - turns the churten experience into a kind of exaggerated colonial fantasy, and then attempts to force this perspective on the three people with him, who are experiencing quite a different set of events.

The churten stories are something of a departure for Le Guin in that they are not concerned with political systems or events on a planet-wide scale, but focus exclusively on interpersonal relationships. Despite this, there is still a strong movement towards unity in them all. This is most explicit in “The Shobies’ Story”, which features a literal dissolution into fragmented chaos, from which the affected individuals must come together to rebuild a unified shared perspective. The stories also differ markedly from Le Guin’s earlier works in that the Ekumen no longer functions in the background as a symbol of unity, but features prominently in the action of the stories, with parts of “The Shobies’ Story” and “Another Story” take place on Hain itself. This should be considered in relation to Nudelman’s claim that “The movement towards Oneness on the planetary scale is absorption into the League; within the planet, it is the reunification of a fragmented society; on the individual level, it is the striving towards fellow-beings and unification with them” (247). In most of Le Guin’s earlier works (including The Left Hand of Darkness and The Dispossessed), all three principles are in clear operation. The churten stories, however, ignore the first two aspects of this to focus entirely on the ‘striving towards fellow-beings’ that characterises the movement towards unity ‘on the individual level’.

By focusing exclusively on the individual, the churten stories are updating Le Guin’s vision of unity - integrating it more thoroughly with exile and communication. In “The Shobies’ Story”, every single character is an exile in their subjectivity. The movement towards unity is retained, and is linked more closely to the idea of communication as an essential tool of this movement. In this sense, the churten stories are more complete in terms of presenting Le Guin’s major concerns in a coherent and
unified way, yet it could be argued – at least for “The Shobies’ Story” and “Dancing to Ganam” – that this exaggerated didactic element comes at the expense of quality prose. In any case, the churten stories, taken as a group, have more than enough to say on exile, unity and communication to excuse any awkwardness in their construction.

Le Guin has described the churten stories as “metafictive” (Fisherman 9). She has written that in “The Shobies’ Story”, “transilience acts as a metaphor for narration, and narration as the chancy and unreliable but most effective means of constructing a shared reality” (Fisherman 9). Considered purely in this light, “The Shobies’ Story” seems somewhat heavy-handed in its intent. Thankfully, it is more nuanced than this description implies. ‘Narration’ in “The Shobies’ Story” is the means by which the crew of the Shoby impose order over chaos, unity over fragmentation. More than being a mere metaphor for storytelling, “The Shobies’ Story” relates to and reinforces the importance of interpersonal communication in the construction of unity, or shared reality.

“The Shobies’ Story” is not explicitly presented as one of Le Guin’s ‘report’ stories. Elizabeth Cummins has, however, suggested that “The Shobies’ Story” is, in fact, the report that the Shobies submitted to catalogue their experience (218), which is certainly plausible and potentially supported by the title, but impossible to know for certain. In any case, the crew of the Shoby only begins ‘narrating’ - or combining their individual experiences into one coherent account – in order to record a report to the Ekumen in case they don’t survive the experience. Taken together with The Left Hand of Darkness, “Solitude”, and “Another Story”, the importance of communication - as represented by these reports - becomes impossible to ignore. The first thing that the Shobies do upon arriving/not arriving at their destination is attempt to send a message back over the ansible. Their discovery that the ansible is not working is one of the first signs that something is wrong, and the inability of each of them to coherently communicate their own subjective experiences to one another is the largest isolating factor, keeping them from consolidating their fragmented perspectives into unified experience.

The chaos facing the crew of the Shoby is mirrored by the language of the story, which becomes progressively less clear and more jarring as the churten experience takes hold of them. The high point of this movement away from clarity is the following: “Unduring a nonperiod of no long, he perceived nothing was had happening happened that had not happened. Lost, he groped, lost, he found the word, the word that saved –
‘You-’ he said” (106). Irritating sentences like this serve to obfuscate meaning in such a way that the reader is forced into sharing the uncertainty and confusion of the churten experience. A more subtle example of the multiple realities at play is found in a description of a moment, from the Cetian Gveter’s point of view: “He perceived that Betton and Shan came with him through the hatch… and that Karth, Sweet Today, Shan, and Tai were on the bridge” (105). Here the character Shan appears simultaneously in two places, as reality bends to accommodate two differing ideas or possibilities of where Shan could be. Reality continues to dissolve into surrealism, eventually breaking down completely:

I am the darkness between the suns, one said.
I am nothing, one said.
I am you, one said.
You – one said – You -
… “I can’t breathe,” one said
“I am not breathing,” one said.
“There is nothing to breathe,” one said
… “We’re here, at the hearth,” said another. (107).

This marks the transition from the formless, jarring chaos seen in the previous passage to the mediated narration that begins shortly afterwards. Slowly, the Shobies – as well as the language of the story – are brought back into linearity and sense. Cummins attributes this to the Shobies abandoning “the attempt to reach agreement on what ‘really’ happened. They shift from the report mode to the story mode, whereupon the arguments diminish” (217). The reason they had been unable to effectively communicate before is that they were attempting to speak in the objective language of a ‘report’ in order to make sense of their experience, instead of just accepting it and describing it as a ‘story’. The crew members begin to take turns narrating, and their narrative becomes clearer and more solid with each instalment, until they can simply dismiss the chaos experience:

They were thoughts in the mind; what else had they ever been? So they could be in Ve and at the brown planet, and desiring flesh and entire spirit, and illusion and reality, all at once, as they’d always been. When he remembered this, his
confusion and fear ceased, for he knew that they couldn’t be lost.

“They got lost. But they found the way,” said another voice. (113)

Having reclaimed their shared perspective, the crew are able to locate themselves in linear time and in space, and the Shoby reappears back in Ve port.

