BALANCING FLUX AND STABILITY:

URSULA K. LE GUIN’S *THE DISPOSSESSED*

A Dissertation in

Communication Arts and Sciences

by

Hillary A. Jones

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The dissertation of Hillary A. Jones was reviewed and approved* by the following:

Thomas W. Benson  
Edwin Erle Sparks Professor of Communication  
Dissertation Advisor  
Chair of Committee  
Head of Department

Stephen H. Browne  
Professor of Communication Arts and Sciences

Rosa Eberly  
Associate Professor of Communication Arts and Sciences and English

Matt McAllister  
Professor of Communications

Nancy Tuana  
DuPont/Class of 1949 Professor of Philosophy  
Professor of Philosophy and Women’s Studies

*Signatures are on file in the Graduate School
ABSTRACT

In this dissertation, I argue that Ursula K. Le Guin offers the Reader of *The Dispossessed: An Ambiguous Utopia* a utopian vision that balances flux with stability. With the novel’s textual structure, ideological underpinnings, and imagined worlds, Le Guin teaches the Reader ways to change the world, and through rhetorical criticism, I explore how rhetoric, anarchism, and feminism articulate possibilities for socio-political transformation in her novel. *The Dispossessed* features a society informed by Taoist principles, anarcho-syndicalist organization, and open and changing relational structures. More specifically, Le Guin imagines new ways of being in the world by using Taoist paradox and contradiction to guide the Reader down a new path, weaves in Kropotkin’s anarchism to re-work how society functions and labors, and, although she did not call her suggestions feminist, performs feminist politics to re-relate the individual to institutions, identities, and places.

Textually, Le Guin strikes a balance between opening and closing the text. The novel opens outward to the Reader, with uncertainty and flux characterizing the reading experience. The cognitive estrangement that drives science fiction separates the Reader from the novel’s setting but encourages the Reader to seek answers to real-world problems in the novel’s fictional environment. Le Guin trains her Reader to look for connections, to participate in creating the argument, and to craft relationships. To prevent the Reader from wandering endlessly, however, Le Guin closes the text using a spiraling structure, similar to a spinning skater, to turn the Reader back toward the central points. Recurring symbols, such as prisons and light, guide the Reader through these twists, keeping the text in motion as the Reader navigates the turns. Le Guin provides additional guidance using iconicity to unite content and form.
Le Guin draws on paradox, ambiguity, and confusion to encourage her Reader not to share her protagonist’s journey but to embark on one of her or his own, informed by Taoist philosophy. The Reader learns, through the novel, how to navigate dialectic, contradiction, and paradox. Those paradoxes help both the main character and the Reader to appreciate how truths might emerge from the tension created by contradiction.

The re-working of the workplace that Le Guin performs in *The Dispossessed* offers the Reader a view of how anarcho-syndicalism could change how work functions. Workers in Kropotkin’s workplace enjoy their work, administer and organize themselves, and depend on other syndicates to help them to create a balanced society. The society that Le Guin forms in the novel applies Kropotkin’s decentralized government to separate the means of distribution from the means of production and his syndical and interdependent societal organization and work structure. The motives driving characters to work form a balanced social organism that eliminates government and maximizes individual freedom.

Le Guin uses the novel to alter not only how people work but how people relate to one another, to institutions, and to vectors of identity. To avoid socio-political dystopia, the Reader can turn to the new relationships that Le Guin offers in *The Dispossessed*. The novel offers new ways to relate to institutions, identities, and the planet. Each new relationship option helps to stabilize the protagonist, and the Reader, in the midst of a fluctuating political world and reading experience. The Reader is left with the need to re-form her or his own relationships, to the social order, to the nation, to identity and the self, to the planet, and to other people.
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The ship assembled, stocked, and readied, I turn my glass to the horizon. Over the next several years, my ship will accumulate its share of barnacles, toss about on stormy seas, and require hours of swabbing decks, repairing rigging, and sealing leaks. But thanks to the support and lessons I obtained from this crew, I do not need fair weather to manage smooth sailing.
Chapter 1

*The Dispossessed*

Opening a novel, a reader expects to encounter a story. That story might illuminate the human condition, engage in philosophical or political inquiry, recount historical events, explore foreign lands, or solve a mystery. The mystery that greets readers from the first page diminishes as they read, discovering the book’s premise and its promise. Books that promise new ways of being in the world, that speculate about how readers might change their world for the better, that suggest readers can make a difference, fall under the generic categorization of utopian fiction. Utopias teach readers, critique society, and rekindle hope that the world could become a better place. What constitutes “better” depends on how one defines it, and if the definition an author advances champions radical freedom and equity, then it probably draws upon work by anarchists and feminists.

What might anarchist and feminist utopian fiction teach readers? What socio-political tools, which Kenneth Burke would call equipment for living, reside in such texts? In this dissertation, I take up the gold standard of anarchist-feminist fiction, *The Dispossessed*, a 1974 novel by Ursula K. Le Guin. I contend that Le Guin offers the Reader of *The Dispossessed* a utopian vision that balances flux with stability. With the novel’s textual structure, ideological underpinnings, and imagined worlds, Le Guin teaches the Reader ways to change the world, and through rhetorical criticism, I explore how rhetoric, anarchism, and feminism articulate possibilities for socio-political transformation in her novel. I conclude that *The Dispossessed* features a society informed by Taoist philosophical principles, anarcho-syndicalist organization, and open and changing relational structures. To offer her Reader new ways of
being in the world, Le Guin uses Taoist paradox and contradiction to guide the Reader down a new path, weaves in Kropotkin’s anarchism to re-work how society functions and labors, and, although she did not call her suggestions feminist, engages in feminist politics to re-relate the individual to institutions, identities, and places. The new relationships, work structures, and textual techniques enable Le Guin to construct new possibilities for socio-political transformation.

I illuminate the socio-political tools Le Guin uses in the novel, ranging from rhetoric to anarchism to Taoism. Each of these areas helps Le Guin to construct the novel and together constitute her work’s larger intellectual context. That context culminates in the novel. I am not the first scholar to study *The Dispossessed*, but with my sustained consideration, I contribute to scholarly conversations about the novel, feminist science fiction, utopian politics, and rhetoric by bringing a rhetorical perspective to bear on the text.\(^1\) To analyze the novel, I use rhetorical criticism to unpack the places, relationships, and politics that *The Dispossessed* offers to the Reader that Le Guin implies, who can re-tool her or his own world with the tools proffered by the feminist, anarchist, and utopian contexts.

**Imagining New Ways of Being**

Rhetoricians study how texts foment action, and utopian studies scholars consider how people imagine new ways of being and doing. Their projects could interact productively, but rhetorical scholars and utopian studies scholars do not participate in one another’s conversations frequently, as shown in Table 1.1. Literary scholars have studied

specific utopias, primarily More’s *Utopia* (sixty-six of the JSTOR articles listed below), but few of the articles adopt a rhetorical perspective. Rhetorical scholars have published almost no work in the utopian studies journals, but the scholars and their literatures could interact productively.

Table 1.1: Database Hits for “Rhetoric” and “Utopia”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Database</th>
<th>Total Hits</th>
<th>Rhetoric Journals</th>
<th>Literature Journals</th>
<th>Other Disciplinary Journals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>EBSCO’s Film and Literature Index</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6 Science Fiction</td>
<td>1 Asian Cinema Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EBSCO’s Communication and Mass Media Complete</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>All rhetoric and communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ProQuest</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2 Marketing 2 Social Science²</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MLA International Bibliography</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>4 Composition Pedagogy 1 Political Theory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project MUSE</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>3 Cultural Studies 3 History</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JSTOR</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>18 Social Science 22 Cultural Studies regional 16 History</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Utopian fiction prompts readers to question their world and to seek new ways of being in those worlds. To realize those worlds, readers both consider and act upon the possibilities provided by the fictional visions. To construct those visions, authors endorse some positions and possibilities and criticize others. To build a case, they magnify pieces of the readers’ world and imagine alternatives. Analyzing which actions and ways of being a utopian vision condemns, critics can reveal a society’s socio-political anxieties and wounds. The healing options for those wounds emerge from the dreams and hopes, the other ways of being, that a utopian vision contains. Examining utopian texts to discover how rhetors craft utopias, critics can glimpse what rhetorical resources hopeful fictions provide to readers. Readers

² Social science scholars tend to use “utopia” colloquially to mean hopeful, rather than indicating fully-imagined fictional utopias.
might use what they learn from utopian fiction for many purposes, but the texts help to reveal pressing questions of their time, political and rhetorical resources to help cope with those questions, and suggestions for ways that readers can act.

Readers do not simply take the content of a novel and apply it, wholesale, to their own world, however. Considering what the readers’ world would become with full-scale reproduction of what was in a utopia, utopian studies scholars, in early studies, viewed textual content as a blueprint. The detail of a blueprint disappears totally in Frederic Jameson’s consideration of utopia; he argues the existence of utopian texts, which proves that people have hope, constitutes the primary work of utopian fiction.³ Tom Moylan responds by balancing the two views, arguing that utopianism is “best understood as a process of social dreaming that unleashes and informs efforts to make the world a better place, not to the letter of a plan but to the spirit of an open-ended process.”⁴ To study that process, and how it provides a field of possibility, utopian studies scholars in more recent years have focused on the flexibility and the flux of utopian envisioning, including the details of the content, the larger (rhetorical) function, and the ways in which a particular utopia reveals a culture’s subconscious and offers options for changing socio-political flaws.

To illuminate cultural flaws and offer new options, most utopian texts contain both eutopic and dystopic elements. Rhetors who imagine eutopia offer readers hopeful or idealistic ways of being, whereas dystopic rhetors critique culture through cataclysmic or


⁴ Tom Moylan and Michael J. Griffin, *Exploring the Utopian Impulse: Essays on Utopian Thought and Practice*, Michael J. Griffin series editor, Ralahine Utopian Studies Series (New York: Peter Lang, 2007), 11.
negative ways of being. Dystopian rhetors craft an exigence for change, highlighting what fails to work in a culture’s present. To improve upon the present, eutopian rhetors offer solutions to pressing issues. Thus, utopian texts offer readers political means, revealing the core of what people wish to change and presenting new options for being in the process. Utopia, as a term, combines the Greek _outopos_ (no place) and _eutopos_ (good place), suggesting utopia means a place that will become good. Utopia is the good place that is not, yet.

Hoping to change the world into a good place is an important political enterprise, and interrogating how utopian texts promote political action toward that end is an important rhetorical enterprise. Seeking to change the socio-political structure with their rhetoric, both anarchist and feminist utopian rhetors imagine utopia as a place without, or with fewer, hierarchical power structures. Feminists challenge power relations, and anarchists critique hierarchy by rejecting all vertical power relations. The extremity of anarchist rhetoric helps its audience to view what a rhetor finds problematic about a culture’s use of hierarchy and how to eliminate hierarchy in political relationships.

From the Greek _anarchia_, meaning no chief or head, anarchy signifies absolute individual liberty, unsettledness, disorder, or an absence of government.\(^5\) Rejecting government and settled order, anarchists aim to achieve total liberty and freedom.\(^6\) How best to advance individual freedom divides anarchist opinion, however. Those opinions coalesce into two positions, splitting anarchist into communalists and individualists. Individualists

believe individual liberty can be achieved best by removing all strictures and limits from the individual. The individual secures her or his own freedom, limited by no others. The other position, communalism, suggests that freedom can be realized best by forming communities that value individual liberty but work together to secure freedom for all. Communal anarchists emphasize liberty more than the individual, and accept community in lieu of government. These communities range from collectivists to co-operatives to neighborhoods.

The communist anarchism theorized by Russian Peter Kropotkin informs *The Dispossessed*, Le Guin notes in the foreword to the novel. Her text imagines a realized anarcho-communist utopia: the novel’s main setting, the dusty moon of Anarres. Shevek, the novel’s protagonist, also visits the neighboring individualist-capitalist planet, Urras, from

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7 The primary difference between the two camps is economic, making “communal” more accurate than “social,” a term sometimes applied to these anarchists. “Communal” also avoids artificially dividing the social from the political.

which anarchist revolutionaries departed one-hundred and seventy years before. Urras serves
as a foil to Anarres, illustrating the strengths and limitations of each governmental and social
structure. Both societies, set in this imaginary environment, demonstrate problems that
constrain liberty through economics and identities. These limitations allow Le Guin, with *The
Dispossessed*, to provide a revealing example of how communal anarchism could advance
freedom and equity.

Both anarchists and feminists seek to effect change and to eliminate or mitigate
hierarchy. The tactics of the groups overlap, suggesting the two can inform and advance one
another. Anarcha-feminists also divide between individual and communal anarchism. The
division appears between the two main activists from the Progressive Era, individualist
Voltairine de Cleyre and communalist Emma Goldman, and recurs between recent activists
such as individualist Sharon Presley and communalist ecologist Janet Biehl. This
conversation contains both primary theorists and activists such as Goldman and scholars
such as historian Martha Ackelsberg. Feminist science fiction authors connect the two
theories with speculative, utopian fiction, providing readers with the opportunity to critique
culture and to explore new ways of being.

Science fiction provides a productive space for critical and imaginative reading. The
reader gains space to explore visions of the way the world could be through both ideas and
characters. The characters and ideas that feminist science fiction writers imagined changed
the science fiction world and expanded readers’ horizons. Those horizons feminist science

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9 A number of collectives and anarcha-feminist activists write at this intersection, including Alphabet
Threat, Rita-Katrina Andrews, the Dark Star Collective, Carol Ehrlich, Lynne Farrow, Peggy
Kornegger, Vandiver Pendleton, Jeanine Pfahlichert, and Witch Hazel. Scholars writing in the area
include Martha Ackelsberg, Kathryn Pyne Addelson, Kathy Ferguson, Ynestra King, Margaret
Marsh, and Shawn Pyne.
fiction authors imagined expanding did not always succeed, and even challenges that succeeded, such as *The Dispossessed*, incompletely challenged patriarchy.\(^\text{10}\) Nevertheless, feminists in the 1970s used science fiction to explore possibilities for their readers to challenge patriarchy, and, in the process, they redefined and expanded science fiction as a genre.

Embracing the “soft” sciences, such as anthropology, linguistics, and sociology, feminist science fiction authors expanded the bounds of science fiction beyond technology and “hard” science. De-centering these traditional sciences, these rhetors also challenged the reification of rationality, objectivism, and masculinity, introducing more cultural and personal phenomena, such as familial relationships, interpersonal interaction, and identity politics to the genre. The science fiction community historically denigrated and marginalized these more subjective sciences, aligned with femininity, much as these fields were devalued in the “real” scientific world. Patricia Melzer argues the “soft” sciences were “considered witchcraft, evil, manipulative, obscure, and subjective (i.e. feminine).”\(^\text{11}\) Feminists’ introduction of the sociological sciences to science fiction provided new material and crafted a speculative space that enabled feminist rhetors to critique their current culture, to imagine and test new ways of being, and to perform their mantra that the personal is political.

Although Le Guin did not identify as a feminist during the 1970s, she contributed to the feminist political project with her science fiction. She argues science fiction gained

\(^{10}\) Le Guin did not self-identify as a feminist when she published *The Dispossessed*. She discovers her feminism later, but she does not name feminists among her acknowledged influences at the time. She did not claim to include feminism in the novel, but her work helped to revolutionize science fiction, critics and theorists identify the novel as a hallmark of feminist science fiction, and the politics in the novel function to advance feminism, even if she did not call her politics feminist in 1974.

ascendancy among female writers during the 1960s and 1970s because it “is this wonderful place to write novels that show different opportunities for women.”

The Dispossessed explores anarchist and feminist possibilities. Feminism, what bell hooks defines broadly as the struggle to end sexist oppression, once again became a prominent force with its second wave, in the 1960s and 1970s. Published in 1974, The Dispossessed emerges at the crest of this wave and performs a protean form of feminism that bears traces of the feminist zeitgeist. Although she may not have called her moves feminist, Le Guin utilizes a united front form of politics prominent in second-wave feminist activism and emphasizes personal relationships in her utopian vision.

Utopian imagining became a major feminist literary phenomenon during the 1970s, with a noteworthy strength in science fiction. Science fiction draws its worlds through its characters and the ideas, the innovative science, informing its plots. Some critics and authors

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argue its characters animate the genre and others champion its science, its ideas. Feminist science fiction critic Sarah Lefanu explains that science fiction divides into “character-based fiction with parameters expanded in a scientific/futuristic setting” or “scientific ideas explored in fictional form.”¹⁵ She categorizes The Dispossessed as idea-driven science fiction, despite Le Guin’s self-identification as a character-based author.¹⁶ Le Guin has publicly acknowledged her tendency to stray from her characters to insert politics by “grinding axes and making points,” to which Lefanu challenges, “What is wrong with making points?”¹⁷ Le Guin, along with her cohort of feminist science fiction authors, such as James Tiptree, Jr., Suzy McKee Charnas, and Joanna Russ, frustrate Lefanu. She charges them with working too much within the “mainstream narrative modes,” maintaining narrative coherence, and advancing deep characterization at the expense of ideas and scientific exploration.¹⁸ Le Guin’s insistence on focusing on characters (whom Lefanu derisively dubs “her dreary male heroes”) over ideas, Lefanu maintains, fails to realize fully the “explosive potential of science fiction.”¹⁹

If Lefanu is correct, if Le Guin fails to advance science with her science fiction, why has the science fiction community honored Le Guin so extensively? Why have other idea-centric authors not vilified her? Perhaps because Lefanu correctly identifies Le Guin’s work as character-driven. The Dispossessed tells Shevek’s story. The male protagonist has dominated science fiction, and, in the mid-1970s, feminist science fiction was just beginning to

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¹⁵ Lefanu, Feminism and SF, 132.
¹⁶ Lefanu, Feminism and SF, 143.
¹⁷ Ursula K. Le Guin, “Science Fiction and Mrs. Brown” in Speculations on Speculation: Theories of Science Fiction, ed. Matthew Candelaria and James Gunn (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow, 2005), 119-139; Lefanu, Feminism and SF, 143.
¹⁸ Lefanu, Feminism and SF, 95.
¹⁹ Lefanu, Feminism and SF, 146.
challenge the centering of male protagonists. Mary Kenny Badami noted, in 1976, “Women have not been important as characters in SF. Women have not been important as fans of SF. Women have not been important as writers of SF.”²⁰ Le Guin helped to change the genre, but some of her changes happened long after *The Dispossessed*, and she openly admits that she did not choreograph all of the advances she achieved. Other authors, most notably Russ, centered women more effectively than Le Guin, at least at the time.²¹ Russ’s science fiction novels, for example, presumed a feminine reading position and featured female protagonists.²²

Le Guin might not center a female character for years after publishing *The Dispossessed*, but she does trouble gender norms, rework the worlds she imagines with principles then ascendant in feminist politics, and advance science fiction by being an important writer of science fiction.²³ Veronica Hollinger defines feminist science fiction as fiction “written in the interest of women” that encourages the “cultural and social transformations that are the aims of the feminist political enterprise.”²⁴ Le Guin does encourage social and political transformation, and much of that imagining advances feminist interests. Years after she published *The Left Hand of Darkness* and *The Dispossessed*, both novels

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²¹ Russ and Le Guin share numerous noteworthy predecessors, such as Helen Weinbaum, Margaret St. Clair, Katherine MacLean, Miriam Allen de Ford, Anne Warren Griffith, Francis Stevens, C.L. Moore, Leigh Brackett, Wilmar Shiras, Hazel Heald, Leslie Perri, Mildred Klinger, Shirley Jackson, Zenna Henderson, and Carol Emshwiller. Badami acknowledges these authors in Badami, “A Feminist Critique of Science Fiction.”

²² Lefanu, *In the Chinks of the World Machine: Feminism and Science Fiction*, 197.


that advanced feminist science fiction dramatically, Le Guin realized her identity as a feminist. She describes it in some depth:

There wasn’t any aha! moment about feminism for me. I just kept reading stuff and thinking. My mind works slowly and obscurely, and I mostly find out what I’m doing by looking at what I’m doing or have done. Mostly I don’t even do that. But when what I do isn’t getting done very well, when it seems to be stuck or going wrong, that induces me to look at it. ‘What am I doing? Why isn’t it behaving?’ This happened in the middle of *The Eye of the Heron*, when Lev insisted on getting himself killed in the middle of the story, leaving my book without a hero, and me wondering what the hell? It took a good deal of backing up and pondering over what I had written to realize that Luz had been the hero all along, that Luz was the one who would lead her people into the wilderness. I can identify that as the moment when I consciously shifted from a male protagonist to a female protagonist, when the male was marginalized and the woman became the center. . . .

But of course that was long after *Left Hand of Darkness*, where the rather naive male narrator is a deliberate authorial outreach to male readers who (or so I thought at the time) would reject an androgynous central character, particularly in a book by a woman. Estraven’s narrative voice comes in late, and quietly. But, of course, Estraven was the center of the story from the start. In *The Tombs of Atuan* you can see me centering on a female character, but enabling her to act only in collaboration with a male. It was a gradual process. It still is.25

Those “dreary male heroes” that Lefanu laments mirrored the norms of the genre at the time, and they would have been familiar to science fiction readers, who, even thirty years later, encounter mostly male protagonists and who mostly read from male bodies. Le Guin’s incorporation of feminist politics in *The Left Hand of Darkness* and *The Dispossessed* occurs years before she consciously centers the feminine. She does not always take advantage of the opportunity afforded by science fiction with her novels, but the feminism present in *The Dispossessed* both reflects the changing political norms of its time and innovates new ways of being that feminists explore years later, such as the political import of representations and

agency. Looking back over what she wrote, Le Guin learns the politics and potential of the times. So does her Reader. The possibilities Le Guin imagines in *The Dispossessed* enter feminist politics over the years, and her readers can see the roots of possibilities for agency (that now seem foregone conclusions) embedded in her early work.

Even in those early years, feminists turned science fiction into a rich resource. Lefanu explains how feminist science fiction authors take the “stock conventions of science fiction – time travel, alternate worlds, entropy, relativism, the search for a unified field theory,” and using figures and tropes, most notably metaphor and metonymy, create “powerful ways of exploring the construction of ‘woman.’”

Feminist science fiction

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27 Lefanu, *Feminism and SF*. Metaphor compares two concepts that share a characteristic in order to clarify or concretize one of the concepts in light of the comparison (for example, Matt Groening writes, “Love is a snowmobile racing across the tundra and then suddenly it flips over, pinning you underneath. At night, the ice weasels come.” He compares the pain of love to the pain of being eaten by ice weasels in order to emphasize how sudden, chaotic, and scary love can be.). Metonymy serves as a synonym for a term with which an audience already associates the term (for example, “Wall Street” for the stock market). For more about metaphor and metonymy, see: Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1969), 503; Richard A.
authors introduced new resources to science fiction, as well. Lisa Yaszek notes that science fiction written by women more frequently explored the “tropes of romance, marriage, and motherhood.” Le Guin, for example, includes romance and parenthood and emphasizes the relational and the personal. She had not “found” feminism when she wrote The Dispossessed, but she personalizes the political. And as she offers hope in one hand, with the other she reveals the flaws of the readers’ world. Joanna Russ observes that the best feminist science fiction stories show readers “what, in the authors’ eyes, is wrong with our own society.” Le Guin draws upon Taoism, anthroponomy, and Jungian psychology to critique society in her novels. Feminist authors in the 1970s borrowed resources from other genres, ranging from utopian fiction to romance, included some traditional science fiction elements, added their own perspectives and creativity, and re-fashioned the genre. Le Guin and her contemporaries largely succeeded at infiltrating and transforming a genre dominated by masculine authors, themes, and readers. Patricia Melzer notes that “feminist science fiction irreversibly shaped the genre, first in the 1970s with its criticism of gender roles, racism, and class exploitation, and later in the 1980s with a growing use of postmodern elements such as the exploration of linguistics and disrupted narrative structures.” Containing both disrupted narrative structure and linguistic exploration, The Dispossessed both participates in the politics of its time, challenging gender, race, and class, and points the way toward what feminist science fiction would become.


28 Yaszek, Galactic Suburbia: Recovering Women’s Science Fiction, 17.


30 Melzer, Science Fiction and Feminist Thought, 7.
Author-Producer-Audience and the Text’s Context

To understand how *The Dispossessed* speaks both from and before its time requires considering its author and her influences, its production, and its impact. By beginning with the “author,” I do not intend to center her role in constructing the text. Rather, I begin with the author because she provides the most precise part of the novel’s larger context. Progressing from the individual author (Le Guin) through the text’s production to its awards and its effect more generally, I suggest the novel’s context layers, loops back upon itself, and moves between the author, the novel’s production, and its readers, the co-authors of the text, to constitute the context for *The Dispossessed*.

The Author: Ursula Kroeber Le Guin

Born 21 October 1929 to Theodora Covel Brown Kracaw Kroeber, a psychologist and best-selling author, and Alfred Kroeber, who founded the department of anthropology at the University of California at Berkeley, Ursula Kroeber joined her parents and three brothers, Clifton, Karl, and Ted, in Berkeley, California.31 Growing up in an academic household, Le Guin read avidly and, as an adult, pursued her love of literature. She earned a bachelor of arts degree in literature from Radcliffe College in 1951 and a master of arts degree in French and Italian Renaissance literature in 1952 from Columbia University. As of 2011, she held nine additional, honorary degrees.32 In 1951, Phi Beta Kappa inducted her, and in 1953 Fulbright awarded her a fellowship to France. Headed to France aboard the

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32 Le Guin holds honorary degrees from Bucknell University, Lawrence University, the University of Oregon, Western Oregon State College, Lewis and Clark College, Occidental College, Emory University, Kenyon College, and Portland State University.
Queen Mary, Ursula met her future spouse, historian Charles Le Guin. They married in Paris in 1953 and have lived in the same house in Portland, Oregon for over forty years. They share three children and four grandchildren.

Although Le Guin’s relationship with literature began early in her life, she did not publish until her early thirties. At thirty-two, she sold her first publication, the short story “April in Paris,” for thirty dollars. Since then, Le Guin has published twenty-two novels, eleven short-story collections, seven poetry volumes, twelve children’s books, four essay collections, and a variety of screenplays, sound recordings, and photography projects. In addition, she has translated four volumes, including Lao Tzu’s *Tao Te Ching*. Her original work has earned numerous prominent science fiction awards, including the Nebula (5), Hugo (5), James Tiptree Jr. (3), Jupiter (2), and Locus (8) awards. Le Guin has won twenty other writing awards, including the Newberry Silver Medal and eight lifetime achievement awards. The Science Fiction Writers of America (SFWA) has granted her the title of Grand Master and Hugo awarded her their lifetime achievement “Gandalf” Award. In 1995, she appeared on the short list for the Pulitzer Prize.

Critics have honored her, as well. Damien Broderick attributes Le Guin’s “triumph at the cusp of the seventies as the thoughtful, elegant anthropologist of SF and fantasy” to her early work, but he maintains that *The Dispossessed* confirmed her position as a great science fiction author. Lefanu agrees, emphasizing that Le Guin’s “contribution to science

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35 *The Dispossessed* and “The Day Before the Revolution” each earned a Nebula and Hugo award.
fiction cannot be overestimated – she demands a seriousness from readers and from other writers that is enormously important.” 37 That import led to an invitation to shape the genre as a gatekeeper, editing one of Norton’s anthologies. Norton selected Le Guin, Brian Attebery argues, because of her skill connecting canonical literature with science fiction. He expands, explaining that Le Guin represents the “highest level of SF achievement,” as a “spy from the literary world within the ranks of SF writers” who appeals to a large audience by combining “SF and literature in such a way that one can give her books to friends who don’t see what you find so interesting in that stuff.” 38 Venturing across literary and readership boundaries, Le Guin explores new territory, much like her protagonists, who often epitomize the stranger in a strange land. Strange lands abound in The Dispossessed.

Producing the Text

Since its initial publication run, The Dispossessed has been released sixteen times by eleven publishers and has been translated into thirteen languages. 39 With so many editions, the novel’s pagination varies widely. Laurence Davis and Peter Stillman, in their edited volume, helpfully summarize the pagination of the major editions of The Dispossessed, which I have reproduced in Table 1.2. 40 Page references in this dissertation correspond to the first

37 Lefanu, Feminism and SF, 146.
38 Atteberry, Decoding Gender in SF, 184. SF can signify either science fiction (only on the page – on the screen it becomes sci-fi) and speculative fiction more generally.
39 The publishers include Perennial, Gollancz, Easton, Granada, Book of the Month Club, Avon, Millennium/Orion, and four of the Harper houses. It has been translated into Bulgarian, Croatian, Danish, Dutch, Finnish, French, German, Hebrew, Japanese, Portuguese, Romanian, Serbo-Polish, and Spanish.
column, the HarperCollins Eos paperback edition. The variety of editions have sported several different covers, featured in the Appendix.

Table 1.2: Pagination in *The Dispossessed*

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*Table Key:*

HRC: Harper & Row cloth 1974
AP: Avon paperback 1975
GP: Granada paperback 1975

In addition to the various editions of the novel, one other publication engages directly with the setting of *The Dispossessed*, a short story entitled “The Day Before the Revolution.” The story first appeared in 1974 in *Galaxy*, was reprinted in Le Guin’s *The Wind’s Twelve Quarters* in 1975, and was reissued in 1995. “The Day Before the Revolution” tells the story of Laia

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Odo, the woman who foments the revolution that leads to the founding of the anarcho-communist society on Anarres, the primary setting of *The Dispossessed*.42

**Awards and Influence**

Both “The Day Before the Revolution” and *The Dispossessed* have been honored by the science fiction community. The Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America (SFWA) awarded *The Dispossessed* their most prestigious awards, the Nebula Award for Best Novel in 1974 and the Hugo Award for Best Novel in 1975, honoring it as an exemplar of the genre.43 “The Day Before the Revolution” won the Nebula Best Short Story award in 1974. In addition to the most prestigious awards, the Nebula and Hugo, *The Dispossessed* has fared well in the Locus poll of science fiction fans. It won the Best Science Fiction Novel Award in 1975 and earned thirteenth place in the 1975 All-Time Best Novel poll, seventeenth place in the 1987 poll, and nineteenth place in the 1998 All-Time Best Science Fiction Novel Before 1990 poll. In addition, in 1993, the novel won the Best Classic Libertarian Science Fiction Novel Award. In short, anarchists, science fiction fans, and science fiction literati have all honored the novel.

The prominence of its science fiction awards reflects *The Dispossessed*’s setting, its cultural criticism, and its mobilization of its political and philosophical influences. Le Guin’s novel speaks from and beyond its time. Science fiction and literary critic Darko Suvin

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concurs that Le Guin writes out of the 1970s, a time that involved great “alienation, isolation, and fragmentation” in social, political, and psychological arenas. Any period’s rhetoric shapes and reflects its zeitgeist. Walter Benjamin argues that literature functions as an organon of history, helping to illuminate contemporary times in light of the text’s moment of origin. Studying a text strongly and explicitly grounded in its moment in history can enhance our understanding of the time period in addition to revealing how the period shapes a text’s rhetorical strategies.

Those temporal markers influence *The Dispossessed*, and Le Guin affirms the novel’s link to its time. However, she attributes the parallels to shared influences. The book pulls from utopian and science fiction conventions, but it also draws upon Taoism and Kropotkin’s anarchism (what Le Guin calls the “Pacifist Anarchist tradition”). These influences have overlapping values and mores with what Le Guin dubs the “so-called counterculture of the sixties and seventies.” Some of the concerns of this time, such as countering inequality, war, socioeconomic strife, and environmental degradation, have persisted, helping to explain how the text speaks beyond its time. Victoria Strauss’s review of *The Dispossessed* captures the text’s ability to speak beyond its time while simultaneously remaining rooted in its moment of origin:

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45 Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*, vi.


47 Le Guin, “Chronicles of Earthsea: Q&A Transcript.”
Le Guin examines the tension between human aspiration and human nature, between what can be dreamed and what can be achieved. This larger theme, together with Le Guin’s mature mastery of her craft, give *The Dispossessed* a universality that has prevented it from becoming dated, despite its roots in the political issues of its time (the communal counterculture of the late 60s and early 70s, the original women’s movement).48

Le Guin constructs a modernist novel by exploring the human condition and a novel that adheres to science fiction conventions by imagining new ways of being and critiquing culture. The result, *The Dispossessed*, provides her audience with a text that both offers a glimpse at the late 1960s and early 1970s zeitgeist, and also speaks to the human condition and possibilities for the future more generally.

**Rhetorical Criticism**

To uncover how Le Guin uses *The Dispossessed* to create an active reading experience, to champion balance alongside fluctuation, to restructure the workplace, and to suggest new ways for people to relate to one another, to societal structures, and to the universe, I turn to rhetorical criticism informed by a critical/cultural perspective. Critical/cultural inquiry considers power relationships, aiming to effect social transformation. Transforming representations, identity politics, and textual possibilities in the novel, Le Guin relies on tools whose work rhetorical criticism can reveal. By revealing how this text functions rhetorically, I suggest that readers can gain tools to help change the world. That is, Le Guin helps her readers learn how to engage in utopian politics.

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Critical/cultural scholars study texts by drawing upon theory that examines (cultural) and critiques (critical) culture.⁴⁹ M. Gigi Durham and Douglas Kellner suggest that critical studies of culture critique domination to effect “social transformation.”⁵⁰ Transforming power relationships and trying to understand how socio-political change occurs connects critical/cultural studies with rhetoric, Raymie McKerrow argues. He maintains that critiquing domination focuses on the “discourse of power which creates and sustains the social practices which control the dominated. It is, more specifically, a critique of ideologies, perceived as rhetorical creations.”⁵¹ If texts, rhetorical creations of a culture, can reveal its ideologies, then studying those texts can help critics to understand how a culture functions, what it values, how it constructs its ideologies, and how it could change. McKerrow continues to explain that “critical rhetoric examines the dimensions of domination and freedom as these are exercised in a relativized world.”⁵² Thus, a critical rhetorical perspective considers the culturally-specific workings of power and ideology, ranging from overt exertion of power to the production of identity and consent, in order to explicate options for socio-political transformation.

Critical/cultural critics also explore culture and how rhetors present, shape, and reflect their cultures through their textual creations. Ernest Wrage establishes that public


⁵⁰ Durham and Kellner, *Media and Cultural Studies: Keywords*, xxxvii.


speeches serve as idea-vehicles, noting that a “speech is an agency of its time, one whose surviving record provides a repository of themes and their elaborations from which we may gain insight into the life of an era.” Each era packages its culture in different textual forms, and Bonnie Dow demonstrates that “entertainment television does some of the cultural work that formerly was done through public speeches.” Speeches and political culture combine with popular culture to record a culture’s socio-political zeitgeist. Durham and Kellner expand upon how this occurs, explaining that,

Forms of media culture such as television, film, popular music, magazines, and advertising provide role and gender models, fashion hints, life-style images, and icons of personality. The narrative of media culture offers patterns of proper and improper behavior, moral messages, and ideological conditioning, sugar-coating social and political ideas with pleasurable and seductive forms of popular entertainment.

The form extends beyond coating messages with sugar, critical scholars remind us, to perform a culture’s ideological work.

Investigating how textual tools and forms perform that cultural and ideological work, critical/cultural rhetorical critics consider to what ends, or why, a text performs certain ideological work. By combining rhetorical and critical/cultural perspectives, textual critics investigate how, to what ends, and why all in one study. Therefore, adopting a critical/cultural rhetorical perspective enables critics to look at how texts mobilize or challenge forms of power to effect socio-political transformation and how texts affect the spirit of an age with rhetorical means.

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55 Durham and Kellner, Media and Cultural Studies: Keyworks, 1.
Attending to how texts work, rhetorical critics uncover the ways culture and ideology emerge from texts. Textual critic Barry Brummett suggests that the “empowerment and disempowerment of whole groups of people occurs bit by bit, drop by drop, in the moment-to-moment experiences of popular culture.” Looking to popular culture, rhetorical critics seek to illuminate the bits, drops, and moments that combine to create a culture. Cultural studies combines well with rhetoric. A rhetorical perspective, Dow explains, “assumes that symbolic acts function to accomplish an end, and that they do so through the employment of strategies that influence audiences.” She explains that a rhetorician need not seek to offer the “most accurate retelling of how a text is received” nor the “widest variety of interpretations,” but instead, “persuade the audience that their knowledge of a text will be enriched if they choose to see a text as the critic does, while never assuming that that particular ‘way of seeing’ is the only or the best way to see that text (or that all audiences do, in fact, see it that way).” Rhetorical critics need not argue for the Truth of a text. Instead, they should seek to learn how texts persuade or move people, bit by bit, drop by drop, moment by moment. Those moments, explained by a critic, can enrich both the critic’s and the readers’ understanding and evaluation of a text.

Critics judge texts, in addition to illuminating them, and thus, although they need not present the text’s Truth, they should endeavor to present the text accurately. Rhetorical critics, Edwin Black argues, should seek to “see a thing clearly and to record what they have seen precisely,” as well as seeking “to judge the thing justly.” For Black, the “critic is an

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educator,” who presents an audience with his or her findings. Those findings, Black claims, help critics, and their audiences, to understand culture. He concludes that “criticism is a discipline that, through the investigation and appraisal of the activities and products of [humans], seeks as its end the understanding of [humanity].” Human culture produces texts, which encapsulate a culture’s hopes and fears, and critics work to illuminate the human condition by considering those texts.

Considering a text might entail studying an author, the text itself, the actual or the implied audience, the historical milieu, or a combination of these elements. Even amongst those reading texts closely, critics emphasize different elements. Black defines persuasion in terms of an author’s intent, but Michael Leff stresses the role of the text. Michael McGee dismisses authorial intent altogether, contending that every audience member and critic assembles a text from available fragments. Thomas W. Benson and Maurice Charland both suggest that texts call audiences and rhetors into being. All of these rhetorical critics contribute to the approach a critic can take when examining a text. Textual critics can illuminate the text by attending to the author’s intentions, the text’s invitations, and/or the

60 Black, “Rhetorical Criticism,” 46.
61 The original quote ends with “man himself.”
ways an audience, or rhetor, might interpret, construct, or constitute a text, author, or audience.

The variety of elements and approaches available to critics precludes a strict delimiting of “criticism” as a method. Black argues that an “orientation, together with taste and intelligence, is all that the critic needs. If his [or her] criticism is fruitful, he may end with a system, but should not, in our present state of knowledge, begin with one.” Black’s argument suggests that critics should adopt an inductive approach that prioritizes the text itself rather than beginning with a standardized method. Dow advances a similar approach, explaining:

At the level of analyzing individual texts, then, my approach is inductive rather than deductive. I begin with the programming that I wish to understand and to explain, and I gain a thorough familiarity with it. . . . My experience with the text itself governs the approach I will take to it . . . the critical tools that enable my discussion of each unique text differ because each text functions differently.

Each text dictates a different set of critical tools, requiring the critic to adapt to a text’s particularities. Benson notes that “criticism is driven by a fascination with the particular, though it struggles to articulate the particularity of a given case in terms of larger concerns – interpretive, historical, technical, theoretical, and philosophical.” In short, close textual critics delve into a text and its details, use that initial foray to formulate an approach to analyze the text rhetorically, and finally plumb a text for its revelations about humanity and culture.

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65 Black, “Rhetorical Criticism.”
One large research question drives this study: What can Ursula K. Le Guin’s *The Dispossessed* teach us about rhetoric and the social and political possibilities of anarcho-syndicalism and feminist science fiction? To answer this question, I first familiarized myself with the text and assembled possible questions. Martin Medhurst and Benson suggest a variety of questions critics may ask of any mass-mediated text, ranging from content to structure to effect. 68 McKerrow reminds rhetorical critics that criticism is performative and that “absence is as important as presence.” 69 Combining Benson, Medhurst, and McKerrow’s questions with those suggested by the text itself, I offer a reading of Le Guin’s novel that can enrich readers’ understanding of the text. I argue that the rhetorical and political tools in this text enrich our understanding of rhetoric and popular culture, of the socio-political possibilities offered by anarchism and feminism, and of the ways that audiences can interact with texts.

**The Reader Subject Position**

Within each text resides a homunculus, a person whom the author imagines as her or his audience. The author implies who the Reader should be, leaving traces in the text to invite readers to adopt the position the author imagined for them. At the very least, the language an author selects invites in some readers and excludes others. Advanced vocabulary, for example, indicates that the author imagines a Reader who has completed some higher education. Beyond education, an author can build a subject position for readers that suggests an approach to the text, political stances, and identities. The homunculus


constructed invites individual readers to engage with the text from a particular standpoint, as the Reader of the text.

Wayne Booth, working through Henry James, suggests that the author creates a Reader. Just as a text implies an author, it implies an audience. Booth explains, “the author creates, in short, an image of himself [or herself] and another image of his [or her] reader; [s]he makes his [or her] reader, as [s]he makes his [or her] second self, and the most successful reading is one in which the created selves, author and reader, can find complete agreement.” Within rhetorical studies, critics who focus primarily on the text, such as Michael Leff and Stephen H. Browne, often consider the audience and author implied by a text.

Black terms the audience implied the “second persona.” The second persona appears naturally, Black explains, allowing critics to assume that “rhetorical discourses, either singly or cumulatively in a persuasive movement, will imply an auditor, and that in most cases the implication will be sufficiently suggestive as to enable the critic to link this implied auditor to an ideology.” The ideology that an author builds into the implied auditor, the second persona, enables the critic to render judgment. Judging a person, the homunculus embedded in the text, turns on identifying more than readers’ implied ages or base identities, Black argues. He contends that the ideology a rhetor implies not only creates a fuller version of the second persona, but it allows the critic to access “a model of what the rhetor would

74 Black, “The Second Persona.”
have his real auditor become.” In short, the author invites readers to become a particular Reader, complete with identities and ideologies. Analyzing the text and the Reader implied can help critics to understand the political possibilities presented by the text by understanding more about the agents its readers could become.

Philip Wander expands Black’s second persona, suggesting that critics also consider a third persona. Wander’s third persona chides critics to take up those “audiences rejected or negated through the speech and/or the speaking situation.” Each speech or situation hails some audiences, but it also marginalizes and excludes others. Wander reminds critics not to neglect those whom the rhetor already ignores. Ignored audiences can be recuperated, and Charles Morris III provides a theoretical apparatus to consider how neglected audiences might engage with a text. Morris expands the implied audience by theorizing a fourth persona, a subject position that hails only certain readers, performing what he calls a “textual wink.” Those who catch the wink might read against the text’s overt message to catch its sub-text or the author’s invitation to read resistively. Different readers bring varying literacies and reading apparati to a text. Morris draws attention to those whose literacy enables them to assume a different subject position in relation to the text, even if the rhetor neglects to include them in the Reader subject position.

Rosa Eberly also doubts the inclusiveness of the abstract “reader,” although she admits that “text-based methodology requires” an abstract version of the reader. In Citizen

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75 Black, “The Second Persona.”
Critics, she surveys the role of the “reader” in literary criticism from “high new criticism through reader-response and into cultural criticism,” and she laments that most often the reader “was merely standing in, rationalistically, for the critic.”79 She critiques criticism that does not account for actual readers, arguing that “it is what people do with their judgments about books and cultural products, not the books or even the authors in and of themselves, that enables books to affect our shared worlds.”80 The way that books move people to speak and to act, the ways in which they use books, animates Eberly’s inquiry. She maintains that “public discussions of novels and other cultural products are necessary to a healthy democracy,” but to achieve this deliberation, in what she terms “literary public spheres,” citizens must act.81 Doubting that critics can predict readers’ actions, Eberly agrees with Booth, who claims, “‘We’ flesh-and-blood readers are unpredictable, and no one can speak with high reliability about us.”82 To access what actual readers do with books, she considers “arguments that attempted to exert cultural force alongside the discourses of legal and aesthetic experts and in media controlled first by cultural and then by corporate elites.”83 Eberly dubs the rhetors who produce these vernacular arguments “citizen critics,” and she examines the “reading and writing in public about books of common concern to them” that these citizens produced. In other words, she emphasizes not the rhetoric within the novels but the rhetoric produced by citizens engaging with the novels.

The methods extant in rhetorical scholarship enable critics to understand who the author asks the audience to become. The audience implied by a text contains identities and

80 Eberly, *Citizen Critics*, xii.
81 Eberly, *Citizen Critics*, xiii and 11.
83 Eberly, *Citizen Critics*, xii.
ideologies, in the second persona, and can reveal who is not included, in the third persona, and who can read through that exclusion back into the text, with the fourth persona. Texts contain subject positions for their audiences. Audiences might be overtly implied, apparent by their explicit exclusion, or engage with the text resistively. Critics who consider the personae can account for the successes and failures of the invitations extended to various audiences. If a rhetor fails to create a subject position the audience wishes to inhabit, the rhetoric does not succeed, as Benson demonstrates in his analysis of the speakers at the 1972 Ordnance Research Laboratory protest at Penn State.84 Protestors accepted the invitation proffered by one speaker, not the first, choosing to inhabit the subject position they found most appealing. Critics who attend to the subject positions offered by a text can account for its rhetorical work by considering the text’s personae.

