Evolution of Ambiguous Literary Utopias: Comparative Analysis of Ursula Le Guin’s *The Left Hand of Darkness* and *The Telling*

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*Utopian thinking is essential for our social, political, and psychological health, but, like everything else, utopian thinking is time- and place bound. One model does not fit all.*

Lyman Tower Sargent (2004: 4)

Abstract

In this paper, I propose an analysis of the evolution of ambiguous literary Utopias using as terms of comparing two of Le Guin’s utopias, published with a thirty-year gap between them: The Left Hand of Darkness and The Telling. The aim is to analyse how these two literary utopias try to respond and/or react to real specific social, cultural, and political conditions. Every literary utopia is an artistic and political reaction to reality. At the same time, both these Ursula Le Guin’s works are open utopias, that is, projects of societies that tend to evolve believing they are the best possible answers to a specific time and culture, and assuming the need to transform and improve previous premises. The goal of the paper is to try to reach some conclusions regarding several issues: a) How these utopias suffered the influence of different political and cultural realities (both the world and author evolved during the thirty-year gap between novels). b) How the genre itself evolved from a fixed, rigidly structured society frozen in time to an evolutionary one. c) What kind of compromises are assumed to ensure the future of these utopian worlds. d) Which are the political and philosophical ideas that stand as foundations to Le Guin’s utopian thought and see if they also evolved in time.

**Keywords:** Utopia, Ursula Le Guin, possible worlds, utopian thought, The Left Hand of Darkness, The Telling.
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1. Introduction

Two of the recurring debates surrounding utopia and its twin counterpart, dystopia, have been, in western culture, the difficulty of finding a balance between the collective and individual domains, and the question of how to prescribe an evolutionary system of government for communities that, naturally, are based on evolution. When Elliott wrote *The Shape of Utopia* (Elliott, 1970), the utopia/dystopia debate and literary production hanged, for several decades, strongly in favour of the negative view of a tightly regulated society, both as a menace to human individuality as well as to species’ survival. A “disillusioned” society smeared the few who dared to write a utopian narrative. This conflict between *eutopia* and dystopia started on the foundational narrative of the genre: Thomas More’s *The Best State of a Commonwealth and the Island of Utopia* (More, 1965). More spoke of a game of mirrors; Kumar in the 20th century clarified it by using the coin simile (Kumar, 1987). The two sides of a coin are different, more than simple mirror images, and that is why we have different names for each coin side.

Undoubtedly, *utopias* and *dystopias* enclose political criticism (thus being near utopianism), but as literary texts, they should be interpreted as fictional worlds, more or less similar to the author’s actual world, and his/her Weltanschauung. Therefore, one must always take into account the historical and cultural milieu in which the texts are written, to try to understand why they present such different fictional worlds and what messages may the actual reader construe after entering and travelling through unfamiliar surroundings.

This paper proposes to compare Le Guin’s *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) and *The Telling* (2000) and try to find out some answers to the following issues:

1 - How the genre itself evolved from a fixed, rigidly structured society frozen in time to an evolutionary one.

2 - How these specific Le Guin’s utopias suffered the influence of different political, and cultural realities (both the world and author evolved during the thirty-year gap between novels).

3 - What kind of compromises did these fictional worlds assume to ensure the future of these utopian worlds?

4 - Which are the political and philosophical ideas that stand as foundations to Le Guin’s utopian thought and see if they also evolved in time.
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2. Le Guin’s ambiguous utopias

Though only *The Dispossessed* has the subtitle *An Ambiguous Utopia*, it is my opinion that all Le Guin’s utopias are “ambiguous”, meaning they stand outside the canon of rigid utopian/dystopian worlds. Furthermore, I believe that this is a conscious option, assumed by an author who was introduced to anthropological thinking quite soon, and therefore, incorporated the basic idea that all human societies evolve in time and space. *The Left Hand of Darkness* and *The Telling* are both “open utopias”, I think a somewhat more accurate name for the fictional worlds they present. I agree with Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan when they say that:

…”to a greater or lesser extent, the dystopian imagination has served as a prophetic vehicle, the canary in the cage, for writers with an ethical and political concern for warning us of terrible socio-political tendencies that could, if continued, turn our contemporary world into the iron cages portrayed in the realm of utopia’s underside. (2003: 1-2)

All prophecies despite functioning as warnings, they also have a more or less hidden hope that things will not happen as prophesized, that change is possible. They are prophecies, not premonitions. In a way, Orwell, Huxley, and many others still believed that the warning would work its magic in the minds of collective and individual consciousness. Ray Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit* (1953) is perhaps the most obvious expressing this hope: things will get better once people plunge to the bottom of the pool of misery and destruction and pull themselves up again, restarting a new society through the rediscovery of culture (Bradbury, 1993).

Le Guin belongs to the generation that followed Orwell and Huxley. Like Bradbury, she too believes that the key to a better or happier society lies in culture, not in science or technology. Though the Hainish cycle being sci-fi fictions, the questions are not in the hardware, but in culture. The “Empire” is devoted to the incensement of humankind, in the development of its full potential, in the exchange of knowledge and human abilities to the benefit of all. Hainish ambassadors and envoys cannot get involved in domestic affairs, cannot choose sides, and cannot interfere in the worlds’ politics. They hope and aim their efforts to gain a voluntary adherence.

This is the utopic dimension in Le Guin’s Hainish cycle. She does not want merely to extrapolate. Has she puts it in the introduction to *The Left Hand of Darkness*: “Almost
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anything carried to its logical extreme becomes depressing, if not carcinogenic.” (1989b: 130)

Le Guin is concerned with writing modern fiction, therefore embracing all the complexity its carries with it: character psychology, construction of complex fictional worlds, characters interactions, etc. And she says:

> In a story so conceived, the moral complexity proper to the modern novel need not be sacrificed, nor is there built-in dead end; thought and intuition can move freely within the boundaries set only by the terms of the experience, which may be very large indeed. The purpose of a thought experiment, as the term was used by Schrödinger and other physicists, is not to predict the future [...] but to describe reality, the present world. (1989b: 131)

3. **How the genre evolved from a fixed, rigidly structured society frozen in time to an evolutionary one?**

How did utopia as a genre evolved until modern fiction could use it? To find out, I will borough Baccolini’s subtitle of her analysis of *The Telling*: “memory and historical reconciliation” (2003: 113).

I am not going to indulge in a thorough history of the genre for it is neither the place nor the time to do that. Nevertheless, there is something we all learn with historians and since my area is comparative literature, history, and cultural studies play an essential role as cornerstones, alongside literary theory, for any comparative analysis. Historians teach us to look at the past with two different pairs of lenses: those of the historical time and those of present time. We need both to understand and view the whole picture.

I will focus only on the utopias I considered the most important for the genre’s evolution. First, obviously, it is Thomas More’s *Utopia*, a fascinating narrative to which over the years I keep coming back and always leaving with the feeling that I have not grasped its multiple meanings and twists, and probably never will.

More’s *Utopia* has for basis sixteenth-century London and English realities. He knew them both well, the poor’s and the rich man’s ways of life, the peasant, the King and the vagabond. This is the reality presented in book one. However, the book is also a *jeu d’esprit* intended for his humanist friends, so the second book becomes the twisted image of the first or vice versa. Moreover, the game extends to language, to nonsense, and to bitter reality. The inevitable connection between utopia and its ugly sister dystopia is like
a Siamese’s connection, that may be disguised but is always there, in the background, like Janus, a metaphor I prefer to the two faces of a coin.

However, historical and cultural evolution conditioned the way More’s *Utopia* was to be read throughout the centuries. The first book was neglected, and the second over reading and over-interpreted. This route stayed more or less straight until Louis-Sébastien Mercier, in 1770, decided to write a utopia set in the future: *L’An 2440, rêve s’il en fut jamais* (Mercier, 1772).