Earlier attempts by crew members to convey their own experiences in the ‘report mode’, without the context of narration, only added to the confusion by occasionally influencing the perceptions of the others: “When one of you tells how they saw it, it seems as if it was that way, but then the next one changes the story” (109). This is a gross failure of communication and, as a sidenote, is possibly at the heart of the Sorovians’ fear of ‘magic’ in “Solitude”. Rather than helping or soliciting unity, attempts to impose one’s own subjectivity over someone else’s creates further fragmentation and confusion, as well as raising issues of power. Salvation lies not in the individual, but in the group. In order to achieve unity and stability, the Shobies had to sacrifice part of their sense of self, too see themselves as group members first and individuals second. Even so, they retain their uniqueness, as is seen when they take turns to narrate their experience: “Voices, not named individuals, speak. And the reader who has been “listening” closely to these voices throughout the story can identify nearly every voice” (Cummins 217).

The idea of a single individual that dominates the subjective experiences of a group is taken up and explored further in “Dancing to Ganam”.

The churten experience in “Dancing to Ganam” is essentially the same as in “The Shobies’ Story”: a dissolution into chaos and fragmented subjective experience. The chaos experience, however, is much less obvious in “Dancing to Ganam”. Reality only has to diverge to accommodate four different perspectives instead of ten, and initially these perspectives have far more in common with one another than did the Shobies’. This is largely due to the crew of this mission coming from similar backgrounds in the Terran military. The main differentiating factor is Dalzul himself. Commander Dalzul is universally respected as a hero of the Ekumen, especially on Terra, where he was once worshipped as a god.

Despite “Dancing to Ganam” being Dalzul’s story, almost all of it is told from Shan’s perspective. Shan is the only male member of Dalzul’s crew, and was also one of the Shobies. His admiration of Dalzul is made clear very early on: “Shan knew that heroes were phenomena of primitive cultures; but Terra’s culture was primitive, and
Dalzul was his hero” (118). So through him we initially get a very sympathetic portrait of Dalzul as a larger than life hero, endowed with “grace, with wit, with patience, reliability, resilience, trickiness, and good humour, with all the means the Ekumen most honoured” (117). This characterisation is consistently called into question throughout the rest of the story, and is often directly contradicted. Although Dalzul does display most of these listed attributes, they are outweighed by an unconscious arrogance and self-centredness; by his small minded assumptions concerning the world and his place in it; and by a frightening, almost psychopathic tendency to ignore other people’s emotions, perspectives, and agency in favour of his own grandiose worldview.

Dalzul did not initially want to take a crew with him, preferring to work alone. The crew of three that he eventually does pick is deliberately - though perhaps not consciously - imbalanced. Dalzul does not regard the two female members, Forest and Riel, as ‘properly’ feminine, due to their lesbian relationship. He confides to Shan that “it’s why I chose them… With two real women, the psychological dynamics might have been too complicated” (136). As the perceptive dissonances of the churten experience increase, Dalzul stops recognizing the women’s existence entirely. It is also left explicitly ambiguous whether Dalzul knows that Shan has a history of mostly homosexual relationships - in which case he would be unlikely to consider Shan a ‘real’ man, and could comfortably dismiss his opinions as well as Forest’s and Riel’s. In any case, Shan’s obvious hero worship of Dalzul causes him initially to accept Dalzul’s subjective version of events without question: “Shan’s anxiety slipped from him. He knew that with Dalzul there would be no chaos” (128).

Dalzul has thus chosen a crew whose opinions he can either ignore or control: three Terrans like himself, all with military backgrounds (so that his higher rank would always be a subconscious factor in their relationship), two whom he considers incomplete or less than human, and one who worships him: It is clear that Dalzul is, from the very beginning, unwilling or unable to take on any version of events that differ from his own. There can be no possibility of group narration acting to reverse the chaos experience, because Dalzul refuses to allow the others to narrate, preferring to take charge of their experiences as well as his own.

Compare this to the selection of crew for the Shoby. Each member in that case was chosen to fill a certain role, specifically likened to a familial role. They were also deliberately chosen from different planets, and given a period of time, called isyeye, during which they spent over a month living together in a small coastal village for the
sole purpose of bonding as a group. By the time they leave on their mission they are a unified entity, functioning in all respects as a family. This group dynamic - arising out of their vastly different backgrounds and personalities - makes the unity that they achieve stronger, able to weather the chaos experience and remain salvageable even after their shared perspective has entirely dissolved.

Dalzul does not bond with his crew in this way. Although they do observe the period of isyeye, discussion is centred on Dalzul and his earlier experience churtening to Ganam, debating the fidelity of his account. They certainly do not establish the familial roles and relationships to one another that the Shobies do. Dalzul does acknowledge the necessity of a state of unity in order to resist dissolution and chaos, however, his understanding of unity is incomplete. He is singularly focused on the individual and seems largely to ignore, or to vastly underestimate, the possibilities of the group. This is touched on early in the story, when Dalzul says dismissively of the Anarresti that “to them, morality isn’t accessible to individuals, only to groups” (125).

Despite superficial similarities, Dalzul’s individualism is also nothing like that of the Sorovians’ in “Solitude”. Sorovian society exists as a perfect manifestation of unified differences. They value individual initiative, but also balance and equality, and reject the idea that one individual can or should have power and influence over others. Dalzul’s own individualism is the polar opposite of this. He seemingly believes that the ‘strongest’ individual should lead, and that it is the role of the group to follow. This is seen in his erroneous interpretation of Ganam as being a predictably patriarchal, top-down feudalism. It is seen also in his idea of entrainment, which he describes in positive terms as “individual experiences of transilience [being] made coherent only by a concerted effort” (123) and “functioning in rhythm” (124), but which in action seems to be his way of saying ‘I’ll lead, you follow’. This is borne out by the churten jump itself, during which “Dalzul was charged, full of mana, a power to which others responded, by which they were entrained” (128). Entrainment here seems to be involuntary, and to once again put Dalzul into a position of power over the other three.