Throughout this dissertation, I refer to the subject position Le Guin constructs, the second persona position she offers to her readers, as the Reader. Actual bodies reading books I signify as readers. I note variations from the Reader position, those that constitute third or fourth personae, such as a repeat reader, with a lowercase reader and a modifier. With the Reader, I do not suggest Richards’s “qualified reader,” Booth’s “flesh-and-blood readers,” nor Eberly’s “citizen critics.”85 I focus not on what readers do with the material in The Dispossessed or even what they say about it. Instead, I investigate what the text provides to them as tools. Aristotle defines rhetoric as the faculty (dynamis) of discerning the available means of persuasion, and I focus on what available means The Dispossessed provides, not on

84 Benson, “Rhetoric as Being.”
85 Eberly, Citizen Critics, 11.
the faculty of discerning that readers wield.\textsuperscript{86} I use the subject position (Reader) to stand in for any reader who might pick up the book and take advantage of the possibilities within it. Le Guin implies that this Reader has some characteristics and qualifications that might align with some actual readers, but the Reader I consider need not share those characteristics in order to make use of the book’s political tools. The Reader position I consider most closely approximates Black’s second persona.

I consider primarily the second persona she constructs, with an emphasis on a first-time reader relatively unversed with the texts to which she alludes (Lao Tzu’s \textit{Tao Te Ching} and Fyodor Dostoevsky’s \textit{The Possessed/Demons}, for example). Le Guin presumes that her Reader lives in the First World, claims some fluency with the conventions of science fiction, entertains speculation and questioning of socio-political norms, and wants to learn about new ways of being in the world. By considering the homunculus that \textit{The Dispossessed} contains, I endeavor to account for the rhetorical experience that Le Guin offers to her readers.

\textbf{Preview of Chapters}

This dissertation contains six chapters, including this introduction. Chapter two explores how the novel functions rhetorically to encourage the Reader to actively participate by simultaneously opening outward and turning inward. I contend that Le Guin strikes a balance with the novel’s structure, training her Reader how to connect disparate points and requiring the Reader to practice building stability in a fluctuating world. Chapter three

considers the experience of reading *The Dispossessed*, including Le Guin’s use of Taoism, paradox, and organic fluctuation. I suggest that Le Guin equips her Reader to find balance in a changing world, what anarchism creates, and to value Taoist philosophical principles.

Chapter four surveys how Le Guin suggests anarcho-communist changes to how society functions, moving from government to governmentality. In particular, she re-works labor and work and I suggest she changes government from an external to an internal function.

Chapter five unpacks the ways in which changes to relationships, between people, institutions, identities, and places, balances the fluctuation introduced by the governmentality of the work structure with stable, enduring (but constantly changing) connections. In chapter six, I offer some conclusions and implications for what we can learn about rhetoric, politics, and the active reading experience that Le Guin constructs. I conclude that *The Dispossessed* contains rhetorical, social, and political tools that could help readers to craft new ways of being in the world, ways that balance flux and stability.
Chapter 2

Re-Balancing the Structure:

Riding Out and Reining In

To understand how Le Guin crafts the Reader’s subject position in *The Dispossessed* to suggest new socio-political possibilities, I consider the text’s macro-level structural strategies and its micro-level linguistic strategies from a rhetorical perspective. By opening the text outward, reinforcing her central concepts using form, and encouraging audience involvement, Le Guin constructs her Reader’s subject position and offers the Reader tools s/he can use to construct new ways of being in the world. The novel balances opening outward, to involve the Reader and to open the text to more interpretations, with turning inward, to maintain a coherent structure and to reinforce its central socio-political points.

In *The Dispossessed* Le Guin corrals meaning with this inward-focused structure, but she also opens the text outward to involve the Reader. The Reader gains space for experimentation by reading science fiction, a genre that tries out new ways of being by drawing upon a technique that literary critic Darko Suvin calls “cognitive estrangement.” In addition, Le Guin encourages active reading of her novel by building in ambiguity and gaps, using tropes such as asyndeton. Techniques that open the text outward balance with those that serve to stabilize the text for the Reader. The Reader can experiment, but s/he does not ride the range without a guide. Le Guin trains her Reader to connect points within the novel using a spiral structure that turns back on itself, repeating symbols, and ties between form
and content ranging from the level of the book and its structure to its individual sentences to
the main character and his story to the reading experience.

**Riding Outward, Opening the Text**

Le Guin actively involves her Reader, asking that s/he reflect on the novel, participate in creating meaning, and learn how to cope with the uncertainty endemic to anarchist political systems. Uncertainty creeps into the reading experience throughout the novel. In *The Dispossessed*, Le Guin takes advantage of the experimental space provided by the generic conventions of science fiction. The genre, Suvin explains, depends on creating a gap between the readers’ world, a step back accomplished by constructing an unfamiliar setting that includes familiar issues. To grapple with those familiar problems and possible solutions, the readers need to learn from an author’s suggestions and to read actively, filling in the gaps.

Using ambiguity and gaps, Le Guin provides her Reader with an opportunity to participate in constructing the meaning of *The Dispossessed*. The text refuses to settle, much like the anarchist political system it presents, and the Reader learns how to cope with uncertainty as s/he navigates the novel. The text includes structural devices that encourage the active reading experience, such as asyndeton. This trope omits connective words, forcing the Reader to determine relationships between nouns and clauses. Connecting clauses and interpreting the structure of each sentence, the Reader learns how to find order and new relationships in a disordered world.
Science Fiction and Cognitive Estrangement

The Reader can explore potential new social and political relationships in the experimental space created by science fiction. Speculative fiction, which includes science fiction and utopian fiction, depends on its readers to imagine, to speculate. That speculation in science fiction texts occurs, Suvin contends, by estranging readers cognitively. Cognitive estrangement creates a gap between readers’ real world and the world of the text, and the gap enables readers to reflect, to compare, and to imagine. Imaginative readers can take the blocks a rhetor offers inside of a text and build something new. Although critics cannot predict exactly what readers might imagine and build, the blocks in the text provide clues. Suvin suggests that, instead of seeking to understand exactly what the blueprint of the text might build, the critic should seek to discover the more perfect principle that guides the ideas and characters in a speculative text. Readers of speculative fiction learn to seek this principle and the blocks provided by authors. Le Guin provides blocks through her characters, more than the scientific ideas she includes, but, in addition to science fiction’s traditional sciences (such as physics and biology), she uses the social sciences (such as sociology) to enable her Reader to engage in utopian speculation that extends beyond the intellectual into the socio-political.

Utopian and science fiction operate rhetorically by involving readers, by opening up a text, and by inviting political involvement. Peter Fitting argues that utopian texts extend science fiction’s invitation to engage politically, suggesting these tales hail readers, asking them to become agents “in the process of building utopia, unlike the passive role
traditionally assigned to the reader, where it suffices to dream and wait.”¹ Peter Fitting concludes that the utopian text contains a subject position invested with agency and potential.² This potential, he contends, can help readers to relate the content to real world situations, if it places believable characters in political settings that readers can imagine readily. Similarly, utopian scholar Tom Moylan explains that utopias create “textual interventions” that “help to develop the critical capacity of people to know, challenge, and change.”³ In short, utopian visions provide readers with a subject position (as the Reader) along with political tools and possibilities that strengthen agency, model political action, and foster an active reading experience.

In a similar fashion, science fiction connects readers’ outside world with the text’s experimental space. Brian Atteberry suggests that science fiction uses the strange to create wonder and to cultivate reflexivity that can help readers to translate a novel’s lessons into other parts of life. The Dispossessed, like most literary science fiction, explores new ideas, philosophies, and characters. The Reader of this novel can imagine alternative ways of being in the world by using the text’s experimental space. The experimental spaces require the Reader to discern similarities between her/his own world and the invented world of the novel. Science fiction novels create enough difference to enable readers to step back from their own world and see the cracks because of the juxtaposition with the novel’s world.

Drawing on Bertolt Brecht’s notion of estrangement, Darko Suvin, the most prominent science fiction scholar of the 1970s, argues that this step back defines science fiction scholar, where it suffices to dream and wait.”¹ Peter Fitting concludes that the utopian text contains a subject position invested with agency and potential.² This potential, he contends, can help readers to relate the content to real world situations, if it places believable characters in political settings that readers can imagine readily. Similarly, utopian scholar Tom Moylan explains that utopias create “textual interventions” that “help to develop the critical capacity of people to know, challenge, and change.”³ In short, utopian visions provide readers with a subject position (as the Reader) along with political tools and possibilities that strengthen agency, model political action, and foster an active reading experience.

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fashion as a genre. Defining the genre as “literature of cognitive estrangement” that crafts an “imaginative framework alternative to the author’s empirical environment,” Suvin proposes that science fiction makes the ordinary strange to encourage readers to reflect on the real world, to imagine change, and to consider new possibilities.\(^4\) Readers can learn to “investigate aspects of society, self, perception, and the physical universe,” Suvin asserts, through cognitive estrangement.\(^5\) Science fiction’s cognitive estrangement persuades audiences by connecting readers’ “real” world with a novel’s “literary” worlds through shared political issues and problems.

Scholars such as Suvin, Atteberry, and Donna Haraway all maintain that science fiction connects the literary to the socio-political.\(^6\) Jan Johnson-Smith extends the point, adding that science fiction invites and encourages readers to speculate about “potential and plausible realities.”\(^7\) In the 1960s and 1970s, science fiction novelists expanded the science they drew upon to build those realities, turning to social sciences such as anthropology, psychology, and sociology for ideas. Suvin observes that science fiction informed by social sciences issues a “diagnosis, a warning, a call to understanding and action, and — most important — a mapping of possible alternatives.”\(^8\)

For years, scholars of utopia approached those possible alternatives as blueprints to realize, as plans readers could reproduce, full-scale, in the real world.\(^9\) The practicality and

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\(^4\) Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*, 4, 7 note 2, 8.

\(^5\) Atteberry, *Decoding Gender in SF*, 4-5.

\(^6\) Atteberry, *Decoding Gender in SF*, 1; Donna Haraway, *How Like a Leaf: An Interview with Thyrza Nichols Gooden* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 120; Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*.


\(^9\) For a thorough survey of the evolution of utopian studies, see Tom Moylan, *Demand the Impossible: Science Fiction and the Utopian Imagination* (New York: Methuen, 1986); Moylan, *Scraps of the Untainted*
the applicability of utopian texts dogged the conversations. These conversations altered dramatically after Frederic Jameson joined the conversation. Beginning in the early 1980s and culminating in his 2005 *Archaeologies of the Future*, Jameson posits that utopian fiction provides hope simply by existing. The earlier treatments focused too minutely upon the details in utopian fiction, but Jameson misses the rhetorical function of particular details by oversimplifying utopianism. The scholarly conversation has achieved balance in more recent years, considering both blueprints, those that advocate for wholesale reproduction, and existence, holistic value for the text without reference to its details.

Suvin provides another useful way to balance the two extreme approaches to utopian fiction. He emphasizes the “more perfect principle” that guides a rhetor’s envisioned possibilities. Uniting science and utopian fiction, Suvin argues that estrangement in utopian fiction depends upon an “alternative historical hypothesis.” Science fiction and utopian novelists persuade by inviting readers to speculate and to imagine, rather than by overtly arguing. The two genres’ fictional nature need not obscure their political utility, however. Hopeful and hypothetical suggestions that authors craft can offer alternate ways of being by teaching new principles that can guide changes in readers’ real lives. Le Guin, well aware of these generic tools, asks,

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Wouldn’t you say any attempt to tell a story is an attempt to tell the truth? It’s the technique you use in the telling that is either more or less plausible. Sometimes the most direct way to tell the truth is to tell a totally implausible story, like a myth. That way you avoid the muddle of pretending the story ever happened, or ever will happen.13

The moral or lesson might appear in an unrealistic frame, a story set in a world quite foreign from the implied reader’s own. The “more perfect principle” that guides such an improbable vision can suggest a blueprint as well as offering hope by being. Finding what drives an imagined society, the nuggets of hope and provocative moments that construct the perfecting principle, the critic can identify how the fictional tale might speak beyond the page to influence the Reader.

To create space for reflection, science fiction and utopian fiction authors craft stories riddled with holes and uncertainties. Samuel Delany, for example, notes the utility of uncertainty, observing that the Reader’s imaginings may “ultimately end with an ‘I don’t know’ about any given point, but only after a good deal of speculation, either implicit or explicit, has left its signs in the text.”14 By rhetorically analyzing the textual traces of a novelist’s invitations to speculate, critics can unravel the imaginative threads that construct the tapestry of the implied audience, that is, the subject position of the Reader.

To craft this position and to foster cognitive estrangement, science fiction novelists use both speculative ideas and characters. However, authors who work in the genre historically have identified as idea-driven or character-driven.15 Le Guin, who tells her stories

through her characters, identifies as character-driven. Shevek is *The Dispossessed.* Le Guin maintains, “It is, basically, a novel, because at the heart of it you will not find an idea, or an inspirational message, or even a stone ax, but something much frailer and obscurer and more complex: a person.” She skillfully weaves political and intellectual questions that construct the novel’s perfecting principles through Shevek and his story. By entwining politics into his everyday encounters, Le Guin urges her Reader to engage with the philosophies and theories as they might be embodied, detailed, and lived.

Readers who opt to read science fiction have learned to watch for the perfecting principle. Science fiction trains its readers to read carefully and closely. Suvin comments that science fiction is “an educational literature,” that “demands from the author and reader, teacher and critic, not merely specialized, quantified positivistic knowledge (*scientia*) but a social imagination whose quality of wisdom (*sapientia*) testifies to the maturity of his critical and creative thought.” Le Guin, reflecting on interactions with her readers over the years, notes, “With the science fiction, often they want to either appreciate an argument of mine, or argue with me. It’s more intellectual.” She celebrates science fiction readers’ analytical tendencies, continuing, “It’s one of the good things about science fiction. You can actually throw in a whole chapter of what is to a large extent intellectual speculation, without losing all your readers. You might lose some of them, and I don’t blame them, but some of them

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16 Le Guin, “Science Fiction and Mrs. Brown,” 129.
18 Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*, 36, emphasis in original.
19 Wilson, “Le Guin Straddles Genres.”
will not only bear with it, they'll even like it.” Science fiction and utopian fiction readers encounter cognitive estrangement and imagine new ways of being more frequently than readers lacking literacy in the genres. The Reader that Le Guin constructs should slog through prose that might deter a more casual reader because s/he understands the conventions of the genre.

Rendered well, science fiction’s descriptive, didactic passages can enhance a text’s symbolism, develop its characters, and progress the plot. Warren Rochelle writes of *The Dispossessed*, for example, the “novel is a work of rhetoric, as Le Guin juxtaposes, through Shevek’s journey, two societies [Anarres and Urras] with opposing philosophies. She admits its didacticism.” Indeed, Le Guin laments her didacticism, wryly observing, “the sound of axes being ground is occasionally audible.” However, Le Guin’s axes create a straightforward style that David Porter argues invites the “Reader to think politically.” The *Dispossessed’s* political didacticism slows down the reading experience, but Le Guin encourages her Reader to ponder and to meander, complementing the slowing influence of the novel’s didacticism with textual techniques that open the text outward.

**How to Open a Text**

An author could open her text up to the Reader’s engagement using any number of techniques. Le Guin relies on ambiguity and strategic gaps. These techniques encourage the

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20 Wilson, “Le Guin Straddles Genres.”
22 Le Guin, “Science Fiction and Mrs. Brown,” 129.
Reader to help to construct the text, employing an active reading experience, but Le Guin does not leave the Reader without any guideposts. The Reader learns to strike a balance between closing the gaps and making peace with uncertainty. Although Le Guin includes uncertainty throughout the novel, the technique appears most clearly at the minute level. Within sentences, Le Guin uses a trope, asyndeton, to encourage the Reader to supply the relationships between terms, phrases, and clauses. The connecting that the Reader learns at the level of the sentence scales to the entire novel, as s/he spans the ambiguities and gaps in her or his own mind.

**Ambiguities and Gaps**

Le Guin claims to intend to create gaps and ambiguities for her Reader to negotiate. She says, “If you give them enough background/context, they can fill in the gaps.”24 The gaps invite the Reader to help to construct the text. *The Dispossessed*’s exposition and storytelling persuade indirectly, through the story and its characters. Fiction opens the text up to interpretation and engages the Reader in creative work alongside the author.

To discourage her Reader from straying too far afield, Le Guin couches the gaps in *The Dispossessed* in atmosphere and exposition. Too much description or commentary from an author dictates instead of inviting and engaging the Reader, however, and Le Guin refuses to tell the Reader how to read. She writes, “I have and want no control over my readers, except, of course, the sway of the stories themselves.”25 She further claims to aim to “leave the reader free to decide what [her] work means, that’s the real art; it makes the work

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Exhaustion she risks, however, by coupling her exposition with frequent
gaps and ambiguity. If spanning those gaps makes the Reader work too much, s/he might
quit reading altogether. Opening the text to active engagement, without overwhelming the
Reader, requires exquisite balance.

Some critics think Le Guin strikes the balance well. Suvin, for example, judges the
ambiguities dynamic and shifting. For example, Shevek muses, “there were many questions
he never did ask on Urras.” In context, he means he did not ask the Urrasti how they
sanitize their water, but the statement provides the Reader a glimpse of regret and a
foreboding dramatic irony that suggests Shevek’s regret might encompass much more than
his ignorance of their water treatment methods. The Reader decides what meaning to apply
to this statement. Too many different possible meanings could confuse and overwhelm the
Reader, as Rafail Nudelman points out. On the other hand, although including ambiguities
risks losing the Reader completely, including the gaps opens the text up, promises to engage
the Reader in an active reading experience, employing the cognitive estrangement of science
fiction.

Those critics who disparage the gaps miss the possibilities that ambiguity provides to
the Reader. The text thrusts the Reader into confusion and uncertainty, and it occasionally
contradicts itself. Criticizing these inconsistencies, critics such as Samuel Delany pounce on
the textual gaps. But even Delany, Le Guin’s harshest critic, interprets those textual gaps
positively. He argues, “as Quine has observed, ‘No two of us learn our language alike . . .’

28 Darko Suvin, “Parables of De-Alienation: Le Guin’s Widdershins Dance” in Science Fiction Studies:
Science Fiction Series (Boston: Gregg, 1975), 301.
29 Delany, “To Read The Dispossessed.”
Perhaps the signs we take as flaws signify merely discrepancies in the reader’s and the writer’s learning.”\textsuperscript{30} Delany continues, challenging, “who is to say that the extensional lacunae are not intentional elements of the novelistic totality?”\textsuperscript{31} Regardless of Le Guin’s intent, these gaps in the text rhetorically function to provide a space for the Reader to engage with the ideas and characters in the novel. \textit{The Dispossessed} constantly shifts the ground, creating uncertainty and asking the Reader to provide the relationships and connections between ideas, even at the level of the sentence.

\textit{Asyndeton}

Le Guin’s \textit{The Dispossessed} involves the Reader in a connecting process at all levels. At the sentence level, Le Guin uses asyndeton, a trope that omits connectives. Richard Lanham, in \textit{A Handlist of Rhetorical Terms}, defines asyndeton as the “omission of conjunctions between words, phrases, or clauses.”\textsuperscript{32} In a typical sentence, conjunctions indicate relationships between words, phrases, and clauses. “Because,” for example, joins terms or clauses in a cause–effect relationship. “And” stacks terms one upon another additively, and “but” and “however” tell a reader that the expected connection will reverse or qualify the first claim. Conjunctions coach readers about how to connect ideas. These relational cues disappear from the reading experience when an author employs asyndeton.

Le Guin incorporates asyndeton extensively, teaching her Reader to question connective relationships, starting at the sentence level. The uncertain relationships between terms and clauses heightens the text’s ambiguity, repeatedly opening \textit{The Dispossessed} up to

\textsuperscript{30} Delany, “To Read \textit{The Dispossessed},” ellipses in original.
\textsuperscript{31} Delany, “To Read \textit{The Dispossessed}.”
\textsuperscript{32} Lanham, \textit{Handlist of Rhetorical Terms}, 25.
Reader participation. For example, in the phrase “acres of luxuries, acres of excrement,” Le Guin does not specify the relationship between luxuries and excrement.\textsuperscript{33} If we add a coordinating conjunction, the phrase would read “acres of luxuries and acres of excrement,” specifying two separate, discrete nouns, additively listed. “Acres of luxuries, hence acres of excrement” argues that excrement results from luxury. Without a conjunction, as it reads in the text, the Reader supplies his or her own connection. Le Guin uses this structure repeatedly, tasking the Reader with determining the relationships. Many instances of asyndeton proceed as the luxuries and excrement example does, leaving the Reader to consult the novel’s context to suss out the relationship between the terms. Using asyndeton to create a series of appositives, essentially offering the Reader a series of synonyms, Le Guin trains the Reader to build new relationships, sentence by sentence.

Appositives constructed with asyndeton ask the Reader to connect terms analogically. The analogies create arguments that move the politics of the novel forward. In the following example, Le Guin uses asyndeton, as appositives, three times to discourage the Reader from closing the text and to encourage her/him to revel in the fluctuating nature of the novel:

Fulfillment, Shevek thought, is a function of time. The search for pleasure is circular, repetitive, atemporal. The variety seeking of the spectator, the thrill hunter, the sexually promiscuous, always ends in the same place. It has an end. It comes to the end and has to start over. It is not a journey and return, but a closed cycle, a locked room, a cell.\textsuperscript{34}

This example includes three instances of asyndeton: “circular, repetitive, atemporal,” “the spectator, the thrill hunter, the sexually promiscuous,” and “a closed cycle, a locked room, a

\textsuperscript{33} Le Guin, \textit{The Dispossessed}, 132.
\textsuperscript{34} Le Guin, \textit{The Dispossessed}, 335.
cell.”35 The first set (“circular, repetitive, atemporal”) combines with the third set (“a closed cycle, a locked room, a cell”) to contend that closure equals imprisonment, even if the repetitive tasks thrill or titillate. In the second example, Le Guin analogizes the pleasures gained from scopophilia, adventure, and sex to argue that engaging in any activity, even a pleasurable one, to excess can create a prison. The asyndeton in this passage brings the Reader into the text, suggesting that s/he, too, should resist closure to avoid imprisonment. Thus, Le Guin intimates how the Reader should handle the text’s opening gestures. She, through the text, asks the Reader to revel in complexity, process, flux.

Fluctuating the possible meanings between phrases with asyndeton, Le Guin increases the story’s complexity and complicates the reading experience. Active reading, facilitated by asyndeton, opens the text up, introduces contradictions that elude easy answers, and constitutes relationships based on input from the Reader. The Reader could revisit the text every five years and come away with a different reading. The text refuses to resolve, much as the anarchist society on Anarres refuses to settle and as interpersonal relationships change over time. The text places the Reader in a state of flux. One might experience shifting foundations in an anarchist society or an interpersonal relationship, and Le Guin models this continual process in *The Dispossessed*’s reading experience. The experience teaches the Reader to create new relationships and to practice dealing with uncertainty. The gaps in the text, at best, perform and reinforce *The Dispossessed*’s anarchism. At worst, the textual gaps could swallow the Reader up in a process of endless interpretation, an atemporal prison. To prevent infinite interpretation, Le Guin couples the use of free-ranging ambiguity with a spiral structure and iconicity that rein in the Reader.

Corralling Meaning with Structure

If an author leaves a text too open to interpretation, readers might miss the ideas the text privileges. To constrain the Reader subject position, the author needs to construct some fences. A resistive reader might jump the fence, but the corral circles the interpretations most central to the novel’s argument. Le Guin builds her corral with a spiraling textual structure that brings the Reader back to the centers of her arguments repeatedly. She builds her fence using iconicity, a linguistic structure that unites the form of the novel with its socio-political content.

The spiral structures, best described as a spinning ice skater, turn the Reader back to the text’s central points, over and over. Repeating symbols, such as prisons, walls, light, and rocks help to teach Le Guin’s Reader how to navigate the spirals. To help to stabilize the spinning Reader, Le Guin unites the spiral structure with iconic connections between the text’s form and content. The content oscillates at the level of the book by matching form with the content and furthering the disorienting reading experience that reinforces the text’s ambiguity. The Reader and Shevek both seek to overcome alienation and to realize harmony, at the level of the character. Shevek seeks harmony with his society, and Le Guin shows the Reader integrated relationships between Shevek’s setting and society, for example. He serves as a liminal figure to show the Reader how an indirect orbit can eventually achieve balance. The novel balances content and form at the level of the sentence, as well, starting in the book’s front matter and proceeding through conjunctions, alliteration, and constitution of characters. As the Reader integrates all of these levels of iconicity, s/he learns to integrate and balance the shifting, fluctuating parts of the text, mirroring Shevek’s efforts to integrate and to balance the parts of his world.
Spinning Structure

Although critics disagree about what the spirals in *The Dispossessed* mean, almost all mention the novel’s circling structure.\(^{36}\) Donald Theall identifies resonance between Shevek’s unification of the two temporal theories (“Simultaneity” and “Sequency”) and the novel’s larger “social and ethical questions.”\(^{37}\) David Porter agrees, adding that the spiral mirrors Shevek’s journeys.\(^{38}\) Rafail Nudelman attributes the novel’s spiral structure to its Taoism, seeing in each spiral the proverbial single grain of sand containing the entire universe.\(^{39}\) Even Delany, who writes a scathing critique, acknowledges, “what works is the way in which the discussion of the conflicting ‘Sequency’ and ‘Simultaneity’ theories of time reflect the macrostructure of the novel itself, with its ordered, pendulating chapters, crossing time and space which is, by semantic extension, the goal of Shevek’s theory.”\(^{40}\) All of these critics, no matter their specific reading, agree that the book’s content and spiral structure reinforce one another.

Suvin devotes the most attention to Le Guin’s spiral technique, tracking it through large swaths of her work. He describes her as “one of the most consciously analogical or parabolic writers around.”\(^{41}\) Analogy and repeated comparisons do appear in *The Dispossessed*, but this novel exhibits a structure more complex than analogy alone. To depict this structure,


\(^{38}\) Porter, “Politics of Le Guin’s Opus,” 276.

\(^{39}\) Nudelman, “Structure of Le Guin’s S.F.” 245.

\(^{40}\) Delany, “To Read *The Dispossessed*.”

Suvin suggests a “falcon circling to a swoop,” in a narrowing, centripetal spiral. The falcon image comes close to capturing the novel’s complexity. Each storyline shares Shevek, a center around which the text’s spirals can circle. Le Guin uses the spirals to balance many different lines of inquiry, including, Suvin identifies, “temporal, physical, political, cosmic, ethical, historical, and personal” elements, advancing through “Shevek, his physics, and the binary planetary sociopolitic and psychology.” Le Guin structures *The Dispossessed* to present new systems and theories at multiple levels, reinforcing her central arguments using repetition and analogy, thereby encouraging her Reader to engage in an active reading experience by tracing repeating symbols and navigating the spiral structures.

The novel’s structure contains more complexity than a single spiral, however. The spiral, a phenomenon that orbits a single center repeatedly, implies a linearity, a clear endpoint. *The Dispossessed* does unite lines with circles, but Le Guin pursues multiple lines and circles, manifesting multiple spirals. Some of the spirals center around Shevek’s politics, whereas others develop other characters or establish the political setting. Suvin, too, comes to reject the spiral to describe the novel’s structure. Instead, he proposes:

> The synthesis of linear, sequential progress and cyclical, simultaneous fullness of being into spiral simulsequentialist dialectics is balanced only in the way a master skater or a hovering falcon is — in permanent revolution and evolution, which fails as soon as it is arrested. And it is always a left-hand skate or swoop, a counter-clock helix; a widdershins dance that goes against the dominant and alienated received ideas of our civilization.

The widdershins dance of a twirling skater captures the complexity of an organic, fluctuating system that contains many spirals. Some of the spirals connect, just as a skater might pair an axle with a toe loop. Others pirouette alone. Each spin centers around a balance point, and a

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skater might use that balance point more than once. But each rotation — and each reading — occurs on a slightly different bit of ice, facilitated by a thin skin of contemplative water.

The twirling spirals fluctuate as the skater renews his points of balance at the end of each jump, turn, and sit spin. Balanced by repeating symbols, the Reader too skates through the twists and turns of scenes, chapters, and the novel on a film of fluid. Table 2.1 summarizes some of these skating spirals.

Table 2.1: Spiral Structures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Characters</th>
<th>Nature of the Spiral</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>Shevek</td>
<td>Main character, root of the plot spirals overall</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Couple</td>
<td>Shevek–Takver</td>
<td>Romantic partners, orbit one another</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family</td>
<td>Shevek, Takver, Pilun, Sadik, perh</td>
<td>All four cardinal people orbit one another, Bedap peripherally as part of this family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syndicates &amp; Communities</td>
<td>Syndicate of Initiative, social</td>
<td>Collective that Shevek, Takver, and Bedap form to challenge the PDC (administration);</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>groups, other work syndicates</td>
<td>their peer groups, workplaces, and formal affiliations all structure their stories and lives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cities and Towns</td>
<td>Abbenay, Northsetting</td>
<td>Different towns on Anarres, mirror one another’s structure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rebel Societies</td>
<td>Odonians</td>
<td>Followers of Laia Odo’s philosophy on Anarres and Urrasti rebels, follow similar paths</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inter-planetary</td>
<td>Anarres-Urras (Cetians)</td>
<td>Two planet system, orbit one another and a shared star (Tau Ceti)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inter-national</td>
<td>A-Io, Thu, and Benbili (on Urras)</td>
<td>Three Urrasti nations, allegorically similar to the first, second, and third worlds, all spiraling with the Reader’s Cold War world</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Temporal</td>
<td>“Sequency” and “Simultaneity”</td>
<td>Temporal theories (one linear and one circular) that Shevek works to integrate throughout his lifetime</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inter-spatial</td>
<td>Hainish Cycle/Ekumen</td>
<td>An intergalactic universe, setting for a number of Le Guin’s novels, history repeating itself</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time-Space</td>
<td>Integration</td>
<td>Shevek’s life work and its application (ansible) enables transcendence of space through temporal integration and instantaneous communication</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Shevek intersects with all of the spirals that structure *The Dispossessed*, ranging from his day-to-day life to the highest levels of abstract, theoretical physics. Le Guin uses the individual, Shevek, and his relationships (as a couple, family, community, town, and rebel society) to spin stories upon stories. His stories relate him outward to the planet, the inter-planetary system, multiple nations, international systems, the interspatial universe, and, most abstractly, to theoretical physics through temporal theories and his temporal-spatial integration.

Most of Shevek’s interactions reverberate on several of these levels. A seemingly minor description might encompass political theory, societal norms, relationships, and physical description. For example, Shevek and Takver, reunited after a four-year separation, hug one another. The scene reads, simply:

> The brighter light in the room was behind her. He could not see well enough for a moment to be sure it was Takver. She stood facing him. She reached out, as if to push him away or to take hold of him, an uncertain, unfinished gesture. He took her hand, and then they held each other, they came together and stood holding each other on the unreliable earth.\(^{45}\)

The earth in Chakar, where they meet, literally does not provide stability; earthquakes happen frequently. The long separation Takver and Shevek have suffered, the uncertainty of their anarchist society, and the constant change that typifies their lives also mean in Le Guin’s phrase, “unreliable earth,” however. Their relationship provides them some stability, finishing Takver’s gesture.

Shevek and the members of his family form a small universe of orbiting bodies. On a much larger scale, the planets, Urras and Anarres, mutually orbit, just as Shevek, Takver, Sadik, Pilun, and Bedap orbit each other. All the points, relatively fixed within themselves, move, constantly adjusting to those around them. The Reader, relatively fixed within herself

or himself, can find a way to balance all of the novel’s fluctuating points, despite Le Guin’s efforts to transform solid ground into a slippery ice rink of uncertainty. Slipping and sliding along the icy spiral paths, the Reader’s experience resembles the changing relationships and politics Shevek navigates.

Le Guin teaches the Reader to follow the novel’s spiral structure by using smaller spirals in the larger sculpture, such as iterative symbols. These symbols might function simply, as with Le Guin’s use of light to symbolize hope, or complexly, as with her use of prisons, walls, and a rock in flight. Each example helps her to constitute the novel’s spiral structure and teaches the Reader how to connect the points along a spiral in the larger argument.

Le Guin utilizes a handful of these simple symbols. Light coincides with Shevek’s moments of hope and connection with others. Connecting to others first appears on page twenty-seven, with Shevek as an infant in an Anarresti nursery. Sitting in a square of sunlight, Shevek is crowded out by another child, prompting him to push the other child away, protesting, “Mine sun!” The nursery attendant sets him outside the sunlight and corrects, “Nothing is yours. It is to use. It is to share. If you will not share it, you cannot use it.” Shevek harbors an intense desire to bask in light from his infancy onward, and the Reader learns from this early scene to watch for Shevek’s encounters with light. The light appears repeatedly, as detailed in Table 2.2, and it coincides with Shevek’s moments of hope and interpersonal connection, political and social harmony, and intellectual success.

Throughout *The Dispossessed*, light stands in for Shevek’s hopes: to connect to other people, to change the world, and to achieve harmony. The Reader learns to read hope into

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moments that include light and to see how those moments connect throughout Shevek’s life. By the end of the novel, the increasing levels of light help to indicate Shevek’s rising hopes. Hoping to meet the revolutionaries on Urras, Shevek flees the university that has hosted him. He finds himself in the dark of the city, but once he has a lead, a storekeeper who can guide him to the rebellious group, Le Guin provides him with uneven light. That light grows in strength as he draws near to the rebel leader, who Le Guin describes as sharing Shevek’s “luminous” eyes. The light continues to crescendo until Shevek finds himself beneath the blazing sun, squinting at its strength, during the parade and demonstration on Urras, where he speaks to the gathered revolutionaries. The light disappears from this scene when the Ioti police squash the uprising and Shevek flees, hiding in a basement with a dying man. The intensity of Shevek’s despair parallels his anger and frustration from childhood. Once again, he has been set outside of the light, bringing Shevek and the Reader full circle, connecting points along the symbolic spiral of his life.

Although light consistently symbolizes hope, connection, and harmony in *The Dispossessed*, Le Guin invests more complexity in some of the other guiding symbols. Prisons, for example, recur throughout, constituting a spiral that asks the Reader to connect many forms of prison. Through the repeating symbol of the prison, in its various forms, as detailed in Table 2.3, the Reader practices how to connect pieces of the larger spiral structure.

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page No.</th>
<th>Nature of the Light</th>
<th>Significance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>Connection</td>
<td>Sunlight story, as a child, links the warmth from their sun (Tau Ceti) to the family and interpersonal connection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51</td>
<td>Connection</td>
<td>First sexual partner (Beshun) approaches him in the light of a cookfire, emerging from the “darkness”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>320-322</td>
<td>Connection</td>
<td>Shevek and Takver’s reunion after a four-year separation creates a “flood of sunlight” that overcomes the dark surrounding them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>368</td>
<td>Connection</td>
<td>Luminous when he smiles, amused by the Urrasti thinking money would motivate him to visit and share ideas with them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>365</td>
<td>Connection</td>
<td>Bedap sees Shevek in a new “light” when he learns about Shevek and Rulag’s relationship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60</td>
<td>Connection</td>
<td>Light eyes, about to talk at length about his ideas about how people connect to one another through shared pain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>369-371</td>
<td>Connection</td>
<td>Sadik, scared and threatened, in a “weak light,” she and Shevek walk through soft pools of light in the dark, then see bright lights riddled by shadows of fear, return to Takver-Shevek’s room and its light, dark equates alienation and light connection and relationship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>112</td>
<td>Connection and Hope</td>
<td>Shevek walks “light on the earth,” meaning he is not connected to others as he’s absorbed by his work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33-35</td>
<td>Lack of Hope</td>
<td>Prison (literally) is a space without light/alienated and exiled from the light</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>120</td>
<td>Harmony</td>
<td>Sadik’s birth bashes him in light, a moment that parallels his intellectual discovery, a moment of balance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>280-281</td>
<td>Harmony</td>
<td>Moment of intellectual revelation, “like a child running out into the sunlight”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>385</td>
<td>Harmony</td>
<td>Garden on the Hainish ship Darenant balances light and dark</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31</td>
<td>Hope</td>
<td>Light accompanies the realization of his lifelong goal (unmaking walls) in his dream (a sleeping dream, not a goal dream)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>57, 60</td>
<td>Hope</td>
<td>Pleasure of discovery makes him radiant, his eyes alight</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>190</td>
<td>Hope</td>
<td>Light cooler, lots of shadows, as he struggles with his work’s fate and difficulty publishing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>382</td>
<td>Hope</td>
<td>Shevek escapes the University and sees reflected light</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>108</td>
<td>Hope</td>
<td>Light-eyed as a boy, sees hope and ways of being the others do not perceive, flashes of brilliance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>282</td>
<td>Hope</td>
<td>His eyes light up as the moon wanes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>387</td>
<td>Hope</td>
<td>Returning home, empty-handed, Shevek’s arrival coincides with the sunrise on his planet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>349</td>
<td>Hope</td>
<td>After Shevek talks with Ambassador Keng, he looks out the window, “light filling his eyes” as he feels hopeful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>360</td>
<td>Hope</td>
<td>Takver and Shevek arrive in Abbenay, the central city, for the first time, hopeful, and their room is full of light</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>299-301</td>
<td>Hope</td>
<td>At the resistance parade, Shevek notes that the full sunlight (299) is so bright that it makes him squint (301)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>290-293</td>
<td>Hope and Connection</td>
<td>Shevek goes to the Urras slums seeking the revolutionaries, where there is not any light (290), then uneven light (293). Once he has a lead, and as he draws close to the leader (Tuio Maedda), he sees a weak light in the hall (293), which culminates in a man with “luminous eyes” (293)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2.3: Prison in *The Dispossessed*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page Number</th>
<th>Nature of Prison</th>
<th>Significance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Limits</td>
<td>Anarres as prison because disconnected from other planets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>193</td>
<td>Limits</td>
<td>Prison begins with walls and disconnection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>170</td>
<td>Limits</td>
<td>Prison contrasted with refuge or asylum, based on freedom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>297</td>
<td>Limits</td>
<td>Shevek seeks to open prison doors (both metaphoric and physical) by writing about his ideas with the revolutionaries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>273</td>
<td>Limits</td>
<td>Jail/locked in at university, first realizes his limits on Urras</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>202</td>
<td>Literal</td>
<td>Shevek has hope because he hears that Benbili revolutionaries, held as prisoners, are granted amnesty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Physical</td>
<td>His room aboard the <em>Mindful</em>, the spaceship he takes to Urras</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11-12</td>
<td>Physical</td>
<td>Locked doors on the spaceship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35-41</td>
<td>Physical</td>
<td>The prison game Shevek and other boys play</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>88</td>
<td>Physical</td>
<td>Physical building (Fort Drio) on Urras</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>314</td>
<td>Physical</td>
<td>Laia Odo held in prison (Fort Drio), historically</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>375</td>
<td>Physical</td>
<td>University as prison, fellow physicist Pac holds the keys to the campus and to Shevek’s room</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>279</td>
<td>Physical</td>
<td>His room at the university as his prison cell</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>245</td>
<td>Physical</td>
<td>Jail, literally a building serving to contain people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Physical</td>
<td>Small room aboard the ship still, but also unmaking walls/undoing limits and realizing freedom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>382</td>
<td>Physical</td>
<td>Escapes the university on Urras</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>294</td>
<td>Physical, Property, and Limits</td>
<td>University as jail, all jails if ideas are private property</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>139</td>
<td>Property</td>
<td>Keeping ideas as property constructs a prison</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>303</td>
<td>Property and Limits</td>
<td>Locks create private property, Shevek breaks a physical lock to seek refuge after the resistance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>228-229</td>
<td>Property and Limits</td>
<td>Freedom as being without property, jailed by possessing (part of his drunken rant at Vea’s party)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>206</td>
<td>Property and Limits</td>
<td>A-lo as prison that limits people through property, contemplating escape from the university and from Urras</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>335</td>
<td>Static</td>
<td>A locked room/cell, generally anything arrested and unchanging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>332</td>
<td>Static</td>
<td>Seeks to unbuild walls and prisons, to get out of a closed cycle and to reintroduce change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>280</td>
<td>Static</td>
<td>Certainty as a prison, lacking flux and renewal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>138</td>
<td>Static</td>
<td>Seeks to unmake prison/exile by reintroducing change</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The novel’s spinning structure asks the Reader to lay the abstract over the material. Both material and symbolic prisons enable Le Guin to train the Reader how to navigate a larger spiral. The spiral, containing at least thirty occurrences, contains both physical prisons and symbolic “prisons” that limit action. The symbolic prisons (listed in Table 2.4) range from alienation to arrested processes.

### Table 2.4: Spiral Structure through Prison Symbolism

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character</th>
<th>Shevek (Symbolic)</th>
<th>Prison of alienation/separated from society by his genius</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Scheme</td>
<td>Prison Game (Literal)</td>
<td>Boys play at “prison” but learn more about limits than the physical containment of a prison</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plot Line</td>
<td>Societies (Symbolic)</td>
<td>Societal norms as political and intellectual prisons, convention confines the individual mind</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter</td>
<td>Life's Journey (Symbolic)</td>
<td>Prisons of childhood (no freedom to act but free from adult responsibilities) contrasts with prisons of adulthood (freedom to act but no freedom from responsibility)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content</td>
<td>Anarchism (Literal and Symbolic)</td>
<td>Society that does not stop, arresting it leads to political imprisonment (symbolic) of new ideas and ways of being</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Novel</td>
<td>Reading Experience (Meta)</td>
<td>Uncurl spirals/integrate the levels, lets the Reader “unlock” the structure and argument of the prison motif</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These symbolic forms of prison contribute points that teach the Reader to look for the symbol in multiple forms, thereby complicating a simple spiral. The complex spiral models, and helps to constitute, the novel’s larger structure, helping the Reader learn how to connect points, in addition to advancing the argument.

Le Guin uses prisons extensively in *The Dispossessed*, but she opens her novel with an accompanying image: the wall. The first line of the book reads: “There was a wall.” Walls, the Reader learns on page one, matter for this story. Le Guin starts this spiral immediately and returns to it repeatedly, as detailed in Table 2.5.
Table 2.5: Walls in *The Dispossessed*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page No.</th>
<th>Nature of the Wall</th>
<th>Significance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>All</td>
<td>First line, describing wall around the landing pad for spaceships on Anarres</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>384, 386</td>
<td>All</td>
<td>Shevek invites Ketho (the Hain) to walk through the wall with him, polysemous here as physical wall but also all of the other meanings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33</td>
<td>Dream</td>
<td>Shevek dreams of unmaking the wall, shifting its foundations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>153</td>
<td>Dream and Limits</td>
<td>About Takver, they walk toward the horizon, afraid of the wall’s limit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>125</td>
<td>Emotional</td>
<td>Foot of the wall, alienated from his mother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>190-120</td>
<td>Intellectual</td>
<td>“Simultaneity” as a cornerstone to the wall</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Limits</td>
<td>Shevek notices the ship doctor cannot think outside of the box, his ideas are all walled in by his expectations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>378</td>
<td>Limits</td>
<td>He’s stuck at work, walled in by limits on his work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>263</td>
<td>Limits</td>
<td>Limits placed on ideas by trying to “own” them, Shevek blithely disregards these limits and walks through their walls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>332</td>
<td>Limits</td>
<td>Shevek wants to unbuild walls with the Syndicate of Initiative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>278</td>
<td>Limits</td>
<td>Terrans described as “intellectual imperialists” who wall off their ideas and limit their ability to grow through discussion with others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>161</td>
<td>Limits</td>
<td>Stuck at work, discouraged about not serving a function and increasing alienation from society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>138</td>
<td>Limits</td>
<td>Wants to bring the walls down, reintroduce change on Anarres</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>80</td>
<td>Limits and Political</td>
<td>Pae refuses to tell him anything about other nations, tries to limit his political knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>229</td>
<td>Limits and Political</td>
<td>Drunken rant at Vea’s party, he perceives the wall, the limits, in the eyes of the Urrasti and their desire for control and property</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>89</td>
<td>Limits and Political</td>
<td>Unmaking the walls to end alienation and exile</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>368-369</td>
<td>Limits, Political, Intellectual</td>
<td>Shevek asked to publish through the Physics Institute, an attempt to tame him, leads Takver to conclude the walls are down (the limits on publishing) but Bedap counters that there are walls behind walls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>75</td>
<td>Limits and Relational</td>
<td>Shevek’s fondest wish is unmaking the wall and creating an open exchange of ideas, creating connections and opening up ideas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>280-281</td>
<td>Limits, Dream</td>
<td>Wall comes down when he’s integrated the two temporal theories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Physical</td>
<td>Locked into his room, notes that being locked in and out is the same act and serves the same purpose</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>337</td>
<td>Physical</td>
<td>Walls of the Terran embassy, “long-standing”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>193</td>
<td>Physical and Limits</td>
<td>Walls as the start of building a prison</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>256</td>
<td>Physical and Limits</td>
<td>Walls create private property, possessions as limiting freedom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>384</td>
<td>Political</td>
<td>Shevek decides preventing the Hain (Ketho) from visiting would constitute building walls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>164-165</td>
<td>Political</td>
<td>Invisible power structure, the literati and tyranny of the majority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>258</td>
<td>Political</td>
<td>Society’s need versus personal need, role of sacrifice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>133, 346</td>
<td>Political and Relational</td>
<td>Society behind a wall, limited in its connections to others and unable to progress because lacking input from others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>331</td>
<td>Relational</td>
<td>Tirin cannot build walls, does not have limits but freedom alienates him from society</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Like the prison symbolism in *The Dispossessed*, walls function both literally and symbolically. The symbolic versions permeate Shevek’s life, animating his central goal: unmaking walls. The wall, in both its physical and symbolic manifestations, sets up Shevek’s integrative function. The first passage lays these terms out. Le Guin writes:

> There was a wall. It did not look important. It was built of uncut rocks roughly mortared. An adult could look right over it, and even a child could climb it. Where it crossed the road-way, instead of having a gate it degenerated into mere geometry, a line, an idea of boundary. It was important. For seven generations there had been nothing in the world more important than that wall. Like all walls it was ambiguous, two-faced. What was inside it and what was outside it depended upon which side of it you were on.\(^48\)

The wall she describes in this passage exists, materially, but it functions symbolically. With the very first image the Reader encounters, Le Guin instructs her/him to delve deeper, to consider ambiguity, and to understand the image on multiple levels.

