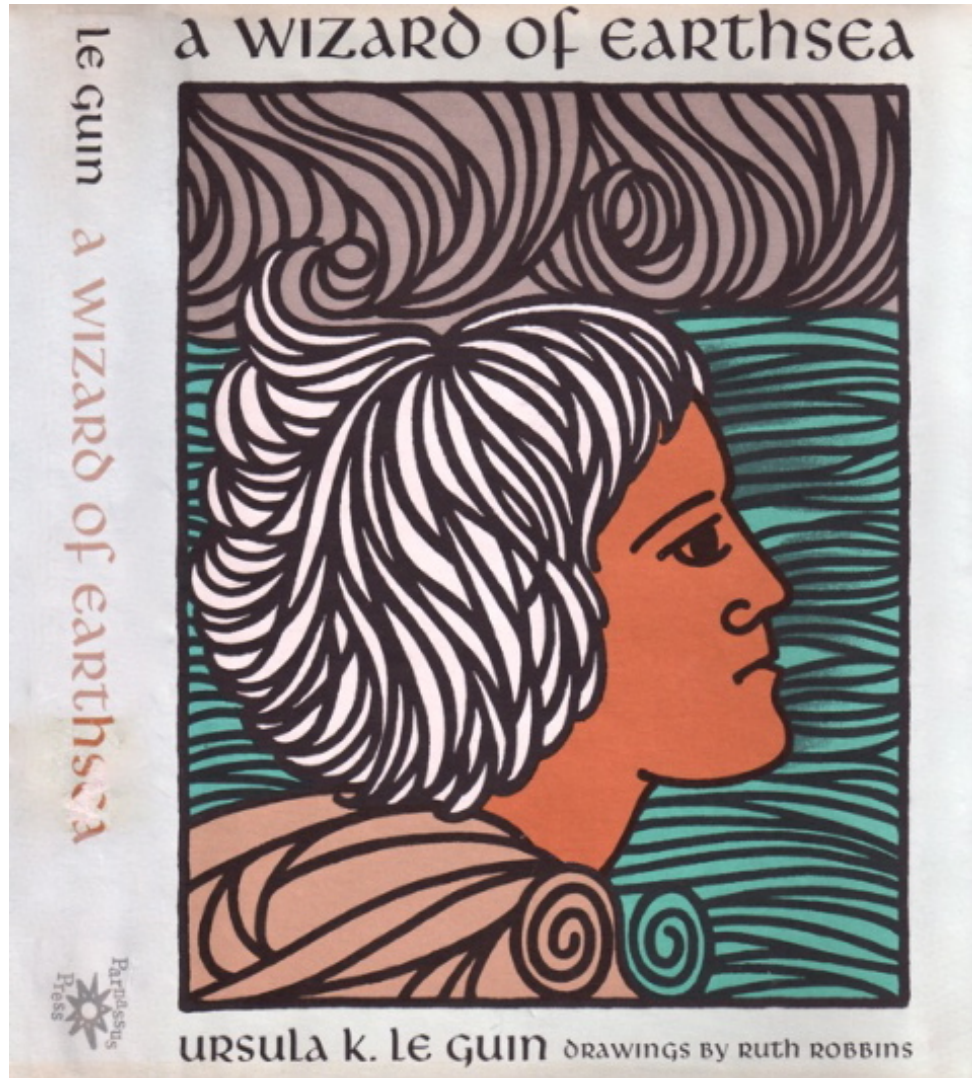


Critical Approaches to the Worlds of Ursula K. Le Guin

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Office Hours: To be announced



Cover art for the 1968 first edition of *A Wizard of Earthsea*

Course Description:

Shortly after Ursula K. Le Guin's death in January 2018, the Library of America reached out to writers for reactions to the news. Zadie Smith remarked that "she took nothing for granted, interrogated everything" and "deconstructed the idea of the 'center'"; Elaine Showalter described how she "set the pace as a writer for women unlearning silence, fear, and self-doubt"; and Michael Chabon mourned "the passing of the greatest American writer of her generation." That any author should garner such praise is noteworthy. More surprising is that this recognition was largely built on her speculative fiction, work in traditionally marginalized genres such as fantasy, science fiction, and young adult literature. In her anthropologically informed meditations on society, Le Guin departed from her predecessors by responding to the most pressing contemporary social issues of her time. In the process, her work did much to unsettle the racist, misogynist, and authoritarian tropes that had