Dalzul confuses unity with conformity, failing to comprehend that true unity is possible only when it preserves the autonomy of its component parts. His one concession to unity is to have them all sing in harmony as their ship churtens. Even then, though, it is Dalzul who sets the tune, and expects the rest of his crew to harmonise and follow as best they can. He does not respect their uniqueness, and does not strive towards unity with them, aside from this one token gesture, which is
ultimately shown to have been false and almost grotesque when Dalzul - addressing the empty air that he perceives to be Forest and Riel - declares that, “we can still sing a tune together, eh, shipmates” (150). His unquestioning belief in himself, and in his own interpretation of events, has cut him off completely from his shipmates. His unwillingness to communicate with them as equals, or to accept their attempts to communicate to him the potential danger that he is in, has led to the disunity becoming so pronounced that, by this point, Dalzul is essentially living in a different world from the rest of them.

In the end, of course, Dalzul dies. He is killed instantly by massive jolt of electricity as he grasps a sceptre, in a ceremony that he believes is making him a kind of god-king of Ganam, but which is actually a form of sacrifice that he unknowingly volunteered for by sleeping with the woman he has labelled the ‘princess’. He clearly brought this death upon himself, having been cut off so completely from his crew that he totally ignored their warnings and their attempts to share their own interpretations of events with him. The first and last lines of the story offer complementary explanations for his behaviour and ultimate demise. The first: “Power is the great drumming… the thunder… It fills you till there’s no room for anything else” (115), and the last: “We came to see things differently, but which of us knew the truth? He knew he had to be a god again” (157).

Dalzul was filled with ‘the great drumming’ of power, which made him deaf - unwilling or unable to accept differing points of view - dismissing, ignoring or erasing from his mind any attempts by his crew to communicate to him the extent of his mania. So despite all four of them being in the grip of a chaos experience, and therefore exiles in their own subjectivities, Dalzul was exiled further. The experiences of Forest, Riel, and Shan match in most crucial areas – and increasingly more so as they continue to communicate with one another, bringing their subjectivities into a shared reality – whereas Dalzul is completely alone, and drives himself further into his solipsistic exile from reality with every decision that he makes.

A more positive example of a character willingly moving further into their own exile comes from “Another Story”, which is arguably the most interesting of the churten stories. It is concerned explicitly with exile and homecoming, while also examining the implications of churten technology: the price of achieving transilience, and what it means to eliminate the journey.

It is structured as a report to the Ekumen written by Tiokunan’n Hideo, who was
one of the scientists involved in the early testing and refinement of churten theory. The account begins with his childhood on the planet O, and establishes the unique social arrangements of that planet. The society of the ki’O is divided into two moieties, Morning people and Evening people, with sex being permitted only with people of the other moiety. A ki’O marriage - called a sedoretu - is initially made up of four people, a man and a woman of each moiety, but can become even larger as other unmarried men and women attach themselves to the marriage as ‘aunts’ or ‘uncles’. Social structure, at least in the “dispersed villages” (163) like Udan, where Hideo grew up, is built around the sedoretu, so that there are a First and Second sedoretu of the village and so on.

Village life itself is organised through “thick planning” (169), which Hideo describes as “ecology politics profit tradition aesthetics honor and spirit all functioning in an intensely practical and practically invisible balance of preservation and renewal” (170). This, taken with the idea of the sedoretu, shows ki’O society to be yet another example of unity built on diversity.

Hideo, therefore, grew up in a loving environment with an enormous family. He was particularly close to his ‘germane’, Isidri, the daughter of the Morning marriage of his parent’s sedoretu. As a young man, Hideo decides to enrol in the Ekumenical School on nearby Hain – four years distant by NAFAL travel – and intends to continue from there as a Mobile, essentially planning to drive himself into exile.

Leading up to his departure, Hideo “indulges his anticipatory nostalgia to the full by imagining [him]self on another planet a hundred years away…” (174). Rather than accepting the great loss that his decision entails, Hideo submerges true feeling beneath trite sentimentality. He “luxuriates in sorrow” (171) without allowing himself to actually feel any of it. He is jolted briefly out of this cosy self-denial by Isidri, who tells him that she is in love with him. This simple truth cuts through his protective lies and he is “shocked out of emotion, bewildered, blank… empty… looking at the world [he] had thrown away” (175). Almost immediately, however, he begins “to build up a screen of emotions and evasions… to look away from what Isidri had shown [him]” (175). So although somewhat shaken by what he comes to call “the hour in the boathouse” (175), Hideo nonetheless leaves O with his protective shell intact.

On Hain, Hideo becomes involved in the early development of churten technology, and instead of becoming a Mobile and leaving forever, he remains at the Churten laboratories on Ve, which is another planet in the Hainish system. Eventually he is sent back to O in order to set up a laboratory there. Eighteen years have passed
since he left home. He visits Udan again and finds it changed. His mother is old and sick, and Isidri is married to a traveling scholar. He is forced into confronting that which he had denied: that by leaving, he had made himself a true exile and cut himself off forever from the life of his village. Once more, he deceives himself, admitting in his report that “I felt strange, out of place, in my home. I did not acknowledge it to myself” (188). Subconsciously, however, he is affected, and his visit home triggers an emotional collapse. He retreats into religion and buries himself in his work, but takes no more pleasure in it. This state of affairs comes to an end when, while testing the churten field on himself, Hideo is somehow transported back in time to the night after he first left his village. He goes home, marries Isidri, and basically lives happily ever after. His vestigial sense of responsibility to the Ekumen eventually compels him to write the report, though he knows that it contradicts reality and may not be believed.

Hideo is an exile: his exile is - like that of the Shobies and of Dalzul’s crew – from the everyday world of sequential time. Hideo, however, does not seek to escape his exile - he embraces it. In this, his actions are similar to those of Dalzul, who also tries to lose himself in his exile but with far more disastrous results. The difference, perhaps, lies in their intent: Dalzul wants to be a hero or a god, whereas Hideo only wants to go home and make up for past mistakes. Both Hideo and Dalzul were already exiles before their churten experiences. Hideo was cut off from his village and Dalzul, being “prey to deification” (117) on his home planet of Terra, could never go back to it. Hideo’s second exile - stemming from his churten experience - into the past, thus gives him a unique and spectacular opportunity to end his exile from his village. Dalzul’s second exile likewise gives him the opportunity, perhaps, to build a new home for himself: an opportunity that he squanders through arrogant blindness. Hideo moves further into exile and finds his home at its centre, while Dalzul finds only death.