Those multiple levels help the Reader to comprehend one of the less obvious, but more important, symbols in the novel. *The Dispossessed* includes a version of Zeno’s dichotomy of motion paradox, translated to a rock in motion.\(^49\) This rock returns to Shevek’s thoughts throughout his life, as detailed in Table 2.6, and he must solve this puzzle in order to integrate the two temporal theories.

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Table 2.6: The Rock in *The Dispossessed*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page Number</th>
<th>Nature of the Rock</th>
<th>Significance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Theoretical Paradox</td>
<td>He has been hit by a thrown rock, marvels at the paradox</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Metaphorical</td>
<td>The planet as “barren stone” as he leaves Anarres, and he is the rock, stuck at mid-point</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28-29</td>
<td>Theoretical Paradox</td>
<td>The full story about the rock, intervals, and the impossibility of motion (Zeno’s dichotomy of motion paradox)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33</td>
<td>All Integrations</td>
<td>The cornerstone to the wall in his dream, “both unity and plurality” is the rock</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>179</td>
<td>Interpersonal Integration</td>
<td>As Shevek and Takver work out the nature of their relationship, Shevek tosses rocks down into the river, creating “a ceaseless harmony composed of disharmonies” and finding a balance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>225-226</td>
<td>Theoretical Paradox</td>
<td>Linked to the temporal theories: the rock can never hit the tree if time is “Sequency” but already has if it is “Simultaneity”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>280</td>
<td>Theoretical Integration</td>
<td>Interval, first introduced by the rock story, proves the key to integrating the two temporal theories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>380</td>
<td>Societal Integration</td>
<td>Returning home, Anarres as the rock: “moving yet not moving, thrown by what hand, timelessly circling, creating time”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Shevek first explains this paradox, using a rock in motion, as an eight-year-old:

> I was thinking, let’s say you throw a rock at something. At a tree. You throw it, and it goes through the air and hits the tree. Right? But it can’t. Because – can I have the slate? . . . To get from you to the tree, the rock has to be halfway in between you and the tree, doesn’t it. And then it has to be halfway between halfway and the tree. And then it has to be halfway between that and the tree. It doesn’t matter how far it’s gone, there’s always a place, only it’s a time really, that’s halfway between the last place it was and the tree – . . . it always has to go half of the way that’s left to go . . . It can’t reach the tree.⁵⁰

Until Shevek discovers how the rock can hit the tree, he cannot solve how time can move both linearly and circularly simultaneously. Like those solving Zeno’s paradox, Shevek seeks to understand how two objects can ever actually touch each other. The paradox, first framed in physics, contains Shevek’s metaphysical questions. The rock comes to stand in for all objects arrested in flight, any object or idea stuck in between. Trying to move the two points together, to help the tree and the rock to unite, Shevek must consider intervals, orbits, and

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connections. He, like Le Guin’s Reader, learns to connect points along the spiral story of his life.

With each of these iterative symbols, the Reader learns to skate along the novel’s spinning structure. The novel’s never-ending flux conditions the Reader to cope with constant change. Furthermore, Le Guin crafts a complex, open structure that avoids incoherence by tethering the novel’s structure to its content. In addition to these recurring symbols and the novel’s larger spinning structure, Le Guin incorporates iconicity to connect *The Dispossessed’s* form with its content.

**Iconicity**

An icon visually resembles the item or idea it represents. James Dean embodied youthful rebellion. The Microsoft Word icon looks like a document. The Christian cross resembles the instrument of Christ’s sacrifice. In short, a symbol resembling what it represents functions iconically. The symbol alone does not suffice. The Tennessee Titans logo symbolizes the team but does not qualify as an icon. The team’s mascot does not look like the flaming T in their logo. On the other hand, the Miami Dolphins, the Philadelphia Eagles, and the Denver Broncos each use an iconic symbol as their logo: the dolphin, eagle, and bronco all resemble the actual mascots. The symbol must resemble what it represents to be classified as iconic.

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51 Leff and Sachs, “Iconicity and the Rhetorical Text.”
52 These icons are already similes. A simile transfers or emphasizes a quality through comparison. These teams suggest that they can maneuver as well as a dolphin in water, an eagle in air, or a bronco on the range.
Rhetorical critic and theorist Michael Leff extends the concept of the icon, arguing that iconicity occurs when a text’s form and content coincide. Iconicity as a rhetorical technique simultaneously describes, performs, and constitutes. Drawing upon linguists Jonathan Culler, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, and Geoffrey Leech and Michael Short, Leff and Andrew Sachs define iconicity as “a representational mark (signifier) bearing an actual resemblance to whatever it signifies.”53 They extend the linguistic conversation, suggesting that iconicity changes when it considers a relationship that exceeds a single word and its definition. They write, “above the level of the word, discursive form often enacts representational content.”54 Leff and Sachs summarize Leech and Short’s (admittedly incomplete) typography of iconicity, identifying three types of iconicity:

1. chronological in which textual time imitates real time (the unfolding order of events in a text follows from and maps itself onto our temporal experience in the real world);
2. psychological in which syntactic order imitates psychological experience (the configuration of language in a text embodies states of mind and feeling that occur in real world experience);
3. juxtapositional in which placement of elements in a text imitates our general conception of psychological or locative relatedness (words that are grouped close together in sentences suggest connections and relations attached to other levels of experience).55

Leff and Sachs refuse the form-content dichotomy, urging critics to interpret texts by considering the relationships between form and content. Readers experience both texts’ style and content, and to understand how a text shapes the reading experience, critics need to account for both elements. Iconicity provides rhetorical critics with a method for exploring how a rhetor unites form with content to change an audience’s experience.

54 Leff and Sachs, “Iconicity and the Rhetorical Text,” 258.
55 Leech and Short, Style in Fiction, 233-234; Leff and Sachs, “Iconicity and the Rhetorical Text,” 258.
Iconicity functions rhetorically to stabilize Le Guin’s Reader in the fluctuating text of *The Dispossessed* by connecting the form with the content. The connection provided by iconicity enables Le Guin to open the text up to the Reader’s involvement, granting him or her freedom, without evacuating all coherence or shared meaning. Iconicity facilitates a connective reading experience without closing the text to other possible connections or readings.

Scaling from the minute to the grand, the Reader connects points in the novel’s spinning structure, accepts Le Guin’s invitation to participate, and introduces coherence by connecting points within the spirals and between the form and the content. In short, iconicity serves as a lubricant, the film of water, between the moving parts of the text, the Reader’s skates (his/her reading apparatus), and the ice of the novel. The elegance of her application of this technique in *The Dispossessed* has earned Le Guin critical admiration for her balance.\(^{56}\) To strike this balance, she utilizes iconicity on at least four different levels: at the level of the sentence, the character, the book, and the reading experience.

**The Level of the Sentence**

In *The Dispossessed*, Le Guin describes, performs, and constitutes the novel’s iconic content through the basic unit of the sentence. Sentences structure most prose, but Le Guin’s sentences introduce the Reader to iconicity. From her front matter to her coordinating conjunctions, Le Guin uses description to demonstrate the novel’s political content. The content emerges performatively, helping the Reader to experience the

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\(^{56}\) See, for example: Nudelman, “Structure of Le Guin’s S.F.” 246. Many critics do not use the jargon or explore the concept in depth, but almost every critical essay about the novel mentions the text’s connection of form with content.
characters’ feelings. Those feelings help to forge the core of the characters and the societies that Le Guin imagines. All three elements combined serve to stabilize the Reader’s experience by uniting content with form.

Le Guin introduces the Reader to the iconic connection between sentences and the content in the novel’s front matter. Le Guin dedicates *The Dispossessed* to her life partner, Charles Le Guin. She does not dedicate the book to “my partner” or “my husband,” but to “the partner,” foregoing possessive and gendered pronouns, just as the characters in the story do. Le Guin begins as she means to go on, with form and content reinforcing one another. The Reader starts experiencing the iconic form before s/he reaches the novel’s first page.

As she proceeds, Le Guin uses proliferating coordinating conjunctions to connect even minor content with the form of her sentences in *The Dispossessed*. For example, Shevek describes Urras as a “box, a package, with all the beautiful wrapping of blue sky and meadows and forests and great cities.” In this sentence, Le Guin turns to polysyndeton, the opposite of asyndeton, placing a conjunction between every clause. The wrappings stack one upon the other with the repeated use of “and.” The Reader gains a vivid vision of a beribboned box. Shevek does not encounter such elaborate packaging on Anarres, and his wonder enhances the description to advance the Reader’s appreciation of the pastoral beauty Urras offers. Le Guin draws simple iconic connections, such as this one, frequently in the novel. This iconic work does not advance the novel’s substance much, but the links between the form and content help to stabilize the Reader’s reading experience. They also help to

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teach the Reader to form associations, a skill that can help him or her to understand more complex iconic connections.

Many instances of iconicity at the sentence level do advance the novel’s argument. In the following example, from early in Shevek’s career, the text turns back in on itself to move the story forward. Shevek tells Takver,

About the time sex began to go sour on me, so did the work. Increasingly. Three years without getting anywhere. Sterility. Sterility on all sides. As far as the eye can see the infertile desert lies in the pitiless glare of the merciless sun, a lifeless, trackless, feckless, fuckless waste strewn with the bones of luckless wayfarers.

Shevek emphasizes how his life had grown increasingly barren. The description draws on the suffix “-less” seven times within a single sentence. More and more “-less” appears as the Reader reads. Combined with this passage’s asyndeton, Le Guin’s use of this suffix (-less) iconically performs how much less Shevek has in his life, turning him, and the Reader, in circles of loss. The sentence shows the Reader how the circular temporal theory (“Simultaneity”) plays out at the sentence level. By iconically demonstrating this theoretical content through the sentence’s form, Le Guin provides the Reader a paradoxical, iconic statement that decreases what Shevek has in his life by piling on more and more words.

In a similar fashion, Le Guin performs the novel’s content with alliteration and rhythmic devices. Repeating sounds phonetically circle, even as the text moves forward, iconically performing Shevek’s ultimate intellectual achievement, the integration of the temporal theories of “Sequency” and “Simultaneity.” For instance, Bunub, a neighbor who envies Shevek and Takver their room, visits Shevek. Irritated by this person, he thinks how

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59 Le Guin, *The Dispossessed*, 179, ellipses in original. The Anarresti do not use the word “fuck.” The closest they come is a word that signifies rape. Does Shevek regret that his intellectual, personal, and societal lives do not contain rape? It seems unlikely. This appears to be the implied author speaking, playing with language by maximizing the rhyme with luck and the alliterative “ck” to create rhythm in this sentence.
she “explained, explained,” and eight lines later, “complained, complained.” The repetition, rhyme, and asyndeton constitute the character’s repetitive and monotonous personality for the Reader, who also experiences monotony through the repeated sounds and rhythms. The rhyme reinforces the text’s “Simultaneity,” sending the Reader’s glance circularly between sentences in the text even as s/he moves forward sequentially through reading the novel.

The iconicity that Le Guin includes in *The Dispossessed* constitutes the society on Anarres, performs that which it describes, and crafts characters. A seemingly minor sentence, introducing a new character, reads: “Sabul was a small, stocky, slovenly man of forty.” The sentence, too, is small and stocky. It uses small, short words. The only word exceeding two syllables, “slovenly,” denotes messiness, with excess hanging out. The word’s extra syllable reinforces its content. The sentence’s short stature and its blocky, succinct words and slovenly adverb reinforce the description of this character, performing his shortness, and constituting Sabul concretely and succinctly. The sentence and words iconically reinforce the content, and the content in turn reinforces the style.

In short, Le Guin uses iconicity to describe, perform, and constitute the reading experience for each sentence. She drafts long sentences to overwhelm the Reader in the same way that Shevek feels overwhelmed. For example, when the splendor or excess of his surroundings strike Shevek, the Reader encounters splendid and excessive description. When Shevek encounters Urras’s shopping street, a meandering pair of sentences iconically describe, perform, and constitute the street’s overstocked nature and leave Shevek (and the Reader) reeling:

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60 Le Guin, *The Dispossessed*, 259.
Coats, dresses, gowns, robes, trousers, breeches, shirts, blouses, hats, shoes, stockings, scarves, shawls, vests, capes, umbrellas, clothes to wear while sleeping, while swimming, while playing games, while at an afternoon party, while at an evening party, while at a party in the country, while traveling, while at the theater, while riding horses, gardening, receiving guests, boating, dining, hunting—all different, all in hundreds of different cuts, styles, colors, textures, materials. Perfumes, clocks, lamps, statues, cosmetics, candles, pictures, cameras, games, vases, sofas, kettles, puzzles, pillows, dolls, colanders, hassocks, jewels, carpets, toothpicks, calendars, a baby’s teething rattle of platinum with a handle of rock crystal, an electrical machine to sharpen pencils, a wristwatch with diamond numerals; figurines and souvenirs and kickshaws and mementos and gewgaws and bric-a-brac, everything either useless to begin with or ornamented so as to disguise its use; acres of luxuries, acres of excrement.  

This twisty sentence, a litany of items that sends the Reader up one side of the street and down the other, leaves the Reader reading and reading and reading, much as Shevek looks and looks and looks. The sentences’ length does not enhance substance, however. The lack of meaning for each word increases as the description moves from more necessary items (such as clothing) to items so bizarre they defy description: “bric-a-brac,” “kickshaws” and “gewgaws.” The iconic sentences describe the street, but they simultaneously perform its over-stocked excess. They constitute an overwhelming reading experience that connects the Reader’s experience to Shevek’s.

*The Level of the Character*

Shevek unites the foreground of the novel, its plot and characters, to its background, its setting and politics. For example, Le Guin uses the weather to show the Reader Shevek’s emotional state. In a similar fashion, the nation’s health matches Shevek’s physical health. In both examples, Le Guin teaches the Reader to use Shevek to connect the environment and background iconically with the foreground. Le Guin extends this technique by having

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Shevek and Takver stand in for the two temporal theories, producing a desire in the Reader, like Shevek’s, to integrate two into one. The Reader, and Shevek, both desire integration between the characters, the temporal theories, Shevek and his society, and the societies in the universe. These desires and connections demonstrate how iconicity functions at the level of the character.

Le Guin uses the weather to reveal Shevek’s emotional state, thereby connecting the character to his world iconically. For example, when Shevek stalls intellectually, his work failing to move forward and his reviewers critiquing him harshly, Le Guin emphasizes the matching stagnation of the weather: “It was midwinter. The dry wind blew day after day; the ground was frozen. Everything seemed to have come to a halt, an uneasy halt, waiting for rain, for birth.” Shevek needs a breakthrough as urgently as Anarres needs spring to thaw the frozen ground. Both Shevek and his world require a more fluid foundation to move forward.

In contrast, when Shevek’s life moves forward smoothly, the setting calms. Scenes that unite Shevek and Takver soften the weather, setting a scene without a cloud in the sky, reflecting their tranquility. However, during times that their society’s syndicalism requires them to work far apart from one another, Shevek encounters turbulent, unsettled dust storms. After they reunite, the planet recovers from an extended drought and famine, growing lush and radiant, like their love. Throughout The Dispossessed, Le Guin synchronizes the weather with Shevek’s emotional state. She, and the Reader, work to fasten the

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64 Le Guin, The Dispossessed, 237. Takver carries their first child at this time, so she, too, awaits birth.
65 The Odonians base their entire society on Laia Odo, who is repeatedly compared to mud in “The Day Before the Revolution.”
66 Le Guin, The Dispossessed, 178.
67 Le Guin, The Dispossessed, 189.
foreground (the character) to the background (the setting) with an iconic relationship that advances the content through a coordinating conduit.

Another conduit, Shevek’s physical state, also asks the Reader to unite the character and the political content. For example, encountering corruption in his utopian society, Shevek contracts pneumonia. Fevered, he rushes to the hospital, accompanied by a feverish storm descending upon the city. The city and Shevek both, the narrator observes, have come “out from the shelter of the porch into the wind.” In this scene, all of the plot elements coalesce to show the Reader how Shevek’s political disillusionment sickens him, both figuratively and literally. His body, his emotions, and his society all suffer from a fevered illness, and the elements reinforce one another. The iconicity limits the Reader’s possible interpretations. The content and characters reinforce a central, uniting point in the scene: corruption makes us sick.

Le Guin draws heavily on iconicity at this level in order to reinforce many of the novel’s central points. She labors to produce a desire in her Reader, matching Shevek’s desire, for integration and balance. Takver and Shevek’s balanced, integrated interpersonal relationship previews Shevek’s eventual integration of two temporal theories and his matching attempts to unite societies. To model these integrations, Le Guin uses Takver and Shevek to symbolize the two temporal theories (“Sequency” and “Simultaneity”).

Takver symbolizes the linear temporal theory, “Sequency.” The narrator tells the Reader that, unlike Shevek, “Takver saw no such obscure concatenations of effect/cause/effect.” Instead, Takver sees time as “a road laid out. You walked ahead, and

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She moves the story forward linearly; her tale proceeds from past to future, sequentially, as depicted in Figure 2.1.

![Diagram of linear time progression from Past to Future](image)

**Figure 2.1:** “Sequency” View of Time

Takver’s work, cultivating and studying generations of fish, also moves forward linearly, generation by generation. Her connection to “Sequency” matches her genealogical work, iconically, as naturally as Shevek’s “Simultaneity” theory represents his work in theoretical physics.

Shevek serves as a cyclic character, symbolizing the circular temporal theory, “Simultaneity,” depicted in Figure 2.2, with his simultaneous journeys outward and inward.

![Diagram of cyclical time progression](image)

**Figure 2.2:** “Simultaneity” View of Time

The Reader will not discover a straightforward denouement to Shevek’s journeys, which circle upon one another. The narrator tells the Reader that Shevek “would always be one for whom the return was as important as the voyage out.”

Indeed, *The Dispossessed* concludes as he heads home, concluding one journey (to Urras) by resuming another (his life on Anarres). Having integrated the two temporal theories, Shevek faces reconnecting with his family and

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with Anarresti society, recommencing his previous itinerant journey as he concludes another. Shevek’s thoughts and the narrator’s observations collaboratively overlap the journeys, spinning them together as he circles the same points repeatedly.

In the process, Shevek leaps hurdles and creates himself, only to face the same hurdle again, in another form, as he rounds the track. The narrator confirms, “everything that had happened to him was part of what was happening to him now.” Shevek realizes this, stating, “You can go home again, the General Temporal Theory asserts, so long as you understand that home is a place where you have never been.” Shevek uses the statement’s apparent contradiction to create an argument using juxtaposition. He repeats this argument again, remembering that the “Settlers of Anarres had turned their backs on the Old World and its past, opted for the future only. But as surely as the future became the past, the past became the future.” The past becomes the future, and the future becomes the past, creating a tidy circle. The Reader follows Shevek on all of his journeys, learning how “Simultaneity” functions through a cyclical, iconic reading experience.

The Reader, like Shevek, unites “Simultaneity” with “Sequency” to create a unified reading experience. Time oscillates in The Dispossessed, moving forward only by moving both linearly and circularly. Neither “Sequency” nor “Simultaneity” explains the novel’s time fully. The past and the future co-constitute each other. Le Guin produces a desire to integrate the two theories by juxtaposing them. The Reader needs to change the line and the circle into a chiasmus. Chiasmus, derived from the Greek letter Chi (Χ), creates an X by swapping two terms (see Figure 2.3). Lanham defines chiasmus as “the ABBA pattern of mirror inversion,”

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73 Le Guin, The Dispossessed, 280.
74 Le Guin, The Dispossessed, 184.
75 Le Guin, The Dispossessed, 55, italics in original.
76 Le Guin, The Dispossessed, 89.
that “sets up a natural internal dynamic that draws the parts closer together, as if the second
element wanted to flip over and back over.”

Figure 2.3: Chiasmus
Chiasmus changes the relationship between terms. John F. Kennedy’s famous call to action,
“Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country,” for
example, trades the first clause’s subject (your country) with its object (you) in the second
clause. This phrasing changes the agent acting, constructing a complex argument succinctly.
In short, chiasmus changes relationships. Shevek changes the relationship between the two
temporal theories when he integrates them, linking past and future inextricably.

Le Guin encourages the Reader to integrate the two theories, as well, and to avoid
viewing time through only one of the theories. “Sequency” (Figure 2.1) only accounts for a
single, linear arrow, failing to account for how the entire system works. The circularity of
“Simultaneity” (Figure 2.2), however, misses some of the direct relationships between the
pieces. The Reader needs to construct a chiasmus (Figure 2.3) to understand each theory’s
limitations and to experience Shevek’s desire to integrate the two theories. He can realize his
lifelong intellectual achievement, integrating “Sequency” and “Simultaneity” into an inclusive

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77 Lanham, *Handlist of Rhetorical Terms*, 33.
temporal theory, only by looking backward, to Ainetain (an allegorical reference to Albert Einstein), and forward, to his return to his home planet. Shevek laughs about the Urrasti designing the ansible, a real-time communication device, explaining they are building the effect “before I have provided the cause.”78 He needs to see both the past and the future to understand his purpose and his world, just as the Reader does.

The need to integrate terms repeats in the novel’s politics. Shevek tells the Urrasti, “You are our history. We are perhaps your future.”79 They need to find a way, in the present, to meet and to talk. Shevek provides the present when he integrates the temporal theories. The Reader, too, provides the present. In The Dispossessed, the societies never integrate. They oscillate past one another, failing to find a balance point, as hard as Shevek tries to serve as a fulcrum. The Reader faces a similar challenge, and the iconic connection Le Guin draws between Shevek and the temporal theories scales to the Reader’s experience of the book.

The Level of the Book

In chapter one of The Dispossessed, Le Guin introduces Shevek as he prepares to depart from Anarres, his home planet, to visit Urras, the neighboring planet. The story of his journey to Urras resumes in the third chapter. The second chapter introduces a second story, starting in Shevek’s early childhood. Every even-numbered chapter details Shevek’s life on Anarres and each odd-numbered chapter tells about his trip to Urras. The novel’s final chapter returns the Reader to the point where the first chapter begins: Shevek about to leave Anarres to visit Urras.

78 Le Guin, The Dispossessed, 276 and 288.
79 Le Guin, The Dispossessed, 75.
These journeys iconically encompass the temporal theories. “Simultaneity” creates a circle and “Sequency” an arrow. Le Guin twines the two together in the text’s structure, plots, and characters, who all advance by orbiting one another. The chapters also orbit one another. In other words, the form of The Dispossessed reinforces its content, iconically. Le Guin’s integration of the two theories into the reading experience could be characterized in the same way the narrator describes Takver’s Inhabitation of Time sculpture: “oval wires in completely interwoven ellipsoid orbits about the common center, never quite meeting, never entirely parting.” The two ellipses dance and spin. In her sculpture, Takver integrates fluctuation with stability to achieve balance. In a similar fashion, the Reader encounters Shevek’s journeys in parallel oscillating chapters but reads in a full circle by the end of the novel. If s/he succeeds in integrating the parts of the story, like Shevek does with the theories, then the Reader, too, can achieve balance in a fluctuating story.

The story in The Dispossessed moves sequentially forward within each story line, but folds back in upon itself when united into the novel’s larger structure. Thus, Le Guin iconically performs, in form, the temporal theories that Shevek studies in the book’s content: ‘Sequency,’ moving forward linearly, and ‘Simultaneity,’ moving in layering circles. Delany, who critiques Le Guin ruthlessly for other parts of her story, lauds the novel’s structure, explaining that she provides an “aesthetic form that reflects the technological underpinnings of her tale.” Reading The Dispossessed, the Reader learns to connect the content, disorienting politics, with the disorienting experience of reading the novel.

The Dispossessed models the Reader’s disorienting experience with its political forms. Delany regrets, “if, however, [Le Guin] had found a form that reflected the socio-economic

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80 Le Guin, The Dispossessed, 368.
81 Delany, “To Read The Dispossessed.”
underpinnings, which are even more central to it, she would have written one of the great novels of the past three hundred years.” The political form Le Guin chooses may not imitate the socio-economic underpinnings Delany opines, but it does reflect *The Dispossessed’s* socio-political content. For example, the individualist Urras parallels Shevek’s solitary journey whereas his time on the communalist Anarres contains his interpersonal and social experiences. His experiences in both settings disorient and disillusion him, connecting the Reader to his experiences and journeys through their shared confusion.

Writing Shevek’s physical journey into odd-numbered chapters and his metaphorical journey into even-numbered ones, Le Guin thrusts the Reader into the middle of the story on page one. Starting in the middle, Le Guin disrupts a linear story. She troubles time, order, and memory, forcing the Reader to remember content across chapters, to sort out a timeline, and to juxtapose experiences that occur throughout Shevek’s life. Both Shevek and the Reader step outside of the linear flow of time and head into new, unfamiliar territory. Epitomizing the temporal theories, the novel’s structure requires the Reader to tack back and forth between form and content, creating an iconic reading experience. Shevek must integrate the temporal theories to complete his life’s work and to conclude his tale. Dealing with disorientation requires the Reader and the character both to balance “Sequency” (forward in 1, 3, 5, and 2, 4, 6) and “Simultaneity” (1, 2, 3, 4) to make sense of Shevek’s entire story.

82 Delany, “To Read *The Dispossessed.*”
**The Level of the Reading Experience**

Le Guin produces an iconic connection to Shevek and his struggles, leaving the Reader looking to the character to learn how to find balance and harmony in an oscillating, uncertain world. Shevek models the integration that the Reader needs to perform, analogizing his experiences in the novel with the reading experience. Shevek seeks harmony and unity. The alienation and separation he experiences drive him to integrate disharmonious elements, but creating harmony proves difficult for him. He succeeds in integrating some elements, however, effectively creating balance points that provide him with succor and stability. The Reader’s experience, seeking points of balance, mirrors Shevek’s quest for unity.

Shevek seeks unity and harmony in a disharmonious world in multiple ways, by integrating alienated elements. Table 2.7 summarizes some of the integrations Shevek works to achieve throughout his lifetime.

Table 2.7: Shevek’s Integrations and Unifications

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Connecting this…</th>
<th>With this…</th>
<th>Does it work?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Sequency” (linear time)</td>
<td>“Simultaneity” (circular time)</td>
<td>Yes. His major intellectual epiphany.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shevek (as a youth)</td>
<td>Nation/Society on Anarres</td>
<td>Unknown. A lifelong quest left open-ended at the novel’s conclusion.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shevek</td>
<td>Takver</td>
<td>Yes, after their second meeting, as adults.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desire to connect with others</td>
<td>Desire to pursue individual goals</td>
<td>Yes, but takes his entire lifetime to figure out how.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shevek</td>
<td>Intellectual Peers</td>
<td>Yes, after he goes to Urras and reads the ‘Terrans’ physics.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anarres</td>
<td>Urras</td>
<td>No, but he returns to Anarres with a Hain (Ketho), promising the possibility of inter-galactic unity.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The disharmony Shevek experiences throughout his life separates him from others, his ideas from one another, and his society from other societies. Thus, he seeks to integrate the two temporal theories, to unite himself (and later his family) with his society, to balance the contradicting parts of and desires in himself, to connect to his intellectual peers, and to initiate communication between the Anarresti and Urrasti societies. For the most part, he succeeds, promising the Reader the possibility of finding balance, as well.

Beginning in his childhood, Shevek’s genius, curiosity, and commitment to anarchism set him apart. Most people on Anarres do not experience such disharmony with their society. Frustrated by their society, Bedap (one of Shevek and Takver’s best friends), Shevek, and Takver form a syndicate (the Syndicate of Initiative) that further alienates them from their peers. This alienation hurts Bedap, Takver, and Shevek and Takver’s children (Sadik and Pilun). For Shevek, however, Bedap muses, “it was no bother to him, he had always been alone.”83 Bedap is mistaken; Shevek responds to the pain of his lifelong alienation by spending his life’s journey on Anarres seeking unity: with Takver, with Bedap, with Rulag (his mother), with the physicists, and with his society. His trip to Urras aims to unite the societies. Shevek, alienated by his genius, wants to belong, but he does not compromise who he is or conform. Instead, he works to change his world to create harmony.

Trying to find harmony with his society, a collection of anarchist individuals, proves a complicated task for Shevek. As young adults, Shevek and Takver, about to realize mutual harmony in a budding romantic partnership, encounter a mountain stream. Shevek describes the stream, unwittingly foreshadowing their relationship, as a “ceaseless harmony composed

of disharmonies. To duplicate the harmony of disharmonies native to the stream, Shevek must find his function within the societal whole. For most of his life, his society views his genius as a status-quo-upsetting curiosity. Frustrated in his quests to connect to his society and to integrate his temporal theories, Shevek muses that “he could go no farther, yet he must move,” encapsulating the seeming futility of the challenge he faces. Shevek serves as model for the frustration likely to face a Reader trying to change her/his world. His attempts to integrate and unify suggest ways that his society, his relationships, and his work could achieve balance, but he struggles to accomplish the integrations.

Imagining ways to integrate multiple ways of being and doing, Shevek seeks balance points. He reflects upon his work, for example, noting that, “in the region of the unprovable, or even the disprovable, lay the only chance for breaking out of the circle and going ahead.” In *The Dispossessed*, Le Guin takes advantage of the rhetorical potential of her spinning structure to provide the Reader with multiple points of integration, balance, and hope. Shevek repeatedly finds, and performs, balance in the in-between, modeling the integration the Reader needs to perform to create balance in the reading experience. For example, early in the book, Shevek laments that he has come “up against the wall” with his work, stuck on one side and unable to understand the other side. Later in the novel, Shevek dreams of a wall that separates him from home, and he believes that he must unmake the political wall separating the societies to find balance. Shevek eventually learns he needs to locate “the cornerstone” that balances both “unity and plurality,” both the static and fluid

for each integration. He does not find balance in his work until he can see both sides of the wall. The Reader, too, needs to see each storyline to its end before s/he can grasp the whole.

Shevek models integration repeatedly, iconically reinforcing that integration, although difficult, can be achieved. For example, he integrates himself with others in his society, with scientists on Urras, and with his friends and family to achieve unity (Figure 2.4).

![Figure 2.4: Self, Other, Unity](image)

In each case, he combines a sequential, linear connection between the self and the other with a mutual, circular relationship that creates a unified system between the self and the other. In a more specific example of the same integration, Takver and Shevek use love to unify into a cohesive, familial system (Figure 2.5).

![Figure 2.5: Takver, Shevek, Love](image)

With each integration Shevek performs, each balance point he finds, Le Guin shows the Reader ways to create balance. Shevek serves as the central integrating cornerstone for the Reader. The Reader, too, uses Shevek to integrate the novel’s storylines and journeys (Figure
2.6) by reading sequentially (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, etc.), simultaneously (2, 4, 6, 8, etc.), and actively, connecting the spirals with iconic connections in content and form.

![Diagram of Even and Odd Chapters]

Figure 2.6: Even Chapters, Odd Chapters, the Novel

Circling Shevek, the Reader learns how to scale from words to sentences to chapters to characters and plot lines to the experience of reading *The Dispossessed*. The integrative experience teaches the Reader ways to create new relationships and to cope in an uncertain environment. Watching Shevek find his own points of balance, the Reader learns what it would mean to connect the novel’s politics to the real world. The Reader also practices the skills s/he would need to apply these tools successfully outside of the novel.

Both the Reader and Shevek try to find balance, being a drop amongst the whole, whole in oneself but part of the larger collective as well. Shevek experiences this balance during the parade of rebels on Urras. He explains:

> The singing of the front of the march, far away up the street, and of the endless crowds coming on behind, was put out of phase by the distance the sound must travel, so that the melody seemed always to be lagging and catching up with itself, like a canon, and all the parts of the song were being sung at one time, in the same moment, though each singer sang the tune as a line from beginning to end.  

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The singing of the rebels performs “Sequency” and “Simultaneity,” the integration Shevek makes with the temporal theories, the societies, and his own journeys. Throughout his journeys, Shevek discovers the unity of time only once he accepts his own (dis)unity with others. Until he makes peace with the flux and relativity in his life, Shevek cannot understand how to integrate all into one, preserving individual identity but crafting unity.

Shevek, as a character, navigates both his own and alien cultures to find his own wholeness, providing a model for the Reader, who attempts to integrate the parts of the novel into a coherent whole. The Reader learns that, like Shevek, s/he needs to identify centers that can hold, points that can balance without fixing or arresting fluctuation in order to achieve harmony.

Harmony promises to end the pain Shevek suffers because of his separation from others and the confusion the Reader experiences reading this novel. Le Guin’s intellectual style, which introduces distance rather than inviting identification, should weaken the Reader’s connection with Shevek, but instead it intensifies the connection through iconicity. The novel’s style helps the Reader to feel, to experience, Shevek’s alienation and his desperate desire for harmony and balance. Both its characters and ideas demonstrate the ambiguity that The Dispossessed’s subtitle, “An Ambiguous Utopia,” invokes. The text’s ambiguities and gaps encourage a slow reading experience, asking the Reader to pause and to contemplate. The prose feels heavy, weighing down the Reader, who grapples with the complexity of its ideas. The novel’s iconicity demands that the Reader craft connections,

between sentences, characters, settings, chapters, content, and the experience of reading the novel in order to realize harmony.

Conclusions and Implications

Le Guin strikes a balance in *The Dispossessed* between an open and a closed text. The text opens outward to the Reader, with uncertainty and flux characterizing the reading experience. The cognitive estrangement that drives speculative fiction simultaneously separates the Reader from the novel’s setting and encourages the Reader to seek answers to real-world problems in the fictional environment provided by the novel. Le Guin labors to open the text up to an active reading experience, training her Reader to look for connections, to participate in creating the argument, and to craft relationships.

To prevent the Reader from wandering endlessly, however, Le Guin closes the text, as well. Using a spiraling structure similar to a spinning skater, she turns the Reader back toward the text’s central points. Recurring symbols, such as prisons and walls, guide the Reader through these twists, keeping the text in motion as the Reader navigates the turns. Le Guin provides additional guidance to the Reader with iconicity. By uniting the form with the content and encouraging the Reader to do the same, she both confines the readings possible and reinforces an active reading experience. At the level of the sentence, character, novel, and reading experience, iconicity helps the Reader to understand the text’s political claims, to strike a balance between the text’s expanding and constricting forces, and to look for ways to apply the lessons learned in this cognitively estranged space to everyday life.
Le Guin skillfully matches the form to the content iconically to describe, perform, and constitute. She creates a position for the Reader that mirrors that of the character, connecting the sentence level iconicity to the level of the character and the level of the novel, scaling to the reading experience. The structure leads the Reader to move sequentially and simultaneously only to return to the beginning. Le Guin primes the Reader to seek ways the text can unite the reading experience with her or his life, at the level of minutiae, relationships with other people, and public politics.

Shevek serves as a liminal figure between anarchist philosophy and the Reader’s reality. Because the novel, as science fiction, cognitively estranges the Reader, socio-political experimentation occur in a space apart from the Reader’s own life. However, the experimentation and integration suggest ways that anarchism and feminism could provide harmony, balance, and freedom. Shevek seeks unity in disunity to find harmony, modeling ways that the Reader could achieve similar, Taoist ideals.
Chapter 3
Re-Paving the Path to Utopia:

The Taoist Social Organism

Utopianism in *The Dispossessed* appears in many forms, but Le Guin paves each path to utopia with Taoist ideals, particularly process and balance. To advance these ideals, she depends on paradox, contradiction, and symbolic allegory to construct her utopian philosophy. The novel uses a philosophical version of Taoism (in contrast with its religious form). The Anarresti overtly reject structured religion, but they embrace a spiritual connection with the cosmos. They pursue utopian ideals and try to circumvent dystopian downfalls, like the Reader’s own society. Journeying through the societies on Anarres and Urras, Shevek moves from defining utopia on the basis of a physical environment to appreciating a socio-political environment informed by Taoist principles.

Like the characters in Dostoevsky’s *The Possessed/Demons*, Shevek comes to appreciate a society dispossessed of evil political theories. Those theories possess Dostoevsky’s characters fully, making them incarnations. Le Guin employs incarnation as well but more frequently she uses symbolic allegory to direct her Reader along the path to utopia. Guiding the way, Shevek becomes the messiah of a new world for both the Urrasti rebels and the Reader, leading them along a path constructed of philosophical Taoist ideals.

Taoism uses paradox and contradiction to highlight truths and options for ways to be in the world. Shevek’s way of being in the world provides a model for the Reader, demonstrating one path to anarcho-syndicalist utopia. That utopia, on Anarres, depends on
contradiction and paradoxes to reveal deeper, defining truths. Shevek discovers underlying truths in art, which teaches him about finding harmony in disharmony. He discovers that harmony appears in art that shares as well as art that destroys, but the two forms combine to show him, and by extension the Reader, how the universe intermingles seemingly contradictory terms. In addition to using contradiction, Le Guin draws upon the Taoist ideal of process. Flux and change serve as explicit ideals for the Anarresti anarchist society, leading them to fend off the threats of centralization, rigidity, and convention to maintain continual revolution. That constant revolution provides Shevek with stability, in private, and with a path toward discovering his essential function in the social organism.

Le Guin uses the organism as a metaphor for Anarresti society. Their society champions the organic, derides the mechanical, and positions each individual as a cell in the organism. For the organism to thrive, each person must identify the function that he or she can best serve. Wanting to serve his society, Shevek struggles throughout his life to identify his function and finally determines that his disharmony with society, leading to his alienation and expulsion from the organism, serves, paradoxically, to re-vivify his society’s revolutionary flux. Shevek, and the Reader, work to uncover new pathways, or tao, that can change their worlds, renew their societies, and help them to build utopia.

Walking the Path to Sociopolitical Utopia

Shevek’s society, the Anarresti, dismiss organized religion, opting for a loosely defined spiritual relationship to the cosmos. Their universe contains a socio-political utopia (Anarres) and an environmental utopia (Urras). Urras initially impresses Shevek, but he
comes to view it as hell, as the incarnation of absolute evil. Through incarnation and possession, Le Guin alludes to Dostoevsky’s *The Possessed*, or *Demons*. Dostoevsky’s novel incarnates characters with political theories, using the downfall of the characters to critique the politics. Although Le Guin also uses incarnation at times, she relies more on symbolic allegory to guide her Reader toward good and away from evil. She offers Shevek as a guide, as a messiah, to guide the way along the Taoist path.

**Religion and Spirituality**

In *The Dispossessed*, Le Guin contrasts spirituality, a connection to the cosmos, with organized religion.¹ On Urras, religion involves “churches, creeds,” and liturgy, and the Anarresti overtly dismiss this relationship to spirituality. Shevek describes religion as “barbaric,” “elaborate,” and “unnecessary,” much as he depicts Urrasti capitalism.² His analogy demonstrates his society’s derision for Urrasti ways of being, including their religious forms. One of the Anarresti physicists, Sabul, tries to direct Shevek away from studying ‘Simultaneity’ theory by describing the temporal theory as “superstitious-religious speculations.”³ In short, religion does not characterize the Anarresti relationships to the cosmos. Instead, they define spirituality, as Shevek puts it, as engaging in the “profoundest relationship man has with the cosmos,” construing it as one of the “natural capacities of the mind.”⁴ The mind and its relationship to the universe more broadly constitutes spirituality on

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¹ This fits with the Taoist influences on the novel, as well. Taoism offers two primary texts, one that leads to a spirituality and one that leads to an organized religion. Le Guin uses the *Tao Te Ching*, the text that informs spiritual Taoism.
Anarres, directing the Reader away from trappings and ceremonies to emphasize the relationship between the individual and the cosmos more generally.

These relationships help to construct what the Anarresti regard as eutopian paradise and dystopian hell. Anarres offers a socio-political eutopia. Every citizen has work, no one goes without food unless everyone does, and freedom and equality typify their civic relationships. These characteristics lead the Urrasti to refer to Anarres as Utopia. Indeed, they wish a person luck by saying “may you get reborn on Anarres.” Anarres cannot compete with Urras’s eutopian planetary environment, however.

When Shevek first arrives on Urras, its forest, animals, and abundance impress him. He loses this enchantment over time, learning how much the Urrasti emphasize property, status, hierarchy, the State, and weapons. Shevek observes that the Urrasti have “no freedom,” and he defines paradise as freedom of spirit. He expresses his disgust and his realization of the value of human eutopia at a party he attends. His tongue loosened by liquor, Shevek tells the Urrasti the “truth” about Anarres:

No. It is not wonderful. It is an ugly world. Not like this one. Anarres is all dusty and dry hills. All meager, all dry. And the people aren’t beautiful. They have big hands and feet, like me and the waiter there. But not big bellies. They get very dirty, and take baths together, nobody here does that. The towns are very small and dull, they are dreary. No palaces. Life is dull, and hard work. You can’t always have what you want, or even what you need, because there isn’t enough. You Urrasti have enough. Enough air, enough rain, grass, oceans, food, music, buildings, factories, machines, books, clothes, history. You are rich, you own. We are poor, we lack. You have, we do not have. Everything is beautiful here. Only not the faces.