calcified in the genre fiction of previous generations. Le Guin's early novels, produced at a blistering pace during the late sixties and early seventies, exemplify her brazen spirit: In *A Wizard of Earthsea* (1968), the archipelagic world of the novel and its nonwhite protagonist Ged, provided alternatives to white European medievalist models of fantasy, while *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) and *The Dispossessed* (1974) provide visions of worlds free from pernicious gender binaries and the oppressive "freedom" of neoliberal capitalism, respectively. Perhaps most remarkable, however, is Le Guin's willingness to return to her created worlds later in her career, revising aspects of her work that had aged poorly in hindsight: 1990's *Tehanu* offers a fiercely confident feminist vision of Earthsea, whereas 1995's "Coming of Age in Karhide" amends Le Guin's previous default to the masculine pronoun to describe the ambisexual Gethenians in *The Left Hand of Darkness* while more thoroughly exploring the cultural potentialities of the conceit. Despite setting most of her fiction in far-off, imaginary worlds thousands of years in the future or in an ineffable, fantastical past-time, Ursula Le Guin remained profoundly attuned to the ever-shifting tides of contemporary social discourse.

In this junior tutorial, we will read the most well-known and influential pieces of fiction written by Le Guin and explore the ways that her writing engaged with social, political, and philosophical issues. We will also devote time to her predecessors, contemporaries, and successors who influenced and responded to her work. As such, the course is arranged in four thematically consistent parts of three classes; two will be occupied with works by Le Guin and the third will focus novel or series of short stories by related authors either directly responding to novel by Le Guin or related in some other way. Within the four broad movements of the course, concerned with genre, gender studies and feminist criticism, utopianism and postmodern theory, and ecocritical postcolonialism, students will familiarize themselves with the various theoretical and critical frames that Le Guin was herself exploring in her works. In addition to our primary sources, students will read theoretical pieces, secondary criticism, and short essays by Le Guin herself. These will serve to facilitate discussion about each week's primary texts, as well as provide models for the sort of critical work students will be expected to undertake in their final paper.

Course Goals:

Over the course of the semester, students will:

- Develop an understanding of the major themes and stylistic features of Le Guin's fiction, engaging critically with her work by close reading, analysis, and interpretation.
- Learn how to conduct scholarly research in the discipline of English literary studies, culminating in the composition of a 20-25 page research paper.
- Gain experience working with a variety of sources and applying various theoretical and critical approaches such as Marxism, ecocriticism, genre studies, postcolonial, and feminist literary critique.
- Hone integral scholarly skills, such as designing a research question, conducting research, compiling a critical bibliography, and sharpening writing.

Assignments and Grading:

- **Short Essay** (Week 4, 10%): 5-6 page paper, comprising an extended close reading of one of the texts on our syllabus.
- **Prospectus and Annotated Bibliography** (Week 6, 15%): 2-3 page prospectus of the paper before you begin to work on it. Your annotated bibliography should include 8-10 scholarly sources, and describe, in a few sentences, how each source engages with the thesis of your project.

- **Draft** (Week 11, 15%): A full draft of the final paper will be due in Week 11 and then circulated among classmates the following week in preparation for a final paper workshop during the final tutorial meeting.
- **Final Essay** (Reading Period, 40%): 20-25 page paper incorporating 8-10 critical sources.
- **Minor Assignments and Participation** (20%):
 - 2 short response papers of 1-2 pages, focusing on a passage from one of our primary texts (sign-ups during first class)
 - 2 in-class presentations summarizing one of our critical articles (sign-ups during first class)
 - **Participation and Preparation:** A small seminar thrives when students participate actively and offer thoughtful contributions to class discussion.

Required Texts:

Ursula K. Le Guin:

Planet of Exile (1966)

A Wizard of Earthsea (1968)

The Left Hand of Darkness (1969)

The Tombs of Atuan (1970)

The Lathe of Heaven (1971)

The Dispossessed: An Ambiguous Utopia (1974)

The Word for World is Forest (1976)

Always Coming Home (1985)

Tehanu (1990)

Samuel R. Delany, *Trouble on Triton: An Ambiguous Heterotopia* (1976)

Marge Piercy, *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976)

N. K. Jemisin, *The Fifth Season* (2015)

All excerpts, short stories, and secondary readings will be available in PDF format on the course website.

Around Week 6 (though this may change depending on schedule compatibility), the class will meet in Widener for a discussion about leveraging the resources of Harvard libraries and their resources with the department's research librarian.

Part One: Thinking about Genre: Science Fiction and Fantasy as “Genre Fiction”

Week 1: Le Guin's Predecessors: Genre Fiction and the Pulp

We begin by considering structuralist theories of genre, both in general and regarding so-called “genre fiction,” a term often sloppily applied to traditionally “low” genres like science fiction and fantasy, constructing a contentious dynamic with so-called “literary fiction.” We'll discuss these issues while also exploring some stories from the “Golden Age” of American SFF to get a sense of the tradition Le Guin was writing with and against.