The idea of homecoming – the resolution of the exile’s journey – is a major part of “Another Story”. It can perhaps best be understood in relation to the same idea as it appears in “The Dispossessed”. Shevek reflects at one point that “if you evade suffering you also evade the chance of joy. Pleasure you may get, or pleasures, but you will not be fulfilled. You will not know what it is to come home” (TD 276). The tactics of self-denial that Hideo uses to avoid admitting his own pain and loss can thus be seen as ‘evading the chance of joy’ and keeping him in exile. This is borne out by the period following his breakdown, during which he no longer takes joy in anything and feels “deeper inside [him] than [his] bones, the knowledge of being no one, no where”
The concept of exile in “Another Story” is paralleled by the Japanese folk-tale of Urashima, which was Hideo’s favourite story as a child. Urashima spends what seems like only a few nights with the daughter of the sea king, but when he returns to his village he finds that hundreds of years have passed, and everyone he knew is long dead and forgotten. He opens a box given to him by the sea king’s daughter, instantly becomes an old man, and dies.

Like Urashima, Hideo returned to his village the first time to find it all changed and himself out of place, a stranger. Unlike Urashima or any other exile, though, Hideo is given a second chance, and can return to his home on the day he left it, with a new appreciation for the life that he almost threw away. The story of Urashima also has clear parallels to the time-dilation of NAFAL travel, and is explicitly linked to Hideo’s mother – a former Mobile of the Ekumen – who came originally from Terra: “Did I know then what that story meant to her? That it was her story? That if she were to return to her village, her world, all the people she had known would have been dead for centuries?” (162).

Churten technology promises to end this type of exile by eliminating the journey altogether. However, in describing his first NAFAL flight from O to Hain, Hideo hints at the underlying conceptual problem with churten technology: “Of the journey itself I have no memory whatsoever… I felt cheated. I wanted to have felt the voyage, to have known, in some way, the great interval of space” (176). During his visit home he tries explaining churten theory to his mother, who immediately sees the problem. She recognises that churten technology - by essentially eliminating the ‘great interval of space’ - would “shrink the galaxy” (184). This can be compared to Commander Dalzul’s assertion that churten technology would “make the household of humankind truly one house, one place” (121). Indeed it would do so, but only at the cost of the decentralised, diverse unity that makes the Ekumen an ideal, and elevates it from the numerous other examples of flawed, centralised governments that populate Le Guin’s fiction

“Another Story”, like the other two churten stories, is concerned with interpersonal relationships over large-scale politics, but it is also more concerned with internal conflict. All of the conflict of “Another Story” can be said to have originated inside Hideo’s head, with his self-denial, and later his subconscious mourning for the home he set aside. The churten experience of “Another Story” – the time travel – is
similar to the churten experiences of the other two stories (especially “Dancing To Ganam”), except that in this case Hideo’s is the only perspective, and reality warps to accommodate him, so that he perceives that he is living eighteen years in the past and has been given another chance at life. Whether or not this perception is ‘true’ is not the concern of the story, and we are given no reason to doubt its veracity.

The story is partially hinged around Hideo’s room at Ran’n academy on O. This is the room he lived in during school terms up until he left for Hain. He stays there again when he returns to O the first time, and it is in that room that he has his emotional breakdown after visiting his family:

I turned out the light and darkness filled me as it filled the room. Where was I? Alone in a room among strangers. As I had been for years and would always be… Alone, part of nothing, part of no one. Udan was not my home. I had no home, no people… I sat up in the bed and began to cry. I could not stop crying. (AS 189-90)

This is the turning point after which Hideo is forced to accept – though still he attempts to deny it – that he regrets the choices he has made, and the course that his life has taken. This passage follows immediately after a paragraph documenting his visit to Udan as “mild and dull” (189); describing a poem that he wrote during his visit about “the peacefulness of following a chosen course” (189); and describing his final self-deception: “It would always be my home, Udan with its wide dark roofs riding time like a dark-sailed ship” (189). The sudden shift in tone from the dull, pastoral platitudes that describe his visit home, to the dark, self-loathing realisation of his exile signals the shift in Hideo’s personality from quiet, bland contentment to frantic desperation. He revisits the room again after being sent back in time to the Ran’n academy of eighteen years ago, spending the first night of his second chance at life in the room that had once hosted his darkest moment. In the wastepaper bin are some of his papers from that earlier time, from “Sedharad’s class on Interval” (197), which, aside from being a strange experience for Hideo, resonates in that he has now essentially been stripped of the interval between past and present, happiness and misery.

The causes of Hideo’s time travel are left ambiguous, but seem to be linked to a “wrinkle” or “fold” (193) in the churten field he is working on, which is in turn linked to Hideo himself by Gvonesh (the Cetian scientist in charge of Churten research on Ve)
who tells Hideo “you got [sic] some kind of wrinkle in your life” (194), referring perhaps, to his unadmitted regret and yearning for the life that he had “crumple[d up] like a piece of paper tossed in a basket” (205). Both ‘wrinkles’ are ironed out by his churten experience, and the story ends on the same night that he travelled back in time, with Hideo having this time spent the preceding eighteen years in Udan. The difference between this Hideo and the manic, self-deceptive Hideo of the ‘other’ story is marked and profound. Water imagery, of whirlpools in flowing water, and Isidri catching fish bare handed, is used throughout “Another Story” to mirror the path and frustrations of Hideo’s life, but in the final scene he wakes up “beside the pool of silent water” (207), his journey is long since ended, and he is home.
Conclusion

The various planets and cultures of the Hainish universe are separated from one another by the vast emptiness of space. The distance between the planets is mirrored in the solitariness and self-sufficient isolation that characterises many of their inhabitants. Paradoxically, this very distance between its worlds and people is what allows the Ekumen to retain its complex and variegated unity, which emerges across all of the Hainish stories and is almost always the goal that they aspire towards. This unity is made possible on the planetary scale by the sacrifices of individuals who leave their homes and loved ones, spending generations at a time in Faster-Than-Light transit between worlds, in a state of permanent and irrevocable exile. On the individual level, exile is shown to be a state that one must necessarily pass through in the pursuit of unity. Shevek, Genly, Estraven and Serenity all contribute to the enrichment of a united Ekumen – indeed, Shevek’s Simultaneity theory is essential to the very possibility of the Ekumen existing, as it allows instant communication between worlds, and communication is the foundation upon which the unity of the Ekumen rests.