Utopia left eternity or undeterminable time, quite unsuitable for humans, and was, for the first time, set in the future - sci-fi had not been invented yet, Mary Shelley would give birth to it only in 1818, with *Frankenstein: or, The Modern Prometheus* (Shelley, 1869). Enlightenment gave way to positivism and with it several other “isms”: capitalism, industrialism, and communism. These were the seeds necessary to make people forget the second book of More’s *Utopia* (as Karl Marx did) and start reading the first. And in 1846, another French writer, Émile Souvestre, wrote the first dystopia, as far as we know: *Le Monde Tel Qu’il Sera* (Souvestre, 1846). The twentieth century had the mission to perfect this other face of Janus, and Zamiatin, Orwell, and Huxley surely did it.

Let us jump some decades, to meet the generation after World War II. The war had shown the worst nightmare Europe faced so far (time probably will soon prove me wrong). However, the new generations refused to lose hope, despite the loss of naïveté. Utopia and dystopias were not possible without threatening to become “depressing, if nor carcinogenic”, as Le Guin puts it.

If utopia was no longer possible, but dystopia seemed inevitable, the only way out of the depression was the hybrid utopia, the best possible state, the one always in need of revision, of change, of evolution.

4. **How Le Guin’s utopias suffered the influence of different political and cultural realities (both the world and author evolved during the thirty-year gap between novels)**

In 1969, the western world was undergoing a cultural revolution, a clash of generations. Much has been said about *The Left Hand of Darkness*, and most of the criticism centred on the androgyny issue and its expression in the novel. I must confess that is not the most
interesting aspect of the novel, from my point of view. It belongs to the category of thought experiment in a period when society and language did not still have the necessary tools to deal with it.

Le Guin was still attached to the model of a male protagonist, a mainstream habit, something she abandoned later. Entering the skin of Genly Ai, the narrator expresses the mainstream point of view, and part of the interest of the androgyny issue has to do with the inability of the main character to deal with it. But from the utopia described, Le Guin follows a similar path to the one used in *The Dispossessed* (1974). We have two countries with different political regimes: a communitarian but corrupted one, and an anarchic monarchy ruled by a mad king. In the middle is Estraven, the only character who can view past borders and particular interests and focus on the planet’s interest in establishing an alliance with the Ekumen.

What planetWinter has to offer is its particular type of religion, based on a psychic experience that gives accurate answers to questions set in the future, while the sect followers are interested in “not knowing”, in “unlearning” to achieve a kind of taoistic “Wu Wei” (non-action), to be one with nature. In portraying the dictatorial communitarian state, Le Guin goes further than *1984* (Orwell, 1989), for she had already the information of the real face of communist elite, due to Khrushchev’s visit to the United States.

Nevertheless, Le Guin’s point is not to make the reader choose sides, but to embrace difference: Says Estraven:

> Hate Orgoreyn? No, how should I? How does one hate a country, or love one? [...] I know people, I know towns, farms, hills and rivers and rocks, I know the sun at sunset in autumn falls on the side of a certain ploughland in the hills; but what is the sense of giving a boundary to all that, of giving it a name and ceasing to love where the name ceases to apply? What is love of one’s country; is it hate of one’s uncountry? [...] Insofar as I love life, I love the hills of the Domain of Estre, but that sort of love does not have a boundary-line of hate. And beyond that, I am ignorant, I hope. (1981: 181)

Now comparing *The Left Hand of Darkness* with *The Telling* some differences become obvious. The envoy, apart from being a female, is homosexual, has difficult personal issues to solve, and took the mission in part to run away from those problems. She is prejudicial, with a tendency for taking sides due to her particular and painful life experiences. She lacks self-confidence; she is sometimes unable to assume an impartial
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point of view and lacks the ability to see the bigger picture. Throughout the significant part of the narrative, she is a disabled, damaged person, seeking her point of equilibrium. Until she finds it, her mission is compromised.