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7 Le Guin, *The Dispossessed*, 295, 232, 244.
On Anarres nothing is beautiful, nothing but the faces. The other faces, the men and women. We have nothing but that, nothing but each other. Here you see the jewels, there you see the eyes. And in the eyes you see the splendor, the splendor of the human spirit. Because our men and women are free – possessing nothing, they are free. And you the possessors are possessed. You are all in jail. Each alone, solitary, with a heap of what he owns. You live in prison, die in prison. It is all I can see in your eyes – the wall, the wall!\textsuperscript{10}

The wall of possession shields Shevek’s access to the people on Urras, and he realizes the social and political aspects of eutopia matter more than the environmental. He concludes, “Paradise is for those who make Paradise.”\textsuperscript{11} Environmental paradise, on Urras, proves insufficient, Shevek decides, in the face of socio-political dystopia. At the end of the novel, he tells the Terran ambassador that he judges Urras hellacious. Shocked, the ambassador shares that Terra has a totalitarian government, by necessity, because they destroyed their planet, and she finds Urras “as close as any could [come] to Paradise.”\textsuperscript{12} Paradisiacal at first, Urras comes to signify hell, the place of absolute evil, for Shevek. During their adolescence, Shevek and several of his friends debate the definition of hell, each nominating places that the foreign word “hell” might signify. Takver suggests the “shit depot,” Desar votes for Urras, and another teen for the dusty southwest portion of Anarres during the summer. Shevek proposes a place of absolute evil, a definition he applies throughout his life. The negative connotation of the word informs the Anarresti characters’ use of hell to curse.\textsuperscript{13} Cursing poses a problem in Pravic (the Anarresti language). The narrator explains, “It is hard to swear when sex is not dirty and blasphemy does not exist.”\textsuperscript{14} For the Anarresti to blaspheme, they turn outside their language, telling the Reader that

\textsuperscript{10} Le Guin, \textit{The Dispossessed}, 228-229. This appears as a single paragraph in the text.
\textsuperscript{11} Le Guin, \textit{The Dispossessed}, 89.
\textsuperscript{12} Le Guin, \textit{The Dispossessed}, 347.
\textsuperscript{13} Le Guin, \textit{The Dispossessed}, 74, 266, 331.
\textsuperscript{14} Le Guin, \textit{The Dispossessed}, 258.
absolute evil resides on Urras. The Anarresti relate to evil only peripherally because evil, depending on possessions, appears only on the periphery of this world of dispossessed people.\textsuperscript{15}

Possession signifies on at least three levels in \textit{The Dispossessed}. Le Guin uses possession to indicate owning property, being inhabited by a devil or demon, and being overcome by feeling. Property possession, the most literal version, serves to contrast the anarcho-syndicalist Anarres with the capitalist Urras but it also provides Le Guin with a concrete vehicle to elucidate the symbolic forms of possession. When Shevek first encounters shopkeepers on Urras, he is shocked that their only relationship with their wares is “possession,” and he links this literal form of possession to the demonic form of possession, wryly observing, “They knew no relation but possession. They were possessed.”\textsuperscript{16} Takver compares property possession to demonic possession through pregnancy, commenting, “I think that’s why the old archaïsms used women as property. Why did the women let them? Because they were pregnant all the time — because they were already possessed, enslaved!”\textsuperscript{17} Possessed by hormones, by a foreign creature (the child), and by a drive to protect the child at all costs, Takver finds pregnancy as confining as her society finds material possessions. Shevek also feels possessed by his body. Reflecting upon his first adult sexual experience, he thinks, “His own body had, in its first outburst of adult sexual passion, possessed him indeed – and her.”\textsuperscript{18} Ecstasy separates the mind from the body for Shevek and his partner, Beshun. Giving in to their sexual desire, they lose themselves to their bodies and to one another. Their relationship, containing only sex, takes on propertarian

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{15} Le Guin, \textit{The Dispossessed}, 242.
\textsuperscript{16} Le Guin, \textit{The Dispossessed}, 75, 132.
\textsuperscript{17} Le Guin, \textit{The Dispossessed}, 332.
\textsuperscript{18} Le Guin, \textit{The Dispossessed}, 53.
\end{footnotesize}
characteristics – they take one another – and demonic characteristics, each possessed by the demon of lust and desire.¹⁹

Flipping these meanings of possession, becoming “the dispossessed,” in The Dispossessed might mean not owning material possessions. Losing possession might mean exorcising demons, or, at the very least, being freed from a confining relationship with another entity. That entity could include an overwhelming feeling, like lust, or it might indicate an idea. If the idea possesses a character to the point it fully constitutes the character, it becomes an incarnation, the literary technique driving Fyodor Dostoevsky’s novel, The Possessed, or Demons.

**Dostoevsky’s The Possessed, or Demons**

The text’s title, The Dispossessed, alludes to Fyodor Dostoevsky’s 1872 novel alternately translated as The Possessed, The Devils, and Demons (hereafter The Possessed). The inter-textuality between the two texts alters the relationship between the text and the Reader, depending on her/his familiarity with each text. Dostoevsky uses parable and allegory, as fully formed incarnations, to advance his political critique.²⁰ The nation (Russia), possessed by demons, requires an exorcism, leading to new relationships between the State, its apparati, and citizens. Although Le Guin’s allusions to Dostoevsky’s novel may only add depth for some readers, she uses a similar allegorical form, symbolic allegory, to guide her Reader

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¹⁹ Le Guin’s use of “propertarian” plays on and flips “proletarian.”
²⁰ Some of the events in The Possessed reference actual historical events. For instance, five members of the Society of National Retribution, founded by Mikhail Bakunin’s disciple Nechayev, killed one of their compatriots, and the event appears in The Possessed with few changes.
through *The Dispossessed* and through building new relationships and re-relating characters to one another and to the larger universes of the nation and the cosmos.

To demonstrate possible political paths to readers, in *The Possessed*, Dostoevsky uses allegory to critique political ideologies. He includes the right’s ability to deal with critiques leveled by the left, leftism, and idealism more generally, as well as specific political ideologies.²¹ He embodies each ideology in a character, and the flaws of each ideology unmake the character in a method revealing these flaws. In short, the devils and demons of political ideologies possess the characters. On a larger scale, the devils and demons of flawed ideology, embodied in the characters, possess Russia. Most of the characters in *The Possessed* incarnate forms of anarchism, in that they oppose the state, church, and other parts of the establishment, and Dostoevsky constructs most of them as revolutionaries and nihilists, as well. Questions about free will and the problem of evil animate *The Possessed*, further playing on the possession trope. In the end, Dostoevsky suggests that the desire for power characterizes ultimate evil, plaguing humanity with a desire to control, to possess, other people.

Literary critic Darko Suvin argues that Raskolnikov, the protagonist of Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*, sees that “all radicals recognized a distorted portrait of themselves.”²² Each struggling to find freedom, the characters in *The Possessed* often recognize these flawed portraits. For example, describing one of the other central characters, Shigalyov states, “My conclusion directly contradicts the original idea I start from. Starting from unlimited freedom, I conclude with unlimited despotism. I will add, however, that apart from my

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²² Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*, 249.
solution to the social formula, there is no other.” As the story proceeds, Pyotr
Verkhovensky performs the devolution into despotism that Shigalyov describes. Another
count, Stavrogin, plagued by ennui and ambivalence, personifies moral nihilism. He
observes, “it wasn’t simply that I had lost the feeling of good and evil, but that I felt there
was no such thing as good and evil (I liked that); that it was all a convention; that I could be
free of all convention; but that if I ever attained that freedom, I’d be lost.” Freedom eludes
all of Dostoevsky’s characters, possessed as they are by the flaws of their political ideologies.

Some of Le Guin’s characters follow Dostoevsky’s lead, incarnating a particular ideal
or flawed application of an idea. For example, one of the physicists on Anarres, Shevek’s
corrupt colleague Sabul, takes joy in hoarding knowledge and controlling access to the
scientists on Urras. He passes off others’ ideas as his own, defends office territory, and
accumulates possessions. Sabul is, at heart, a capitalist. Another character, Chifoilisk,
performatively critiques the threat to free speech in totalitarian (per)versions of communism.
Shevek meets Chifoilisk, a fellow physicist, on Urras. A loyal communist from the nation of
Thu, Chifoilisk tries to convince Shevek to leave the capitalist A-Io. He disappears the next
day. Pae, a loyal Ioti (from A-Io), intimates that the Thuvian State removed Chifoilisk. These
counters incarnate the philosophies of their nations, much like Dostoevsky’s characters.
Each character critiques the political philosophy by living it. They also lose Shevek in a way
that mirrors their philosophy: Chifoilisk shares too much and the State removes him and Pae
tries to own Shevek, prompting him to run away.

Some of Le Guin’s incarnations function profoundly in Shevek’s life, such as his
mother, Rulag, whose name alludes to the Russian gulag. The gulag administered Soviet

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labor camps and prisons, particularly for political prisoners, from 1930 to 1960. In contemporary society, the term refers more generally to prisons as well as “any place or political system in which the oppression and punishment of dissidents is institutionalized.”25 The parallel that Le Guin constructs between Rulag and the gulag paints a less-than-encouraging portrait of motherhood. Rulag serves as an oppressive, punishing force in Shevek’s life, a metaphorical prison warden who seeks to contain his dissidence and revolutionary behavior. She tries to dominate and punish him. When Shevek and Bedap go before the PDC (Production and Distribution Coordination, the administrative syndicate) to seek societal approval for Shevek to go to Urras, she articulately and adamantly opposes his trip. She stands in synecdochally for the ways in which his society rejects Shevek’s difference and dissidence. They seek to contain him; she seeks to contain him. She tries to close the distance between them as adults, but Shevek, hurt by what he perceives as her rejection in his youth, rejects her offer of friendship. In short, Rulag incarnates the gulag, embodying that which restrains and constrains Shevek, limiting his access to free expression and an open exchange of ideas with the Urrasti. She reminds Shevek of his difference and deviation from his society, serving as the socio-political mother (and, as his biological mother, doubling her maternal role), chiding and correcting him, and functioning as the State, in a land with no State, any time he seeks to defy the social conscience.

Le Guin constructs a full incarnation with Rulag, Chifoilisk, and Pac. However, most of the characters in The Dispossessed minimally perform the details of the political philosophy to which Le Guin alludes.26 A full incarnation of a philosophy overpowers the character,

26 Some characters merely allude to The Possessed. For example, Dostoevsky’s narrator is Govorov; one of Shevek’s mentors is Gvarab.
making the image and the theme equally complex. More frequently, Le Guin uses what Graham Hough classifies as symbolic allegory. Symbolic allegory presents a complex theme with a simple image.\textsuperscript{27} The people illustrate the theme and live it enough that they move beyond a naïve allegory, but the characters do not offer enough depth to overpower their underlying thematic purpose, which would classify them as incarnations in Hough’s scheme.

Science fiction scholar Donald F. Theall identifies some of the political functions characters play in \textit{The Dispossessed}, noting that Takver’s “awareness provides the critique of physical science necessary to come to terms with humanity. Tirin, as the artist, poses the challenge of creativity and of imagination to Shevek; Bedap, the propagandist-philosopher, shows the value of social awareness and social communication.”\textsuperscript{28} Thus, Tirin cannot function in a world that limits the imagination and his creativity and inspiration land him in an asylum. Bedap helps Shevek and Takver to establish the Syndicate of Initiative, publishing tracts to raise awareness of the emerging classism on Anarres. Although the characters provide political critique, as symbols they remain simple representations (except for Takver, whose complexity does not simply present her political function), unlike Dostoevsky’s incarnations.

In short, Dostoevsky uses incarnation to critique political theory. Le Guin incarnates some of her characters with political theory, but she incorporates more symbolic allegory in \textit{The Dispossessed}. Both authors use their characters to illuminate political theories, to demonstrate how nations possessed by the demons of political theories behave, and to suggest what does and does not create a socio-political paradise or hell.

\textsuperscript{27} Lanham, \textit{Handlist of Rhetorical Terms}, 5.
\textsuperscript{28} Theall, “Ambiguous Utopian Dialectics of Ursula K. Le Guin,” 293.
Shevek helps to pave the way to paradise for the Urrasti. On Urras, he serves as a messianic figure, as “the idea of anarchism, made flesh. Walking amongst us.” The harbinger of change, Shevek offers hope to the oppressed. Like them, he hails from humble beginnings and his austere lifestyle informs his wisdom and his passion for helping to make the world a better place. Like a messiah, he promises to fulfill a Urrasti prophecy that freedom will follow “one who comes before the millennium — a stranger, an outcast, an exile, bearing in empty hands the time to come.” Bearing a new way of being, for the Urrasti and for the Reader, Shevek models a new, dispossessed way of life. Dispossessing themselves, the Anarresti comprise symbolic allegories. Le Guin’s allegorical work complements the possessed, demonized incarnations in Dostoevsky’s *The Possessed*. With her allegory, and with Taoism, Le Guin changes the definition of utopia and the pathway to it.

**Taoism**

To pave the path to utopia, Le Guin offers the Reader Taoist principles, ideals, and story-telling techniques. She has translated (and published) one of the two primary Taoist texts, Lao Tzu’s *Tao Te Ching*. Throughout the verses, Lao Tzu encourages readers to find new ways (tao). The new ways that Le Guin advances in *The Dispossessed* present some of the ideals that Lao Tzu lays out, such as process and harmony. To realize these ideals, Le Guin uses one of the same story-telling techniques as Lao Tzu: paradox. With paradoxes, Le Guin shows the Reader how disharmony can produce harmony and how constant change can provide stability. To provide the Reader with a complete model of a balanced and stable

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system, Le Guin (reading through Kropotkin) turns to the natural world, comparing society to an organism. The organic model enables Le Guin to demonstrate how exiles on the edge of society, unmaking and challenging the norm, can serve the most central and patriotic roles in society. Constructing the utopian society on Anarres through paradox and flux, Le Guin offers the Reader a Taoist path.

**Taoism**

In *The Dispossessed*, Le Guin champions process and balance, for both her characters and her Reader, reflecting her familiarity with and commitment to Taoist philosophy.\(^3^1\) The Taoist philosophy guiding Le Guin draws from Lao Tzu’s *Tao Te Ching*. Lao Tzu’s text leads to a philosophical Taoism, more of a weltanschauung, than the religious practice of Taoism, derived primarily from the *Chuang Tzu*.\(^3^2\) Chad Hansen, writing for the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, differentiates between religious and philosophical Taoism, as well. The philosophical form, he explains, proceeds from a “mildly skeptical or relativist base,” and includes “pluralism, perspectivalism, skepticism, political equality and freedom.”\(^3^3\) In contrast, religious articulations of Taoism often intersect with Confucianism to posit a single, correct way of being, a single tao.\(^3^4\) Rejecting the one path of the religious form for her novel, Le Guin embraces Taoism as a philosophical standpoint with the potential for many paths.

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\(^3^1\) Rochelle, “Ursula K. Le Guin,” 410-412.
\(^3^2\) Le Guin admits she knows less about the religious tradition and suggests Burton Watson’s translation of the *Chuang Tzu* in Le Guin, “Chronicles of Earthsea: Q&A Transcript.”
\(^3^4\) Hansen, “Taoism.”
Tao (alternately anglicized as dao) translates as way, or guide. Philosophical Taoism does not advocate for one particular end, instead emphasizing process and means. Those means tend to include circuitous organization that depends on parables, stories, and poems more than overt argument. The indirect style of Lao Tzu’s verses reflects the Tao Te Ching’s anti-authoritarian content. Hansen notes that the “Rorschach” quality to Lao Tzu’s text has led to a wide variety of interpretations, ranging from a “sophisticated meta-ethical position rooted in analytic studies of language tending toward ethical skepticism and relativism at one end and ‘praising’ Daoism as an anti-logical, deliberately self-contradictory mysticism — a cultural rebuke of Western rationality — at the other.”

Whatever the interpretation, anarchists and Taoists make natural bedfellows. Le Guin observes, “pacifist anarchism and Lao-tzu have a lot in connection with each other, especially in the 20th century.”

Historically, political Taoism in China, Hansen explains, has opposed government and power-over, resisting, he notes, even “normal socialization in values.” Throughout the Tao Te Ching, Hansen continues, “advice is given that reverses conventional values,” a task that Lao Tzu accomplishes by “either rejecting the usual positive value term (benevolence, sages, morality, social activism) or motivating valuing the opposite (non-being, water, the female, the lower position etc.).” In short, Lao Tzu uses ambiguity and dialectic, based on paradoxes he builds through parables and verse, to advance his principles. Le Guin borrows his strategy, much as she applies his content.

Douglas Barbour provides an excellent in-depth analysis of Le Guin’s relationship with the Tao Te Ching. He views Taoism and feminism as the most influential bodies of

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35 Hansen, “Taoism.”
37 Hansen, “Taoism.”
38 Hansen, “Taoism.” Latin abbreviation in original.
thought informing Le Guin’s work.\textsuperscript{39} For example, balancing, and intertwining, seemingly dichotomous ideas (yin-yang) permeates \textit{The Dispossessed}. Barbour argues that Le Guin’s use of Taoism explains why “her characters’ strength lies not in their action but in their inaction.”\textsuperscript{40} Drawing upon this paradoxical textual form and Taoism’s transgressive political tradition, Le Guin encourages her Reader to resist the authority of the text, to engage actively with the novel, and to find new ways of being by untangling its paradoxes.

\textbf{Paradox}

Le Guin encountered Taoism early in her life, and she weaves its principles into many of her stories. With \textit{The Dispossessed}, in addition to introducing Taoist ideals, she employs paradox, much like the \textit{Tao Te Ching}, to advance her argument. Victoria Strauss observes,

\begin{quote}
It’s a book of opposites: a utopian novel that doesn’t flinch from exposing the flaws of its model society, a feminist-themed narrative with a male protagonist, a social commentary that presents communal cooperation as the truest human ideal, yet focuses on the inevitable separateness of the creative individual within such a structure.\textsuperscript{41}
\end{quote}

Much of the novel’s cultural critique turns on these conundrums and paradoxes. The paradoxes enable Le Guin to involve her Reader, who solves each paradox to learn its the lesson. Her arguments encourage the Reader to adopt a comic frame, considering the big picture, instead of a tragic frame focused on the individual. Transcending the individual to consider the entire system, the Reader can see, along with Shevek, situational and dramatic

\textsuperscript{39} Barbour, “Wholeness and Balance in the Hainish Novels.”
\textsuperscript{40} Heltzel, “Portland Trailblazer.”
\textsuperscript{41} Strauss, “Review of \textit{The Dispossessed}.”
Irony. The systemic viewpoint positions the Reader, along with Shevek, to discern possible ways to integrate and to balance each paradox’s contradictory terms.

Le Guin refuses to eliminate complexity from her utopian society, and she often uses contradiction to clarify her critique. For example, the character Laia Odo asserts, in her treatise *The Social Organism*: “to make a thief, make an owner, to create crime, create laws.” Laia attributes the problem (crime and theft) not to the individual (the person perpetrating crimes), but to a system of property and laws. By focusing the Reader’s attention on the systemic forces, Le Guin reframes how her characters understand crime, changing how the Reader might interpret criminal activity. If the Reader considers crime contextually, then she or he will discover the underlying, contributing factors in the text, seeing the individual action as an interaction of multiple elements rather than a singular incident. The novel teaches the Reader to assume a Taoist stance, to seek points of balance, and to see what each paradox reveals. To integrate the parts of the paradox and to discover a way to balance the elements in the larger system, the Reader, bereft of an interpretive line from the Author, has to consider each situation contextually. In other words, Le Guin trains her Reader to think rhetorically.

By considering the larger forces, the Reader learns to focus not on the single case but on the conditions that enable each instance. Each paradox coaches the Reader, encouraging her or him to adopt a comic frame. A tragic frame, Kenneth Burke explains, leads an audience to scapegoat the individual case, treating it as an exception. Comic framing, on the

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42 Le Guin, *The Dispossessed*, 139. Laia does not appear in *The Dispossessed*, but characters cite her work and quote her maxims.

other hand, considers how culpability depends on variables throughout the entire system. An expanded, systemic viewpoint helps the Reader to grasp the irony that drives many of *The Dispossessed*’s paradoxes. For example, one Urrasti character brags to Shevek: “We’ve outgrown the kind of barbarism that used to bring war into the heart of the high civilizations! The balance of power is kept by this kind of police action.”

Using police action, a form of barbarism, to prevent barbarism is ironic. The irony is not lost on Shevek, but Le Guin addresses her Reader, as well. The Reader in the 1970s, with the juxtaposition of the Vietnam War and the Kent State shooting fresh in her/his memory, would grasp how war and police action do not yield peace better than the Urrasti character can. The characters on Urras appear foolish, endorsing barbaric action to deny their own barbarism, to Shevek and to the Reader. Their larger perspective allows them to see more than the Urrasti, giving them the advantage of dramatic irony. In addition, they appreciate the situational irony, recognizing the futility of using violent means to maintain peace. Desiring peace, Shevek’s people learned lessons the Urrasti have not yet learned. Reading from recent experience, the Reader can connect the text to political reality. Le Guin thus uses paradox, situational irony, and dramatic irony to encourage the Reader to transfer the text’s lessons to the world outside the bounds of the book. *The Dispossessed* also asks the Reader to identify with Shevek, by sharing his judgments and integrating the Reader’s perspective with Shevek’s viewpoints.

Those viewpoints, and their Taoist underpinnings, require the Reader to adopt a systemic stance. Le Guin presents Shevek’s views using a paradoxical story-telling technique.

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45 Le Guin uses the terms “Anarresti” and “Urrasti” to describe the inhabitants of each planet, starting early in the novel. See Le Guin, *The Dispossessed*, 8.
The paradoxes, such as appreciating harmony in disharmonious art, locating stability in flux and change, and learning how disaffection can serve patriotic ends, all help the Reader to understand Shevek’s views. Their society functions like an organism, and Le Guin uses an organic metaphor to reinforce a large-scale perspective for her Reader. The Reader learns to seek the yin within yang, the yang within yin, and to see not the small pieces but the ways that all of the elements combine, in the reading experience and in Anarresti society.

**Finding Harmony in Disharmony**

On Anarres, a world with no luxuries, where people struggle to eat, people unwaveringly support the arts. Le Guin frames art in necessity by highlighting its utility and role in Anarresti society. Anarres’s austere environment forces the Anarresti to abstain from excess and to value only necessities, so their choice to sustain the arts argues that art helps to foster life. Shevek argues for art’s necessity when he visits a gallery on Urras. The gallery prices a piece at double the amount needed to fulfill a family’s needs for a year. Disgusted, Shevek rebukes the gallery owner, “a man makes art because he has to.”46 With his outrage, Shevek tells the Reader to consider art an essential part of life, not a luxury or accessory. Even in the austere anarcho-communist world of Anarres, people create art, to express themselves and to explain their world. Through Shevek’s experience, Le Guin reminds her Reader to regard art as a gangway, as a path that offers balance between people trying to connect and to find harmony with each other. Varieties of harmony, in sculpture, in music, in interpersonal relationships, and in time, teach Shevek, and the Reader, to value art in all its forms.

Shevek learns about art, and life, through Takver’s sculptures. Her sculpture, *Inhabitation of Time*, presents an ideal of balance. Takver’s balanced sculpture provides a vivid image that mirrors the book’s structure, Shevek and Takver’s relationship, the structure of the anarchist society, the relationships between the planets, and Shevek’s temporal, theoretical integration.\(^{47}\) Takver creates sculptures of absence that enable the Reader, and Shevek, to discover meaning in presence.\(^{48}\) Shevek carries his favorite sculpture, entitled the *Occupation of Uninhabited Space*, with him for years, reminding him to look for answers in paradox. The sculptures concretize harmony in disharmony as an image, helping the Reader, and Shevek, to make sense of the abstractions.

Music also helps to explain the world to Shevek.\(^{49}\) His commitment to and identification with music reinforces Le Guin’s oblique allusion to Albert Einstein, who noted, “if I were not a physicist, I would probably be a musician. I often think in music. I live my daydreams in music. I see my life in terms of music.”\(^{50}\) A fellow genius and physicist, Shevek seeks to learn, from music, how to harmonize. He thinks that Laia Odo “had not tried to renew the basic relationships of music, when she renewed the relationships of men. She had always respected the necessary.”\(^{51}\) The necessary, here the principles of musicology, provide him with possible ways to forge new relationships between people, to identify ways he could unmake walls, to re-relate himself to society, to unite Urras and Anarres, and to

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\(^{47}\) Le Guin, *The Dispossessed*, 368. The sculptures appear throughout the text, providing a guiding image similar to the larger symbols, such as prisons and walls.

\(^{48}\) I envision these as Cosmix spinners.


integrate the two temporal theories. Seeking ways to harmonize, Shevek walks a paradoxically disharmonious path.

Shevek’s path forces him to find harmony and balance in disharmony and instability. Instability violates musical norms, as Shevek learns from a musician who has been ejected from the music syndicate. Salas tells Shevek, “I write dysfunctional music,” including a chamber piece that shares its title with one of Shevek’s temporal theories. The “Simultaneity Principle” includes, Salas explains, “five instruments each playing an independent cyclic theme; no melodic causality; the forward process entirely in the relationship of the parts. It makes a lovely harmony.” Salas’s harmonic, unstable symphony models his alienation from society. Like Shevek, Salas does not fit into Anarresti society, bending the principles of harmony and seeking to craft a new way. Shevek admires Salas’s efforts, telling him, “music is a cooperative art, organic by definition, social. It may be the noblest form of social behavior we’re capable of. It’s certainly one of the noblest jobs an individual can undertake.” Presented in this light, seeking harmony, even one comprised of disharmonies, becomes a civic virtue.

Shevek begins pursuing his virtuous path to creating societal harmony at an early age. At age eight, he exceeds and violates his society’s expectations, asking a question about advanced physics and confounding the teacher. The teacher chastises him, “speech is sharing — a cooperative art. You’re not sharing, merely egoizing.” This incident teaches Shevek, and the Reader, that society, even one espousing anarchist ideals, silences people who do not conform to create harmony. Shevek rejects their form of harmony, but he comes to view art

52 Le Guin, *The Dispossessed*, 175. Le Guin does not cite Arnold Schoenberg, but her description bears a strong similarity to Shoenburg’s revolutionary twelve-tone serialism.


as inherently sharing, later telling Salas, “any art, it’s a sharing. The artist shares, it’s the essence of his act.”\textsuperscript{55} Shevek cannot share what he can offer his society without leaving it. Like Salas, Shevek must learn to use disharmony to create a new harmony.

The explicit forms of art, such as music and Takver’s sculptures, help the Reader to understand Shevek’s attempts to create harmony in other parts of his life by sharing, like in his interpersonal relationship with Takver. For example, when they decide to become life partners, Shevek reflects on how the stream in the mountains has a “ceaseless harmony composed of disharmonies.”\textsuperscript{56} The image helps to show the Reader the balance that the two strike. They create harmony together. But, like the text and like Takver’s sculptures, they do so by orbiting around one another. Constant and endless orbiting typifies their entire relationship, and Shevek’s larger life’s journey. Takver, watching Shevek sleep, reflects:

\begin{quote}
We came from a great distance to each other. We have always done so. Over great distances, over years, over abysses of chance. It is because he comes from so far away that nothing can separate us. Nothing, no distances, no years, can be greater than the distance that’s already between us, the distance of our sex, the difference of our being, our minds; that gap, that abyss which we bridge with a look, with a touch, with a word, the easiest thing in the world. Look how far away he is, asleep. Look how far away he is, he always is. But he comes back, he comes back, he comes back. . . \textsuperscript{57}
\end{quote}

The distance between them, their disharmonies as individuals, they close with their love. The narrator describes their sexual connection, reunited after years of separation, in language very similar to the description of Takver’s sculptures: they “circled about the center of infinite pleasure, about each other’s being, like planets circling blindly, quietly, in the flood of

\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{55} Le Guin, \textit{The Dispossessed}, 175.
\textsuperscript{56} Le Guin, \textit{The Dispossessed}, 179.
\textsuperscript{57} Le Guin, \textit{The Dispossessed}, 322, ellipses in original.
\end{footnotes}
sunlight, about the common center of gravity, swinging, circling endlessly.”

They return to one another, they orbit one another, and they create art by sharing one another.

As he does with his interpersonal relationship, Shevek creates art by sharing with his temporal theories. Integrating the two temporal theories helps him to understand how to achieve harmony, on all the levels of his life. An integrated theory, achieving a harmony between disharmonious, even seemingly contradictory, theoretical elements, accounts for how time can move simultaneously forward and orbitally. Shevek’s theory helps to explain how yin and yang co-exist and mutually entangle. This entanglement extends to Shevek’s other integrations. He refuses to yield his integrated temporal theory to the Ioti, who want to use it to gain property and accumulate power. To thwart their attempt, Shevek takes his integrated theory to the Terran embassy, asking them to broadcast his equations to all the peoples in the universe, as a gift. His intellectual integration, and what he does with it, helps to explain the universe and to advance equity amongst peoples, ennobling Shevek’s work as he shares it.

Sharing and harmony characterize much art on Anarres, but Shevek also learns to value the art of destruction. Reflecting on his friend Tirin’s experiences, Shevek tells Takver, “I think Tir’s a born artist. Not a craftsman — a creator. An inventor-destroyer, the kind who’s got to turn everything upside down and inside out. A satirist, a man who praises through rage.” Tirin’s rage drives him to write a scathing play that critiques their society. Their society, founded on revolution, needs artists to maintain flux through constant cultural critique. Critique and deconstruction help to guide those reinventing a political world,

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60 Le Guin, *The Dispossessed*, 328.
finding a new way. Tirin’s path leads him to an asylum. He cannot assimilate with his society, and he cannot destroy it on his own, leaving him to seek refuge away from it. Shevek learns from Tirin’s efforts, and he merges destruction with sharing and harmony.

Integrating Taoism into her science and utopian fiction, Le Guin serves as a destructive artist for the Reader. Utopian fiction reveals to its readers what to avoid and what to emulate. It provides a model for how readers can approach the world in new ways; it provides not a literal, but an epistemological, blueprint with a perfecting principle. Le Guin’s epistemological blueprint presents Taoism as a perfecting principle that encourages the Reader to harmonize, to share, and to destroy. Salas, Tirin, and Shevek’s nobility and civic virtue derive from their art, from their challenges, and from their efforts to overturn the status quo. They perform the tasks most important for an anarchist society: advancing freedom. They offer harmony in through disharmonious dissolution and shared reconstitution.

Flux

To maintain harmony in a large-scale civilization, including large cities, the Anarresti require a degree of centralization. Centralization must be “countered by lasting vigilance,” if the Anarresti want to preserve their decentralized anarcho-syndicalism, however.61 To protect their society’s anarchism, they decentralize the organization of the means of production, managing the production of goods and performance of services through local syndicates. The syndicates distribute their goods through one syndicate and post openings with another. The three major organizational structures operate independently from one another. The three major organizational structures operate independently from one another.

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another, and the two larger syndicates select their workers by lottery, preserving as much independence and flux as possible. They also integrate flux in the parliamentary procedure of the distribution syndicate. Debate and discussion in administrative meetings flows freely. The narrator explains: “to report an Anarresti managerial debate in full would be difficult; it went very fast, several people often speaking at once, nobody speaking at great length, a good deal of sarcasm, a great deal left unsaid; the tone emotional, often fiercely personal; an end was reached, yet there was no conclusion.” The group does not seek a conclusion, and, if each individual speaks at whim, the inefficient procedure helps to protect freedom of speech. To protect freedom of association, as well, a single syndicate handles work postings. The Anarresti workers rotate assignments periodically, and the labor syndicate helps them to locate new postings. By dividing the administration of production, distribution, and work postings, the Anarresti seek to implement flux and to prevent rigidity in their society.

Even with these structural preventatives in place, the Anarresti struggle to keep changing, Le Guin demonstrates, when their central values conflict. The conflict of key values, such as flux and safety, emerge most clearly in high-risk employment situations.

“Anywhere that function demands expertise and a stable institution,” Bedap observes, people will be tempted to value stability over flux, but, he continues, “that stability gives scope to the authoritarian impulse.” The impulse to provide stability and to take advantage of expertise emerges naturally in situations where even expertise does not eliminate the danger of the work. Mining, for example, requires experts to minimize the risk to the individual, and developing that expertise requires time and training. Training experts, only to rotate them into a new position, prevents anyone from assuming too much risk or from

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giving in to authoritarian impulses. The Reader’s reaction to this approach, however, might mirror that of the Urrasti: rotating experts after training them is inefficient, at best, and, at worst, it increases risk to the individual worker. Those workers, as a society, agree to rotate to avoid tempting anyone from using their expertise to acquire and exercise authoritarian power. To eliminate centralized power, or any power-over, the Anarresti choose to cope with inefficiency, but the need to protect their citizens’ lives as well as their freedom creates a conundrum.

That conundrum threatens their society as surely as increased risk in the workplace threatens the individual. If flux in the social organism maintains an anarchist society’s health, then ossification and rigidity threaten society. Shevek sees what a society that allows itself to freeze can become when he visits Urras. During his visit, he sees Fort Drio, the prison where Laia Odo, his society’s founding philosopher, had been imprisoned. This prison saddens Shevek with its visual rhetoric: “I have been here for a long time, the fort said, and I am still here.” The permanence of the physical prison reminds Shevek of the Urrasti society’s ultimate failure to nurture the individual. Individual action, challenging the State, imprisons Laia Odo physically. Intellectually, she retained her freedom, but Shevek, free physically, fights the nation’s imprisonment of intellectual thought. Allowing convention to rule creates an internalized prison. Faced with the physical prison on Urras, Shevek realizes that “he had been demanding a security, a guarantee which is not granted, and which, if granted, would become a prison.” Obtaining security, Le Guin suggests, might build a prison that requires the individual to forfeit freedom. To protect freedom, society cannot imprison its people either physically or intellectually. Questioning the norm and encouraging

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flux emerge as the path to freedom that prevents rigidity, imprisonment, and the loss of freedom, through bars and conventions.

The Anarresti society has begun to let this arresting danger slip into their society, the main characters of The Dispossessed contend. Bedap, Shevek, and Takver finally decide to form their own syndicate to try to counter increasing rigidity and the resulting bureaucracy. Takver comments, “We have let bureaucracy creep up on us.” Shevek agrees, suggesting that the change has happened gradually: “this is the way it was done, this is the way it is done, this is the way it has to be done.” The move to rigid thought might not happen maliciously, but it does reveal a society losing its vigilance and vivacity. Bedap wryly observes, “It’s always easier not to think for oneself. Find a nice safe hierarchy and settle in. Don’t make changes, don’t risk disapproval, don’t upset your syndics. It’s always easiest to let yourself be governed.” Bedap reminds Shevek, and the Reader, that the will to dominance is as central in human beings as the impulse to mutual aid is, and has to be trained in each individual, in each new generation. Nobody’s born an Odonian any more than he’s born civilized! But we’ve forgotten that. We don’t educate for freedom. Education, the most important activity of the social organism, has become rigid, moralistic, authoritarian. Kids learn to parrot [Laia] Odo’s words as if they were laws — the ultimate blasphemy!

Not forcing change, questioning society, or challenging the status quo allows citizens to walk an easy line, and the ease accounts for the increasing rigidity that the main characters confront.

Unwilling to take the easy route, Shevek, Takver, and Bedap set out to re-unsettle their society. Shevek shares, “It was our purpose all along — our Syndicate, this journey of

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66 Le Guin, The Dispossessed, 166.
67 Le Guin, The Dispossessed, 253.
68 Le Guin, The Dispossessed, 329, emphasis in original.
69 Le Guin, The Dispossessed, 168.
70 Le Guin, The Dispossessed, 167-168, emphasis in original.
mine — to shake things up, to stir up, to break some habits, to make people ask questions. To behave like anarchists!"  
Shevek’s journey trains the Reader how to behave like an anarchist, as well. *The Dispossessed* turns on, as Judah Bierman notes, “continual choice and change, life in ambiguity,” in “both the content and structure.” The novel, and Kropotkin’s anarcho-syndicalism, should serve as gospel no more than Laia Odo’s words should for the Anarresti. Reading the novel, receiving an education, should not serve as the end but as the beginning, as the clay from which the Reader can mold new worlds and identities by embracing process and fluctuation.

Flux places responsibility for acting well and for changing society on the individual. Shevek explains, “There was no end. There was process: process was all. You could go in a promising direction or you could go wrong, but you did not set out with the expectation of ever stopping anywhere. All responsibilities, all commitments thus understood took on substance and duration.” If one’s responsibility for any action never ends, then every action matters. Each action endures, Le Guin argues, thereby increasing one’s duty to act with care. Trusting in that care, the Anarresti place the agency and duty to change society on the individual. Shevek informs one of the Urrasti physicists, “everyone on Anarres is a revolutionary, Oiic.” Discovering his revolutionary responsibility as a young adult, Shevek paradoxically affirms his devotion and commitment to society by revolting against it. He explains:

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74 Le Guin, *The Dispossessed*, 76.
Bedap had forced him to realize that he was, in fact, a revolutionary, but he felt profoundly that he was such by virtue of his upbringing and education as an Odonian and an Anarresti. He could not rebel against his society, because his society, properly conceived, was a revolution, a permanent one, an ongoing process. To reassert its validity and strength, the thought, one need only act, without fear of punishment and without hope of reward: act from the center of one’s soul.75

Thus, the individual Anarresti citizen bears responsibility to maintain society, driven by duty and acting on conscience. Individuals change, and, acting as they judge best, force society to change, as well. Shevek argues that society stays in flux as individuals act. He recognizes the challenge before him to act responsibly, to encourage change, to live, noting,

with the myth of the State out of the way, the real mutuality and reciprocity of society and individual became clear. 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.76

Change constitutes the foundation of life, and it constitutes the foundation of their society. Bedap agrees, “change is freedom, change is life — is anything more basic to Odonian thought than that?”77 That base both troubles and reassures Shevek, who desperately seeks balance.

Paradoxically, Shevek discovers balance, security, and stability by accepting that the world, his society, and time are not set, certain, or stable.78 Embracing flux in his public life, in his work, and in his relationship with society, Shevek discovers stability by using his freedom to make promises and to forge his romantic partnership. Takver and Shevek’s enduring and sustaining relationship provides them both with stability, and their commitment to one another provides a fulcrum upon which they can balance the individual

75 Le Guin, The Dispossessed, 176, emphasis in original.
76 Le Guin, The Dispossessed, 333.
77 Le Guin, The Dispossessed, 166.
78 Le Guin, The Dispossessed, 349.
changes that each experiences. Shevek and Takver opt to create a point of stability together, but their behavior does not create a societal demand or even a norm. They do not impose their individual desires upon others. Some Anarresti might opt to forego all stability, in their political, public, and private lives. Their society’s freedom and support for individual needs enables Takver and Shevek to commit privately, free of the coercion even of convention. And, in a land where no one expects promises, where flux typifies most relationships, those commitments mean even more. Shevek concludes, “the enduring, the reliable, is a promise made by the human mind.” If the enduring and reliable depend upon a promise, then the stability and certainty of a political bond, an interpersonal bond, or any relationship relies on human agency and assent. Before the individual acts, he or she is free. Freedom becomes the default, and humans guarantee one another not stability but freedom. By acting freely, those individuals constitute a complex social organism.

**Organic Society**

To provide the Reader with a model of a harmonious, but fluctuating, system, Le Guin, drawing upon Kropotkin, turns to the natural world, comparing Anarresti society to an organism. The organic, and its complexity and flexibility, guide individual and group behavior on Anarres. For example, the narrator explains how a distributors’ meeting functions:

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there were no rules of parliamentary procedure at meetings in PDC. Interruptions were sometimes more frequent than statements. The process, compared to a well-managed executive conference, was a slab of raw beef compared to a wiring diagram. Raw beef, however, functions better than a wiring diagram would, in its place — inside a living organism.\(^8\)

Watching a meeting of the PDC (Production and Distribution Coordination), an observer might doubt the utility of an organic organizational scheme. For an organism, though, balance appears at a systemic level. One might not discern much order in the working of a ribosome, either, unless the observer considered the entire cellular system. By using the Reader’s systemic viewpoint, Le Guin encourages the Reader to look for order by integrating multiple levels with this organic metaphor.

Le Guin champions the organic and derides the mechanical. The mechanical’s predictability, static structure, and unity do not function well for an anarchist society, and Le Guin teaches the Reader to dismiss a mechanical model. In a silly example, Shevek bounces his baby daughter Sadik on his knee, reciting “ridiculous mnemonics” to her, singing, “Time is a manacle, Time is tyrannical, Supermechanical, Superorganical, pop!\(^8\)\(^2\)” This game presents the Reader with a subtle hierarchy. Building up to the organic, Le Guin helps the Reader to break the tyrannical manacles of time by moving beyond the mechanical. The mechanical, Shevek reminds his peers, is inferior as a model for society, chiding, “if we must all agree, all work together, we’re no better than a machine.”\(^8\)\(^3\) Using a machine to model society threatens to constrain it, to limit it. The limits enter the story as Bedap, frustrated by Rulag’s opposition to their new syndicate, laments her engineering mindset, her “clarity and

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pragmatism of mind, plus the mechanist’s hatred of complexity and irregularity.”

Rulag’s gift, clarity of mind and the ability to identify patterns, leads her to define the world strictly, with little room for change. Change and adaptability, Shevek reasons, comprise the “essential function of life” for an organism, and, by extension, for a society. Societies that organize mechanically cannot achieve true balance because they cannot accommodate change. By embracing the change of the organic and deriding the structure of the mechanical, Le Guin constructs a hierarchy that encourages the Reader to embrace change to foster a healthy social organism.

A healthy organism cycles constantly, and it delegates functions to specialized cells. Each cell within the social organism, each syndicate and individual, fulfills a “cellular function” for the larger system. Society benefits when the individual performs “the work he can do best, therefore his best contribution to his society.” Some contributions and functions feature more centrally, but an individual identifies what task he or she can best perform for the social organism. Sabul notes that physics does not feed people, suggesting that even a society organized organically has priorities. “Every Odonian has to be a functions analyst,” Sabul tells Shevek, chastising, “You’re thirty, aren’t you? By that age a man should know not only his cellular function but his organic function – what his optimum role in the social organism is.” Takver discovers her role as a biologist easily, but Shevek has to look beyond his first calling. Sabul chastises him for doing work without “social organic utility,” and Shevek counters that theoretical physics, what he identifies as his function as a young

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88 Le Guin, *The Dispossessed*, 264. This edition reads “role is the social organism is,” but I believe that is a typographical error.
man, serves a key task for the social organism. He argues, “the more that is organized, the more central the organism: centrality here implying the field of real function,’ Tomar’s Definitions. Since temporal physics attempts to organize everything comprehensible to the human mind, it is by definition a centrally functional activity.”

As he grows up, Shevek comes to believe that his function does not involve organizing the universe, but using his knowledge to rebel, to “unbuild walls.” Although this wall-wrecking rebellion emerges as his true function, he does so not as a diplomat, the way he thinks he will, but as an exile. Performing his central cellular function in the social organism requires Shevek to stand outside of society, to find a horizon that will enable his society to change and to reconstitute.

The closest connections between people, Shevek argues, depend not on laws but on shared suffering and pain. Pain founds relationships between people, enabling individual cells to form a communal bond that makes society possible. Shevek finds utility even in suffering brought on by a severe drought, musing, “the priorities were becoming clear again. Weaknesses, soft spots, sick spots would be scoured out, sluggish organs restored to full function, the fat would be trimmed off the body politic.” The body sloughs the cells that no longer fulfill their function, and the social organism scours out those cells, those individuals or syndicates, that do not help the organism to prosper. To prosper, the Anarresti need Shevek to rise to rebellion, not to settle for theoretical physics. The Physics Syndicate votes to exile Shevek immediately after he expresses his thought about societal function. To find his full function, he must experience difference and alienation. Alienation and exile, being scoured out, repositions him outside of his chosen field. Feeling like an

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90 Le Guin, *The Dispossessed*, 166.
outsider, Shevek learns what he needs to reconstitute the health of his society (and, incidentally, to solve his physics question, as well). Disaffected, he becomes a patriot by becoming the cell that connects the social organism to a larger ecosystem and that enables it to function as a changing, fluctuating anarchist society.

**Conclusions and Implications**

Anarchist theories all champion freedom and constant change. Le Guin celebrates the flux of anarchism, praising the trickster and her ability to muddle:

Coyote is an anarchist. She can confuse all civilised ideas simply by trotting through. And she always fools the pompous. Just when your ideas begin to get all nicely arranged and squared off, she messes them up. Things are never going to be neat, that’s one thing you can count on. Coyote walks through all our minds. Obviously, we need a trickster, a creator who made the world all wrong. We need the idea of a God who makes mistakes, gets into trouble, and who is identified with a scruffy little animal.

Walking along coyote’s muddy path, the Anarresti reject religion and embrace contradiction, change, and complexity. Donald Theall observes that in *The Dispossessed* “wholeness is only gained in a process of change and the process of change is only raised to consciousness through her ambiguous utopian dialectic.” Le Guin uses paradox, ambiguity, and confusion to encourage her Reader not only to share Shevek’s journey but to embark on one of her or his own. The Reader learns, through the novel, how to navigate dialectic, contradiction, and paradox. Those paradoxes help both Shevek and the Reader to appreciate how truths might emerge from the tension created through contradiction. The contradiction of identifying harmony in disharmony, for example, helps Shevek to understand art as harmony, sharing,

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93 Porter, “Politics of Le Guin’s Opus,” 274.
94 White, “Coming Back from the Silence.”
and destruction. Destruction precedes construction, and Le Guin strives to equip her Reader to destroy her or his world. Furthermore, destruction serves a central purpose in an anarchist society that requires revolution to sustain the social organism’s health.

To avoid the disease of unyielding rigidity in both governmental centralization and social convention, the Anarresti champion the organic and scorn the mechanical. The whole of Urras functions mechanically, with operators at the top limiting the movement of the cogs in the machine, and the mechanical presents a cautionary tale that produces a desire for the Reader to follow the spiritual, organic path that Shevek walks. Shevek, and the Reader, learn to uncover new pathways, or tao, that can help them to change their worlds.

Changing the world might simply mean preventing the sequence that Shevek outlines. If reaching the “has to be done” level ossifies society, then trying to prevent people from connecting how something has been done and how it must be done might prevent the emergence of bureaucracy. Eliminating bureaucracy to encourage political flux need not inform only anarchist governments, and Le Guin’s novel demonstrates how valuable flux can be politically and personally. Shevek demonstrates the utility of flux in his personal journey, only finding personal stability after he embraces the flux of the public sphere.