- Short Stories:
 - Isaac Asimov, “Nightfall” (1941)
 - Ray Bradbury, “The Long Rain” (1950)
 - L. Sprague De Camp & Fletcher Pratt, “The Roaring Trumpet” (1940)

- Jack Vance, “Mazirian the Magician” (1950)
- Ursula K. Le Guin, “Genre: A Word Only a Frenchman Could Love”
- Alastair Fowler, “Concepts of Genre” from *Kinds of Literature*
- Tzvetan Todorov, “The Origin of Genres”
- Andrew Milner, “Science Fiction and Fantasy,” from *Locating Science Fiction*

Week 2: Introducing the Ekumen: Le Guin’s Early SF

The first three novels of the loosely connected “Hainish Cycle,” *Rocannon’s World*, *Planet of Exile*, and *City of Illusions*, are generally regarded as interesting but un compelling within the larger oeuvre of Le Guin’s bibliography. Nevertheless, they’re packed with the ideas, albeit in nascent forms, that occupy Le Guin for the remainder of her career. We’ll read the second while we also explore Le Guin’s early life and the origins of her “anthropological” style.

- *Planet of Exile*
- Ursula K. Le Guin, “Myth and Archetype in SF”
- Ursula K. Le Guin, “Indian Uncles”
- Beth Baker-Cristales, “Poiesis of Possibility: The Ethnographic Sensibilities of Ursula K. Le Guin”

Week 3: Introducing Earthsea: Le Guin, Fantasy, and Taoism

This week, we turn to Le Guin’s fantastical works, reading the first two books of Earthsea (they’re quick reads!). We’ll think about fantasy as a genre with secondary essays by Le Guin, while also exploring the influence of Taoism on the Earthsea Cycle and Le Guin’s work at large.

- *A Wizard of Earthsea*
- *The Tombs of Atuan*
- Ursula K. Le Guin, “Why are Americans Afraid of Dragons?”
- Ursula K. Le Guin, “Some Assumptions about Fantasy”
- Dennis Friedrichsen, “Aspects of Worldbuilding: Taoism as Foundational in Ursula K. Le Guin’s Earthsea Saga”

Part Two: Le Guin’s Explorations of Gender and Feminism

Week 4: Writing and Rewriting Gender in *The Left Hand of Darkness* and Later Fiction

We begin our second thematic unit with perhaps Le Guin’s most well-known novel. *TLHoD* considers the effects of sex and gender on culture and society by means of a planet populated by ambisexual humans to explore how a world without the divisions sown by gender difference might develop. Our critical texts investigate the same topic, and the short story finds Le Guin returning to Gethen with the benefit of nearly thirty years of progress.

- *The Left Hand of Darkness*
- Short Story: “Coming of Age in Karhide”

- Ursula K. Le Guin, “Is Gender Necessary? Redux”
- Judith Butler, “Imitation and Gender Insubordination”
- John Pennington, “Exorcising Gender: Resisting Readers in Ursula K. Le Guin’s *Left Hand of Darkness*”

Week 5: Le Guin’s Feminist SF Contemporaries: Marge Piercy and Joanna Russ

****Short Essay Due****

This week we turn to two of Le Guin’s contemporaries, and two incredibly influential authors part of the “New Wave” movement of SF. *Woman on the Edge of Time*, along with *The Female Man*, the novel-length sequel to the Russ story we’re reading today, are regarded as classics of early feminist speculative fiction. Piercy’s novel reveals its intersectional concerns early on, so the feminist theory of bell hooks provides fitting accompaniment and counterpoint. Russ’ short piece also takes critical aim at *The Left Hand of Darkness*, so we will discuss whether those criticisms are justified.

- Novel: Marge Piercy, *Woman on the Edge of Time*
- Short Story: Joanna Russ, “When It Changed”
- Joanna Russ, “The Image of Women in Science Fiction”
- bell hooks, selections from *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, including “Black Women: Shaping Feminist Theory,” “Feminism: A Movement to End Sexist Oppression,” and “Feminist Revolution: Development through Struggle”

Week 6: Library/Research Visit

Week 7: A Feminist Return to Earthsea: *Tehanu*

****Paper Prospectus and Bibliography Due****

This week, we jump ahead in time to the 1990s for Le Guin’s return to Earthsea, in which the author confronts the patriarchal structures of her own fantasy world, exemplified in the proverb appearing in the initial novel, “weak as woman’s magic, wicked as woman’s magic.” In doing so, Le Guin confronts her own influences and genre tropes to produce a subversive, incendiary feminist fantasy novel.