Communication in the particular unity of the Ekumen is, however, anything but simple, and instantaneous ansible communication between worlds is only one of its forms. Equally important are the reports of the Ekumenical agents, of which The Left Hand of Darkness, “Solitude”, “Another Story” and, perhaps, “The Shobies’ Story” are examples. These reports are communication of a different kind, slower and more personal than ansible transmissions, but also more detailed and better able to describe the progression towards unity that is a major concern of their authors-in-exile, and of Le Guin herself. Although these report stories all end in a state of unity, the interest is in how they reach this state, rather than in the state itself. Unity is achievable only after the writer of the report has suffered through some period of exile and emerged with the tools to end both their own exile and the wider exile, fragmentation, and isolation that had previously surrounded them - often by some combination of opening a line of communication to the Ekumen; bringing a new planet into the Ekumen; achieving a new unity or lasting peace on their own planet; or simply by going home. In all cases, their exile is indispensable to the unity that they achieve, and in all cases their exile eventually ends.
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Literature Review

The novels and short stories of Ursula K. Le Guin have been instrumental in getting Science Fiction recognised as a legitimate genre that is worthy of academic attention. The renowned literary critic Harold Bloom asserted in 1986 that "Le Guin, more than Tolkien, has raised fantasy into high literature for our time" (10), and George Slusser has since written that “Le Guin’s work has become attractive to academic scholars of SF seeking to ‘legitimize’ their field of study… there are easily three times as many articles on her work in the field’s specialized journals than on any other major figure” (110). Slusser goes on to write, however, that “almost never is [Le Guin] elevated as an SF writer, but rather in spite of her SF” (110).

These perspectives, taken together, effectively convey the common (though increasingly less so) perception of science fiction as being an ‘illegitimate’ genre, unworthy of serious critical engagement. This view is historically understandable, given that until the advent of highly talented science fiction writers like Le Guin, Philip K. Dick, Gene Wolfe, and others, works of fantasy and science fiction were often needlessly violent, hyper-sexualised, and intellectually barren. In an essay on “Myth and Archetype in Science Fiction”, Le Guin runs through a list of clichés that had hitherto dominated the genre: “… the blond heroes… with their unusual weapons; insane or self-deifying computers; mad scientists; benevolent dictators… brave starship captains and/or troopers; evil aliens; good aliens; and every pointy-breasted brainless young woman who was ever rescued from monsters, lectured to, patronized or, in recent years, raped, by one of the aforementioned heroes” (Language 65). So the enormous success of Le Guin’s work can perhaps be partly attributed to her awareness and intentional avoidance of these stale and often offensive clichés.

Some of the most influential critical literature on Le Guin dates back to the 1970s, specifically to the November, 1975 issue of Science Fiction Studies, which was wholly dedicated to the science fiction of Le Guin. The bulk of the articles were primarily concerned with The Left Hand of Darkness and The Dispossessed, but a few of her short stories up to
that point were also discussed, as well as her earlier science fiction novels: *Rocannon’s World*, *Planet of Exile* and *City of Illusions* - collectively referred to as her “apprentice” trilogy. Articles in this issue of *Science Fiction Studies* identified three of the major areas of critical inquiry into Le Guin’s fiction: unity, anarchy, and utopianism. Much of the criticism that has been written since has worked to either expand or to refine one or more of these areas. In this sense, criticism of Le Guin’s fiction is similar to that very fiction, in that both can be understood as “a narrowing spiral… delineating ever more precisely the same object” (Suvin, “The Science Fiction of U.K.L.G” 233).

It is interesting to note that none of the essays in the Le Guin issue of *Science Fiction Studies* address Le Guin’s feminism or engage with the presentation of gender in her fiction. Nor are any of the articles written by a woman - aside from Le Guin’s own contribution, in which she notes that “the very low status of women in SF should make us ponder about whether SF is civilised at all” (238). This is a curious omission, for feminist analysis is the fourth major pillar of Le Guinian scholarship, and is probably extensive enough to be considered a sub-field in its own right. Many of Le Guin’s pseudo-critical works are directly concerned with her feminism, especially the ‘Redux’ of her 1976 essay “Is Gender Necessary?” In the original essay Le Guin defended her feminism, particularly in *The Left Hand of Darkness*, from criticisms that it wasn’t taken far enough. The ‘Redux’ of this essay, written in 1988 and first collected in *Dancing at the Edge of the World*, includes the original text as well as a parallel commentary by Le Guin that tracks the evolution of her feminist thinking across the intervening years and provides a valuable insight into her own feminist values and self-awareness.

James W. Bittner describes early feminist arguments regarding *The Left Hand of Darkness* as being “superficial” (45) and overly concerned with such trivialities as “whether Estraven is or is not ‘male’” (45). He gives credit to Donna Gerstenberger (Conceptions Literary and Otherwise: Women Writers and the Modern Imagination.” 1976) for “[shifting] the debate on the feminist content of *LHD* from superficial issues… to deeper issues of feminist aesthetics” (Bittner 45).