The Anarresti public requires a spiritual, not a religious, connection to the cosmos, although they retain notions of heaven and hell. Shevek concludes that socio-political heaven means more than environmental paradise. To prevent his paradise, Anarres, from becoming hell, like Urras, he helps to dispossess it of its demons. Dostoevsky’s demons, and his use of incarnation to critique political theory, guides Le Guin, as well. She uses both incarnation and symbolic allegory to reinforce Shevek’s need to change his world and his relationships and to offer Taoist and anarchist options to her Reader. Guiding the Reader and the Urrasti
rebels, Shevek finds his cellular function in his social organism by leaving his society, breathing new life into it by challenging and undermining it, and serving as a messianic conductor along a Taoist path to utopia.
Chapter 4

Reworking How Society Works:

From Government to Governmentality

Le Guin’s ambiguous utopia, on Anarres, employs an anarcho-syndicalist form of governance. Government, as a structure, serves to organize and administer a State. That State might align with a nation, a group of individuals banded together, or not, but, either way, it requires allegiance from its people. External to the individual, government provides, protects, and polices. If the police, and the protection they provide, move inside the individual, government transforms into a political technology of the self, into a part of governmentality.

Governmentality explains how government functions to produce identities, including political and economic subjecthood, in everyday life. Barbara Cruikshank remarks, “From Foucault and from feminism we have learned how individuals come to understand themselves as the subjects of sexuality and gender, respectively,” and she extends this to contend that “individuals learn to recognize themselves as subjects of democratic citizenship and so become self-governing.”¹ In Foucaultian terms, she explores how democratic citizenship (which she explores through Alexis de Tocqueville) becomes a technology of the self. Foucault’s final consideration of technologies of the self, Patrick Hutton explains, focuses on how the “individual participates in the policing process by monitoring his own

behavior.”

In other words, the individual internalizes the police, creating a technology of the self that performs the governmentality tasks that police perform. Foucault defines police as the individuals who maintain the “downward continuity” of proper governance within a society, separate from the state, maintaining the realm of governmentality. Governmentality, Shawn Miklaucic explains, “constitutes a way of understanding governing not as the intrinsic function of the state but as practices that are diffuse and heterogenous,” practices that are “not just of politicians and princes, but of everyone.” These everyday practices, when they function as the police, help to constitute culture. Cultural studies theorist Tony Bennett connects Foucault’s definition of the police, an acculturating force that produces particular practices, to culture, defining them as:

a historically specific set of institutionally embedded relations of government in which the forms of thought and conduct of extended populations are targeted for transformation – in part via the extension through the social body of the forms, techniques, and regiments of aesthetic and intellectual culture.

In short, Bennett explains how culture and governmentality interact, with the police serving to produce particular cultural practices. When an individual internalizes these practices, creating the police as a technology of the self, then s/he performs the governmentality work, inside, that police typically perform for an external government.

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The rigidity of external control turns fluid when it depends on individual judgment in a given context. In other words, governmentality makes government rhetorical. For a nation employing anarcho-syndicalism, which eschews external government, governmentality provides an organizational structure for the nation that does not violate its political principles. Rhetorical governance appears in *The Dispossessed* through Le Guin’s re-working of government, of work, and of Kropotkin’s anarcho-syndicalism.

Peter Kropotkin, one of the most prominent anarchist theorists, theorizes the details of anarcho-syndicalism. Syndicalist societies decentralize governance, placing responsibility for the management and administration of labor in small cells of workers. Those workers select their own work assignments and manage their workplace, and society, collaboratively. Collaboration, Kropotkin suggests, provides a more stable and evolutionarily advantageous societal model than competition. Collaboration aims to protect freedom for the individual but it balances this ideal with security achieved through mutual aid. Rather than policing behavior from an external, governmental source, societies driven by anarcho-syndicalism prevent harm by producing an internal duty, a desire to contribute to society. That desire, Kropotkin argues, can cater to individual interests, can prevent people from dodging work by making work more enjoyable, and can decrease crime by eliminating inequity and envy.

Le Guin applies Kropotkin’s anarcho-syndicalist structure in *The Dispossessed*. The novel models an anarcho-syndicalist society, demonstrating the theory’s strengths, such as an inclusive workplace, and its weaknesses, such as the threat of tyranny of the majority. Le Guin creates an interdependent, organic society that unites the means of production, the worker, and the consumer. Individuals choose work they enjoy, making it more like play, and society limits the length of the work day and spreads distasteful or onerous tasks out evenly
amongst its citizens. The citizens bind together into syndicates based on their work interests, making work the cement of the societal bond. That bond is maintained through governmentality. Governance moves inside the individual, using a sense of duty to monitor and to maintain society. Education, shaming, and peer pressure help to structure this social conscience. The Anarresti social conscience, and the equity it strives to maintain, contrasts with the motives and flaws in capitalism on Urras. The individual on Urras fends for him or herself, but the Anarresti can depend on society, on mutual aid, to meet their needs.

Shevek’s needs, however, challenge the social bond. His society cannot meet all of his intellectual needs, and he learns to balance his sense of duty to his society with his dedication to his work. Contrasting a utopian view of intellectual labor with an anti-intellectual disregard for its utility, Le Guin constructs a dialectic that encourages her Reader to consider the life of the mind and its function in the societal organism. Shevek’s work in the societal organism helps to unmake the mind-body split by revealing the physicality of the intellectual life. That life weighs Shevek down, physically, but buoys him up through an intimate relationship that allows him to birth ideas, including new ways of being in the world.

Le Guin works to foster a desire, in her character and her Reader, to change societal roles. Those roles include work, and its role in forming the social bond. Work roles fulfilled by women in The Dispossessed challenge stereotypes and change the occupations available to women. Placed equally in the sciences and roles unusual for women in the Reader’s world in the 1970s, the women on Anarres nevertheless face double binds and old stereotypes that constrain women. Le Guin helps to widen the options the Reader can imagine as available to women and strives to make Anarres equitable, but the governmentality of the Reader’s world
binds Le Guin’s imagination. That imagination takes the women of the 1970s, Shevek, and the Reader into new areas, however, and provides a rich survey of the possibilities contained in Kropotkin’s anarcho-syndicalist societal structure.

**Kropotkin’s Anarchism**

Le Guin offers political tools to her Reader by drawing upon Kropotkin’s anarchist theory. John Huntington maintains that *The Dispossessed* “renews the possibilities for viable social action.”⁶ Carl Freedman and Darko Suvin praise the way that Le Guin’s created world resonates with readers’ own, but both worry about the novel’s political extremism.⁷ Anarchism, Suvin observes, is the “furthest radical limit” of the left, at its worst deriving from “disaffected petty-bourgeois intellectual” sentiments and at its best offering a “truly new libertarian socialism.”⁸ Leftist anarchism, like feminism, provides new political possibilities by turning attention to the private and its political functions. Applying anarchism to everyday life in the novel, Le Guin shows her Reader which tools anarchism can provide to change how society works. The novel offers the Reader access to characters’ lives and everyday politics, providing concrete suggestions for new ways of being in the world. In other words, Le Guin invites the Reader to see another way of being, lived out in

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an imagined society, in detail. Those details offer the Reader the tools s/he would need if s/he were to implement the ideas in everyday life, thereby changing politics and interpersonal relationships. Considering politics at the level of the individual and the personal, the Reader can imagine what it might look like, practically, to change the world.

To identify tools to help her Reader to re-work society and its relationships, Le Guin looked to major anarchist thinkers. She names “Engels, Marx, Godwin, Goldman, [Paul] Goodman,” in addition to her primary influence, Kropotkin, as the major anarchist theorists who informed her writing of *The Dispossessed*. Carl Freedman suggests, in addition, the “more critical, dialectical Marxist thought of Trotsky.” All of the political theorists she invokes consider the role of economics in personal and political relations. Furthermore, the anarchists in this list all advocate for communal anarchism, a political system in which community and relationships further freedom for the individual without abandoning relationships with and responsibility to others. Of all of the texts Le Guin consulted to compose *The Dispossessed*, Kropotkin’s political anarcho-syndicalist theory features most prominently. Reading Kropotkin alongside *The Dispossessed* helps to illuminate the political tools at work in the novel.

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Peter Kropotkin

Kropotkin was born into the Russian aristocracy, but he lived as a proponent of the people. Throughout his life, Kropotkin pushed intellectual and political boundaries. He transgressed, demanded, and challenged those around him to make the world better. With wide-ranging interests and the means to pursue them, Kropotkin studied and published about many parts of life, ranging from geography to literature to politics. His anarchist theories advocated for decentralizing government, restructuring work and labor, and internalizing government as a sense of duty and social conscience. His arguments reached far during his lifetime, placing him into conversation with Bakunin, Darwin, Marx, Mill, and other prominent minds of his time, and his ideas continue to speak to anarchist theorists and to the public through applications like *The Dispossessed*. His lively mind and unflagging commitment to social justice permeate his works, the culmination of a life of contemplation and political action.\(^\text{13}\)

Born 9 December 1842 to Russian aristocrats Aleksei Petrovich Kropotkin and Yekaterina Nikolaevna Sulima, Pyotr Kropotkin joined three elder siblings. The children studied at a local gymnasium and with a private tutor, Nikolai Pavlovich Smirnov. Peter preferred the tutor. Even as a child, he found the injustice of the group educational system frustrating. This frustration with government and its structures pervaded his life. As a teen, he entered the Corps de Pages, an elite educational opportunity afforded to aristocratic children. Kropotkin excelled and earned a prestigious position at court, as a *page de chambre* to Tsar Alexander II. Graduates of the Corps de Pages could select their army post, and most

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of his peers chose prominent or cushy positions. His experiences with the young aristocrats had impressed upon him the need for educational and societal reform, however. Already a rebel, the young Kropotkin opted to go to Siberia.

During his time in Siberia, Kropotkin observed the life of the newly-emancipated peasants firsthand. The juxtaposition of the peasantry’s extreme poverty with the lavishness and waste he had seen in the tsar’s court indelibly shaped his later politics. His radicalism increased during his time in Siberia. He began agitating for prison reform after working on an administrative project in the Siberian prisons and managed to secure a corrupt official’s dismissal. However, the official’s aristocratic connections prevented any real punishment for the man’s brutality. Frustrated by his failed attempt to effect change for the Siberian prison population, Kropotkin volunteered for a special survey trip to Manchuria.

Kropotkin earned a number of nicknames during his lifetime, including the Anarchist Geographer. After successfully surveying Manchuria, Kropotkin was awarded the opportunity to survey Finland and Sweden. He travelled throughout Europe, reading, studying, and visiting with a variety of radical political groups, including the Jura Federation, the International Workingmen’s Association, and the Circle of Tchaikovsky. His revolutionary activities and alliances during this time led to prison terms in the Peter and Paul Fortress in Russia and in Paris. The abysmal conditions in these prisons weakened Kropotkin’s health. He developed chronic illnesses that rendered him physically frail for the final twenty years of his life. Despite his illness, however, the imprisonment, extensive travel, and exposure to political radicals helped him to produce numerous volumes addressing history, geography, literature, politics, and ethics.\(^{14}\)

Kropotkin remained committed to reaching the peasantry throughout his life, and worked to make his, and other anarchist, socialist, and revolutionary, writings accessible. His works were widely translated and disseminated, both in book form and in pamphlets, with print runs in the hundred-thousands. Kropotkin published almost thirty books and numerous pamphlets, essays, articles, and lectures. Many were not popular with the Russian State. The Russian police purchased the entire first print run of *In Russian and French Prisons*, necessitating an immediate reprint to reach members of the public.

People read his books and pamphlets voraciously. Kropotkin’s ideas moved intellectuals all over the world both during and after his life. Those citing Kropotkin as a major influence include Chinese intellectuals influencing the Chinese Revolution; Diego Abad de Santillan, who credits Kropotkin with influencing the anarchists’ activities in the Spanish Civil War in the 1930s; and German Gustav Landauer, a central founding theorist for the Israeli kibbutzim. Although Kropotkin humbly credited Mikhail Bakunin as the “founder of modern anarchism,” Paul Avrich, one of the principal scholars in anarchist history, maintains that Kropotkin, among the Russian anarchists, was the most celebrated. Avrich pushes this claim even further, maintaining that Kropotkin was the “foremost leader

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16 Kropotkin, *Great French Revolution*, xi (Publisher’s Note).  
and theorist of the anarchist movement” beginning in the 1870s and continuing until his death in 1921. During these years, Kropotkin’s relations with his anarchist and revolutionary peers waxed and waned. His contemporaries hotly debated some of his positions, such as supporting public-driven propaganda of the deed (violence) and celebrating World War I (in the interest of providing the conditions of possibility for the emergence of an anarcho-communist revolution in Europe). He continued to debate these issues in the final years of his life, and he remains a prominent voice in anarchist debates.

Kropotkin died 8 February 1921. His funeral drew approximately 100,000 mourners, including notable anarcha-feminist Emma Goldman (then recently deported from the United States), who spoke at the graveside service in Novodevichi Monastery, and her romantic partner and fellow anarchist Alexander Berkman. Lenin granted the public permission to gather and to march through Moscow, bearing anarchism’s black and red flag and placards and singing hymns. As the processional passed by the Butyrki prison, Avrich explains, the “inmates shook the bars on their windows and sang an anarchist hymn to the dead.” Anarchists in Russia would not convene in public again until 1987.

After Kropotkin’s death, his family home, where he was born, served as a museum and later as a “school for British and American embassy children,” which Avrich observes would have pleased Kropotkin, who celebrated education, possibility for the masses, and social justice above all other ideals. Kropotkin continues to serve as a prominent force in anarchist philosophy. In addition to informing anarchist theory, Kropotkin’s work has

19 Kropotkin, Russian and French Prisons, ix (Avrich’s Introduction).
20 Kropotkin, Great French Revolution, xii (Publisher’s Note).
21 Avrich, Russian Anarchists, 145.
22 Avrich, Russian Anarchists, 26 (note 21).
helped to guide deep ecologists, such as Murray Bookchin.23 With *The Dispossessed*, Le Guin joins the intellectual parade honoring Kropotkin, adopting his theory to re-work work and labor on Anarres.

**Kropotkin and Decentralizing Government**

Kropotkin’s work provides the primary theoretical base for the anarcho-syndicalism that Le Guin deploys in *The Dispossessed*.24 Kropotkin, in his memoirs, succinctly summarizes his anarchist ideals.25 The ideal anarchist society, he argues, organizes into syndicates, decentralizes the management of labor, and provides the individual with ample opportunity to innovate. Initiative and collaboration should flourish, he contends, as uniformity and mandates flounder. Anarcho-syndicalist societies should function as a “living, evolving organism,” Kropotkin suggests, never settling into any permanent structure.26 He defines anarchism simply, as a society without government and its attendant institutions. Instead of government or institutions, communities organize and protect themselves, as groups of freely associating individuals. Groups of individuals will disagree and fight, but Kropotkin suggests community arbitration, informed by a strong social conscience, in lieu of an external government.27 From decentralization to collaboration to limiting conflict, Kropotkin details

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each ideal and suggests ways to realize them with his other books and essays.

Le Guin’s imagined anarchist society in *The Dispossessed* uses many of these details to show her Reader how anarcho-syndicalism would, and would not, work to structure a society.

M. Keith Booker observes that, since at least Plato’s *Republic*, political theorists have grappled with how society should manage labor. Kropotkin advocated for syndicalism, a system that administers labor through cooperatively controlled, voluntary federations of individuals. By building the workplace, and hence the larger economy, on a voluntary base, dictated by individual will, Kropotkin’s system aims to equalize social power and to eliminate any need for external government. To prevent power centralizing in the hands of a few, Jon Bekken explains, Kropotkin proposed labor principles designed to disseminate power widely. In his book *Fields, Factories, and Workshops*, Kropotkin surveys the economic systems of Germany, Austria, India, Italy, France, Great Britain, Belgium, the United States, Russia, and Japan to try to determine the best method for decentralizing power and reworking the relationship between producers and products. He concludes that decentralized industry, motivated by interest and enhanced through communal ownership, best meets the needs of

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30 Baldwin, ed., *Kropotkin’s Revolutionary Pamphlets*, Encyclopedia Britannica Article, 284; Anarchy: Its Philosophy and Ideal, 263; Must We Occupy Ourselves.

31 Baldwin, ed., *Kropotkin’s Revolutionary Pamphlets*, Must We Occupy Ourselves, 82.


33 Kropotkin, *Fields, Factories, and Workshops*, 134.
all the people in a society.\textsuperscript{34} In an anarcho-syndicalist society, need drives access to goods, separately from production, position, or power.

Kropotkin recognized that this form of labor decentralization introduces some issues, and he answers many of the critiques of anarcho-syndicalism in his papers. For example, in his \textit{Pamphlets}, he dismisses the accusation that people would choose not to work, pointing out that people have long worked in distasteful conditions, with much less reward, to survive.\textsuperscript{35} Improving working conditions, such as limiting the workday and changing the relationship between workers and the means of production, would encourage workers, even those performing distasteful tasks, he contends.\textsuperscript{36}

Kropotkin suggests a few additional incentives to encourage people to choose to work. First, he envisions the work day lasting approximately five hours. The rest of the time, individuals would pursue creative innovation or leisure. Tasks that individuals enjoy should become their work, he recommends, thereby making unpleasant work less disagreeable.\textsuperscript{37} Le Guin applies this idea in \textit{The Dispossessed}, presenting her Reader with a character who drives long trucking routes in a dusty, desolate part of Anarres. The man spends large swaths of time away from other people, driving back and forth across an inhospitable environment, but he shares with Shevek that he finds serenity in this work. What one person finds distasteful might delight another.

Even decentralized societies must, at some point, involve disagreeable work such as heavy labor and sanitation. No worker wants to engage in distasteful labor for long. To address this type of labor, Le Guin expands Kropotkin’s structure by having characters cycle

\textsuperscript{34} Kropotkin, \textit{Conquest of Bread}, 33.
\textsuperscript{35} Baldwin, ed., \textit{Kropotkin’s Revolutionary Pamphlets}, Anarchy: Its Philosophy and Ideal.
\textsuperscript{36} Baldwin, ed., \textit{Kropotkin’s Revolutionary Pamphlets}, Anarchy: Its Philosophy and Ideal, 70.
\textsuperscript{37} Baldwin, ed., \textit{Kropotkin’s Revolutionary Pamphlets}, Anarchy: Its Philosophy and Ideal, 71.
through the most trying tasks. No one serves in harsh conditions, such as sanitation plants or mines, for more than a few years out of their entire lifetime. If they desire the work, they could pursue it, but they would have to perform a few years of tasks they found distasteful, just like their peers. The Anarresti divide unpleasant labor equitably, just as they divide their goods and proceeds. Le Guin illustrates the system of willing collaboration that Kropotkin imagined. He suggested in *The Conquest of Bread* that a system that accounts for individual desire and motive, one that relies on collaboration, could alter labor relations. Using his ideas, Le Guin demonstrates how even the most distasteful labor could find willing laborers in a society that champions mutual aid.

Kropotkin arrives at mutual aid as the central principle undergirding his anarchist theory by countering Darwin’s evolutionary claim. The fittest organisms, Kropotkin contends, do not compete — they cooperate and collaborate. Cooperative and equitable control of labor provides the necessary conditions for societal evolution, for continual improvement, in an anarchist society, he suggests. Kropotkin idealizes evolutionary principles to support his political claims, and Stephen Jay Gould defends the emphasis on mutual aid, arguing,

If Kropotkin overemphasized mutual aid, most Darwins in Western Europe had exaggerated competition just as strongly. If Kropotkin drew inappropriate hope for social reform from his concept of nature, other Darwins had erred just as firmly (and for motives that most of us would now decry) in justifying imperial conquest, racism, and oppression of industrial workers as the harsh outcome of natural selection in the competitive mode.

Le Guin also agrees with Kropotkin’s evolutionary goals, suggesting, “all the higher, more penetrating ideals are evolutionary. They present themselves far less in the guise of effects of

38 Kropotkin, *Conquest of Bread*, 37.
39 Knowles, “Political Economy From Below.”
past experience than in that of probable causes of future experience, factors to which the environment and the lessons it has so far taught us must learn to bend.” Evolutionary goals look forward to find ways to adapt in the present, much like utopian and science fiction does. Kropotkin worked to integrate Darwin’s evolutionary claims into his theories to improve society, working conditions, and relationships between citizens. He tried to envision a society that could evolve in response to its environment, a society peopled with citizens invested in helping one another.

Mutual aid, people looking out for one another, helps Kropotkin to answer questions about crime. These questions dog anarchists, demanding: if government does not protect citizens from one another, will chaos and terrorism, the colloquial connotations of anarchism, proliferate? How can one feel safe in a society without punishment? Kropotkin answers that anarchism creates a safe society that does not require police. Rather than leading to more crime, Kropotkin writes, anarchism eliminates the need for police and prisons. Having served a significant portion of his own life behind bars, he doubted prisons’ ability to eliminate or regulate crime, sardonically commenting, that “to fancy that punishment is able to check the growth of anti-social feelings is a Utopia — a wicked Utopia.” To create a more plausible (and less wicked) utopia, Kropotkin turned to education to eliminate the causes of crime. He claimed future generations would view crime as a Social Disease. Prevention, he reminds us, cures disease best.

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41 Le Guin, “Day Before the Revolution,” 276. Le Guin plays here with William James, who, in the 1897 “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life,” argues, “All the higher, more penetrating ideals are revolutionary.” James’s papers are collected in The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy.

42 Kropotkin, Russian and French Prisons, 353.

43 Kropotkin, Russian and French Prisons, 340.
To prevent the social disease (crime) requires preventing its root cause: inequity. Kropotkin analyzes the “crimes” of the French revolutionaries, of anarchists whose crimes were to have “divided the nation into two classes; the Haves and the Have-Not; to have stirred up the one against the other; to have demanded bread — and above all, bread for those who worked.” He lauds their call: “Bread for all!” Eliminating crime, Kropotkin contends, requires eliminating inequality in access to goods, especially those goods fulfilling the most fundamental needs, such as food and shelter. To decrease inequality in this way, labor relations have to shift and Le Guin shows her Reader how that could work.

**Reworking Work and Labor in *The Dispossessed***

Kropotkin’s anarcho-syndicalist ideas permeate *The Dispossessed*. Le Guin uses Anarres to show the Reader how Kropotkin’s ideas would, or would not, work. Work on Anarres organizes labor using Kropotkin’s suggested shortened workday, for example, with work assignments changing frequently. To provide order without hierarchy, the Anarresti rely on syndicalism and interdependent communities. Those communities motivate workers to work by allowing them to pursue work they enjoy and that interests them. In addition, citizens learn about civic duty as children, helping them to develop an internalized desire to help society, to use work to form the social bond, and to pressure any peers who do not contribute to find a new way to participate in society. The Anarresti society, juxtaposed with Urrasti society, allows Le Guin to show her Reader labor motives, work structures, and

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educational purposes foreign to capitalism or communism. Le Guin also uses Shevek, a man who loves his work so intensely that it possesses him and borders on the erotic, to demonstrate the strain that genius places on this system. The labor system on Anarres allows Le Guin to challenge the norms of the Reader’s real world. For example, the Anarresti workplace balances the number of men and women who work, challenges stereotypes, and places women prominently in the sciences. The strides toward equity that Anarres makes mirror the efforts of 1970s liberal feminism, along with its limitations. Women join the workforce, but old stereotypes and roles, constraining Le Guin’s imagination, hamper their progress. Progressing from the Reader’s world to Anarres, the Reader discovers new ways to organize, motivate, and structure labor, along with the limits and benefits each system contains.

Organizing and Motivating Labor

Le Guin’s characters model the short work day Kropotkin envisioned, working five to seven hours per day, and, every ten days, take off two to four days. Although the narrator directly shares this guiding principle with the Reader, characters who violate the norm require the narrator to reiterate the principle, reinforcing this guideline. Takver, for example, works two to ten hours daily, depending on the needs of the fish she studies. Characters comment about her unusual employment structure, reminding the Reader that most workers work a shorter shift. 47 Rulag, appalled to see doctors working eight-hour stints, comments on the short staffing at a hospital. 48 Doctors would work eight hours, an onerously long shift on

47 Le Guin, The Dispossessed, 187.
48 Le Guin, The Dispossessed, 121.
Anarres, only in emergencies. The state of emergency that provokes Rulag’s outrage establishes a shorter work-day as normal. They adjust their societal norms when the need proves sufficient. During an extreme drought, for example, everyone who can shortens the workday to diminish protein shortages. Exceptions help the Reader to learn that, although they flex to meet the demands of their situation, the Anarresti try to limit the length of the workday.

The Anarresti also rotate work assignments. They insist upon limiting individual access to power. For example, they severely curtail the time people can access positions of power in the two largest syndicates. Those who serve at the PDC, which administers the distribution of goods, train for one year and then serve for four years. Volunteers cannot serve more than one term in their entire life. Interested workers request this assignment, but they are selected by lottery. Thus, the Anarresti prevent any worker from identifying with a powerful position. Positions, not individuals, hold access to power. By keeping all jobs fluctuating between workers, they work to prevent anyone from having too much access to positions that contain power.

The Anarresti also separate the administration of goods and distribution (managed by PDC) from production (managed by individual syndicates) from the organization of labor (managed by DivLab). The Division of Labor (DivLab) serves as a clearinghouse for the producing syndicates, organizing “every job being done, every position wanted, every workman needed, and the priorities of each to the general economy of the worldwide economy.”

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49 Le Guin, *The Dispossessed*, 323.
“Work” on Anarres includes tasks such as housework and childcare, and syndicates manage those positions, as well. Using fluctuating assignments for all of society’s tasks, Le Guin helps her characters to avoid double or triple shifts. Separating the syndicates from one another, the Anarresti model anarchist syndicalism, highlighting its strengths and limitations for the Reader.

Using Kropotkin’s syndicalism, Le Guin shows how anarchism can retain order but forego hierarchy. On Anarres, individuals self-organize into syndicates to produce goods and to provide the services society requires. Syndicates list openings with DivLab and individuals can join any syndicate, anywhere, seeking a worker. The workers produce goods and services that the PDC catalogs and distributes. When Shevek attempts to explain this administrative structure to the Urrasti, he tells them that the PDC has “no authority either to support me or prevent me.” Although the PDC coordinates commerce, travel, and shipping, they cannot manage or direct production or labor. Syndicalism separates administration from production to limit each institution’s power.

Syndicates organize the working communities on Anarres, and, the narrator suggests, function as “vehicles of both social action and sociability.” Short buildings, housing people and workplaces, surround plazas. Plazas with syndicates in similar industries group together to minimize the transport of goods. As a result, each community’s cells create

55 Le Guin, *The Dispossessed*, 76.
56 Le Guin, *The Dispossessed*, 76.
interdependent neighborhoods. Each neighborhood serves only some functions, forcing them to interact with and rely upon other cells to survive. The society organizes like an organism and a healthy life form requires balance and adaptability. People move between jobs, change domiciles, and leave and join communities. The organism has to adapt, trusting that people will balance their duty to the community with their individual interests and desires.

The Anarresti use the same term to signify both work and play and they contrast it with a word meaning drudgery. Le Guin unites work and play, replaying a debate at the center of utopian studies. At the end of the nineteenth century, Edward Bellamy and William Morris both imagined utopias changing work. Bellamy’s Looking Backward argues that work should be minimized. Morris’s News from Nowhere contends that work should be redefined and transformed into play. Bellamy and Morris offer two options: minimizing the amount of time needed to perform a necessary evil or making work more enjoyable. Kropotkin argued for both solutions, and Le Guin, too, avoids the binary by choosing both. People on Anarres choose work they love.

Anarresti citizens choose work based on “interest, talent, strength” and duty to society. Each individual, following interest, talent, and strength, then contributes whatever those skills can provide to society. Society derives its strength from allowing individuals to

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58 Le Guin, The Dispossessed, 251.
59 Le Guin, The Dispossessed, 92, 112.
61 Le Guin, The Dispossessed, 17.
62 Le Guin, The Dispossessed, 333.
realize their individual potential and from adapting to encompass each new contribution.

Laia Odo, their guiding philosopher, argues that fluctuating motives work well. She writes,

A child free from the guilt of ownership and the burden of economic competition will grow up with the will to do what needs doing and the capacity for joy in doing it. It is useless work that darkens the heart. The delight of the nursing mother, of the scholar, of the successful hunter, of the good cook, of the skillful maker, of anyone doing needed work and doing it well — this durable joy is perhaps the deepest source of human affection, and of sociality as a whole.  

Most citizens on Anarres opt for work they enjoy, knowing they can change occupations, either temporarily or permanently, if they become bored. For example, a mathematician might opt to volunteer for a two-week assignment planting trees, wishing to spend some time outdoors. Or she might decide to study mathematical patterns in literature for a time. To balance this freedom, however, each person must consider the need to contribute to a balanced society.

The Anarresti do not value self-indulgence or overwork. Just as they emphasize balance for their entire society, they encourage balance for the individual. Rulag, one of the citizens most likely to overwork, given her dedication to engineering, harshly judges those who work to excess, critiquing the “self-sacrifice impulse” for serving to boost individual ego rather than to enhance society. Society discourages dilettantes, as well. People should pursue work they love, but, as Odo argues, society needs people to want to do the tasks that help society to function. Finding and fulfilling at least some of those functions balances with individual interest to motivate the individual.

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63 Le Guin, The Dispossessed, 247.
64 Le Guin, The Dispossessed, 121 and 157.
Shevek illustrates this motivational balance well. He derives great pride from his work. His interest, talent, and joy, his calling, couples with a duty to society, but finding how to fulfill his duty proves challenging. Early in his career, one of Shevek’s mentors (Mitis) warns him, “It’s your duty to seek out the best, Shevek. Don’t let false egalitarianism ever trick you.” If he remains true to his initial calling, to theoretical physics, Shevek performs the work that he most enjoys. His work stands still for awhile, decreasing his pleasure and leading him to question his purpose in society. Only after he discovers that he can redefine what his society deems “needed” does he realize the height of his function and satisfy his internalized government, his social conscience.

**Producing the Social Conscience**

Shevek muses “if we let one another down, if we don’t give up our personal desires to the common good, nothing, nothing on this barren world can save us. Human solidarity is our only resource.” Those who refuse to contribute to the common good hurt themselves. But they also harm others with their negligence. If citizens will not participate in the syndicates and help them to produce needed goods, if they shirk work assignments, if they refuse to contribute, then society collapses. Anarchism, lacking anyone to enforce work, would seem to maximize this danger. Kropotkin and Le Guin obviate this concern by producing a social conscience, a commitment to duty, and desire to help one another, within each citizen. To prepare citizens for the responsibility of self-management, Kropotkin

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emphasizes education, designed to instill not what people should think but a desire to think for oneself.  

Le Guin adopts his suggestion, and Anarresti society produces a desire to contribute through education and polices it with peer pressure.

To practice free association and to learn to think for themselves from a young age, Anarresti children form learning groups based on student demand or instructor interest. Children on Anarres seek to acquire knowledge and to improve themselves and learn along the way how to govern themselves and to work together. The cooperative educational process teaches the children the labor model they will follow as adults. The Reader, too, learns as s/he reads, picking up the principles that produce an anarcho-syndicalist and feminist social conscience through education.

If education fails to produce the desire to contribute to society, the Anarresti community turns to peer pressure to encourage people to do their duty. Duty for children involves learning to share, to contribute equally, and to avoid narcissistic self-indulgence. Indulging the self leads adults to reprimand, “don’t egoize,” encouraging the children to pressure one another into equitable contributions. Shevek experiences this peer pressure again as an adult when a colleague accuses him of going “to school to keep his hands clean.” Shevek does his share of manual labor, but the remark reveals how the community manages those they perceive are not fulfilling communal duties. Citizens learn, beginning in childhood, to rely on one another. They also learn to shame shirkers into doing their share of the work. Refusing to contribute hurts others, who carry the extra weight, and thus it

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71 For example, Shevek, trying to explain about the rock, finds himself ejected from a speaking-listening group in Le Guin, *The Dispossessed*, 28-30.
costs the shirker the respect of his/her peers. The Anarresti call people who habitually
dodge their responsibility to the community *nuchnibi*.

Communities isolate, shame, or remove their *nuchnibi*. \(^{72}\) If informal tactics to reform
an individual fail, then the community publicly reprimands the outlier. Bedap, disillusioned
by the system, explains to Shevek, “Everybody comes to your syndicate meeting and tells
you off. It used to be how they cut a bossy gang foreman or manager down to size. Now
they only use it to tell an individual to stop thinking for himself.” \(^{73}\) Peer pressure might
govern the *nuchnibi*, but Le Guin demonstrates the danger inherent in this method of social
control: tyranny of the majority.

The society manages itself from within each individual, through internalized
government. Without a state, the norms that people internalize are determined by the people
themselves. If a majority advocates for a position, then those in the minority can choose
between reluctant conformity, subtle rebellion that risks public shaming and reprimanding,
or outright isolation as *nuchnibi*. Shevek refuses these choices. Speaking at a PDC meeting, he
explains his reasoning:

> What we’re after is to remind ourselves that we didn’t come to Anarres for safety, but
> for freedom. If we must all agree, all work together, we’re no better than a machine. If
> an individual can’t work in solidarity with his fellows, it’s his duty to work alone. His
duty and his right. We have been denying people that right. We’ve been saying, more
> and more often, you must work with the others, you must accept the rule of the
> majority. But any rule is tyranny. The duty of the individual is to accept *no* rule, to be
> the initiator of his own acts, to be responsible. Only if he does so will the society live,
> and change, and adapt, and survive. We are not subjects of a State founded upon law,
> but members of a society founded upon revolution. Revolution is our obligation: our
> hope of evolution. ‘The Revolution is in the individual spirit, or it is nowhere. It is for
> all, or it nothing. If it is seen as having any end, it will never truly begin.’ We can’t stop
> here. We must go on. We must take the risks. \(^{74}\)

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\(^{72}\) Le Guin, *The Dispossessed*, 150.


\(^{74}\) Le Guin, *The Dispossessed*, 359, ellipses and quotes in original.
After delivering this speech, Shevek defies the opinion of his peers and he leaves to visit his homeland’s foil: Urras.

**Urras Foils Anarres**

To clarify Anaretsi syndicalism, Le Guin uses the Urrasti societies of A-Io, Thu, and Benbili. A-Io manages its labor through capitalism, Thu through communism, and Benbili through tribalism. The allegorical similarity between these three “worlds” and the Reader’s own helps to illuminate the differences between anarchist syndicalism and these other forms of governance. All of the governmental systems resemble systems familiar to the Reader, and using the systems on Urras (especially the Ioti capitalists) to foil the syndicalist system on Anarres, Le Guin shows helps the Reader to discern the differences between the forms.

The second and third world Le Guin allegorizes briefly and dismissively. The Ioti portray the Benbili as barbarous and uncivilized, always at war, and the Thuvians as unable to speak against their state. Indeed, a Thuvian physicist who talks with Shevek disappears suddenly, never to reappear. The Reader receives little time to engage with the communists or tribalists. Instead, Le Guin draws their attention to the capitalists in A-Io.

Shevek finds capitalism curious. He shares with his Urrasti valet, Efor, that on Anarres, everyone works and no one goes hungry.\(^5\) Efor’s obvious disdain for the Urrasti norm surprises Shevek, who does not understand why all people would not work, why all people would not pursue work they love, and why any society would allow anyone to go without. To assuage his curiosity, he asks one of the Ioti physicists why anyone does “bad”

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work, and Oiie explains that “low pay is better than no pay.” Shevek wonders, “wasn’t it immoral to do work you didn’t enjoy?” He muses that the “lure and compulsion of profit was evidently a much more effective replacement of the natural initiative than he had been led to believe.” His observation invites the Reader to compare the motives of the Anarresti and Urrasti directly.

The competing Urrasti, driven by “greed, laziness, and envy,” live lives dogged by pain and inequity. Shevek reels in horror at their everyday practices and spaces, such as a street full of shops. Unlike the Anarresti, who follow their interests, passions, and social conscience, the Urrasti seek to get ahead, to demean others, and to elevate themselves, rather than pursuing ideas, ideals, or the advancement of society. The contrast of ideal and pragmatic motives differentiates between the eutopic Anarres and the dystopic A-Io for the Reader. Shevek’s wonder coaches the Reader to embrace syndicalism as a solution for the flaws in the capitalist system.

The educational system in A-Io magnifies Shevek’s dismay with capitalism. Considering the students at the university, he muses, “their society maintained them in complete freedom from want, distractions, and cares. What they were free to do, however, was another question. It appeared to Shevek that their freedom from obligation was in exact proportion to their lack of freedom of initiative.” In his own life, Shevek reflects that he “had not been free from anything: only free to do anything. Here [Urras], it was the other way around.” The Ioti students study to obtain a career. Shevek’s career, in contrast, unites

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78 Le Guin, *The Dispossessed*, 82, emphasis in original.
the means and ends, simultaneously achieving survival, community, and knowledge.\textsuperscript{81} The Ioti students shock Shevek, sharing with him, “if no competitive distinctions were to be made, one might as well do nothing” and asking him, “what was the good in working hard?”\textsuperscript{82} Interest and duty motivate Anarresti students; grades and competition motivate the Ioti students.

But some of the capitalist students desperately want to learn from Shevek. One student asks him to offer a class, and the administration protests that they have not granted permission. Shevek observes that if the administration gives him a class, he responds to an external authority, not a native desire to share his knowledge.\textsuperscript{83} He marvels, “Do they expect students not to be anarchists? What else can the young be? When you are on the bottom, you must organize from the bottom up.”\textsuperscript{84} Shevek finds himself “on the bottom” on Urras, a position that helps him to renew and to appreciate his own commitment to anarchism. Always ready to learn, Shevek contrasts his experiences on Urras contrast with his time on Anarres. The juxtaposition emphasizes the means and motives underlying each system, helping him, and thus the Reader, to appreciate the anarcho-syndicalism on Anarres.

\textbf{Working to Relate to Society}

The Reader first meets Shevek as he leaves his world, seeking new ideas, disapproved of and frustrated by his society. Society agrees to meet individuals’ basic needs as part of the social contract. The social contract appears in \textit{The Dispossessed} through Shevek’s observation

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{81} Le Guin, \textit{The Dispossessed}, 128.
\item \textsuperscript{82} Le Guin, \textit{The Dispossessed}, 128.
\item \textsuperscript{83} Le Guin, \textit{The Dispossessed}, 173.
\item \textsuperscript{84} Le Guin, \textit{The Dispossessed}, 126-127.
\end{itemize}
that citizens in all societies have the right to “work, to be maintained while working, to share the product with all who wanted it.” Sharing helps Shevek to thrive in the Anarresti scholastic environment at first, but when he pushes too far and they reject his work, he questions himself and his society. Even their permissive society cannot provide everything Shevek needs to succeed. He requires colleagues with the intellectual faculty with and interest in theoretical physics to talk with him. Genius proves to be an extreme limit of this extreme society.

Shevek struggles without a community of peers. Even genius needs community to prosper. Without it, in an austere intellectual environment, his ideas wither. Struggling to find his place in society, he argues that, “If an individual can’t work in solidarity with his fellows, it’s his duty to work alone. His duty and his right.” Even when he disagrees with the other physicists on Anarres, Shevek refuses to abandon his perceived purpose, advancing theoretical physics, and opts to work on his own. Working alone limits the discoveries he can make, however. On Urras, he faces government review of scholarship during wartime and the exclusion of women from his scholarly conversations, but on Anarres, intrusive, possessive, and corrupt intellectuals, such as Sabul, impede his work by constricting his conversation and interaction with others.

Sabul tries to convince Shevek to give up his work in physics, hinting and then baldly stating that other physicists do not see the value of Shevek’s project. The physicists in his syndicate try to scapegoat Shevek in order to maintain the norm. The danger of the tyranny of the majority politicizes Shevek’s workplace and demonstrates, to the Reader, the danger

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85 Le Guin, The Dispossessed, 277.
86 Le Guin, The Dispossessed, 376, 378.
87 Le Guin, The Dispossessed, 359, 239.
88 Le Guin, The Dispossessed, 264.
of decentralized work. Sabul’s interference with Shevek’s work discourages him personally, as well, frustrating his attempts to discern his societal function. His function, engaging in intellectual labor counter to the trend of the times, serves a purpose, but it takes years for him to appreciate this role. As a young adult, he worries, “I saw at last that by pursuing the one, the physics, I am betraying the other [society].”\(^89\) However, once Shevek journeys to Urras, he re-assesses his role, observing, “on Anarres, he had chosen, in defiance of the expectations of his society, to do the work he was individually called to do. To do it was to rebel: To risk the self for the sake of society.”\(^90\) He finally realizes that risking himself to perform his intellectual labor is “my duty, it’s my joy, it’s the purpose of my whole life.”\(^91\) His life’s work integrates temporal theories, unites him with his society, and shows the Reader the challenges of rebelling against society. Even though Anarresti society does not understand his work, its members, by the end of the novel, express their pride in Shevek. Bedap tells Takver, “It’s funny, because they can’t understand his books more than I can. A few hundred do, he thinks. . . . I think a few dozen would be a liberal estimate, myself. And yet people know of him, they have this feeling he’s something to be proud of.”\(^92\) Shevek does not share their pride until he embraces his multiple functions: as a genius, a researcher, and a rebel.

What Shevek originally thinks separates him from his society, his genius, turns into the suture that ties him to it. The narrator shares Shevek’s epiphany: “His sense of primary responsibility towards his work did not cut him off from his fellows, from his society, as he

\(^89\) Le Guin, *The Dispossessed*, 345.
\(^90\) Le Guin, *The Dispossessed*, 272.
had thought. It engaged him with them absolutely.” Only by fulfilling his duty to physics, requiring him to leave Anarres to try to build bridges with other planets, can he fulfill his revolutionary duty to Anarresti society. His society initially fails to fulfill its part of the bargain, forcing him to choose exile to gain the requisite resources to perform his work and to help his society. The societal isolation Shevek suffers enables him to rebel, thereby keeping his society in flux. Shevek illustrates for the Reader how work can craft the social bond. Furthermore, Shevek’s tale trains the Reader to want to integrate separate, seemingly paradoxical, spirals. The Reader who succeeds can enjoy and understand the sublimity of intellectual and social integration.

Rethinking Intellectual Labor

*The Dispossessed* constructs a number of utopias. Anarres presents an anarcho-syndicalist socio-political utopia, Urras offers a verdant planetary utopia, the Hains realize the Taoist ideal of balance, and intellectual utopia appears at the Ioti university. The university, designed to minimize outside distractions, provides an oasis devoted to advancing knowledge and the life of the mind. The scholastic life also provides Shevek a form of utopia. He finds the sublime in intellectual discovery. As he integrates the two temporal theories and finally understands his central social function, pleasure floods him. He delights in discovering the nexus of his life’s spirals. Connecting points that construct the novel’s spirals, the Reader also learns to seek intellectual integration, and Le Guin offers a moment of sublimity, like Shevek’s, as a reward.

Intellectual labor can yield sublime ecstasy, but Le Guin establishes that not everyone views intellectual labor positively. To challenge the bind, albeit indirectly, Le Guin uses Shevek to unite the mind with the body. He finds joy not in the life of the mind, as a habit or career, but in the products, intellectual discovery and integration, he produces. She labors to produce a desire, in her Reader, to integrate the mind with the body, using Shevek as a model. He demonstrates the physicality of intellectual work, connecting the mind to the body. Although intellectual labor fatigues his body, Shevek also forges an intimate, even erotic, relationship to his work, eventually birthing his ideas. Birth, for Shevek and for female intellectuals in *The Dispossessed*, serves to unite the mind with the body, to encourage the Reader to engage in the intellectual, and physical, labor needed to realize intellectual utopia, and to desire changes in society.

Not everyone in Shevek’s society views the intellectual life as utopian, and many do not value his intellectual contributions. After Shevek begins talking with the Urrasti, against the advice of his society, Shevek and his family are derisively called “intellectuals” at the same time people dub them “traitors” and “egoizers,” the worst insults in Pravic. 96 Pursuing one’s individual interests to the detriment of the rest of society, egoizing, draws forth censure and peer pressure to curb the individual’s harm to the community, even if that harm happens in the pursuit of intellectual discovery.

Shevek elevates the life of the mind above politics and everyday life. He reprimands one of his colleagues on Urras for comparing physics to politics, chiding, “I had thought better of your mind!” 97 He values intellectuals much more than politicians. Politics occurs to him as a secondary concern. His moments of intellectual insight, the moments when he

touches the sublime, constitute his eutopia. Using Shevek’s love for the mind, Le Guin shows the Reader the utopian aspects of the free expression of ideas, intellectual solidarity, and the ideals of academe. Over time, Shevek laments intellectual competition and elitism for souring his syndicate (physics). Shevek realizes that intellectual joy comes not through the academy — a place that repeatedly rejects him, competes in petty squabbles, and impedes his work — but through discovering new knowledge. At the moment Shevek integrates the two temporal theories, he reaches self-actualization, a transcendence accompanied by a “rush of piercing joy he did not forget.” He declares, “It is strong, exceedingly strong, to know that one’s life has been fulfilled.” Shevek’s moment of insight highlights the centrality of intellectual labor in his life, but it changes his eutopic ideal from everyday academic life to the “Eureka!” moment of discovery. The Reader learns to separate the life of pursuing knowledge from the act of producing knowledge through Shevek’s experiences.