Judgmentalism. Wrong to let frustration cloud her thinking and perceptions. Wrong to admit prejudice. Look, listen, notice: observe. That was her job. This wasn’t her world. (Le Guin, 2000: 9)

Well, I’m, I think I’m insensitive to this aesthetic. It is so deeply and, and, and flatly political. Of course every art is political. But when it’s all didactic, all in the service of a belief system, I resent, I mean, I resist it. But I try not to. Maybe, since they’ve essentially erased their history – Of course there was no way they were on the brink of a cultural revolution, at the time I was sent here – But anyhow, for this particular Observership, maybe a Terran was a bad choice. Given that we on Terra are living the future of a people who denied their past. (2000: 11-12)

Sutty is an individual portrait of the world she is visiting: both divided, blocking their memory, refusing their history. Cutting out the roots of memory both personal and collective can only bring grievance, suffering, mistrust, insecurity.

In *The Left hand of Darkness*, the reader finds a western male, with his prejudices and hunger for learning being confronted with a Taoist master, balanced, able to see further than his own experience, embracing the collective interest. In *The Telling* the reader finds a society and the main character both unable to step outside their comfort zone, refusing to acknowledge the other as equal, both divided and building fences to block the past, to keep memory repressed.

Apart from the fact that by the year 2000, Le Guin had embraced, for a long time, the development of complex female characters, in 1969 the Taoist philosophy was still giving its first steps to become a cornerstone in her fiction, and the same can be said regarding feminism. *The Telling* is the novel of a matured author that had evolved in both her beliefs, her political ideas, her social concerns, and her profound commitment to knowledge and culture as the best weapons to build a more harmonious society, one that can look for and reach compromises.

5. What kind of compromises do Le Guin’s Hainish novels assume to ensure the future of utopian worlds?

Basically, Le Guin’s utopias stand on the principle that societies evolve in time and space
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and therefore, any form of government must be based on the acceptance of the undeniable necessity to change, keeping in tune with both the individual and the collective interests, and recognizing that perfection is neither acceptable nor possible in human societies. Evolution is made through the constant flow of balance and unbalance, and both the present and the past must be considered as major tools for avoiding errors and preparing individuals for the need to change now and then.

Does this mean that there is a solution for a better and happier society? No, definitely not. It only means that every individual has a collective compromise to assume and the right to vindicate some personal freedom that may allow him/her to express his or her individuality.

6. **Final Question: Which are the political and philosophical ideas that stand as foundations to Le Guin’s utopian thought and did they also evolved in time?**

By now, the answer is already implicit in the ones given to the previous questions. Through all her career, Le Guin has shown an astonishing ability to refuse conformism, to stand up for her own opinions, being political, ethical, artistic, or philosophical. Her profound knowledge of anthropology, of Taoism and human psychology, evolved in time, and so did her novels, where characters became ever more complex, or more human if you wish. The logical thinking is always present in her writings but has Tolkien said: “this is a recognition of the fact, not a slavery to it” (Tolkien, 1983).

As she had hoped for in the introduction to *The Left hand of darkness*, whenever we read or reread Le Guin novels:

… we have to know perfectly well that the whole thing is nonsense, and then, while reading, believe every word of it. Finally, when we are done with it, we may find – if it’s a good novel – that we’re a bit different from what we were before we read it, that we have been changed a little as if by meeting a new face, crossed a street we never crossed before. But it’s very hard to say just what we learned, how we were changed. (Le Guin, 1989a: 133)

Through these years, Le Guin and her readers have evolved, through different paths for sure, but they have done it together. As for the dream of building an ideal society, it is only possible if the transformation is assumed as necessary. The best possible community will always be transitory, never a *fait accompli*. 
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7. Bibliography


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