A great deal of criticism has also been devoted to Le Guin’s Taoism and its manifestations in her fiction. Particularly noteworthy in this respect is Douglas Barbour’s essay in two parts: “Wholeness and Balance in the Hainish Novels of Ursula K. Le Guin” (1974) and “Wholeness and Balance: An Addendum” (1975). In these, Barbour identified a recurring pattern of dark/light imagery across all of Le Guin’s novels up to that point and effectively linked this to her Taoism.
More recent criticism has continued to focus primarily on *The Dispossessed* and *The Left Hand of Darkness* - often with particular emphasis, respectively, on utopianism and gender. Scholarly interest in Le Guin’s fantasy series, *Earthsea*, also continues to grow and although the Hainish novels still receive the larger portion of criticism by a fair margin, *Earthsea* is rapidly closing that distance as the field of children’s literature criticism continues to expand.

The aim of this literature review is to evaluate those specific critical viewpoints that have had the most influence or are most relevant to my line of argument. To this end, I will go no further in discussing critical treatments of either feminism or the Tao. Both issues have always had a strong presence in Le Guinian scholarship and have, I feel, been covered in sufficient depth that little remains to be said of them. For my own research, I wanted to explore one aspect of the criticism that I felt was incomplete: exile.

My thesis is concerned exclusively with those novels and short stories that are set in the Hainish universe. It emerges predominantly from the strand of the literature that deals with Le Guin’s representation of unity, while also aiming to address her depiction of socio-political systems and interpersonal relationships. Most importantly, it aims to fill the gap in the literature concerning exile in the Hainish universe. Le Guin herself has acknowledged that “… almost all [of her] heroes have been in one way or another exiles” (*Fisherman* 11). Yet somehow the significance of Le Guin’s decision to create this abundance of exile-figures has been largely overlooked - especially in terms of the relation of these exile-figures to the larger vision of unity that is present across her body of work and in so much of the critical literature.

The Le Guin issue of *Science Fiction Studies* is a useful starting point for any study of Le Guin. Perhaps the most influential of the articles that it contained was “An Approach to the Structure of Le Guin’s SF”, by Rafail Nudelman. This was the first scholarly paper to identify the enormously important movement “from fragmentation toward unity” (241) in Le Guin’s fiction. Nudelman found that “[Le Guin’s novels] tell of the separate stages through which the abstract idea or process of unification must of necessity pass” (241) and described Le Guin’s presentation of unity as “… a unity of a peculiar kind – not the sum of its parts but rather a common factor, an essential constant derived from them… Genuine unity invariably turns out to be the goal towards which the events of the narrative proceed” (243). He also provides an overview of the typical plot structure of a Le Guinian story, identifying a “spiral structure… [that] alters the world and the culture in which [the story] takes place from a
spatially sundered and temporally cyclic one into a connected and historic one” (249).

Though perceptive and well considered, Nudelman’s analysis does, however, refrain from any serious discussion of the role played by Le Guin’s heroes in affecting this transition. Of particular note is his failure to address the phenomenon of exile except inasmuch as it is implied by his description of the isolated state in which each novel begins. Despite this omission, Nudelman’s ideas have remained highly influential for many subsequent analyses of Le Guin’s plot structure, and his article is the critical starting point of my own thesis.

Articles by John Huntington and Darko Suvin partly make up for Nudelman’s failure to discuss the role of Le Guin’s exiled protagonists. Huntington wrote in “Public and Private Imperatives in Le Guin’s Novels” that “… public action demands the sacrifice of a private bond. The success of the heroic quest entails personal loss” (268). Huntington’s essay provides a fairly detailed discussion of this central conflict facing many of Le Guin’s protagonists, and should be considered alongside Suvin’s claim that “[Le Guin’s] heroes pay a stiff price for their victories” (“Parables” 301). Suvin’s concern, though, is primarily political. Writing from a Marxist perspective, he sees “the main thrust and strength” of Le Guin’s fiction as the “quest for and sketching of a new, collectivist system of no longer alienated human relationships” (295), and criticises her “distrust of mass politics” (302) as well as her “naïve dissolution of politics into ethics” (302). Both Huntington’s and Suvin’s articles are also worth mentioning because they were among the first critical essays to directly address the price that Le Guin’s heroes must necessarily pay for their success.

Other articles in the Le Guin issue of *Science Fiction Studies* were primarily concerned with manifestations in her fiction of Le Guin’s anarchic politics and with the utopian aspects of her works. The best example of the latter is probably Judah Bierman’s discussion of “Ambiguity in Utopia: *The Dispossessed*”. Bierman writes that “the utopian vision presses a special responsibility and an alienation on the ‘knower’” (279), which again relates to the idea of a price that must be paid for successful social unification, without touching on the exile aspect. Bierman partly attributes the ambiguity of Anarres-as-utopia to the unity in *The Dispossessed* of means and ends (283). He identifies the “absence of plenty” (280) on Anarres as a major cause of this ambiguity and writes that although “Anarres meets all the criteria for a traditional utopia”, it is a utopia that is “built on scarcity, almost deprivation”, and that “to call a land without green leaf a utopia is surely to cast ambiguity over the term, over the whole idea [of utopia]” (280). Bierman also provides a useful introduction to morality in the Hainish novels: “Men are moral agents in Le Guin’s universe, whether they realise it or not: their actions have consequences” (283).
Donald F. Theall - also writing from a utopian perspective - accurately identified the primary function of the Ekumen, which he described as “an instrument of communication, a way towards interplanetary wisdom” (289). He found that “the prime theme of [Le Guin’s] major novels and, in fact, the unifying theme of her Hainish novels, is communication” (288; italics in original) and later, that “communication is a central theme and motivation for producing the action [in Le Guin’s novels]” (291). Theall also discusses the significance of communication in *The Left Hand of Darkness*, writing that Genly is “fully aware of the difficulties involved” (288) in his mission - from which it can be inferred that the goal of opening communication with Gethen and of bringing it into the unity of the Ekumen is seen by Genly as being important enough to justify his exile and the other sacrifices that he makes throughout the novel – an idea that I take up and develop in my thesis. Theall also claims that the action of *The Dispossessed* is largely attributable to the difficulties that Shevek encounters in freely communicating his ideas on Anarres (291) - though Theall inexplicably fails to formally link this to the ansible, which is the culmination of Shevek’s theory in *The Dispossessed*, as well as Le Guin’s most basic and powerful symbol of the importance and transformative power of communication.