Unlike the uplifting moment of discovery, the life of producing knowledge weighs Shevek down, physically. He obsesses over his work. Takver has to monitor him, fearing he will work himself to death. She explains, “he might have been sitting at the table for six or eight hours straight. When he got up he would lurch with fatigue, his hands would shake, and he was scarcely coherent.” If Shevek were one of Dostoevsky’s incarnated demons, he would be possessed by intellectual labor. Through Shevek’s labor, Le Guin demonstrates the physicality of intellectual work.

89 Le Guin, The Dispossessed, 187.
100 Le Guin, The Dispossessed, 34.
101 Le Guin, The Dispossessed, 281.
102 Le Guin, The Dispossessed, 188.
Shevek’s physical connection to his work extends beyond fatigue. He has an intimate and erotic relationship with his scholarship. When his studies stymie, Shevek laments, “like sex, it ought to have been a pleasure, and it wasn’t.”103 After moving forward with his work, like after he receives a letter with queries from the Urrasti physicists, his description turns visceral: “for days after getting a letter he was irascible and joyful, worked day and night, foamed out ideas like a fountain. Then slowly, with desperate spurts and struggles, he came back to earth, to dry ground, ran dry.”104 This passage’s crude sexuality emphasizes his erotic relationship with his work, reinforcing the physical connection between his mind and body. Le Guin aligns these two activities, intellectual discovery and ejaculation, to instruct the Reader to transfer the pleasure from sexual activity to intellectual activity. The narrator confirms the connection, as well. At his moment of ultimate intellectual discovery, Shevek experiences ecstasy that merges his mind and body.105 Eroticizing Shevek’s work experience reinforces the personal connection he has with intellectual labor, underlines the joyful motives he embodies, and firmly links the mind to the body.

Shevek’s close, personal connection to his work yields products organically, as though they have been birthed. Upon finishing his book, he tells Takver, “I am that book,” and, rejecting sharing credit for his book with his crooked colleague Sabul, protests, “I’d as soon share you with him as that book.”106 Takver immediately compares the book to their baby, with whom she is pregnant.107 With the analogy, Le Guin shows the Reader how Shevek’s mind and body merge through his relationship with his intellectual product. He

103 Le Guin, The Dispossessed, 158. The Anarresti refer to sexual behavior as copulation, so this appears to be the author’s voice.
104 Le Guin, The Dispossessed, 160.
105 Le Guin, The Dispossessed, 51.
106 Le Guin, The Dispossessed, 240.
107 Le Guin, The Dispossessed, 321, 331.
unites the labor of the intellect with the labor of the body. This united mind-body connection and metaphor occur to Shevek early in his life. He recognizes that the female intellectuals who shape him engage in intellectual birth, as well. He compares Gvarab, his first mentor, to Laia Odo, whose ideas gave birth to the foundation of Anarres. Both examples reaffirm the connection between generating ideas, or mentoring future scholars, and giving birth. Le Guin endows the mind with all the functions of the body, in this case the labor of birthing. Although this risks erasing the body, subsuming it to the mind, and obscuring the sexed nature of giving birth, it also establishes the physical nature of intellectual labor. *The Dispossessed* reminds the Reader that ideas come from minds housed in bodies that tire, excite, and labor. Le Guin makes more of those laboring bodies female, expanding the work opportunities afforded to the women of Anarres.

**Re-Working Women in the Workplace**

Le Guin crafts a society that changes the opportunities women have in the workplace. In contrast, Urras functions similarly to the Reader’s 1970s world, with gender norms constraining opportunities and labor choices. Le Guin expands the choices available to her characters, and helps the Reader to envision a world with increased, if not quite equal, opportunity. Women on Anarres work in a wide variety of industries, including the sciences, in *The Dispossessed*, but that increased access costs them. Some are reduced by their peers to disembodied minds, and others find their effect on society minimized or their identity subsumed by their work. They face double binds that force them to choose between work and family, and they disproportionately perform stereotypically feminine tasks. Although *The

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*Dispossessed* performs the workplace expansion sought by 1970s white, liberal feminists, like the attempts in real-world feminism, women entering the workplace encounter some snags.

Although Le Guin did not identify herself as a feminist until well after she had written *The Dispossessed*, with this novel she contributes to the second-wave feminist effort to broaden women’s employment options and influence in the public sphere.\(^\text{109}\) Le Guin observes that, “part of the job of feminism still is just to take a stereotype and turn it inside out,” a task she does not credit herself with attempting until *A Wizard of Earthsea*.\(^\text{110}\) However, in *The Dispossessed*, a large number of women work in non-traditional sectors. Le Guin nonchalantly casts women in jobs and roles historically held by men. Delany notes how many of the women Le Guin writes into positions “unusual for them in fiction.”\(^\text{111}\) In 1974, women infrequently were portrayed as brilliant engineers (Rulag), forcefully heading defense crews (the first female character the Reader encounters), or rocking the physics world (Gvarab). Le Guin casts women in a wide variety of non-traditional roles by including female machinists, politicians, engineers, physicists, political theorists, philosophers, and activists.\(^\text{112}\)

In addition, a number of women work in the sciences on Anarres. Shevek estimates that women comprise half of the scientific workforce. The representation in fiction far exceeds the Reader’s real world. Even thirty years after the release of *The Dispossessed*, the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics reported, “women were 64% of psychologists, 41% of biological and life scientists, 26% of mathematical and computer scientists, and 11% of

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\(^{109}\) For an account of how race shaped feminist efforts in the 1970s, see Benita Roth, *Separate Roads to Feminism: Black, Chicana, and White Feminist Movements in America’s Second Wave* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).


\(^{111}\) Delany, “To Read *The Dispossessed*.”

\(^{112}\) Le Guin, *The Dispossessed*, 159.
Women in the readers’ world, in 1974 or 2004, were more likely to work outside the sciences or, if in the sciences, in feminized sciences. Women work in all of the sciences on Anarres more frequently than in the real world, but Le Guin reflects the limits of her own world and protean, unintentional feminism in the constrained opportunities she writes for the women in the novel.

Takver, for example, does assume an unusual role, as a talented marine scientist. She strides forward, taking on a new role, but the science at which she excels feminizes her. Science fiction traditionally explored the “hard” sciences: physics, chemistry, math. Takver’s science (ichthyology) appears feminine juxtaposed with Shevek’s hard science (physics). She fosters and studies life, nurtures the natural world, and explores the forces of life. Studying and nurturing life, her science aligns with traditionally feminine roles. Moreover, she cares for creatures who live in a feminized element (water). Takver’s science fosters, and her science feminizes her.

Other women work in the hard sciences, but their enhanced minds cost them in other ways. For example, two very bright physicists, Gvarab and Mitis, mentor Shevek. The more traditional Mitis works at the Physics Institute where Shevek trains, and he believes she has the “best mind” at this syndicate. But his phrasing erases Mitis’s body as a source of knowledge, reinforcing mind-body dualism. Her mind excels but only by erasing the rest of her. Furthermore, she guides Shevek’s early training, a more elementary role than the physicists who help him to make his life’s intellectual breakthrough, two men: the Urrasti.

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114 Lefanu argues that Takver functions as a token. See Lefanu, *Feminism and SF*, 141.
115 The more traditional physicists tell Shevek to dismiss Gvarab as a “mystical gagaist” whose “Simultaneity” theory is “soft,” feminizing her and dismissing her work by aligning it with religion instead of physics. Le Guin, *The Dispossessed*, 113.
Atro and the Terran Ainsetain. Placing Mitis early in the tale, Le Guin affords her honor as a talented physicist but marginalizes her in Shevek’s life physically and intellectually, trapping her brilliance beneath a glass ceiling. Her talent diminishes in the Reader’s awareness as Shevek moves beyond her work into more complex theories, just as he moves from working with her at a regional syndicate to a larger syndicate in Abbenay, the central city. Mitis loses her body and her talent in the shadow of Shevek’s life and genius.

Shevek stands on the shoulders of another great woman to found his life: the central philosopher for the Anarresti, Laia Odo. Shevek is well aware of her gender, admonishing the Urrasti physicists, “Odo was a woman.”117 However, Laia obtains her position, philosophizing and fomenting a revolution, because her husband is martyred. She takes on the philosophical and political role only when he no longer could. She began her career as a politician’s wife, not a political theorist. After her death, the Anarresti cite their shared surname, “Odo,” not her given, and gendered, name, “Laia.” The surname merges Laia with her husband, creating one body of thought. Le Guin eliminates shared surnames on Anarres, demonstrating her familiarity with this feminist tactic, but Laia remains hidden inside their shared legacy, erasing Laia’s body to privilege her mind.

A strict mind-body division rules even more strongly on Urras, where minds in female bodies cannot attend or even visit the University. Le Guin compares the two societies to encourage the Reader to judge Anarres as progressive. Despite the expanded work options, however, the critics express disappointment in the work options Le Guin affords her female characters in The Dispossessed. Delany points to the tradition of the “cold,

117 Le Guin, The Dispossessed, 74.
tradition-bound mother” that Shevek’s mother Rulag embodies. Rulag calls forth patriarchal fables that argue that women’s reproductive and mothering capabilities, their bodies, diminish if they act in the public sphere or enhance their minds. A more talented engineer than Shevek’s father Palat, Rulag appears to be a terrible mother and life partner, leaving both Shevek and his father to pursue her career. Le Guin places Rulag in a classic double bind. Although she provides Rulag with a brilliant career and access to the public sphere, she forces Rulag to trade her family for her career. She chooses her career, and the Anarresti do not require or expect women to mother. But, as Delany suggests, the cold mother character type exists in the Reader’s awareness, if not in the text itself. The Reader does not share Rulag’s socialization and probably will read the character in reference to his/her own world, rather than Rulag’s own, forming the double bind.

These scientists opt to follow their traditionally masculine careers to contribute to society, but Le Guin disproportionately assigns feminized, “traditional” roles as nursery attendants, midwives, and administrative assistants to women in The Dispossessed. Men rarely assume these feminized work roles on Anarres. On Urras, women assume traditional roles as well. For example, Shevek seeks help at a candy shop. The sweet woman running the shop helps him to locate his friend (Vea), and, by convincing him to give Vea candy, initiates a financial relationship between Shevek and Vea that later hurts them both. Why does Le Guin choose a woman who sells sweets for this task? Why not send Shevek to a female mechanic or a male haberdasher? Why not make the candy clerk male? Adding the romantic and gendered element to this very minor character allies women with service professions,

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118 Delany, “To Read The Dispossessed.”
120 Jamieson, Double Bind.
feminizes romantic pursuits, and fails to challenge traditional gendering of jobs by aligning a female body with a feminized job.

Le Guin claims that her (male) heroes share characteristics, that each one engages in “knocking down a barrier, opening a door, enlarging the space available (for life, for thought, for knowledge). Creating freedom. With passion, patience, obsession, transgression.” Le Guin did not completely break down the workplace door for women in *The Dispossessed*, but she does crack a door open. Propping it to, Le Guin grants the Reader a glimpse of where feminist politics would grow in the following years.

**Conclusions and Implications**

Feminist efforts in the 1970s did help to change the workplace for workers, but feminists continue to advocate for equality in the workplace. The re-working of the workplace that Le Guin performs in *The Dispossessed* offers the Reader a view of what anarcho-syndicalism can contribute to changing how work works. Workers in Kropotkin’s workplace enjoy their work, administer and organize themselves, and depend on other syndicates to help them to create a balanced society. The society that Le Guin forms in the novel applies Kropotkin’s decentralized government to separate the means of distribution from the means of production and his syndical and interdependent societal organization and work structure. The workers work short days, rotate assignments, and choose their work based on interest and talent. The motives lead to a balanced social organism that eliminates government and maximizes on individual freedom.

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121 Chee, “Breaking into the Spell.”
Individuals are free to choose their own work and are free of an external government, but they govern themselves. The Anarresti produce a desire to contribute to society, what Le Guin calls the social conscience, for its citizens using education. Educated to value mutual aid, citizens on Anarres shame and pressure those who violate the societal call to duty. That duty can help to prevent workers from loafing, as Kropotkin points out, but it can threaten the individual if the tyranny of the majority limits individual thought and creativity. Creating a world that shows both the promise and the dangers of anarcho-syndicalism, Le Guin offers her Reader a glimpse at how Kropotkin’s imagined society might work (or not). However, a society will not work, Le Guin suggests, if it is structured like Urras, and hence like the Reader’s own society. The capitalist society, and its profit motive, emerge as much more flawed than even the possible breaks in the system on Anarres. The promise of Anarres produces a desire for the Reader to change her or his own society.

Society needs to support the individual in exchange for her or his duty, completing the social contract. That contract seems unbalanced at the beginning of Shevek’s story, but by the end of the novel, he has learned to balance his duty to both physics and his society. His society realizes that Shevek can contribute best to them by undermining their expectations. The expectations of an anarchist society should turn, should revolve, and should enable revolution, as Kropotkin suggests. That revolution, mirroring the fluctuating organization of their workplace, can re-work the workplace and can forge the social bond.

To find his own bond with society, Shevek must navigate between those who view intellectual labor as utopian and those who deride it. Performing this intellectual labor, Shevek’s body intrudes upon the Reader’s awareness. The Reader cannot ignore the physicality of the intellectual life. Shevek’s body relates to his knowledge, sometimes by
limiting him, sometimes by anticipating him, and sometimes by seducing him. Intimate with his ideas, Shevek gives birth to a new era.

Le Guin helps to birth a new era, as well, by imagining a workplace with equitable opportunity. Those opportunities change roles for women in the workplace, challenge stereotypes, and include women more fully in the sciences. Those women stride forward, pointing the way that feminism continues to lead, but the stereotypes and double binds of the Reader’s world constrains those steps. Nevertheless, stepping forward, Le Guin’s women change feminist science fiction by actively engaging in scientific inquiry.

Le Guin also changes what the Reader can imagine about an ideal workplace. Work changes in *The Dispossessed*, but the way that society works changes as well. Changing how people relate to one another, to institutions, and to vectors of identity, Le Guin uses the novel to alter not only how people work but how people relate. Those relationships provide stability for individuals caught in a fluctuating world without external governance and help to construct an internalized, fluctuating governmentality.
Chapter 5
Re-Relating:
Changing Relationships in *The Dispossessed*

Feminists actively work to change relationships for women: between women and romantic partners, between women and political allies, between women and themselves, between women and gender, and between women and institutions. The relational changes that Le Guin imagines in *The Dispossessed* contribute to the feminist struggles of the 1970s, even if she did not align herself consciously with the feminist project then, and also contain seeds of the change to come. The changes she imagines offer new relationships to women, and she grounds this in the cognitive estrangement of feminist science fiction, transforming women’s options and the genre simultaneously.

Critics, fans, and librarians deem *The Dispossessed* one of the best feminist science fiction novels of all time.\(^1\) Emerging during the ascendance of the second wave of feminism, the novel contributes to the growth of science fiction as a genre. In turn, the genre provides Le Guin with experimental space to explore and change how people relate. The relationships in this novel, John Huntington argues, are “inherently conditioned by the shape of the

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In other words, the fluctuation and equality that typify Anarresti political relations transfer to its private relationships, as well. Furthermore, the relationships help to constitute, and to stabilize, their fluctuating society.

A syndicalist, anarchist society fluctuates frequently. People move between syndicates, change towns and tasks, and move to new homes. Their identities also fluctuate. The Anarresti live on a barren planet, but they have abundant resources available to construct and perform their identities. They change who they are, and, in the process, change how they relate to one another and to larger societal institutions, like the State. With language evolving, people constantly moving about, and the workforce shifting, citizens, and the Reader, might struggle to find solid ground. The Reader receives stability through Shevek, and Le Guin offers him interpersonal relationships, with Bedap, Takver, and his daughters, as a firm, fixed force to steady his course. Society orbits around them as their relationships to it, its institutions, and identities, transform.

Le Guin re-relates the individual to language, to the entire symbolic order, by exploring and changing naming conventions. Naming changes the nature of the nation and its collective identity. The identity of a group depends on how they define themselves linguistically, and Le Guin uses the fluidity afforded by language to re-define the nation-state, and characters’ relationship to it and one another, in *The Dispossessed*. The political promise of naming applies to individuals personally, as well, and Le Guin changes naming practices on Anarres to highlight the political power of naming. The individual changes relations with the social order comprised by the nation-state, by personal naming conventions, and by language more generally.

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Relations change between the novel and the Reader, as well. The Reader encounters a world that de-centers whiteness, peopled with predominantly brown bodies. The body politic on Anarres experiences and learns about the world through embodied epistemologies that teach the Reader a new, productive relationship between knowledge and the body. Le Guin also expands the Reader’s normative expectations about sexual practices and identities. Grappling with the politics and economics of sex, she contrasts sex as practice and sex as transaction to show the Reader the danger inherent in commodifying sexual relationships. Transferring the agency of desire, Le Guin changes the identity that governs the desirer-desired relationship from gender to age and maturity. Throughout *The Dispossessed*, Le Guin expands the identity options available to her characters and provides new identity scripts to her Reader along the way. The identity politics Le Guin includes in *The Dispossessed* perform the identity transformations feminists advocated for during the 1970s and beyond, even if she did not label these changes feminist at the time. In some areas, such as “race” and embodied epistemologies, she offers solutions ahead of her time, but she lags behind feminism in others, such as sexual orientation. The novel thus helps to provide the Reader, and the critic, a glimpse into the state of 1970s society, identity politics, and how fluctuation could re-relate individuals to identity.

Beyond identity, Le Guin’s novel changes the relationship between the individual and the planet and animals. Le Guin provides her Reader with new possibilities for relating to the planet, to animals, and to environmental politics. The Anarresti suffer from shortage of natural resources, much as United States citizens did during in the mid-1970s, and Le Guin teaches ways that conservation and environmentalism can produce thoughtful, engaged citizens. She demonstrates, with her characters, the power of relating to the planet and
working to produce a desire to conserve, thereby modeling a relationship that would have been applicable immediately for her 1970s Reader.

In summary, Le Guin re-relates the individual to language through naming, to vectors of identity including “race,” the body and knowledge, sexual practices and orientations, and to the planet and environmentalism. Each new relationship teaches the Reader new ways of being in the world, and helps to constitute the society within the novel. That society depends on a rhetorical relationship between the individual and the social order crafted through language and naming.

Re-Relating to Language and the Social Order

Le Guin provides the Reader with new ways, grounded in language, to relate to both public and personal politics. Public politics enable the individual citizen to connect to the larger community. That connection, Le Guin shows, articulates through language, but it does so in different forms depending on the nation. The forms of the three Urrasti nation-states, loosely allegorical to the three “worlds” of the Reader’s world during the Cold War, lead to limited interaction between citizens and creates enemy relationships between the states. The state-less Anarresti connect more directly, with fluctuating identities and relationships that the Reader experiences through Shevek’s experiences of betrayal and liminality. More interpersonally, Le Guin explores how language shapes the individual’s relationship to the nation through the personal politics of naming, including titles, gender markers, and relational ties. The ties between the individual and the nation change, using language, for both personal and public politics in *The Dispossessed*. 
Connecting to the Nation and Public Politics

The nation transforms a group of discrete individuals into a collective, and that nation forms itself through naming, through language. Using a collective noun, communities of people craft an imaginary connection between its members; Benedict Anderson explains that nations are limited imagined communities. Communities use the noun to draw a line around the group, thereby delimiting who belongs and who does not using language.

Scholars of the nation have documented this phenomenon repeatedly. For example, Maurice Charland demonstrates how le peuple Québécois constitute a nation by adopting a name, and Vanessa Beasley has explored how U.S. American presidents have engaged in similar nation-constituting work. Thomas W. Benson broadens this perspective, suggesting that rhetors offer collective identities to an audience and successful rhetoric crafts a collective identity that appeals to the audience. To understand what identity will function for a group, the critic should consider the invitations extant in the text itself.

*The Dispossessed* presents how the individual might relate to the nation and the larger collective in a land without nation-states. Without the State, a citizen can still connect to the nation. Le Guin creates a world with nation-states paralleling the Reader’s own world that reproduce the State’s mediation of the relationship between the individual and the nation. These nations, on Urras, demonstrate different relationships that the State might provide, and they serve to foil the nation, not connected to a State, on Anarres.

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3 Anderson, *Imagined Communities.*
5 Benson, “Rhetoric as Being.”
Urras and Its Three Nation-States

The Reader brings a familiarity with the form of nations from the “real” world to bear on the novel. In *The Dispossessed*, the Urrasti nations appear in a form that the Reader would recognize. Although the three nation-states on Urras do not provide an in-depth allegory, they do resemble the 1970s global political environment of the Reader’s world. On Urras, A-Io represents the “first” world, Thu the “second” world, and Benbili the “third” world. The three nations, one capitalist, one communist, and one tribal, strongly resemble the Reader’s world during the Cold War. In each case, the nation affixes to a state, and the individual forms a relationship with the nation and the state simultaneously.

A-Io stands in for the first world. The Ioti claim to operate an open democracy. Socially, they maintain an aristocracy that values history and heritage. Shevek’s colleague, Atro, exemplifies the Ioti aristocracy. He displays a “genuine contempt for both money and power,” explaining that “his respect cannot be bought,” but he honors familial roots and “the right name.” Socio-political relationships depend on social standing in A-Io. The aristocracy functions separately from, but in conjunction with, the state, what Shevek’s communist colleague characterizes as a “plutocratic-oligarchic State,” based on the sway that money plays in their capitalist society. The novel speaks to the Reader’s real-world

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6 The “first,” “second,” and “third” world categories vastly oversimplified the political reality, even at the time, and introduced a political hierarchy I do not wish to perpetuate. Although the terms persisted after the conclusion of the Cold War, I use them here only because they were common parlance at the time. After the Cold War, scholars began to use terms such as the developing/developed world, the Global South/North, or the two-thirds/one-thirds or majority/minority world. Post-colonial studies unpack the complex geo-politics at work in these definitions, names, and relationships.

7 Le Guin, *The Dispossessed*, 141, 143.

experience of the first world, and suggests the individual’s relationship depends on either money, power, or heritage.

The Ioti nation relies heavily on military might, in addition to its aristocratic social structure, to maintain peace. Atro tells Shevek that the “common soldier has always been our greatest resource as a nation.”9 Their state also maintains a secret police force comprised of soldiers.10 When rebels on A-Io gather to protest, the police and army break up the demonstration and then hunt down the fleeing rebels.11 Thus, Le Guin positions the Reader to distrust the State mediating relations between the individual and the nation.

The state mediates this relationship even more strongly in *The Dispossessed’s* second world, a communist nation-state that borders on the totalitarian. In Thu, the “state is all, all for the state,” and “one power structure controls all, the government, administration, police, army, education, laws, trades, manufacture.”12 Whether or not the nation leans toward totalitarianism, first-world citizens, like the Reader, had been trained to perceive communist nations in this way. In these nations, the individual relates to the nation-State by subsuming him or herself, creating a flat, unified, and unvaried version of the nation.

Le Guin uses this flat portrayal to teach Shevek a valuable lesson about patriotism and the State. His colleague Chifoilisk’s staunch patriotism earns him ridicule from the Ioti who surround him. He warns Shevek that the Ioti are as patriotic as he, just less obviously so.13 Shevek and Chifoilisk’s conversation emphasizes that nationalism does not depend on the form of government in place, creating a crack in the relationship between the nation and

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the State for the Reader. Patriotic devotion depends not on the political philosophy
governing a citizen’s homeland, Chifoilisk teaches Shevek and the Reader, but instead
depends on one’s relationship to the nation. After their conversation, Chifoilisk disappears.
The Reader never knows if Thu or A-Io made this man disappear for talking politics with
Shevek. Either way, his disappearance teaches Shevek about the danger of blindly devoting
oneself to a state.

The third state on Urras, Benbili, represents the the third world and appears in *The
Dispossessed* primarily as a foil to the “civilized” A-Io and Thu. One of the Ioti patriots and
physicists, Pac, informs Shevek, “Benbili’s a backward sort of country. Always having
revolutions.”¹⁴ The Ioti define themselves by denigrating Benbili. The Benbili function to
show the Reader only who the Ioti and Thuvians are not, just like the first and third worlds
used the third world.¹⁵ The view that third-world nations or tribally organized countries have
citizens who constantly revolt would have been familiar to the Reader, equipping him/her to
read Benbili as a non-industrialized nation. Shevek encounters several characters who
express nationalist or jingoist sentiments from the other two nations, but he only hears
about Benbili from representatives of the first and second world, erasing the Benbili from
the conversation. The subaltern does not speak in *The Dispossessed*, and, as Shevek’s
colleagues remove Benbili from the political milieu, Le Guin relegates them to a
supplementary role. They function primarily to contrast with the first and second worlds,
creating an unequal relationship between the nations.

¹⁵ Mohanty explores this definitional relationship in: Chandra Talpade Mohanty, “Under Western
On Urras, nations define themselves in relation to the state or to other nation-states. Who one is not becomes the key to defining who one is. The Ioti, Benbili, and Thuvians all define the other nation-states as the Other. The specter of the enemy haunts these nations and nation-states. In *The Concept of the Political*, Carl Schmitt argues that identification of the Other, of the enemy, defines a nation’s horizons.\(^{16}\) The horizon divides the self from Other, defining those within the nation on the basis of a shared Other.

*The Dispossessed* presents the Reader with the flaws in each of the three nations on Urras, but it does not ask the Reader to define any particular group as the Other. Thus, Le Guin invites the Reader to consider Anarres and its political possibilities. She does not ask the Reader to abandon an identification with A-Io, Thu, Benbili, or their real-world counterparts. Her simplistic geo-political representation of the Reader’s world emphasizes the relationships between different types of nations rather than directly allegorizing specific nations. By eschewing a direct allegory to the “real” world, she avoids any complications presented by the specific nations or relationships the Reader might have with those nations. Instead, she asks her Reader to acknowledge the flaws in each of the three nation-states. Having granted that these systems limit one’s ability to relate to the nation, the Reader can identify with the Anarresti anarchists without abandoning alliances to real-world nation-states.

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**Anarres: The Nation without a State**

Anarres does not have a state. They do have a collective identity, as Odonians, but their collective identities ebb and flow, like their politics. For example, when Shevek leaves for Urras, a mob gathers, but it quickly disperses because, the narrator shares, “there were as many reasons there as there were people.” This collection of individuals views itself as a group of “members of a community, not a collectivity,” because “they were not moved by mass feeling.” Together they live, work, and disassociate. Their national identity changes as the individuals change.

The individuals could define themselves on the basis of race, sex, ability, a combination of these, or any other identity category, but they choose to identify on the basis of political commitment. As a youth, Shevek tells a friend, “We don’t leave Anarres because we are Anarres.” This early understanding of their collective identity relies on their shared space (their planet), but Shevek’s identification with the place changes as he matures and leaves Anarres to visit Urras. Unlike the Urrasti’s persistent national identity, the Anarresti unite in groupings, such as syndicates, that can change at any time. The limits of their imagined communities change based on the situation and their shared interest. Iris Marion Young’s definition of identity as seriality, in which collective identity comes into being on the basis of shared need and dissolves after that need is met, captures the temporary nature of their collective identity well. Their collective identities perform their political commitment to anarchism’s fluctuating form and the needs that it fulfills.

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Only one shared limited imagined community persists on Anarres: anti-Urras. Anarresti children learn to view Urras as “disgusting, immoral, excremental,” and to “detest Urras, hate Urras, fear Urras.\(^{21}\) One of the boys wonders, “Why hate? Hate’s not functional; why are we taught it? Could it be that if we knew what Urras was really like, we’d like it — some of it — some of us?\(^{22}\) The others doubt it, demonstrating, to the Reader, how strongly this tie binds them together against this “ideological enemy.”\(^{23}\) The depth of the nation’s commitment to defending against this external enemy introduces the possibility of treason for a nation without a state. Betraying the nation, the community, constitutes treason, and damages the relationship to the community dramatically.

The Anarresti nation depends on mutual aid, so betraying the collective threatens everyone. They do not tolerate treason. Takver and Shevek’s daughter Sadik learns this when the woman who supervises her dormitory calls the family traitors. Le Guin presents Sadik’s experience as particularly trying. The little girl struggles to vocalize this accusation, stuttering. Once she manages to tell her parents, she collapses, “as if she had been shot.”\(^{24}\) The nuclear nature of their family challenged the larger community’s form for years; long-standing commitments between individuals can undermine the individual’s identification with the nation. Their family presents a more permanent collective identity than the ever-fluctuating nation, and it serves as a way to define Shevek, Takver, Sadik (and probably Pilun), and Bedap as outsiders, based on their disassociation with the larger nation’s anti-Urras

\(^{21}\) Le Guin, *The Dispossessed*, 43.
\(^{22}\) Le Guin, *The Dispossessed*, 44.
\(^{24}\) Le Guin, *The Dispossessed*, 370.
identification.\textsuperscript{25} The Anarresti nation transfers their anger at Shevek, at his perceived betrayal, to the children and the other members of this long-standing group (their family).

The Anarresti nation reacts so strongly because the difference of opinion between the nation and Shevek centers on the edges of their national identity. Shevek wants to visit Urras, the home of the only persistent Other for the Anarresti. His desire to visit the enemy threatens the only persistent national bond they share. He does not just seek to visit Urras, however, he seeks to unmake the nation by visiting Urras. Although unmaking the nation's enemyship bond makes Shevek an anarchist, a true patriot of their shared political theory, the citizens have come to depend on their anti-national identification and feel as though Shevek betrays the limits of their imagined community.

In contrast, the Urrasti physicists actively recruit Shevek. He wryly observes, “when the enemy enthusiastically embraces you, and the fellow countrymen bitterly reject you, it is hard not to wonder if you are, in fact, a traitor.”\textsuperscript{26} If he leaves Anarres and goes to Urras to talk with their physicists, then does he betray his relationship to his homeland? Or, does he betray the Urrasti for accepting their help but maintaining connections with and loyalty to Anarres? When Shevek first arrives on Urras, he reminds himself that these men are “enemies of his homeland, rivals, strangers, brothers.”\textsuperscript{27} But Shevek’s colleague, Atro, challenges, “what defines brotherhood but non-brotherhood?”\textsuperscript{28} Atro’s point that non-brotherhood serves to define brotherhood asks Shevek to consider his relationship with each

\textsuperscript{25} Shevek and Bedap want to increase contact with Urras. Many of the Anarresti do not share this opinion, and the difference in opinion leads Bedap, Takver, and Shevek to form the Syndicate of Initiative and lobby for Shevek to visit Urras.
\textsuperscript{26} Le Guin, \textit{The Dispossessed}, 354.
\textsuperscript{27} Le Guin, \textit{The Dispossessed}, 160.
\textsuperscript{28} Le Guin, \textit{The Dispossessed}, 142.
group. He identifies with the scientists as intellectual brothers, but they are enemies of his homeland, his political brothers. He betrays both. And neither.

Shevek’s position reminds the Reader that he is liminal, in and out of both groups, moving the edge of each community toward the other. To perfect his temporal theory, Shevek needs to encounter his homeland’s enemies, his brothers in intellect.\textsuperscript{29} To create peace, he must identify with the enemy of his intellectual brothers, his homeland. His anarchist identity relies on the enmity between Anarres and Urras. He embodies the contradiction of being an enemy and a brother to all; he unmakes walls. The only relationships that persist for him are not national but interpersonal.

Shevek’s story provides the Reader a model for new civic relationships. Those relationships inform his plea to the Urrasti rebels during the uprising. His revolutionary speech rouses the rebels, and the Terran ambassador later shares that his speech moved her deeply, making her cry. Shevek inspires people to try to change their relationship to the State, to one another in the nation, and to the world. He delivers the following speech, on the steps of the Ioti Capitol:

\textsuperscript{29} Le Guin, \textit{The Dispossessed}, 278.
It is our suffering that brings us together. It is not love. Love does not obey the mind, and turns to hate when forced. The bond that binds us is beyond choice. We are brothers. We are brothers in what we share. In pain, which each of us must suffer alone, in hunger, in poverty, in hope, we know our brotherhood. We know it, because we have had to learn it. We know that there is no help for us but from one another, that no hand will save us if we do not reach out our hand. And the hand that you reach out is empty, as mine is. You have nothing. You possess nothing. You own nothing. You are free. All you have is what you are, and what you give.

I am here because you see in me the promise, the promise that we made two hundred years ago in this city – the promise kept. We have kept it, on Anarres. We have nothing but our freedom. We have nothing to give you but your own freedom. We have no law but the single principle of mutual aid between individuals. We have no government but the single principle of free association. We have no states, no nations, no presidents, no premiers, no chiefs, no generals, no bosses, no bankers, no landlords, no wages, no charity, no police, no soldiers, no wars. Nor do we have much else. We are sharers, not owners. We are not prosperous. None of us is rich. None of us is powerful. If it is Anarres you want, if it is the future you seek, then I tell you that you must come to it with empty hands. You must come to it alone, and naked, as the child comes into the world, into his future, without any past, without any property, wholly dependent on other people for his life. You cannot take what you have not given, and you must give yourself. You cannot buy the Revolution. You cannot make the Revolution. You can only be the Revolution. It is in your spirit, or it is nowhere.\textsuperscript{30}

Le Guin offers the Reader the freedom to become free from possession, in a fluctuating, uncertain world. That world requires that we learn to depend on one another, that we give to others, and that we learn new ways to be, in order to become the Revolution, to inhabit new identities and politics. Those politics might occur formally, as on Urras, or informally, as on Anarres (indeed, Shevek even denies that a nation exists!), or they might occur interpersonally.

\textsuperscript{30} Le Guin, \textit{The Dispossessed}, 300-301.
Naming and Personal Politics

Feminists have recognized the power of naming for some time. On a large scale, feminists continually contest and construct what “feminism” means, demonstrating the power of a collective name. More personally, feminists have deployed naming politically by keeping, or claiming, our own names and choosing androgynous names for children. Some feminists forego titles and honorifics and prefer to be called by their first names; other feminists use their titles insistently. Each of these choices changes relationships between people and between people and language. Assuming a father’s or husband’s name privileges patrilineal familial definitions. Naming a child androgynously reminds people of gender’s social construction and it provides the child with the freedom to choose her/his gender and sexual identifications. Using one’s given name, instead of a titled name, creates a personal connection that minimizes power differences, but using one’s title raises the visibility of female accomplishment and reminds everyone that women earn those titles. No matter how applied, naming provides feminists with a powerful political resource.

Le Guin might not have discovered her feminism before she wrote The Dispossessed, but she makes much of the political power of naming. She says, “a writer, an artist whose medium is words, is likely to find the idea of magic as naming, words as power, a quite natural one.” Naming plays a central role in her Earthsea fantasy series, for example. In The

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31 In the 1970s, Mary Daly, informed by her expertise in language and religion, explored naming extensively. See: Mary Daly, Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978); Mary Daly and Jane Caputi, “Preface and Preliminary Web 1-5” in Webster’s First New Intergalactic Wickedary of the English Language (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), xiii-58. Daly’s early work is rife with imperialist assumptions and has been critiqued heavily by post-colonial scholars. Readers interested in pursuing that line of critique would do well to begin with Mohanty, “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses.”

32 Le Guin, “Chronicles of Earthsea: Q&A Transcript.”
Dispossessed, Le Guin highlights the political and relational power of naming on multiple levels.

Most basically, the Anarresti greet one another by stating their name. Accustomed to this practice, Shevek finds the Ioti custom of formal greeting and naming curious.\(^{33}\) He omits titles and third-person conjugations from his salutations, disliking the distance it introduces between people. He explains, “I thought you might be glad to be free of the unnecessary, that’s all.”\(^{34}\) The Anarresti remove all but the necessary from their lives, reducing the world to all but the absolute necessities, and here Shevek seeks to decrease status differences between people by eschewing the repetition of individual’s titles. Le Guin also applies this principle to naming characters by emphasizing the absence of last names.

Anarresti names do not indicate relationship or gender, unlike societies on Urras or in the Reader’s world.\(^{35}\) On Urras, parents select a child’s first name (one that implies gender), and the father’s last name passes to the child. Males retain their names, unchanged, throughout their lives. But young women retain their father’s last name when they marry, and their husband’s last name becomes their middle name. For example, the main female Urrasti character, Vea Doem Oiie, bears her father’s last name (Oiie) as her surname and her husband’s surname (Doem) as her middle name. Her name designates the closest male relationships in her life. That relationship changes from one with just her father to one including her spouse upon her marriage, treating her as a commodity moving between men. Her name defines her in relationship to men instead of in relation to other women or to herself.

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\(^{34}\) Le Guin, *The Dispossessed*, 81. Shevek comments on their politics, indirectly, here. Explicitly, the “unnecessary” indicates titles, but it could easily be government, as well.

Rather than change the relationship implied by a name to other women or to the individual, Le Guin removes all interpersonal relationship markers from names on Anarres. A computer randomly generates a single word, five to six letters, to name every child born. Names do not indicate lineage, gender, or romantic or sexual partner relationships. Parents have no influence in the naming process, either. Takver dislikes her firstborn’s name, protesting, “it doesn’t fit her,” but the baby becomes Sadik nevertheless. Once the computer assigns a baby’s name, it does not reissue the name again until the person dies. After someone dies, the computer can re-assign the name to a new child, enabling the collective to re-absorb the individual. The individual’s legacy, through their name, passes through society instead of through bloodlines.

Although they do not indicate interpersonal relationships, names matter to the Anarresti because they serve as a person’s sole identifier. People initiate conversations by exchanging names, and their name serves as the primary symbolic identifier for each other and for the collective. No other person shares exactly the same name, reiterating that their society values the individual by respecting the rarity of the name. The Reader learns how important names are to the Anarresti when Shevek encounters an issue with a man named Shevet. Upset by the intimacy implied by the similarity between their names, Shevet initiates a fist-fight with Shevek. Unaccustomed to encapsulating a relationship to anyone else with his name, Shevet strikes out to decrease the implied intimacy between the two men (ironically, he increases the intimacy between them by emphasizing the similarity of their names).

36 Le Guin, The Dispossessed, 250, emphasis in original.
38 Le Guin, The Dispossessed, 74.
The naming practice on Anarres eliminates relationship markers based on naming, instead prizing the individual with its unique, androgynous naming system. The system encourages individuals to identify with their name and with society, instead of with other people. With this naming system, Le Guin asks her Reader to consider new relationships between the individual and the social order. In a similar fashion, she changes the relationship between the Reader and various vectors of identity.

**Re-Identifying: New Scripts to Perform**

In *The Dispossessed*, Le Guin uses the space afforded her by science fiction to explore new possibilities for changing how the individual relates to identity. Identities on Urras and in the Reader’s world contrast with the new options the characters on Anarres craft and perform. These new performances provide the Reader with scripts for changing her/his own performance of identity, in its various forms. The different identities that Le Guin re-relates direct the Reader’s attention to identity and to the political work it performs in interpersonal interactions. Le Guin uses these interactions to de-center whiteness and emphasize the “race” of her characters, to value the body as a source of knowledge, to change the role of sexual practices in society, to warn against overlapping sex and economics, to change which identity wields the agency of sexual desire, and to alter romantic and sexual relationships between people.
Race

Throughout her career, Le Guin has sought to broaden the racial spectrum portrayed in science fiction.39 She says,

Most of the characters in my fantasy and far-future science fiction books are not white. They’re mixed; they’re rainbow. . . . My color scheme was conscious and deliberate from the start. Whites are a minority on Earth now — why wouldn’t they still be either a minority, or just swallowed up in the larger colored gene pool, in the future?40

To realize this rainbow, Le Guin describes the majority of her characters with explicit racial markers. For example, in “The Day Before the Revolution,” she renders Laia Odo the “color of mud,” Gadeo as “black,” and Noi as “dark.”41 In *The Dispossessed*, the women on Urras show their “brown bellies,” Sewa Oii has “dark hands,” and a pawn broker and the leader of the Urrasti resistance are each described as a “dark man.”42 An “alien” character, from Terras (allegorically Earth) has a “jet-black face” and the Terran ambassador, who hails from India, appears “yellow-brown.”43 By presenting primarily characters of color, featuring non-white characters as protagonists, and denying racial invisibility, Le Guin challenges white privilege.44 The white privilege in the Reader’s consciousness necessitates Le Guin’s description. She notes, “it is possible that some readers never even notice what color the

people in the story are.” To overcome the Reader’s presumed, assumptive racism and to change the Reader’s relationship to “race,” she colors her characters.

However, Le Guin exercises her own privilege in inscribing positions with “color.” Le Guin, as a white woman, speaks from a position of privilege. Presuming to speak from a subject or identity position vastly different from those for whom one speaks assumes a familiarity and knowledge. Achieving a standpoint that does not align to one’s own ascribed and avowed identities requires some effort. Le Guin tries to take account of her own privilege. She learned early in life about speaking for others – her father worked as an anthropologist and her mother, a psychologist, came to fame for relaying the tale of Ishi, the final member of the Yahi tribe. She learned early about the political and imperialist dangers of speaking for others. In, “A Whitewashed Earthsea: How the Sci Fi Channel Wrecked my Books,” Le Guin argues that science fiction and fantasy lessen the dangers of speaking for others because the author can present, in lieu of a direct allegory to reality, a “rainbow world we can imagine.” She cautions, however, that “with all freedom comes responsibility.” Le Guin takes particular care speaking for others and the science fiction community has lauded the racial sensitivity of her work. Her reflexivity combines with her science fiction settings to help to diminish the dangers of speaking for others.

45 Le Guin, “A Whitewashed Earthsea.”


47 Le Guin, “A Whitewashed Earthsea.”

48 Le Guin, “A Whitewashed Earthsea.”
With *The Dispossessed*, Le Guin provides a vessel for characters of color in an imaginary setting to speak for themselves. She reminds her Reader not to whitewash her characters, thereby disrupting whiteness’s invisibility. She refuses to erase the voices of people speaking from the racial margins of the Reader’s awareness, centering people of color instead. The people she speaks for are fictional, allowing her to maximize the potential to hear voices from the margins without suffering the political repercussions of speaking for others, despite speaking from a white woman’s body.

The Body

Le Guin embodies her characters as insistently as she races them. Although *The Dispossessed* glorifies the life of the mind, she embodies that quest for knowledge. Feminists have written prolifically about the body as a source of knowledge and about women’s relationships with their bodies.  

LaDelle McWhorter, in *Bodies and Pleasures*, provides an autobiographical example that reveals the embodied nature of knowledge particularly clearly. Driven by the desire to meet romantic and sexual partners, McWhorter started to frequent a country-western bar. Patrons of the bar engaged in line dancing, and, after a

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50 McWhorter, *Bodies and Pleasures*. 
couple of visits, McWhorter began to learn the dances in order to interact with the other patrons. She reflects how her body could perform dance steps that she did not know and could not have explained to another person. She explains,

I am not a good mimic. Doing what other people do has never come easy to me. Furthermore, prior to that night I had never been shown how to do Slap Leather and had never attempted to do it before. Something about the situation, though, compelled me. I slipped into line and began the dance, at first keeping one eye on my neighbor’s feet but then ceasing altogether to keep my eyes on anything. The dance just flowed through me. I had it. I knew it. And it wasn’t a matter of knowing how the dance was supposed to look. I could feel the dance from the inside. What I knew was what it felt like to be that dance. It was absolutely exhilarating.

Her body knew what her mind did not. Her embodied epistemology acknowledges the body’s capacity to produce knowledge and refuses to elevate the mind above the body or to separate the two.

In a similar fashion, Le Guin unites the mind and body in “The Day Before the Revolution” and The Dispossessed. Through Laia Odo and Shevek, she shows the Reader a new relationship with the body that values the body as a source of knowledge. Le Guin provides the Reader with Laia Odo’s body of thought and physical body to model and to urge change. Change can serve not only the next generation but those embodied now. Through Shevek, Le Guin shows the Reader that even intellectual genius cannot compete with the body’s knowledge.

Le Guin embodies the primary philosopher whose ideas ground Anarresti society. “The Day Before the Revolution” tells the story of Laia Aseio Odo. Laia’s physical body disintegrates into the dust that helps to ground Anarres, and her body of thought founds the new anarchist society. The body of thought her body produces inspires a revolution and leads to the formation of the society on Anarres, just after her death. Laia’s body, old, ill,

51 McWhorter, Bodies and Pleasures, 171.
dark-skinned, disabled, and female, provides an unusual hero, but her sliding, fluid physical presence fits with the Anarresti’s non-traditional, anti-authoritarian, fluctuating society. With both her sliding body and her slippery philosophy, she firmly embodies the knowledge underlying *The Dispossessed*.