- *Tehanu*
- Ursula K. Le Guin, “Earthsea Revisioned”
- Holly Littlefield, “Unlearning Patriarchy: Ursula Le Guin’s Feminist Consciousness in *The Tombs of Atuan* and *Tehanu*”

Part Three: Examining and Critiquing Utopian Societies

Week 8: Contending with Capitalism and Struggling with Socialism in *The Dispossessed*

****Optional: Revised Paper Prospectus and Bibliography****

The Dispossessed, a novel in which a physicist from an anarcho-syndicalist society visits a patriarchal, capitalist state, provides the perfect site to consider Marxist literary critique as well as means of discussing the effect of large political systems, utopian or flawed, on individuals.

- *The Dispossessed: An Ambiguous Utopia*
- Short Story: “The Day Before the Revolution”
- Excerpts from Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*
- Matthew Beaumont, “The Anamorphic Estrangements of Science Fiction”
- Tom Moylan, “Introduction” to *Demand the Impossible: Science Fiction and the Utopian Imagination*

Week 9: Contemporary Responses to Le Guin: Delany and *The Dispossessed*

In the interview we read today, Samuel Delany claims that *Triton* and *The Dispossessed* generated an interesting dialogue with each other, a dialogue we will explore in class today. Delany borrows the concept of a heterotopia from Foucault, a “disturbing” place that “shatter(s) or tangle(s) common names,” which he exemplifies in the character of Bron Helstrom, an ex-prostitute who finds it difficult fitting into a world where everything is provided for him.

- Samuel R. Delany, *Trouble on Triton: An Ambiguous Heterotopia* (1976)
- Samuel R. Delany, “On *Triton* and Other Matters: An Interview with Samuel Delany”
- Valerie Holliday, “Delany Dispossessed”
- Tom Moylan, “Beyond Negation: The Critical Utopias of Ursula K. Le Guin and Samuel R. Delany”

Week 10: Estrangement and Empathy: Searching for Utopia in *The Lathe of Heaven*

With 1971’s *The Lathe of Heaven*, Le Guin produced one of the primary examples of the “New Wave” of science fiction that flourished during the experimental sixties and seventies. Abusing drugs to suppress dreams that have the power to change reality, the novel’s protagonist, George Orr, reflects the frustration and alienation expressed in the work of this week’s postmodern theorists. Over the course of the novel, he learns that every utopia comes with an unexpected cost.

- *The Lathe of Heaven*
- Fredric Jameson, “The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,” from *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*
- Lewis Call, “Postmodern Anarchism in the Novels of Ursula K. Le Guin”

Part Four: Attending to the Environment: Ecology and Human Society

Week 11: Territorial and Ideological Colonialism in *The Word for World is Forest*

****10 Pages of Final Paper Draft Due****

Often construed as Le Guin’s criticism of the Vietnam War, *The Word for World Is Forest* also represents an early example of science fiction’s engagement with ecological and postcolonial concepts. We’ll explore both today, with Maran’s work on ecosemiotics and excerpts from Assad, who critiques Western ideas regarding secularism as the spiritual apex of civilized intellectualism. Each provides a way into thinking about the novel’s intersectional concerns in the interactions between the mystical, forest-dwelling Athsheans and the atheistic, resource-hungry Terrans.

- *The Word for World is Forest*

- Talal Assad, from *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, and Modernity*
- Timo Maran, excerpts from *Ecosemiotics: The Study of Signs in Changing Ecologies*

Week 12: A Different Way to Live: Reimagining Relationships with Nature in *Always Coming Home*

****Full Draft of Final Paper Due****

Today we discuss *Always Coming Home*. Set in post-apocalyptic California, this experimental work provides a record of a culture, the Kesh, written by an ethnographer, including records of Kesh poetry, accounts of Kesh life, and personal histories. Discussing both parts of the novel together, we will consider the novel's ecological concerns as well as how it touches upon many of the themes we've been discussing in Le Guin's work as a whole.

- *Always Coming Home*
- Ursula K. Le Guin, Todd Barton, Margaret Chodos-Irvine, George Hersh, "The Making of Always Coming Home: A panel at Mythopoeic Conference XIX Berkeley, California, July 31, 1988"
- Sheryl Medlicott, "Conceiving an Ecofeminist Utopia: Gender, Genre, and Ecology in Ursula K. Le Guin's *Always Coming Home*"

Week 13: Speculative Fiction After Le Guin: N.K. Jemisin

In our final class of the semester, we jump ahead a few decades to focus on *The Fifth Season*. Set on a world with a volatile environment, like the best of Le Guin's fiction, Jemisin's compelling narrative and novel setting set the stage for the author's exploration of climate change, systematic oppression, misogyny. We'll also have a short, in-class final paper roundtable.

- N.K. Jemisin, *The Fifth Season* (2015)
- Hannah V. Warren, "The Sin of Reproducing: Intersectional Marginalization in N.K. Jemisin's *The Fifth Season*"