In “The politics of Le Guin’s opus” David L. Porter finds that “Le Guin consistently concerns herself with individuals striving to preserve their integrity, and their resulting conflicts with society” (274). This echoes Huntington’s ideas concerning the conflict between the public and the private. Porter’s focus, though, is on the wider socio-political aspects of Le Guin’s fiction, rather than on her individual characters. He claims that her writing style has developed through different phases, starting from an early, existentialist concern with the individual, then moving through a transition phase that started to place more emphasis on social structures and the Tao, and ending (as of 1975, the time of writing) in a third phase, specifically concerned with anarchism and collective action (274). This is a somewhat simplistic, redundant view of Le Guin’s development as a writer, and has since been disproven by some of Le Guin’s later works – especially “Solitude”, which is once again focused on the primacy of the individual.

Of course, the themes referred to by Porter - such as anarchism and Taoist imagery - do recur throughout Le Guin’s oeuvre, but her work cannot so easily be divided into these chronological, limited stages, and Porter’s rigid interpretation of everything in purely political terms causes him to miss a lot of the deeper, complex interaction of ideas, form and meaning that is actually characteristic of Le Guin’s fiction. An example of this is his reduction of some of Le Guin’s characters to mere “images of conservative… and of liberal
logic” (275), and his reductive description and lumping together of the complex, various societies that Le Guin has created, which he describes collectively as “classless” (275). This, though essentially accurate, leaves out so much as to appear deliberately misleading.

Porter concludes that “[Le Guin’s] images of contemporary existence are presented clearly and vividly because they are seen in a consistent though evolving political perspective” (277; italics in original), which is simply not the case: Le Guin’s imagery is both ‘clear’ and ‘vivid’ because of her great skill as a writer, and her complex unity of themes and ideas, of which politics is just a piece (albeit an important piece). For a more recent and accurate discussion of Le Guin’s continued development, both stylistically and politically, see Jose (1991; discussed later).

Finally, Le Guin’s brief contribution to the issue, “American SF and the Other”, attacks the tendency of a lot of science fiction to engage in what she calls “brainless regressivism… a return to the Age of Queen Victoria” (240). She outlines the regressive tendencies in much of SF’s depiction of women, aliens, and the underclasses as ‘other’ - and writes that “the people, in SF, are not people. They are masses, existing for one purpose: to be led by their superiors” (239). Her own work can thus be understood partly as an attempt to restore humanity and agency to the marginalised ‘others’ of SF, and to describe potential social groups that are unified without being reducible to ‘masses’ - at which she has largely succeeded admirably.

The Le Guin issue of *Science Fiction Studies* remains highly influential and critics have, for the most part, continued to revisit and develop the areas of interest that it introduced. Karen Sinclair’s 1979 essay “Solitary Being: The Hero as Anthropologist” seems to have developed conceptually from Huntington and Suvin’s ideas concerning the price of success in the Hainish universe. Sinclair is specifically concerned with Le Guin’s depiction of her heroes as outsiders, or, as Sinclair calls them: ‘anthropologists’. Sinclair writes that “[Le Guin’s] heroes all seem to have characteristics that separate them from the worlds in which they find themselves…” (50), and that their success lies “in their marginality and alienation” (51). Her most significant finding, perhaps, is that “consistently [Le Guin’s] portrayal is pessimistic. Such individuals suffer heartily. Abandoned, misread, and psychologically disoriented, they often sacrifice themselves or are sacrificed for their understanding. Yet often they represent the only hope” (52). This argument, like Huntington’s, identifies the price that is often paid by Le Guin’s heroes for unity or success. Sinclair takes the idea further than Huntington, though, by acknowledging Le Guin’s protagonists’ status as
outsiders and exiles, and implying that this is a significant aspect of their construction.

Although Sinclair does effectively convey that the state of exile or anthropological
detachment is an indispensable aspect of Le Guin’s protagonists, she does not show the role
of these exiles in affecting the eventual attainment of unity. Her essay thus provides an
excellent discussion of the causes of exile, but not of its function. Her failure to recognise the
exile’s role in establishing unity also leads her to a more negative interpretation of the
eventual fate of the exile. For Sinclair, the exile never comes home. They remain isolated,
even after the attainment of unity, in their critical, anthropological distance. They “erect
barriers between themselves and their society… they contribute to their own isolation… for if
there is an aloneness in the chaos of social life, there is an even greater solitariness once order
is achieved (65).

This sentiment was echoed more recently by Frank Dietz (1992), who wrote that
“even though [Le Guin’s characters] return, their exile is a permanent one” (112). Dietz’
article provides an excellent, detailed analysis of exile in *The Left Hand of Darkness* and *The
Dispossessed*. He accurately finds that “exile… is much more than a plot device for Le
Guin… the tension between home and exile, familiarity and isolation… emerges as a positive
force” (107). He also begins to link exile with communication, writing that in *The Left Hand
of Darkness* “it is only after both Ai and Estraven have been gone into exile that true
communication becomes possible” (110). Excellent though Dietz’ article is, it was written
immediately before the publication of either “Solitude” or the Churten stories, and so only
discusses exile in *The Dispossessed* and *The Left Hand of Darkness*. Dietz is predominantly
concerned with the utopian aspects of those two novels, rather than with the exiles
themselves. He claims that “Le Guin’s Hainish cycle forms a meta-utopian construct which
problematizes the very possibility of imagining utopia” (105) and describes the state of exile
as “a metaphor for living in an unfinished world, in which utopia will never be finally
achieved” (112-13).