Laia’s anarchist body of thought emphasizes change’s productivity, but her physical body suffers from disintegrating change. Disgusted by the effects of aging and a stroke she has suffered, Laia embodies the societal death that precedes rebirth on Anarres. Her physical decline grinds her into the earth beneath the feet of the new Anarresti society. Laia, as a foundation, slips, slides, and shifts. She describes herself as mud-colored, and mud, and its slipperiness, serves as an apt metaphor for her symbolic and physical founding of Anarres.\(^\text{52}\)

Le Guin symbolically and visually shapes Laia into foundational mud. When Laia ventures into poverty-stricken Urrasti neighborhoods, the places of her youth, the narrator describes her act as “water seeking its level, mud to mud.”\(^\text{53}\) Laia deems the slums a “foul, noisy” place where “all the ugly weakness of her old age was at home.”\(^\text{54}\) Despite her disgust, directed at her body and at the poverty she sees, Laia thinks, “they were the foundation, the reality, the source.”\(^\text{55}\) The poor build the bottom of the hierarchical civilization on Urras, and they live in mud and dirt. The Anarresti take root, instead, in Laia’s mud and no one can climb atop them. Le Guin uses Laia to contrast the people at the base of the hierarchical civilization and Laia as the base of the new society, reinforcing her founding role.

At the bottom of her own society on Urras, Laia disintegrates and dies, physically. Intellectually, she foments a revolution. Both physically and intellectually, she founds the

\(^{52}\) Le Guin, “Day Before the Revolution,” 287.


\(^{54}\) Le Guin, “Day Before the Revolution,” 301.

\(^{55}\) Le Guin, “Day Before the Revolution,” 301.
new society on Anarres as her mind and body unite. Laia’s political theory advocates for a fluctuating society and embraces a muddy, deteriorating foundation that cannot firm up or settle.\textsuperscript{56} Her physical body, with its disintegration, models this anarchist system for the Reader, and teaches the value of the body, both metaphorically and physically.

Laia’s body and the new Odonian society are “ramshackle,” but they are also revolutionary.\textsuperscript{57} Not only does Laia write her body into her account, but she mobilizes her body’s crudest features, urinating and spitting, to defy and defile the society she seeks to overthrow. Laia explains, reflecting on her transformation,

\begin{quote}
she who had screeched, and sworn, and kicked policemen, and spat at priests, and pissed in public on the big brass plaque in Capitol Square that said \textit{HERE WAS FOUNDED THE SOVEREIGN NATION STATE OF A-IO ETC ETC}, pssssss to all that! And now she was everybody’s grandmamma, the dear old lady, the sweet old monument, come worship at the womb. The fire’s out boys, it’s safe to come up close.\textsuperscript{58}
\end{quote}

She uses her physical body as a weapon, much like her body of thought fights the state by changing minds. Her philosophy moves people to act, and her womb, her most potent weapon, births the revolution. Laia’s body, her most personal parts, serve her political ends. Much to her chagrin, in her dotage Laia’s body is treated as though it (and, by extension, she) has been tamed, a state at odds with her sharp, incisive politics. Hardly the crone, Laia gives birth to the new society as she physically dies.

Laia’s foul body and deteriorating visage, along with her philosophy’s mess and mud, prepares the Reader to embrace a society constantly in flux, a shifting society whose philosophy and body politic takes root in the mud of her mind and body. Her slipping and

\textsuperscript{56} Le Guin, “Day Before the Revolution,” 300.
\textsuperscript{57} Le Guin, “Day Before the Revolution,” 292.
\textsuperscript{58} Le Guin, “Day Before the Revolution,” 297. Punctuation, spelling, capitalization and formatting all original.
sliding teach the Reader to value the revolutionary potential of flux. Laia may become a muddy foundation, sliding into her grave, but, by decomposing, she provides the earth for a new society who need not piss in public but who need to understand how to cope in a world that leaves citizens feeling dizzy and unseated. Laia laments her body’s clumsiness, dizziness, and uncertainty after her stroke. This uncertain state, however, parallels the newly birthed Odonian society on Anarres, which also finds itself stumbling about, clumsy, dizzy, and hesitant.

Le Guin refuses to let the Reader privilege Laia’s body of thought over her physical body. Her physical body doggedly appears in her story as Laia reflects on her hands, her feet, her bones, her modesty, her handwriting, and her relationship with her body. She feels tired and stiff. She resents its dribbling and leaking. She struggles to style her own hair. The Reader repeatedly encounters Laia’s physical challenges and deterioration. Facing her own death, she retains her sense of humor, joking that she is the “drooling old woman who had started a world revolution.” Her revolutionary body of thought emerges from a slipshod physical body, and Le Guin makes certain the Reader remembers the embodied nature of Laia’s revolutionary thought.

Change cannot happen only in the mind or in imagining the future. Le Guin needs her Reader to embody politics, and she provides Laia as a model revolutionary. Laia notes, “Maybe the mystics could detach mind from body, she had always rather wistfully envied them the chance, without hope of emulating them. Escape had never been her game. She had sought for freedom here, now, body and soul.” Embodiment adds urgency. The Reader should not defer or delay, lest they find themselves aged and disintegrating before

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change can be realized. Le Guin embodies Laia, telling the Reader that these suggestions should leave the page. Imperfect as she may be, Laia acts. Reflecting on the role of the body in politics, she muses, “A proper body’s not an object, not an implement, not a belonging to be admired, it’s just you, yourself. Only when it’s no longer you, but yours, a thing owned, do you worry about it — Is it in good shape? Will it do? Will it last? ‘Who cares?’ said Laia fiercely, and stood up.”

Laia treats her body as a source of knowledge rather than a possession. She models the attitude Shevek later performs.

Shevek, an intellectual giant, might seem the pinnacle of the Mind. However, Le Guin reminds the Reader that Shevek’s knowledge emerges from a body. His body knows before his mind at times, insisting upon the body’s ability to know. The Reader cannot ignore his body or its role in Shevek’s intellectual discoveries. For example, in chapter one, Shevek leaves for Urras and notices how the gravity aboard the ship, and later on Urras, weighs upon him. His joints ache. The stress foreshadows how their world, both the planet and society, will pull him down. The Reader learns about the heavier load Shevek bears through his body, which recognizes the gravity of his situation long before his mind does.

Shevek’s mind often lags behind his body. Utopian studies scholar Tom Moylan points out that bodily functions frequently precede Shevek’s leaps of knowledge and gains in life. Immediately before Shevek loses his faith in Urrasti society, he tries to eat meat for the first time and his body violently rejects it. Le Guin’s phrasing, “his stomach had its reasons which reason does not know,” alludes to Blaise Pascal’s *Penseés*: “the heart has its reasons

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61 Le Guin, “Day Before the Revolution,” 287. Laia moves from thought to speech here. The quotation marks within the quote set off her words from her thoughts and actions.
63 Moylan, *Demand the Impossible: Science Fiction and the Utopian Imagination*. Also cited by Lefanu, *Feminism and SF*, 141.
which reason knows nothing of.” Shevek’s body discerns that the Urrasti society, and its rich diet, will make him ill. His mind takes much longer to arrive at this conclusion. Similar bodily realizations precede sexual encounters, the birth of Shevek and Takver’s daughters, his intellectual breakthroughs, and everyday moments of transition. Through Shevek’s embodied epistemology, the Reader learns to view the body as a source of knowledge production. It produces knowledge more quickly and reliably than even Shevek’s gifted mind.

Through Laia and Shevek, Le Guin teaches the Reader to view the body as a source of knowledge production. It produces knowledge for the characters, helping them to navigate their world. Their bodies guide the Reader, as well, often presenting a point before the characters’ conscious mind can do so. Le Guin embodies knowledge for both the characters and the Reader, and the Reader learns to view both the mind and the body as ways to gain knowledge, fundamentally changing the relationship to the Body.

Sexual Identities and Practices

Le Guin changes the Reader’s relationship to Shevek, the sexual relationships between characters, and the relationship between sexuality and society through her construction of sexual identities and practices in *The Dispossessed*. Although she includes characters who engage in homosexual and celibate sexual practices, Le Guin retains many of the key features of a heteronormative society, such as heterosexual nuclear families, fixed gender norms and identities, and homosocial interpersonal relationships. The relationship

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governing who on Anarres desires and who is desired changes, however. Le Guin transforms the key identity in this relationship from gender to age. The change helps to support the open and equitable sexuality the Anarresti enjoy. The Urrasti, in contrast, combine sex and economics, leading to unbalanced relationships. Those troubling relationships lead to troubling relations, culminating in *The Dispossessed* in an assault and the need for the Reader to re-relate to Shevek.

**Heteronormativity**

*The Dispossessed* is heterosexist, charges literary critic and science fiction author Samuel Delany.\(^{65}\) He principally contests a scene that occurs late in the novel. In the scene, Shevek comforts his daughter Sadik. Their friend Bedap walks away but, looking back at the pair, he envies their father-daughter bond and mourns the emptiness in his own life.\(^{66}\) The scene reads:

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\(^{65}\) Delany is known best for his Hugo and Nebula award-winning science fiction novels, *Babel-17* and *The Einstein Intersection*. His novel *Trouble on Triton* alludes to *The Dispossessed* with its subtitle, “An Ambiguous Heterotopia.”

\(^{66}\) Throughout the novel, the narrator reminds the Reader that Bedap prefers homosexual practices. Bedap does not have a life partner or children. In contrast, Shevek engages in sexual practices with both men and women during his lifetime, but eventually partners with a woman (Takver) with whom he shares two daughters (Sadik and Pilun). This scene occurs late in the novel and the Reader would read Bedap as homosexual and Shevek as heterosexual at this point in their lives.
There was nothing for Bedap to do but leave them there, the man and the child, in that one intimacy which he could not share, the hardest and deepest, the intimacy of pain. It gave him no sense of relief or escape to go; rather he felt useless, diminished. ‘I am thirty-nine years old,’ he thought as he walked on towards his domicile, the five-man room where he lived in perfect independence. ‘Forty in a few decads. What have I done? What have I been doing? Nothing. Meddling. Meddling in other people’s lives because I don’t have one. I never took the time. And the time’s going to run out on me, all at once, and I will never have had . . . that.’ He looked back, down the long, quiet street, where the corner lamps made soft pools of light in the windy darkness, but he had gone too far to see the father and daughter, or they had gone. And what he meant by ‘that’ he could not have said, good as he was with words; yet he felt that he understood it clearly, that all his hope was in the understanding, and that if he would be saved he must change his life.\footnote{Le Guin, \textit{The Dispossessed}, 370-371, ellipses in original.}

Delany interprets this moment as heterosexist, claiming that the “innuendo that ‘. . .if he would be saved’ Bedap must change his homosexuality is both coy and pious (already an ugly combination) and, to [Delany], offensive.”\footnote{Delany, “To Read \textit{The Dispossessed}.”} If the scene supported that claim, many readers would share Delany’s outrage.

But I do not read Bedap regretting his sexual identity. Le Guin commits heterosexist sins in \textit{The Dispossessed}, but this is not among them. Delany implies that Bedap’s envy hints that Le Guin intends for her Reader to interpret Bedap’s reaction as regret for his homosexual preferences. For that reading to stand, Bedap would need to either live in a society that limited parenting relationships to heterosexuals or would need to envy Takver’s relationship with Shevek. Anarres de-normalizes the parenting relationship for everyone, and Bedap does not envy the sexual relationship between Shevek and Takver but the familial relationship between Shevek and his daughter Sadik. He envies their intimate affection, not anything sexual.

I read Bedap’s reaction not as regret not for his sexual life but for his lack of parental intimacy. Parents and children rarely connect closely on Anarres, and Shevek fosters a close
relationship with his daughters in defiance of societal norms. Shevek, not Bedap, has the unusual relationship here. And, even in the Reader’s world, as Delany himself observes (and practices), one’s sexual practices or identities need not preclude this intimate familial relationship.\(^6^9\) Parenting does not require a heterosexual, or even a partnered, relationship in either the Reader’s or the novel’s world. Delany’s reading of this scene contrarily cedes fatherhood and the intimacy of parenting to heterosexuals and fails to challenge a heteronormative definition of parenting.

However, in *The Dispossessed* Le Guin does privilege the heterosexual and does create a heteronormative society. The text normalizes heterosexuality, but it does so in different scenes than the one Delany identifies. The Reader follows Shevek and Takver, a monogamous, cohabiting male–female couple raising their children together, who conform to the traditional, patriarchal, Western family structures the Reader would recognize. The Reader learns nothing about surrogacy, adoption, or ways to craft familial relations without heterosexual childbearing. Le Guin offers no stories or even allusions to partnered homosexual couples. Genders divide too neatly between the masculine and feminine, omitting anyone gender-bending, dressing in drag, changing gender identification, or queering the masculine-feminine or male-female binaries in any way. The omissions reinforce heteronormative familial and sexual assumptions.

The family structure Shevek and Takver perform reinforces a heteronormative, and gender-normal, social structure for the Reader. For example, although both parents work as highly-trained scientists, Takver cares for the children more than Shevek and much more than most of the other women in her society. When work demands send Takver and Shevek

to different parts of the planet, the children go with Takver, not with Shevek, and they do not stay in a nursery in the city, as most children on Anarres would do. As a child, Shevek lived primarily in a nursery, and he sees his father, Palat, when he visits the area. Shevek resents the alienated relationship he has with his strong, independent mother, even though their relationship resembles the Anarresti norm much more than his relationship with his father or, later, with his own children. Shevek’s familial relationships violate the norm on Anarres, where trained caretakers raise children, and performs the norm from the Reader’s world instead, thereby reproducing its heteronormativity.

Even the prohibition of sexual violence on Anarres re-centers heterosexuality in *The Dispossessed*. For the Anarresti, “no law, no limit, no penalty, no punishment, no disapproval applied to any sexual practice of any kind, except the rape of a child or woman.”70 The narrator emphasizes Anarres’s permissive sexual mores and open and fluid sexual relationships. However, by tacking “the rape of a child or woman” to the end of this statement, Le Guin introduces gender inequality. Do they accept the rape of a man? Why, in a society professing absolute equality between men and women, do women need the additional protection that a taboo grants? In a society that does not constrain sexual action based on gender identification, would sexual violence occur primarily in this way, after one-hundred and seventy years? In the Reader’s world, sexual aggression aligns with masculinity, with an overwhelming majority of sex crimes perpetrated by men and suffered primarily by women and children. Delimiting victimage and aggression on the basis of gender, the narrator and the author speak from the norms that govern the Reader’s world, not Anarresti society. Once again, Le Guin borrows the heteronormativity of the Reader’s world.

Furthermore, Le Guin reproduces the heteronormativity of the Reader’s world in the novel’s world by using gender to over-determine behavior. Shevek muses that women “want to complete their training and start their research or find a post they liked before they bore a child.”\textsuperscript{71} Shevek assumes that intellectually-inclined, serious young women are less sexually active because of their careers. He places women into competition with one another, such that the “serious” women associate with the mind and lesser women embody themselves. Moreover, he elevates those who abstain above those who indulge, introducing a prudishness at odds with their society’s stated sexual permissiveness. Assuming that the women abstain only to delay pregnancy, Shevek mandates pro-creation and suggests that all women will have children, want to have children, and engage only in sexual actions that could lead to children. Their lack of interest in heterosexual intercourse could have nothing to do with children or with their careers. Perhaps these young women avoid having children because they never intend to pro-create.\textsuperscript{72} Perhaps pure ambition, not a rush to make time to bear and raise a child, accounts for their dedication to their training. Perhaps they engage frequently in sexual activity that does not lead to children, with males, with themselves, or with other women. Shevek obscures a bevy of possible motives from the Reader with this assumption. Le Guin introduces heteronormativity by hiding motives that would normalize lesbianism and by acknowledging only heterosexual desire.

Essentialist constructions of sexual relationships limit desire, and homosocial assumptions magnify the resulting heteronormativity. Sexual relationships might not include other forms of intimacy, but social relationships typically have multiple aspects. They do not

\textsuperscript{71} Le Guin, \textit{The Dispossessed}, 55.
\textsuperscript{72} The Reader never learns how many women on Anarres have children. If they all have a child, this sentence loses some of its heteronormativity.
require sexual relations. In a heteronormative society, the norm encourages people to interact sexually with those of the opposite sex and socially with those of the same sex. Michael Flood, studying male homosocial relationships, concludes that “homosociality organises the male-female sociosexual relations.” Social relationships form between those who do not desire one another sexually. If a society delimits desire to heterosexuality, social relationships tend to form between people in the same sex, homosocially, preventing sexual desire from interfering with the interpersonal relationship. The majority of interpersonal social relationships between characters in The Dispossessed can be categorized as homosocial. The homosociality suggests a heterosexual norm to the Reader, whose own world pairs the two in this way.

Adolescence amplifies the differentiation between the social and the sexual. The narrator tells the Reader that Shevek and his male, teenaged homosocial friends found that the “presence of females was oppressive to them all.” At this point in the novel, the Reader does not know Bedap prefers homosexual practices, but a repeat reader might question: does Bedap feel oppressed by females? Shevek describes the teen-aged Bedap as “never very energetic sexually” even though he “accepted the homage of a younger boy who had a homosexual-idealistic crush on him.” The repeat reader will catch the irony in this scene.

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73 Michael Flood, “Men, Sex and Homosociality: How Bonds Between Men Shape Their Sexual Relations with Women,” Men and Masculinities Vol. 10, No. 3 (2008): 339. Flood identifies five ways that homosociality determines socio-sexual relationships: “male-male friendships take priority over male-female relations and platonic friendships with women are dangerously feminizing. Sexual activity is a key path to masculine status, and other men are the audience, always imagined and sometimes real, for one’s sexual activities. Heterosexual sex itself can be the medium through which male bonding is enacted. Last, men’s sexual storytelling is shaped by homosocial masculine cultures.”

74 A correlating with B does not necessarily mean that the existence of B will lead to A, but the correlation does suggest that it is probable that they will accompany one another.

75 Le Guin, The Dispossessed, 41.

76 Le Guin, The Dispossessed, 55.
Shevek simply fails to understand Bedap’s sexual orientation, concluding that Bedap settles for a relationship with the boy, rather than actively enjoying that relationship. Shevek’s explanation reveals the heteronorm that undergirds their society’s social relationships. Bedap socializes with the boys, not the girls, and he does not express a desire to interact sexually with women. Shevek, guided by their homosocial relationship, does not consider that Bedap might desire boys. Instead, he believes Bedap makes do with a homosexual relationship and presumes that Bedap simply has less sexual energy than the other boys. Shevek’s observation presumes and normalizes heterosexuality for all of the boys in a way that marginalizes Bedap. Would an adolescent male who prefers homosexual acts not find the social environment with other boys sexually oppressive? Are the boys oppressed by the people they desire or by their own raging hormones? With hormones running amok, the boys opt to socialize only with other males, creating a homosocial environment haunted by heterosexist assumptions. Bedap may not find the homosocial environment comfortable, but Le Guin does not provide the Reader access to his perspective. By lumping all of the boys into a heterosexual clump, Le Guin divorces sexuality from sociality and recreates the Reader’s world’s heteronormativity through these teens.

As a young adult, Shevek spends his social time with women and older adults, deeming the other young men too immature and obsessed with sex. He increasingly determines his social connections on the basis of age instead of sex, mirroring the change Le Guin makes with gender and desire. However, when sexual desire re-enters his behavior, he returns to socializing primarily with men. Homosociality dominates Shevek’s intellectual relationships as an adult, as well. During his visit to Urras, for example, he reflects that

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77 Le Guin, The Dispossessed, 35.
78 Le Guin, The Dispossessed, 55.
always being with men at the university lacks the “tension and attraction of the sexual difference.”
Le Guin creates a homosocial university, a space populated only by males. Shevek does not pine for the social or intellectual company of women but for their sexual difference. This phrasing turns the Reader’s focus from the social and intellectual relationships of the workplace to the sexual relationships of the private sphere. No matter how open their society on Anarres, Shevek has internalized a heteronormative viewpoint that he applies on Urras.

Shevek does engage in a sexual relationship with Bedap as a young adult, but Shevek ends their sexual association. Not long after, he partners with Takver. Their mutual desire and choice to live monogamously marginalizes Bedap to the social and intellectual portions of Shevek’s adult life. Their interactions lead to “intellectual change” followed by “action” and “emotional support,” leading Delany to judge Shevek and Bedap’s intellectual and homosocial relationship as more influential to the characters than Shevek and Takver’s romantic and heterosexual relationship. Takver interacts with Shevek intellectually as well, but, despite her intelligence and talents, Bedap provides more intellectual inspiration (reinforcing the heteronormativity, in Flood’s scheme). Shevek relates intellectually and socially with Bedap, but he seemingly grows out of any homosexual desire.

With Shevek as the contact point between the Reader and Le Guin’s universe, the predominance of heterosexual and homosocial practices in Shevek’s life marginalizes other practices and options, such as homosexuality, heterosociality, and celibacy. Characters who challenge heteronormativity in *The Dispossessed*, such as Bedap, engage in sexual relationships...

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80 Delany, “To Read *The Dispossessed*.”
81 This also perpetuates a heterosexist stereotype about hidden homosexual desire for people who identify as heterosexuals.
with Shevek but his division between the heterosexual and the homosocial constitute what
the Reader experiences as central. Constructing the characters in this way, Le Guin divides
the sexual from the social, reinforces norms from the Reader’s culture rather than
performing the principles guiding the fictional society on Anarres, and centers
heterosexuality. With heterosexual practices privileged and other options only mentioned
marginally, Le Guin repeatedly transfers the normativity of heterosexuality from the Reader’s
world into the novel’s worlds.

**Desiring or Desired**

Although the text privileges and norms heterosexuality, Le Guin changes the primary
relationship governing desire from gender to age/maturity. For example, Laia transforms
from the object of desire to the agent who desires. In her youth, Laia derived pleasure in
dressing nicely for her father’s friend. She enjoyed serving as an object of his desire. In her
dotage, she takes pleasure in desiring the youthful (male) Noi. Asking the Reader to read
the desiring–desired, subject–object positions as a matter of maturity, Le Guin implies that
one outgrows being an object of desire. Desiring to act rather than to be acted upon
becomes a mark of mature sexual desire.

Shevek and Takver each begin as an object of desire, during adolescence, and mature
to become desiring agents. Shevek’s first major sexual relationship occurs with an older
woman, Beshun, who pursues him. When he first meets Takver, however, she acts indirectly.

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83 A post-1990s reader might read the young man Noi alluding to the slang term “boi,” indicating a
young, attractive, and submissive male. The term might not have been in common parlance in the
1970s, but by the late 1990s the term, which emerges from BDSM culture and indicates a
submissive bottom, would have been recognizable to most readers.
Shevek notices her because she wears her hair short, a tactic she designed to attract his attention, she later admits. Although the adolescent Takver desires an intimate and sexual relationship with Shevek, she does not seek him out, talk to him, or actively engage with him. Instead, she grooms herself, hoping to attract his gaze and to become the object of his desire. Too inexperienced to understand her invitation, Shevek misses the opportunity to connect with her. Years later, they meet again, and the more mature couple express their mutual desire. Takver explains,

> It wasn’t just sexual. I’d noticed you before, that way. This was different; I saw you. But I don’t know what you see now. And I didn’t really know what I saw then. I didn’t know you well at all. Only, when you spoke, I seemed to see clear into you, into the center. But you might have been quite different from what I thought you were. That wouldn’t be your fault, after all. It’s just that I knew what I saw in you was what I needed. Not just wanted!\(^84\)

Believing her desire might not be reciprocated, and a bit intimidated by the intense intimacy she feels for Shevek, Takver cut her hair, seeking sexual contact only if he initiated it. Even as an adult, she keeps her thoughts to herself until Shevek approaches her. Once she and Shevek share the power to act as and the desire to become equals, however, they both embody desiring agent positions.

With each example, Le Guin re-orienta sexual subject positions from gender and sexuality to age and maturity. For the Reader, however, Le Guin’s connecting of desire with maturity might map back onto gender. Desiring, and acting upon that desire, aligns with masculinity and lacking desire and the ability to act aligns with femininity in the Reader’s (1970s) world. If the Reader replaces masculinity with maturity in the desiring/desired dualism, then s/he might replace femininity with immaturity, as depicted in Figure 5.1.

\(^84\) Le Guin, *The Dispossessed*, 181.
Figure 5.1: Desire and Maturity

The alteration offers the Reader a subject position that changes acting upon desire from gender to maturity by re-relating desiring relationships. However, connecting desiring with maturity merges two subject positions with great access to agency. Le Guin risks removing agency from the feminine. The Reader, used to associating the terms along gender lines, might flip to each term’s supplement (masculine-feminine, mature-immature, desiring-desired), connect them, and thus impoverish the feminine by linking it to immaturity and being a desired object. Changing the relationship between desire and agency from gender to maturity, Le Guin risks reifying masculine power, even though she works to break that bond.

Sexual Practices on Anarres

On Anarres, sexual practices depend on mutual consent. The Anarresti reject treating “another person as [an] object” sexually, what the narrator terms the “mere relief of need.”

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Sexual acts imply an intimacy, but they do not entail any commitment or property relations. The Anarresti’s language, the narrator informs the Reader, “lacked any proprietary idioms for the sexual act. In Pravic, it made no sense for a man to say that he had ‘had’ a woman.”

Owning another person would violate all of the principles guiding their society. Indeed, they define rape as a power struggle for consent and control expressed through sex, and it serves as their worst curse word. In a world with greater equity, and thus less need to struggle for control, than the Reader’s world, acts of rape and molestation would diminish, Le Guin suggests. The Anarresti retain the power of sexual violation with the word for rape, but they broaden it to encompass all acts that objectify or control another person. To prevent subject-object relationships, they use the social conscience to regulate sexual behaviors, encouraging shame for any acts not rooted in joy and mutual connection. For example, Shevek breaks off relationships with two people because his interest wanes and he does not want to disrespect them. Apart from respecting one’s sexual partner and avoiding rape, the individual on Anarres is free to pursue whatever sexual practices s/he prefers.

Some characters prefer to copulate with those of the same sex (Bedap), others prefer the opposite sex (Takver), and some engage in sexual practices with both (Shevek). No character turns their activities into a set sexual identity, although they do occasionally mention preferences. Most Anarresti begin engaging in sexual intercourse at puberty, but no

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90 Le Guin does not present any adult-youth relationships in *The Dispossessed*, but the re-relation of desiring with maturity opens the door for these practices. The Anarresti define rape in terms of control, such that consent limits sexual interactions. However, Le Guin does not problematize consent, and what relationships might occur with these norms is not clear.
91 Le Guin also offers celibacy as a preference. Both Shevek and Takver abstain from sex purposefully in their youth. Takver mentions she does so because she hopes abstaining from wants will help her to obtain her needs, and Shevek does so in order to focus on his work.
one polices children’s sexual expression and curiosity.\textsuperscript{92} Teens and young adults experiment promiscuously. Monogamy occurs, but does not dominate, adult relationships. The society does not expect long-term commitment and partnerships are rare. Shevek and Takver live in an exceptional fashion for the Anarresti.

As a young adult, Takver abstains from fleeting encounters and chooses to practice celibacy. She tells Shevek, “if I take what I don’t need, I’ll never get to what I do need.”\textsuperscript{93} Trained to take only what one truly needs, Takver applies her society’s anarchist principles to her love life. Abstaining until she meets the person with whom she can connect both sexually and romantically, Takver and Shevek agree to partner for life. She trades her celibacy for a deep, meaningful, and multi-faceted partnership. Takver’s abstinence and her trade, however, hint that sex might be more commodified than anyone on Anarres admits.

The Anarresti define prostitution, a phenomenon that occurs only on Urras in \textit{The Dispossessed}, as “copulation in the economic mode.”\textsuperscript{94} One of Shevek and Takver’s youthful friends, Tirin, highlights the absence of sex work on Anarres with a comedic play. Tirin’s play makes the Anarresti audiences laugh; they find ownership ludicrous and silly. The main character, who calls himself the “Owner of Anarres,” tries to sell people items so that he can acquire gold nuggets and build a palace.\textsuperscript{95} The “owner” in Tirin’s play extends his economic proclivities to sexual relationships, as well. He propositions a woman, and she proves willing. But she rejects the gold he offers to her, confounding him. He protests that he cannot engage in sexual relations without paying. Takver, who saw the play performed, explains that the subsequent scene is “awfully funny,” juxtaposing the woman, ready and willing, legs in

\textsuperscript{92} Le Guin, \textit{The Dispossessed}, 51.
\textsuperscript{93} Le Guin, \textit{The Dispossessed}, 180-181.
\textsuperscript{94} Le Guin, \textit{The Dispossessed}, 18.
\textsuperscript{95} Le Guin, \textit{The Dispossessed}, 327.
the air, with the man, objecting in asides, “I must not! It’s not moral! It’s not good business!”
The Anarresti, who judge prostitution as ludicrous as property ownership, laugh uproariously in response. Using Tirin’s play, Le Guin shows the Reader how the Anarresti separate sex from economics and equips the Reader to understand one of the most important, and uncomfortable, scenes in the novel.

**Sex and Economics Mix on Urras**

On Urras, where economics and sex routinely mix, Shevek forgets the lesson of Tirin’s play. Economics confuse him and he forgets to respect his sexual partner. The day he and Vea Doem Oiie go out, she has him pay for meals, admission fees, and transportation. They flirt. He cannot separate her sexual flirtation from economic flirtation, having never encountered the latter. He idly wonders if Vea may be a prostitute. After she and Shevek spend the day wandering the city together, she invites Shevek back to her home for a party. During the party, she asks him into her bedroom. Shevek, for the first time in his life, has been drinking alcohol, heightening his confusion. Vea flirts with him, but responds to his sexual advances by indicating that, although she would welcome a sexual encounter generally, she wants to delay until another time and place.

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The sexual assault that follows embarrasses them both. Shevek persists in seeking sexual contact with Vea although she clearly states “No” three times, “not now” three times, “let me go” twice, “wait” three times, and “stop” once. She pushes him. Clearly, she means no. The narrator notes that not only does Shevek ignore her protests, but “her resistance excited him further,” with “her soft breasts staring at him with their blind eyes, her face smiling, complacent, flushed” and “his blind urgency, his force” overwhelm him. They do not have intercourse; drunk and bumbling, he ejaculates on her skirt. Vea responds as though Shevek has blown his nose on her rather than assaulting her, focusing her irritation on the trouble of changing her dress and not on his refusal to listen to her. Abashed, Shevek stumbles from the room, reeling from the alcohol and shame. He promptly vomits onto a party platter of hors d’oeuvres.

The motives leading to this scene extend beyond intoxication, however. Do cultural differences in sex roles, miscommunication, malice, or some other factor motivate this encounter? Shevek does not seem malicious, nor does he seem to want to control Vea. His shame, evidenced by his vomit, overrides any malicious intent, telling the Reader he immediately regrets his actions. They do not communicate well and their societal differences complicate their relationship. Shevek reads Vea as a prostitute, based on her actions, but, from her perspective, a man should pay for her and flirting functions superficially, even if it occurs economically.

99 Le Guin, The Dispossessed, 228-230. Urrasti women do not wear shirts when dressed for the evening. Neither Shevek nor Vea bares her breasts. They started out that way.
100 Moylan, quite rightly, uses this scene to support his point about bodily effluence and important moments in Shevek’s life coinciding. See: Moylan, Demand the Impossible: Science Fiction and the Utopian Imagination.
The Reader needs Tirin’s play to parse how Shevek could view Vea as a prostitute and to find a way to forgive him. No one wants to identify with a sex offender, but Le Guin asks the Reader not to dismiss him as a sexual predator and to stick with him. The Reader follows Shevek out of Vea’s bedroom, allying the Reader with him rather than with her. She showed Shevek around her city, invited him into her home, and then endured this encounter, but Le Guin wants us to trust Shevek. Shevek betrays Vea’s trust, but the morning after her party and the assault, Shevek perceives her as betraying him.\textsuperscript{101} The Reader does not have access to Vea’s thoughts or information about her world or her life that might shape our understanding of her experience. The Reader has only Tirin’s play to guide her or him through the scene.

The narrator, earlier in the novel, assures the Reader that “no law, no limit, no penalty, no punishment, no disapproval applied to any sexual practice of any kind, except the rape of a child or woman.”\textsuperscript{102} Shevek, inhabiting a foreign world that commodifies sex (Urras), treats this woman as an object, disrespecting her, himself, and the Odonian ideals that guide his life and his society. Has Shevek gone beyond the pale? In Burkean terms, ought the Reader adopt a tragic frame and scapegoat Shevek? Or should the Reader place this in a comedic frame that forces us to assume partial responsibility for contributing to a world where violence and dominance are eroticized?\textsuperscript{103}

The Reader, positioned to support Shevek, must choose between identifying with the protagonist, and thus accepting some of the responsibility for his actions, or abandoning the hope offered by his utopian world. Le Guin demonstrates how even those socialized to view

\textsuperscript{101} Le Guin, \textit{The Dispossessed}, 272.
\textsuperscript{102} Le Guin, \textit{The Dispossessed}, 245.
\textsuperscript{103} Burke, \textit{A Grammar of Motives}, 406. Burke explains that scapegoating in a tragically framed situation occurs when the “iniquities are shared by both the iniquitous and their chosen vessel.”
everyone as equals may violate women. Can a world that does not guarantee the most basic
safeties and mutual respect constitute utopia? Importantly, this scene occurs on Urras. For
the Anarresti, sex is not a commodity. Exposed to a world rife with commercialism, Shevek
loses his way, showing the Reader how commodification can corrupt a lifetime of social
conditioning. Tirin’s play encourages the Reader to laugh at the commodification of sex, but
Shevek and Vea teach the Reader the danger of colliding social mores.

Those colliding mores limit Anarres’s fluid, open sexual freedom with
heteronormativity. Their society, family structure, sexual violence taboos, gender identities,
and homosocial relationships all reinforce a heteronormative society, albeit in ways different
than Delany suggests. Le Guin suggests new sexual relationships, such as changing the
desiring/wished relationship from one based on gender to one based on maturity and age,
through her characters’ relationships. The open, fluid sexual norms that govern Anarresti
society eliminate sex work, decrease sexual crime, and enable people to love freely. She
contrasts this open system, even with its flaws, with the ill effects of mixing sex and
economics on Urras. The confusing encounter between Shevek and Vea, the assault, requires
the Reader to navigate a difficult scene, to re-relate to Shevek, and to learn the necessity of
changing relationships.

The Planet and Animals

In addition to advocating for increased sexual equality and more permissive social
mores, feminists in the 1970s participated in other social movements, such as the burgeoning
environmental movement. Ecofeminists maintained that the oppression of women paralleled
the oppression of the planet. Both forms of oppression proceeded from the hierarchical, power-over relationships that typify patriarchy. Patriarchal relationships elevate one term in a dualism over another, and the devalued terms, ecofeminists argued, line up, creating similar relationships between patriarchy and the planet, animals, people of color, women, and other oppressed groups. The oppressed could be empowered if the relationships changed, ecofeminists posited.

Some ecofeminists argued that ecological protection could be effected best by women. Women, these ecofeminists suggested, connected to the planet naturally, or, at the very least, had been socialized to nurture. Used to caring for others, women, by their very nature, could provide better ecological stewardship and nurturance than those from dominant, privileged groups. Reversing the dualism to value the feminine more than the masculine, many ecofeminists based their arguments in ancient goddess religions and paganism, incorporating a strong spiritual component to support their environmentalism.

Feminist environmentalism gradually grew to encompass a range of perspectives and approaches, expanding to include more than the essentialist and spiritual assumptions of early ecofeminism. Many of the values, such as changing relationships, caring for the planet, encouraging vegetarianism and veganism, and advocating for more rights for women and the planet simultaneously have endured, however.

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*The Dispossessed* anticipates the early ecofeminist emphasis on changing relationships and aligns women’s oppression with dominance of the natural world. The planets and animals in the novel receive feminine pronouns from Le Guin, and she constructs closer relationships between the female characters and the plants, animals, and the natural world, including the planets. In addition to uniting women with the natural world, Le Guin advocates for environmental politics that epitomize 1970s environmental politics, most specifically conservation. The conservation in the novel connects to the world reduction technique Le Guin employs, as well, and the environmental content both reflects the time the novel appeared and contributes to the politics of the 1970s.

**Women, Nature, and Animals**

The Urrasti and the Reader’s cultures elevate the human over the animal, creating a power-over relationship using connotation. The negative connotations associated with animals transfer to Urrasti women through the comparisons that characters make. Shevek’s valet, Efor, for example, repeatedly calls his wife an “old sow.”

Birds, and their greed, dominate the narrator’s description of Vea, who “picked and pecked” like the “fat white birds” who watch the “diners with indolent greed, awaiting scraps.” The birds juxtaposed with the woman eating ask the Reader to connect the two, transferring the greed and flightiness of the birds to Vea. Vea appears even more frivolous when the narrator aligns her with other parts of the natural world, such as the weather. The bright, bubbly character of shafts of sunshine and dancing flakes of snow parallel Vea’s “inconsequential talk,” making

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her seem frothy and light and encouraging the Reader to dismiss her as greedy, frivolous, and inconsequential. In short, demeaning women on Urras turns on comparing them with negative connotations associated with animals and the planet.

Although the Anarresti do not denigrate women by comparing them to animals or the weather, they do align women with the natural world. The connection in the novel places Shevek in a paternalistic, stewardship role. Shevek assumes a paternal role with his daughters, and Takver and Shevek overtly connect their daughters, Sadik and Pilun, to the natural world, particularly with animals. Immediately after Sadik’s birth, Takver describes the baby as “fishlike,” comparing her to the only animals on Anarres. The narrator suggests the Reader read her as mammalian by sharing Shevek’s observation that Sadik “was round, dark, furry, soft.” Shevek parents Sadik, caring for her as a child, not as an equal. Aligning the child with the animal world, Le Guin transfers Shevek’s paternalistic relationship from the child to the animal.

Le Guin further cements this transfer of animalistic characteristics to women with Shevek and Takver’s younger daughter. Like her sister, Pilun is viewed by her parents as a soft, furry creature, happy and purposeless. A minor character, she nevertheless features prominently in the Reader’s experience through Shevek’s comparisons. Shevek sees a lamb gamboling in a field on Urras and he describes it as laughing. The lamb reminds him of Pilun, and he purchases a postcard photo of a lamb to take home to her. This minor moment, connecting Pilun to the lamb, assumes greater prominence for the Reader because Shevek thinks of this lamb again as he returns to his family at the novel’s conclusion. Shevek

109 Le Guin, The Dispossessed, 226.
110 Le Guin, The Dispossessed, 243.
111 Le Guin, The Dispossessed, 315.
112 Le Guin, The Dispossessed, 208.
cares for his daughter, his planet, his society, and nature just as he cares for his child: by assuming a paternalistic stewardship.

Pilun and the lamb provide hope for change by changing the relationship between the Reader and the natural world, however. The lamb symbolizes Pilun, but the two combined, in their innocence and purity, offer hope for the future, frolicking in fields, united with nature. The connection hearkens to Dostoevsky’s work, as well. Joyce Carol Oates views children, or the “child-like woman” in Dostoevsky, as “an image of Nature itself — innocent, near-mindless, possessing no language and very nearly no ego.”

Pilun, too, never speaks. Silent, the young, innocent girl features in the Reader’s experience only because Shevek connects her to the Urrasti lamb. The boundless joy of a lamb, unsullied by the world, provides hope with a warning. Becoming a sheep, the lamb loses its innocence, conforms to the herd, and requires another to guide her. Pilun offers the innocent hope of the lamb, and Shevek hopes to prevent her from transforming into a sheep. He treks to Urras to preserve the possibility of a more meaningful relationship to the world for her, and the Hain (Ketho) who accompanies Shevek back to Anarres provides hope for Pilun, and all of their world, to have a new relationship to one another that parallels the carefree bliss of a lamb cavorting in a meadow.

Should Pilun grow up maintaining her innocent joy and independence, she might shun Shevek’s paternalism and instead connect with the world as her mother does. Takver not only cares for the world, but she crafts a consubstantial relationship with it. She works as a marine scientist, an ichthyologist, studying fish, the only animals (aside from humans) present on Anarres. The narrator compares her to the fish, sharing her desire to become one

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with the natural world and reflecting on her perverse recognition of the desire to consume one’s young, or what one nurtures and raises.\(^\text{114}\) She identifies fully with the natural world, so little differentiates her own children from the fish she raises. Her comparison of Sadik to the fish might be interpreted best as a compliment.

Shevek also sees Takver as intimately connected to the universe. He says her “umbilicus has never been cut,” and that she has never been “weaned from the universe.”\(^\text{115}\) He presents Takver and the world as consubstantial, such that Takver holding a leaf or rock simultaneously shows her being held by the leaf or rock. He also parallels her with the fish he sees at the aquarium and with the animals he meets on Urras. He muses, “he did not think consciously of Takver at such moments, he did not think of her absence. Rather, it was as if she were there though he was not thinking about her. It was as if the beauty and strangeness of the beasts and plants of Urras had been charged with a message for him by Takver.”\(^\text{116}\) Earlier in the novel, she laments the lack of species diversity on Anarres, telling Shevek, “you’d feel so much more a part” on Urras.\(^\text{117}\) On both Anarres and Urras, Takver equates nature for Shevek. When he encounters the natural, he also encounters Takver. Presaging ecofeminist claims, the feminine connects, in its essence, to the natural world.

In Shevek’s life, women and animals connect through Takver, and in the Reader’s experience, women and animals connect through care-giving. Visiting Urras, Shevek encounters other animals for the first time in his life, and he describes how “each stock beast was accompanied by her young,” assuming that female, and not male, creatures serve as

\(^\text{115}\) Le Guin, *The Dispossessed*, 185.
\(^\text{116}\) Le Guin, *The Dispossessed*, 152.
\(^\text{117}\) Le Guin, *The Dispossessed*, 186, emphasis in original.
primary caregivers. Maternal care-giving dominates the mammalian world of the Reader’s planet, but Shevek, having never seen or studied these creatures before, has no reason to presume female caregivers beyond his experience with Takver raising fish. Shevek’s observation would coincide more with the novel’s narrative had he not gendered the animals. His assumption shares greater fidelity with the Reader’s world, and this aside seems like the author’s voice intruding into Shevek’s remark, charging his thoughts with her own gendered knowledge of the Reader’s world. The Reader’s world pushes Shevek, and in turn the Reader, to connect all women, including Takver and their daughters, with animals and the natural world. The natural world, in return, genders feminine for the Reader.

**Feminizing Planets**

In addition to the animals in the novel, Le Guin genders the planets in *The Dispossessed* using feminine pronouns. Anarresti characters describe Urras as a “sister world” but refer to one another as “brothers.” Masculine pronouns align in the novel with those who act, brothers, and Le Guin ties the feminine to scene. The scene-feminine connection appears prominently as Shevek compares Takver to the sky. For example, she juxtaposes description of the sky “hardening to purple at the zenith” with the reminder that “Takver was pregnant,” her belly hardening as she reaches her pregnancy’s zenith. In addition, the narrator describes Takver as “earthy,” encouraging the Reader to connect Takver to the

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Each reference to a planet cements the femininity of Mother Nature in the novel.

Shevek’s desire for each planet mirrors his relationships with women on each planet. On Anarres, he forges a partnership, a long-term, mature, in-depth, monogamous relationship, with Takver. They do not have much materially, but they do have a rich, enduring interpersonal relationship. On Urras, Shevek desires Vea fleetingly, superficially, and possessively. He does not engage with her as an equal. He does not work to get to know her. Instead, they spend most of their time consuming rich goods, foods, and spectacular sights and sites. The beauty and fecundity of the feminized Urras, like Vea, seduces Shevek. Early in his life, Shevek negatively judges the trees imported to Anarres from Urras as overly “lavish,” “extravagant,” and “thriftless.” When he visits Urras, however, Shevek finds himself envying its lush environment, and he takes pleasure in the rain, the forests, and birdsong. When he first meets Vea, he finds her silly, but he comes to desire her. But their relationship overlaps few characteristics with the relationships Shevek shares with Takver and Bedap, which both emphasize talking and interpersonal connections. His connection with Vea severs violently, with betrayal and shame, just as his relationship with Urras ends.

Through his encounters with each planet, and each woman, Shevek comes to realize the value of relationships that endure. Lacking Urras’s abundant environment, the Anarresti maximize human potential, in contrast to the Urrasti, who mirror the wealth of their setting with their excessive consumption. Anarres’s environmental austerity and minimalism reveals to the Reader what matters most: rewarding relationships. Retaining those relationships,

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even if they must go without material goods, the Anarresti reinforce the importance of forging strong relationships.