An article by Jim Jose (1991) continues the discussion of Le Guin’s politics, and her
ongoing attempts to reproduce her “non-euclidean, non-European, and non-masculinist view
of utopia” (187). Jose focuses particularly on the ways that this is reflected in the
development of Le Guin’s narrative style over the years between *The Dispossessed* (1974)
*Always Coming Home* (1988). The bulk of Jose’s essay is a comparative study of these two
texts that draws liberally from Le Guin’s own words - taken primarily from *Dancing at the
Edge of the World* – in order to back his claims. Jose writes that “while [Always Coming
Home], considered as a totality, may exhibit a more or less singular narrative voice, this voice
is a composite of many divergent voices, each with its own life-story… to tell” (193). Compare this to Nudelman’s description of unity in Le Guin’s fiction as “a unity retaining variety” (248), and being “not the sum of its parts but rather a common factor, an essential constant derived from them” (243), as well as his claim – over a decade before *Always Coming Home* – that “it is characteristic of Le Guin’s SF that its structure becomes a sign of its message” (246), and it is easy to see *Always Coming Home* as a very important work in the continued development of Le Guin’s increasingly complex and nuanced depiction of society and unity.

The tendency of Le Guinian criticism to continuously revisit and reinvent the same broad thematic areas - although in a sense useful, in that these primary areas of interest have become increasingly better defined as more has been written on them, and justified, in that Le Guin’s fiction is guilty of the same - does mean, however, that some deviations have been glossed over or ignored in favour of a more ‘unified’ critical approach to Le Guin. How else to account for the relative critical obscurity of “Solitude” (1994) and the churten stories (1990-94)? Despite being highly relevant to Le Guin’s developing philosophy, these stories cannot so easily be made to fit the template established by the earlier scholarship, and have been widely overlooked. They have not, however, been completely ignored.

Two fairly recent critical acknowledgments of the churten stories appear in articles by Peter Brigg (“A ‘Literary Anthropology’ of the Hainish, Derived from the Tracings of the Species Guin”) and Mike Cadden (“Purposeful Movement among People and Places: The Sense of Home in Ursula K. Le Guin's Fiction for Children and Adults”). The focus of both articles, however, is elsewhere. Brigg’s ‘literary anthropology’ contains no analysis of the stories themselves, merely a name-dropping of Hainish characters in “The Shobies’ Story” and “A Fisherman of the Inland Sea”. Cadden goes into slightly more depth in his own analysis and briefly discusses the significance of the journey across all of Le Guin’s fiction. He accurately asserts that the reader should be “extremely suspicious” (347) of churten technology for trying to circumvent the need for the journey, which I identify in my thesis as the underlying conceptual problem of churten technology.

Two other critics, Elizabeth Cummins and Richard D. Erlich, have properly engaged with these overlooked texts and have, for the most part, succeeded in bringing them properly into the wider scholarly discourse. They have begun to link these stories to the wider themes established by earlier Le Guinian scholarship. Elizabeth Cummins’ *Understanding Ursula K. Le Guin* (1993) was published after “The Shobies’ Story” but before “Solitude”, “Dancing to
Ganam” or “Another Story”. In it, Cummins briefly discusses “The Shobies’ Story”, focusing primarily on the text as a metanarrative. She discusses the shared narrative that allows the Shobies to return to true space-time, but does not connect this to either exile or communication. Possibly her most interesting conclusion is that in “The Shobies’ Story”, the story itself is supposed to be the Shobies’ report to the Ekumen. If this is indeed the case, then “The Shobies’ Story” would be another example (along with The Left Hand of Darkness, “Solitude”, and “Another Story”) of Le Guin’s use of reports to highlight the significance of communication in her worlds.

In a book first published digitally in 2001, and printed in 2010 (Coyote’s Song: The Teaching Stories of Ursula K. Le Guin), Richard D. Erlich devotes most of a lengthy chapter to discussing “Solitude” and the churten stories (or “The Churten Effect Group” as he refers to them). He rightly describes “Solitude” as “an important story for a number of Le Guinian themes” (551), and lists these themes as “loners, complexity, abstraction, peoplehood, marriage, projects, politics, magic, communication, self-sufficiency, and soul-formation in the world - a consideration of one extreme way of finding/making the Self that is Universe” (551). He fails to unpack some of these concepts – for example, it is unclear what is meant by ‘projects’ or ‘abstraction’ - and the list reads somewhat superficially, as though Erlich is scrambling to make connections or to identify themes that aren’t always there. He does, however, reaffirm the importance of ‘communication’, which he had identified earlier in the chapter, recounting the scene from “Solitude” when Serenity “helps a zoologist solve - significantly - a communications problem with a cephalopod high-intelligence life-form” (550). Erlich goes on to discuss the role of the “loner” or exile, particularly in “Solitude”, claiming that “in most of Le Guin’s writing, loners come across poorly” (551) and that “Serenity clarifies the limits to [sic] the solitude, the degree to which even [her mother] had to recognize that humans on Eleven-Soro were members of a social species” (552). He describes the isolation of Serenity and the other Sorovians as a mode of being in the world that is “mystic” in nature, relating it back to Always Coming Home and, by implication, to The Left Hand of Darkness.

Despite the substantial amount of criticism that has been written on Le Guin, not enough has been done to theoretically link her more recent fictions (“Solitude” and the Churten stories) to the rest of the Hainish material. Neither has the criticism established the significance of exile in the Hainish universe, or managed to fully examine the complex interactions of exile with communication and unity. Far too often, these concepts have been
studied in isolation from one another, which strikes me as a mistake, considering how closely they function together across Le Guin's oeuvre. Exile, in Le Guin, cannot be properly understood except in relation to these other two concepts – and the same can be said of both of them.

My thesis aims to fill this gap in the literature by examining the function of exile in these more recent stories and identifying the same interactions at work in Le Guin’s better known novels, significantly adding to critical understanding of the science fiction of Ursula K. Le Guin.
Works Cited


Le Guin, Ursula K. "American SF and the Other." Mullen and Suvin 238-40.