**Conserving the Environment**

Le Guin also uses the austere environment on Anarres to argue for environmental conservation. Eschewing luxury and the unnecessary, the Anarresti demonstrate how living in an ascetic environment can help people to appreciate what matters most. Embracing the necessary and eliminating the extraneous, applying a technique that Frederic Jameson calls world reduction, Le Guin helps the Reader to focus on people and shows how to forge an appreciative, respectful relationship with the planet and environment with the Anarresti. The Urrasti, in contrast, she shows awash in waste. The wastefulness of the Urrasti juxtaposed with the Anarresti’s conservation emphasizes the social organism’s need to excrete the unnecessary to maintain health. Health of a society declines when they degrade their environment, she suggests, offering the Reader the Terrans, who have destroyed their planet, as a cautionary tale. Their story sets up the Reader to desire to conserve, to preserve paradise, and to aspire to the socio-political health shown on Anarres.

Anarres has a sparse environment that requires its people to conserve and to preserve resources. To adapt to this limit, the Anarresti society places value on the necessary and devalues waste. These values connect the Reader’s life with the imaginary world that Le Guin proffers in the novel. Published in 1974, *The Dispossessed* emerged on the heels of OPEC’s 1973 oil embargo. Dwindling fossil fuel access joined other environmental pressures, such as climate change, pollution and acid rain, population growth, disease, oil
spills, mercury poisoning, and nuclear disasters, to fuel the emerging environmental movement. These exigencies extend the text’s relevance to readers beyond the novel’s immediate context, but they reflect its originating moment and the world that the Reader inhabits. To model conservation that the Reader could apply in his/her own world, Le Guin turns to a technique that Jameson dubs world reduction.

Jameson’s concept of “world-reduction” involves embracing the austere and ascetic in order to illuminate what is most important or central in a text or society. He explains this concept as a,

principle of systematic exclusion, a kind of surgical excision of empirical reality, something like a process of ontological attenuation in which the sheer teeming multiplicity of what exists, of what we call reality, is deliberately thinned and weeded out through an operation of radical abstraction and simplification.  

In his view, world reduction realizes its full potential when an author celebrates minimalism. Although minimalism might seem more pronounced in The Left Hand of Darkness’s wintery Gethen, Jameson views Le Guin’s earlier novel as a “proving ground” for The Dispossessed, which he suggests exemplifies the technique. By connecting utopia with scarcity, Le Guin provides in The Dispossessed, Jameson suggests, “the most thoroughgoing literary application of the technique, at the same time that it constitutes a powerful and timely rebuke to present-day attempts to parlay American abundance and consumers’ goods into some ultimate vision of the ‘great society.’”  

Not only do the Anarresti reject materialism as a path to happiness and fulfillment, but the sharp contrast that Le Guin draws between Urras and Anarres highlights the higher value of human resources for the Reader.

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Le Guin trains her Reader’s attention on humans by reducing both the flora and the fauna on Anarres. The lack of animals and plants on Anarres, Jameson contends, removes the “Darwinian life-cycle itself” such that humans, lacking any competitors for resources, gain total control over and freedom from stewarding their environment.\textsuperscript{126} By diminishing Darwinian competition in her novel, Le Guin gains not only freedom from historical determinism and destiny, as Jameson observes, but removing the Darwinian influences mitigates the more controversial parts of Kropotkin’s theory, as well. Kropotkin arrived at anarcho-syndicalism, in part, by responding to Darwin. Redefining Darwin’s “survival of the fittest,” Kropotkin suggested the “fittest” being would be socially and communally-minded, thereby necessitating a collective, communal life rather than unhampered competition between individuals. Reducing the world around individuals, Le Guin asks the Reader to amplify the community as a resource.

Unlike the typical utopian setting, Anarres is not environmentally idyllic. Le Guin describes the planet as a “barren world, a world of distances, silences, desolations.”\textsuperscript{127} It is “cold, dry, windy” and “dusty,” with “thin air, hot sun, cold wind,” but “no animals or flowers.”\textsuperscript{128} With so few natural resources, Anarres features a world on which “few could be self-supporting,” forcing them to work together.\textsuperscript{129} Cooperation, begun by choice, perpetuates in their societal values through necessity. They recognize that “if we let one another down, if we don’t give up our personal desires to the common good, nothing, nothing on this barren world can save us. Human solidarity is our only resource.”\textsuperscript{130} With

\textsuperscript{126}Jameson, “World Reduction in Le Guin,” 254.  
\textsuperscript{127}Le Guin, \textit{The Dispossessed}, 365.  
\textsuperscript{128}Le Guin, \textit{The Dispossessed}, 93.  
\textsuperscript{129}Le Guin, \textit{The Dispossessed}, 95.  
\textsuperscript{130}Le Guin, \textit{The Dispossessed}, 167.
world-reduction, Le Guin foregrounds the human and the political by minimizing the environmental. The narrator, and Shevek, discern this clearly, noting, “it was easy to share when there was enough, even barely enough, to go round. But when there was not enough? Then force entered in; might making right; power, and its tool, violence, and its most devoted ally, the averted eye.” To avoid this inclination and realize their political ideals, the Anarresti must band together and share values that transcend mere survival.

As a result, the Anarresti value necessities, eschew luxury, and idealize austerity in all parts of their lives. The Anarresti live an ascetic lifestyle, rely on solar heat and wind turbines, and have only recycling (not rubbish) bins. Hot water runs for limited hours in public baths. They clothe themselves in simple clothing, woven from plant fibers, and most people use a single pair of sturdy boots. Feet provide the primary mode of transport, but people take whatever form of transportation has space available (such as shipping convoys). When they travel, people carry only the bare necessities or a few special items unique to an individual. Shevek carries one of Takver’s sculptures and a book, for example. People do not drink alcohol or eat meat. Although those who live in the central city consume dessert nightly, most Anarresti eat sweets only once or twice every ten days, believing that the “organic-societal conscience got indigestion” if overindulged. Their ascetic everyday practices habitually reinforce their values, for the Reader as well as for the Anarresti.

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Having grown up in a society that values the austere, Shevek finds the Urrasti emphasis on quantity distasteful. He muses, “all they achieved was a kind of mechanical lavishness.”\textsuperscript{138} In contrast, Shevek appreciates the minimalism he encounters at a colleague’s home, reflecting, “here, instead, was grace, achieved through restraint.”\textsuperscript{139} Restrained in public, the Anarresti find beauty in minimalism. Grace and minimalism guide the private on Urras, but the public revels in excess.\textsuperscript{140} Contrasting the two spheres, Le Guin reinforces the Anarresti’s value for austerity by connecting their personal and their public politics, thereby reinforcing the political aspect of the private and the personal aspect of the political. In both senses of the political, the Urrasti waste and the Anarresti conserve.

Le Guin further amplifies the need to conserve by comparing the planets.\textsuperscript{141} The simple Urrasti items Shevek identifies as lavish highlight the extreme scarcity of natural resources on Anarres. Bare and barren, Anarres experiences droughts so severe that people starve, even with rationing. Thus, Urrasti precipitation delights Shevek. Rain and snow elicit a childlike glee.\textsuperscript{142} The narrator (shifting into Shevek) tells the Reader, “He reveled in its excess. It was too white, too cold, silent, and indifferent to be called excremental by the sincerest Odonian, to see it as other than an innocent magnificence would be pettiness of soul.”\textsuperscript{143} Shevek’s joy, encountering snow, emphasizes Anarres’s austerity for the Reader. Although the Reader, and Urrasti natives, might appreciate the beauty of a snowfall, they would not deem it luxurious or excessive.

\textsuperscript{138} Le Guin, \textit{The Dispossessed}, 145-146.  
\textsuperscript{139} Le Guin, \textit{The Dispossessed}, 145-146.  
\textsuperscript{140} Le Guin, \textit{The Dispossessed}, 145-146.  
\textsuperscript{141} Le Guin, \textit{The Dispossessed}, 381.  
\textsuperscript{142} Le Guin, \textit{The Dispossessed}, 134.  
\textsuperscript{143} Le Guin, \textit{The Dispossessed}, 195.
The body politic on Anarres values austerity and defines luxuries as waste, as the
social organism’s “excremental” material.144 “Excess is excrement,” Laia Odo writes in her
foundational text.145 Guided by Odo, the Anarresti excrete that which does not function.
That which “serves no vital function in the social organism,” Bedap explains, hurts society
less if they excrete it than if they tolerate it.146 All organisms excrete unneeded and/or toxic
matter. In a similar fashion, toxins and excess must be banished from a social organism’s
body politic to prevent sepsis. The Anarresti demonize the Urrasti for failing to excrete
wastefulness from their body politic. Embodying the height of wastefulness, Urras fails to
function because they revel in waste (material goods) and fail to foster what they need. The
Urrasti indulgence appears “disgusting, immoral, excremental,” to the Anarresti.147 Shevek
describes Urrasti shops, and people, as “ornate, enormous packages, empty, empty,” relying
on excessive packaging to hide how little substance they contain.148 Contrasting the vacuous,
wasteful Urras with their own bare world, the Anarresti reinforce the need to excrete waste
from the body politic.

To convince the Reader, Le Guin associates the abhorrence the Reader has for
bodily waste with social, political, and material waste. Shevek observes that, ironically, the
“Urrasti lived among mountains of excrement, but never mentioned shit.”149 The Urrasti rely
on euphemism and avoid all scatological language.150 In contrast, the Anarresti do not
denigrate the body; Pravic, their language, does not include euphemisms for the body or its

146 Le Guin, *The Dispossessed*, 162.
149 Le Guin, *The Dispossessed*, 149.
150 Le Guin, *The Dispossessed*, 149.
functions. For example, they refer to the toilet as the “shitstool.” Although they do not denigrate the body, they recognize the process of excreting waste as removing that which does not help the organism to thrive and they apply the concept metaphorically throughout their society. For example, to dismiss a theory he disagrees with, a senior physicist on Anarres labels it “intellectual excrement” to indicate its wastefulness. Waste symbolically suggests that society should excrete the unneeded and reify the valued and needed in the body politic, just as the physical body does. The body politic contains waste, much like the physical body does, and Le Guin trains her Reader to transfer the negative connotation associated with bodily waste to the wasting of resources in the body politic.

If society excretes waste and retains only the necessary, then what does it suggest that Shevek, as a genius, must leave his society? Does his society waste Shevek, as a resource, or is genius wasteful by exceeding what society needs? Austerity limits what a society can achieve, and it pulls against flourishing as an ideal. Bierman suggests the austerity in the novel reinforces Le Guin’s ambiguity, because “there is a very real ambiguity in calling a place where genius cannot flourish a utopia.” What flourishes in The Dispossessed is not the planet, the lifestyle, the goods, or, for Shevek, intellectual advancement. Advancing two contradictory values, austerity and flourishing, the Reader needs the Taoist lessons learned in other parts of the text. The novel, just like the society, finds a way to balance these contradictory values. The narrator observes that “exuberance was perhaps the essential quality of life.” If exuberance defines life, at what point does exuberance become excremental? What humans need, both to survive and to flourish, challenges Le Guin’s

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151 Le Guin, The Dispossessed, 10.
152 Le Guin, The Dispossessed, 116.
154 Le Guin, The Dispossessed, 185.
Reader to question, to find balance, and to figure out how genius might make or unmake the society’s ideals. To advance those ideals, Shevek leaves his world to encounter the alien and to discover his own vital function to society. Society tolerates him as a child, excretes him as a challenging adult, and then stands to benefit when he realizes his full potential and returns to his home, secure in his own sense of balance.

Excreting an individual based on function introduces the danger of social Darwinism into the Reader’s consideration of *The Dispossessed*. Who decides what serves a “function,” let alone a “vital” function for society? To optimize societal functions, Anarres depends on the individual to judge, socializing its citizens to abhor waste and wish to eliminate it from their own lives. Le Guin and Kropotkin retain the organism metaphor, but they make people the most valuable societal resource. To protect that resource, eliminating societal waste, in the form of materialism, serves to protect the people — all of the people — and their value for the austere.

Le Guin strips her utopia down, turning the Reader’s hope and attention away from the environment and the planet to the politics and people. Bierman dryly remarks, “to call a land without green leaf a utopia is surely to cast ambiguity over the term” by questioning what it means to have plenty.\(^{155}\) The world-reduction technique allows Le Guin to render a vision more realistic than one with limitless resources, however. With few to no natural resources, the Anarresti can achieve eutopia, suggesting the Reader need not have limitless resources or a traditionally eutopian setting to achieve the novel’s socio-political ideals. These ideals, anarcho-syndicalism, feminism, and Taoism, also trim away excess to emphasize essential values. Reducing the political world much as she reduces the physical

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world, Le Guin increases the plausibility of implementing a new system for the Reader by making it straightforward and simple.

Le Guin uses the ambassador from Terras (Earth), whom Shevek meets near the end of his visit to Urras, to tell the Reader that conservation needs to happen now. The ambassador tells Shevek that her planet is “hopelessly polluted, ruined by human greed and aggression.” Urras appears to repeat that path of destruction, whereas Anarres provides a way to avoid vice by cutting away waste, retaining only the necessary, and changing one’s values. Thus, the settings support, reflect, and enhance the political and social content. Le Guin warns the Reader that only environmental conservation can protect the luxury of our planet and avoid the dystopic vision of *The Dispossessed*’s future Earth’s environmental desolation or Urras’s socio-political corruption.

Environmental luxury appears only in one spot of green on Anarres, in the central City of Abbenay, in a park called the “Garden of Mind: The Eden of Anarres.” When Shevek first walks on imported, Urrasti grass in this park, he observes that he felt as if he were “walking on living flesh.” The Anarresti do not strictly divide humans from their environment. Rather than subjects acting upon objects, the Anarresti treat their planet as an agent with whom they maintain a relationship. This garden, composed of trees imported from Urras, alienates Shevek from the plants. With a distant relationship established, Le Guin asks the Reader to identify the single green and bountiful spot on Anarres, the setting traditionally eutopic, with Urras. If Urras parallels Eden, then Le Guin asks the Reader to read Anarres as the desert where Adam and Eve find themselves cast out. Unlike Adam and

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156 Lafreniere, “Ursula K. Le Guin.”
158 Le Guin, *The Dispossessed*, 100. Abbenay, the central city on Anarres, features a park with trees, grass, and other plants imported from Urras.
Eve, who judge their desert dystopic, the Reader is asked to judge the desert of Anarres as eutopian. Utopia appears in *The Dispossessed* not in the environment, but in the political, in conservation, and in changing relationships to the world, the nation, and the self.

**Conclusions and Implications**

Le Guin offers the Reader new relationship options in *The Dispossessed*. The novel offers new ways to relate to institutions, identities, and the planet. Each new relationship helps to stabilize the individual, and the Reader, in the midst of a fluctuating political world and reading experience. The relationships help the Reader to strike a balance and to learn how to adapt the individual perspective to changing contexts.

Those contexts, within the novel, give the Reader new ways to relate to language and the social order. The individual’s relationship to the nation, and public politics, could assume many forms, formed and constituted through language. Le Guin offers the Reader four examples. The three nations on Urras offer tribalism (Benbili), totalitarianism (Thu), aristocracy or pluto-oligarchy (A-Io), and a nation without a state (Anarres). The public politics in each nation demonstrate different civic relationships. Shevek must realize his role as a liminal figure to sort out his national and inter-national relationships. His inter-personal relationships also rely on language. His name does not indicate his status or his education, with a title, or his gender or his relationships with other people. The relations between people, both personally and publicly, occur through language, and Le Guin crafts new options for people to relate to these institutions.
She also changes the individual’s relationship to the self, offering new scripts for identities. She races her characters, deliberately de-centering whiteness. Those brown bodies embody and produce knowledge. The knowing Laia Odo provides a case study, showing how a disintegrating body can ground a new nation, and her fluctuation adds urgency for the Reader. The Reader also learns to trust Shevek’s body more than his mind or his desires. The role of desire changes in *The Dispossessed*, as well. Although the society on Anarres includes heteronormativity, through familial structure, taboos, gender identity, and homosocial relationships, Le Guin transforms the locus of desire from gender identity to age identity. Mature sexual relationships on Anarres occur freely, between any consenting individuals, and encompass a wide variety of acts. Their open society avoids sexual exploitation, unlike Urras, where economics entangles sex and limits both the practices and the identities available to individuals.

The individuals on Urras maintain an exploitative relationship with their planet, as well, demonstrating the link between oppressive institutions that ecofeminists critiqued. Ecofeminists also suggested that societies who oppressed and exploited one group, such as women, would apply a similarly oppressive relationship to nature and animals. Nature, animals, and women align in *The Dispossessed*. Shevek assumes a paternalistic relationship to animals, such as the laughing lamb, just as he does to his daughter, Pilun. The interpersonal relationships Shevek has with women on each planet match the relationships that typify each planet’s society. Vea, who lives on the exploitative Urras, is assaulted by Shevek and has an economic relationship with him. Shevek and Takver maintain an equitable relationship, just like the socio-political relationships on Anarres. The Anarresti must conserve, embracing the necessary and excreting the unnecessary. Jameson calls this technique world-reduction, and
Le Guin uses it to strip down the world of Anarres to show what truly matters. The technique helps the Reader to see the plausibility of Le Guin’s relational change, and provides a desire to conserve the Reader’s world. The Reader is left with the need to reform her or his own relationships: to the social order, to the nation, to identity and the self, to the planet, and to one another.
Chapter 6

What’s the Balance?

Utopia translates as the good place that is not — or not yet. By examining communal anarchism, Taoism, and feminism in *The Dispossessed*, in the forms of Kropotkin’s anarcho-syndicalism, Lao Tzu’s ideals, and feminist science fiction, I have endeavored to demonstrate some of the socio-political tools and perfecting principles that Le Guin offers to her Reader. Reading closely through *The Dispossessed*, we have considered what the novel provides to readers, including the subject position of the Reader, Taoism and nineteenth century political theory, and feminist and environmental politics to help them along their path. Balancing individual freedom with equity amongst people, Le Guin guides her Reader down a path that extends well beyond the moment of textual publication toward a new way of being in the not-yet.

By adding sociological perspectives and “soft” sciences to science fiction and by incorporating socio-politics that support women, Le Guin helped to transform science fiction. Using science fiction to create a space of cognitive estrangement, she encourages her Reader to explore alternative ways of being in the world that speak to current issues and problems. The path she constructs in the novel teaches the Reader about rhetoric and popular culture, audiences and the reading experience, anarchism, feminism, politics, utopianism, and the human condition.

Moving government from an external structure inward, Le Guin, drawing on Kropotkin’s political theory, suggests that society socialize and educate its citizens with new ways of being. Those ways depend on individuals to make informed decisions to change
their worlds. One of those decisions, reading *The Dispossessed*, matriculates the Reader in the socialization process, involving learning about alternative ways of being at both a large and a small scale. Across all levels of the novel, the Reader practices coping with uncertainty, integrating ideas, and finding balance. Balanced in moments of uncertainty, the Reader’s experience models the shifting lives of the characters in an anarcho-syndicalist society. Bringing governance and politics within, developing an informed social conscience, the Reader begins walking the path to socio-political utopia by learning more about these options and tools.

To begin the socialization process, the Reader practices dealing with uncertainty, a lesson the Reader learns from the novel’s structure. Le Guin balances opening the text outward, encouraging her Reader to actively participate in the text, with turning inward, using a spinning structure and iconicity to stabilize the Reader. The Reader participates in creating stable moments of meaning, and s/he helps to co-construct the text. Using the generic tools at her disposal, Le Guin asks her Reader to reflect on her or his own culture by providing an alien space with similar socio-political problems. To address those issues, the Reader needs to discover not only what building blocks Le Guin provides in the novel but the more perfect principles that guide the society of Anarres.

The structure of the novel coaches the Reader to embrace the first two principles: ambiguity and balance. The Reader learns to manage, and perhaps even to appreciate, flux and change by navigating the novel’s gaps and ambiguities. The ambiguity of the text, and of the utopia that Le Guin constructs on Anarres, encourages the Reader to participate actively as s/he reads, modeling the type of behavior needed to implement the socio-political
building blocks the text provides. With tools such as asyndeton, Le Guin trains the Reader to connect points within the text and to form integrated relationships between ideas.

Those ideas idealize balance. To rein the Reader in, preventing her or him from wandering too far abroad in the open text, Le Guin uses a spinning structure and iconicity to reinforce her central points. Those points scatter throughout the novel, creating multiple spirals. The spirals help the Reader learn how to integrate divergent points, to cope with uncertainty, and, again, to form relationships between ideas. With symbols such as walls, prisons, light, and the paradoxical rock-in-flight popping up repeatedly, the Reader learns to connect scattered moments in order to make sense of the novel and its arguments.

Le Guin reinforces those arguments with iconicity. Matching the content of her novel to its form, Le Guin provides her Reader with a stabilizing force. That force recurs on at least four levels, ranging from the sentence to the reading experience. With her sentences, Le Guin connects the Reader to Shevek. Her characters help to connect the foreground of the novel, such as the plot, with its background, such as settings. Through the various parts of the novel and Shevek’s overall story, Le Guin shows the Reader that integration proves difficult, frustrating, and time-consuming. Using the temporal theories that Shevek seeks to integrate, Le Guin asks the Reader to engage in a similar integration, finding a balance between reading the novel sequentially and circularly. The oscillating chapters model these temporal theories in the reading experience, bringing the two together and celebrating Shevek’s integrations.

After months on Urras, Shevek finally integrates the two temporal theories of “Sequency” and “Simultaneity.” The temporal integration proves his moment of sublimity,
leading him to reflect on his life at length. In his revelatory passage, Shevek integrates not only the two theories, but Le Guin’s entire project in *The Dispossessed*.

He had been groping and grabbing after certainty, as if it were something he could possess. He had been demanding a security, a guarantee, which is not granted, and which, if granted would become a prison. By simply assuming the validity of real coexistence he was left free to use the lovely geometries of relativity; and then it would be possible to go ahead. The next step was perfectly clear. The coexistence of succession could be handled by a Saeban transformation series; thus approached, successivity and presence offered no antithesis at all. The fundamental unity of the Sequency and Simultaneity points of view became plain; the concept of interval served to connect the static and the dynamic aspect of the universe. How could he have stared at reality for ten years and not seen it? There would be no trouble at all in going on. Indeed he had already gone on. He was there. He saw all that was to come in this first, seemingly casual glimpse of the method, given him by his understanding of a failure in the distant past. The wall was down. The vision was both clear and whole. What he saw was simple, simpler than anything else. It was simplicity: and contained in it all complexity, all promise. It was revelation. It was the way clear, the way home, the light.¹

This passage demonstrates how the motion paradox, the rock-in-flight, helps Shevek to discover the relationship between the two temporal theories. He achieves balance only after he realizes that demanding certainty turns walls into an even more confining prison. To escape the prison and its walls, to see the light and enjoy his utopian moment, Shevek must embrace uncertainty. Finding his certainty in uncertainty, he can revel in a moment of balance, poised in the interval, like the rock. He becomes the point that connects the static and the dynamic, and doing so, he serves as a guide for the Reader. Le Guin gives her Reader Shevek as a guide into the hopeful light of intellectual integration and understanding. Like Shevek, the Reader need not demand certainty. To realize *The Dispossessed*’s promises of new ways of being, working, and relating, the Reader learns and practices accepting, constructing, and valuing being in a state of flux.

Flux, paradox, and organic processes provide Taoist perfecting principles that help to illuminate the path to socio-political utopia. After living on both Anarres and Urras, Shevek concludes that paradise belongs to those who construct it. Dazzled by the environmental lushness of Urras at first, he realizes that having a perfect environment does not equate utopia. Urras comes to signify dystopian hell, a place of absolute evil, in his eyes. Looking through Shevek’s eyes, the Reader sees both the potential and the evil in each society. By revealing the evils on Urras, Le Guin promises the Reader the opportunity to dispossess his or her own world of demonic possession.

What does it mean to be dispossessed in *The Dispossessed*? Dispossession, in an anarcho-syndicalist utopia, might suggest embracing minimalism and decreasing material goods and possessions. Possession also functions symbolically, as it does for Dostoevsky, by possessing characters with political theory demons to the point of incarnation. Incarnations, along with the symbolic allegories that Le Guin constructs, help to critique political theories. Le Guin uses the critiques to show the Reader the value in following Shevek, who serves as a messianic guide along a socio-political path, to dispossess society of its demons. Exorcising demons in *The Dispossessed* encompasses managing desire and lust, diminishing the materialist drive to own goods or other people, and embracing uncertainty and flux.

Flux also characterizes the Anarresti spiritual relationship with the cosmos. Foregoing organized religion in favor of a spiritual, philosophical relationship, the Anarresti walk many paths to effect their utopian ideals. The Taoist ideals that Le Guin draws upon to construct *The Dispossessed* include valuing paradox, flux, and organic change. Those changes weave into the construction of the novel, as well, as Le Guin applies the story-telling techniques of Lao Tzu to present these philosophical principles. Paradox, for example,
features in the novel’s larger structure. That structure encourages the Reader to adopt a comic, not a tragic, frame for Shevek’s story. His story requires the Reader to assume a systemic viewpoint, to consider the story as a whole. For example, Le Guin relies on the Reader using a comic frame to understand that creating equality and decreasing crime depend, as Kropotkin suggests, on changing the enabling conditions in society. The Anarresti experience almost no crime because they have greater equity between individuals. Focusing on why one person does or does not commit a crime, by adopting a tragic frame, the Reader would miss the larger argument that emphasizes what society can do to change, or remove, the conditions that lead the individual to choose a particular path.

That enlarged viewpoint enables the Reader, along with Shevek, to understand how, for example, disharmony might comprise harmony. Using art as sharing, harmony, and destruction, Le Guin argues not only that art is a crucial part of the human condition, but that destruction serves an artistic, productive purpose. Engaging in cultural critique, in writing and reading science fiction novels, authors and readers create art by destroying their previous views and politics. Art, viewed from a comic perspective, becomes a civic virtue by enabling people to reconstitute society.

Furthermore, Le Guin contends that flux enables a society to live freely. She demonstrates how convention can imprison people as securely as walls do. Endeavoring to resist the authoritarian impulse, even in situations that threaten individual safety, the Anarresti reveal how difficult flux can be to maintain. Maintaining flux requires continual vigilance from individuals. Individuals determine the best path in each situation, making decisions informed by the contextual factors in play. In other words, individuals act rhetorically to protect freedom. Le Guin reminds the Reader to act in consonance with his
or her own beliefs. If those beliefs expand based on reading about new ways of being in the world, that world could change and expand in response to the individual’s actions. The Reader should learn from *The Dispossessed*, but s/he should regard it as gospel no more than the Anarresti should turn Odo’s principles into laws. Perfecting principles, such as balance and flux, provide guides and ideals, but they should not ossify into a single path, a single tao, a single way. The individual, facing a world of constant change, can provide stability instead by making promises and acting with care.

Caring for the social organism, each individual helps to advance society by choosing the path that takes best advantage of her or his skills and interests. Those interests might require the individual to step outside of society, as Shevek must, in order to reconstitute the larger social organism. By assuming a systemic viewpoint in relation to the novel and to understanding Anarresti society, the Reader learns how to shun the mechanical, to look beyond seeming contradictions to underlying possibilities and solutions, and to seek her or his cellular function, even if that means choosing exile. These lessons learned, the Reader can consider ways to re-work society and to re-relate to other individuals, to the self, and to societal structures.

The structure of the workplace on Anarres models Kropotkin’s anarcho-syndicalism. Separating the means of production from distribution and labor administration, the Anarresti try to prevent any individual from having too much access, or temptation from, positions of power. Power attaches not to the individual but to the position, so they have workers rotate work assignments periodically. Those positions most likely to accrue power have strict term limits. Labor is limited overall, with no one working double or triple shifts and workers laboring for approximately five hours daily, unless an emergency demands a
change. Changing the laborers frequently and adapting to their environment, the Anarresti ward off the rigidity that threatens to arrest the revolution that invigorates their social organism.

Their organic society arranges itself into interdependent cells, with individuals adapting to those around them. Each person pursues work that s/he finds interesting, enjoyable, and plausible, based on their education, interests, and talents. By changing the motive for work from profit to play, Kropotkin and Le Guin suggest that workers who enjoy their work would not shirk their duties but would pursue their tasks actively. Active socialization, through extensive education, helps the society on Anarres to produce, within each person, a desire to contribute to the greater good. The good of the whole depends on individuals choosing to engage in mutual aid instead of harm, even without an external governmental structure to police them.

Transforming government from an external structure to an internal conscience, Le Guin offers the Reader a form of rhetorical governance. Governmentality, instead of government, enables the society on Anarres to prosper. In contrast, the Urrasti, particularly the Ioti and their capitalist system, show the Reader how the profit motive diminishes the individual’s desire to learn, to change, and to help others. Shevek renews his own anarchism by visiting Urras and experiencing the contrast firsthand. Through Shevek, the Reader learns to appreciate the fluctuating work structure and governmental form on Anarres. Collaboration, the Anarresti teach the Reader, proves more stable and evolutionarily desirable for a healthy, balanced social organism. To evolve, to adapt, and to thrive, society requires its individuals to work together.
Work provides the social bond on Anarres, but working together can also threaten the individual. Through shame, peer pressure, and the tyranny of the majority, an individual who helps society, such as Shevek, might appear, at least initially, to threaten it. The Anarresti do not appreciate Shevek’s revolutionary theoretical physics or his radical politics. His anarchism leads him to leave, to visit Urras, where he surpasses the limits on intellectual labor he had encountered in his own society. The isolation he experiences on Anarres prevents him from moving forward, and he cannot birth his ideas fully until he engages with new interlocutors and their ideas. New ideas promise to help the Reader to realize a moment of sublimity similar to Shevek’s, as a reward, if s/he manages to integrate the ideas in the novel as well as Shevek integrates the temporal theories.

Equity for the Anarresti includes equal opportunity in the workplace. Women on Anarres work in a wide variety of non-traditional jobs. Syndicates in the sciences employ many women, but old stereotypes and double binds constrain them. Takver enjoys her work as an ichthyologist and marine scientist, but her science focuses on nurturing and caring for creatures. In contrast, Shevek’s mother, Rulag, does not care for her child at all, choosing to pursue her career and losing her family to the classic career-family double bind. Another career-woman, Mitis, studies theoretical physics, but to elevate her mind, Le Guin robs her of her body and places her early in Shevek’s life, leaving the real inspiration to men. Shevek’s other early mentor, Gvarab, receives no regard from her peers, who depict her work as soft and mystical. Even their society’s founding philosopher, Laia Odo, loses some of her own identity, hidden inside her husband’s name.

Names feature prominently in Le Guin’s re-relating of the individual to the nation and the State. Nations transform a group of individuals into a collective, using language to
create limited imagined communities. Those communities form nations with a variety of relationships to the individual citizen. Four forms of the nation appear in *The Dispossessed*. A-Io presents a plutocratic, oligarchic nation founded on aristocratic social norms and democratic political ideals. They claim to celebrate freedom, but their nation depends on power, money, and heritage to determine leadership. Leaders of Thu, the communist totalitarian nation on Urras, subsume the individual to the State, presenting a unified, single vision of their nation. The nation of Benbili contrasts with the first and second worlds in the novel, much as the third world did for the Reader’s world. The “third” world, represented by Benbili, is derided by the Ioti and Thuvian characters, who find the constant revolution barbaric. Constant revolution helps to explain Anarres, however, the fourth, and state-less, nation in the novel.

Through the four nations that she portrays in *The Dispossessed*, Le Guin argues that patriotism depends not on the form of the nation or state but on the relationship that the individual has with the nation. The Ioti limit who can shape the nation to those with money, heritage, and power. The power of the State in Thu prevents any individual from crafting a relationship to the nation that varies from the State’s desire. Desiring greater freedoms, the Benbili overthrow their State, hoping to create new, fluctuating civic relationships, like those on Anarres. The political relationships on Anarres depend on individuals, who change and flux, rather than on an external structure. Internalized, their government occurs through shared political ideals and goals that inform their individual choices and actions. Although they learn to hate Urras, building unity around a shared enemy, the Anarresti form their political bond socially, around relationships between individual people.
Using nations with forms familiar to the Reader, Le Guin does not have to include detail about political form or country. She does not construct a complete allegory, however. By featuring vaguely familiar forms, instead of full-blown allegorical representations, Le Guin does not force her Reader to choose between existing relationships to a nation and the new relationships that they might form, using ideas from *The Dispossessed*. The ideas she presents equip the Reader to assess the flaws in each system (including her or his own), and constructs Anarres, freed from the structure of an external State, as a world that can enable the individual to create new relationships, based on his or her own context.

Naming functions personally as well as nationally for the Anarresti. On Anarres, people’s names do not indicate any status, gender, or relationship between individuals. Individuals relate to society, with their name and any legacy passing along to random babies born in the next generation. Severing generational ties, Le Guin uses the political potential of naming to derail paternal ownership of a child. Children craft relationships of their own choosing, to other people (including their parents) and to identities, such as gender. Without gender markers, names on Anarres do not limit people’s identity scripts. People also do not benefit from titles or honorifics or experience distance based on achievement. Their names and titles stripped bare, much like their planet, the Anarresti employ an austere naming scheme that prevents names from unduly limiting the relationships that each individual can form.

Le Guin challenges the Reader’s assumptions about identity. Her characters represent a rainbow of races, de-centering whiteness and challenging its privilege. Her own privilege, as the author, allows her to provide a space that represents all races, a task she undertakes with great care. That care extends to her representation of the body, as well. By
constructing the body as a source of knowledge, Le Guin encourages her Reader to take the ideas in her book and consider the bodies that produce them, using his or her own body as a way to understand, experience, and live these ideals.

To embody knowledge, Le Guin offers her Reader two models of knowing bodies. Laia Odo’s physical body slips, slides, and deteriorates, eventually dying in “The Day Before the Revolution.” Revolution follows Laia’s death, with her body of thought inspiring the rebels (Odonians) to form a new world, rooted in the muddy, slippery ideals of anarcho-syndicalism. Anarchism shifts and slides, much as Laia’s body does as she nears death. The crude representation of Laia that Le Guin constructs helps the Reader to understand how a muddy foundation, in both idea and body, can enrich the soil founding a new world. Anarres emerges, uncertain and stumbling in its youth, from Laia’s uncertain, stumbling dotage. Her body dies, but Laia lives on in the Anarresti. The fluctuating society of Anarres leaves Shevek reeling, as well, and the Reader learns that his body often provides a more accurate barometer of his state of mind than his words. Before his mind grasps an idea, his body reacts, suggesting his body knows more than his mind. Placing his genius intellect inside a knowing body, Le Guin offers a model body that knows even more than the smartest mind.

Leaving Urras, the Anarresti rebels move away from the norms on Urras (and in the Reader’s world), but they nevertheless retain a heteronormativity that limits their otherwise sexually permissive society. The Anarresti do not typically form monogamous, nuclear familial relationships like Shevek does. Shevek’s life-long heterosexual partnership with Takver, his assumptions about women he meets as a young adult, and even his homosocial relationships as a teenager and at the Urrasti university reinforce a hetero-norm. Unlike Delany’s charge of heterosexism, the heteronormativity does not appear through Bedap.
Instead, comments from the narrator, such as an additional taboo on the rape of women and children, and Shevek’s assumptions about young women and their reasons for abstaining from sexual relationships transfer the heteronormativity of the Reader’s world into the novel. The world Le Guin creates explicitly claims to avoid creating norms on the basis of gender or sexual desire, but she ignores lesbian desire, constructs gender norms (such as assuming all women will, or want to, pro-create), and limits social relationships to homosocial groups, particularly amongst adolescents.

Those adolescents mature, and Le Guin connects the agency of desire to this aging process. Instead of associating sexual action with gender, as in the Reader’s world, she suggests that desiring, and its agency, connect to maturity and age. As they grow up, Laia, Shevek, and Takver each transform from a sexual object, as a person desired, into a desiring subject, as one who desires. The desire relationship changes in *The Dispossessed*, but Le Guin risks reifying masculine power because of the Reader’s existing associations. Unlike the explicit markers she places on race for her characters, Le Guin does not delineate clearly between who can and cannot act, sexually. The reading apparatus that the Reader brings to the text could lead him or her astray from the re-fashioned relationship that Le Guin implies.

Le Guin clearly establishes that sex on Anarres does not involve control or property-like relationships, however. The Urrasti structure their sexual relationships with economic forms, reproducing the norm from the Reader’s world and confusing Shevek. Shevek engages in relationships with women that match his relationships to the planets, with a monogamous, faithful, equitable relationship with Takver and an exploitative, economic relationship with Vea. Vea and Shevek spend a day together, culminating in a troubling sexual assault scene. This scene threatens to unravel the Reader’s tie to Shevek. Although the
Reader follows Shevek out of Vea’s bedroom, watches him purge his shame, and continues to read his story, this moment could alienate the Reader, were it not for Tirin’s satirical play. The play equips the Reader to understand that the trouble between Shevek and Vea occurs not because of either individual (a tragic framing) but because a system that treats sex, and women, as a commodity erases respect (a comic framing), even respect fostered by years of education and socialization.

That socialization, for the Anarresti, encourages them to value conservation and to craft a respectful relationship with their environment. Sparse, bereft of almost all plants and animals, Anarres strips away all but the very minimum needed to survive. With so few resources available to them, the Anarresti must conserve and learn to rely on one another. The cooperation and conservation that Le Guin presents in *The Dispossessed* could apply immediately to the Reader’s world, and the lessons she provides about relating to the environment contribute to the emerging ecofeminism of the 1970s, as well.

The ecofeminists argued that the exploitative relationship people have with the planet matches those people in power have with oppressed peoples. The people in the novel who identify most directly with the environment demonstrate the ecofeminist claim that would emerge in the 1970s, that women connect more naturally to the planet, as well. Connecting women to the planet, the ecofeminists hoped to elevate the status of women. In contrast, comparing women to animals, the Urrasti transfer negative connotations and threaten to de-humanize their women. Transgressing the human-animal boundary through comparison can serve to buoy instead of deflate, however. Shevek discerns hope and joy for

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2 Le Guin, too, might purge her shame here, for failing to imagine a safer world for women, even with her protagonist’s actions. Although Le Guin’s novel participates in the feminist science fiction project, scenes such as this one reiterate that Le Guin did not identify as a feminist at the time. The novel does some feminist work, but it also engages in hegemonic practices and dominant narratives.
the future in a lamb he sees on Urras, reminding him of his young daughter Pilun. Her mother, Takver, Shevek describes as consubstantial with the universe. Connecting to the universe, the female characters in the novel craft a respectful relationship to the cosmos that applies ecofeminist politics.

Respecting the planet, the Anarresti, regardless of gender, try to conserve the resources they have. Allotting them very little, Le Guin reduces their world, helping to draw the Reader’s attention to those resources that matter most. The most valuable resource, the Reader learns, is community. They band together and cooperate. In contrast, the Urrasti waste the abundant resources they have. Their society, sickened by waste it fails to excrete, revels in luxury and individual action, but it fails to take advantage of the value of its people. The people on Anarres have few material goods, but they have what the body politic most needs: each other.

If all that one needs to change the world is other people and some socialization, the Reader might find the path to utopia easier to follow. Le Guin reinforces that path’s urgency through the sad tale of the Terrans. They wasted their planetary resources, following the capitalist way of the Ioti, only to find their world barren and their politics turned totalitarian, by necessity. Unlike the Anarresti, who build a socio-political utopia, even though they are cast out in the desert, the Terrans look only to their environment for resources. Changing how the people relate to the planet and to one another, Le Guin offers the Reader a way to avoid the Terrans’ fate by valuing their relationships with other people, as well as with the planet.

Musing on what he has learned on Urras, Shevek realizes that he must go home. Alienated from his society, he discovers how to integrate the two temporal theories and how
he can contribute to his society and its relationship to other societies. To help his own
society, he needs to return to it, bearing his tale and new realizations. He reflects,

He had no right to all the grace and bounty of this world [Urras], earned and
maintained by the work, the devotion, the faithfulness of its people. Paradise is for
those who make Paradise. He did not belong. He was a frontiersman, one of a breed
who had denied their past, their history. The Settlers of Anarres had turned their
backs on the Old World and its past, opted for the future only. But as surely as the
future becomes the past, the past becomes the future. To deny is not to achieve. The
Odonians who left Urras had been wrong, wrong in their desperate courage, to deny
their history, to forgo the possibility of return. The explorer who will not come back
or send back his ships to tell his tale is not an explorer, only an adventurer, and his
sons are born in exile.³

Like Shevek, the Reader learns from the journey of reading *The Dispossessed*. The novel begins
a socialization process that can help the Reader start on the path to socio-political utopia. To
make utopia, however, requires returning to one’s own world, to seek cooperation and peers.
Looking to one another, people can build Paradise from the blocks contained in utopian
visions. The paths toward utopia require frontierspeople, learned in new ways, to guide the
way. Shevek guides the Reader beyond merely identifying the flaws in his or her own world
or succumbing to the temptation to withdraw to a new land. The Reader learns, like Shevek,
to grow from adventuring to exploring to guiding the way: to the future, to hope, to utopia.

³ Le Guin, *The Dispossessed*, 89.
Works Cited


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Appendix:

Key Story Elements

The Covers

The three most common covers for *The Dispossessed* appear below. The most common, the Harper cover created by Fred Winkowski, appears in the right-most image.

![The Dispossessed Cover Images](image)

Figure 0.1: *The Dispossessed* Cover Images

Settings

On Urras

- Benbili (capital Meskti)
- Thu (no capital named)
- A-Io (capital Nio Esseaia)
  - b. Ieu Eun: university where Shevek works
  - c. Fort Drio: prison where Laia Odo was detained
  - d. Vea’s home in Nio Esseaia
- Meitei: mountains
- Ameono: town where Oiie lives
- Rodarred (near A-Io): seat of Council of World Governments, airy, misty, forested, typified by towers
Spaceships

- The Mindful Urrasti freighter that takes Shevek from Anarres to Urras
- The Davenant: Hainish spaceship that takes Shevek home to Anarres

On Anarres

- Abbenay: Anarresti central city, means “Mind” in Pravic
- Ans Hos: Garden of the Mind, Urrasti park in Abbenay
- Chakar, in Northeast, Kidney Mountain: where Shevek and Takver reunite
- Elbow, Dedap Mines, New Hope, and Lonesome: desert towns in southwest Anarres, a.k.a. The Dust
- Fresh Start: town Takver goes to after Rolny
- Northsetting Regional Institute: where Shevek studies as a teen
- Peace-and-Plenty: town where Takver and the girls go when Shevek leaves for Urras
- Port of Anarres: where spaceships land
- Red Springs, Grand Valley: farmland, setting of famine riot
- Rolny, in N. Temaenian: town Takver is posted to, Shevek cannot follow
- Round Valley: Takver’s childhood hometown
- Segvina Island: asylum for those fully alienated from society
- Temae Plains: open space
- West Temaenian Littoral: desert where Shevek acquires lung affliction
- Wide Plains: where Shevek lives as a child

Plot

Chapter One

1. Shevek (child) leaves for Urras aboard the Mindful
2. Shevek arrives on Urras and is greeted at the university

Chapter Two

1. Shevek at nursery with his father (Palat)
2. Shevek at school and learning from Palat
3. Dreams about the Wall (metaphoric)
4. Plays prison with other boys
5. Shevek (teen) visits the mountains
6. Shevek (young adult) has a conflict with Shevet over name
7. Returns to work at the Physics Institute in Wide Plains
8. Prepares to leave for Abbenay, has a going-away party (Takver first appears)
Chapter Three

1. Shevek explores his university quarters on Urras
2. Shevek talks with Urrasti physicists
3. Shevek tours Urras, including the Space Foundation and Fort Drio

Chapter Four

1. Shevek (adult) arrives in Abbenay (on Anarres)
2. History of Odonianism relayed by narrator
3. Shevek arrives in Abbenay and begins work at the Physics Syndicate
4. Shevek learns Iotic
5. Shevek publishes, discovers Sabul’s drive for private property through betrayal
6. Hospitalized with pneumonia
7. Talks with Rulag and rejects a relationship with her

Chapter Five

1. Shevek begins teaching at Ieu Eun (Urras)
2. Reflects on money, shops
3. Fall Break at university
4. Converses with Chifoilisk and Atro
5. Visits Oiie household
6. Dreams of Takver

Chapter Six

1. Shevek tries to get involved in Abbenay society
2. Meets back up with Bedap and has extended conversation and short sexual relationship
3. Takver and Shevek unite on vacation and set up housekeeping
4. Friends celebrate Takver and Shevek’s union

Chapter Seven

1. Shevek receives letter from Urrasti anarchists
2. Shevek talks with Efor (his valet)
3. Shevek plays with Oiie kids in the snow and then talks with Vea
4. Benbili Revolution, Shevek talks about it with Oiie
5. Shevek frustrated at the university
6. Shevek ventures into city and spends day with Vea
7. Vea’s party and extended philosophical conversation about ethics
8. Sexual assault scene
9. Pae admits concerns about others on Urras seeing Shevek
Chapter Eight

1. Anarresti teens converse about hell and language
2. Takver gives birth
3. Shevek stuck at work
4. Draught and labor issues more broadly on Anarres
5. Shevek going-away party with Bedap and Takver
6. Shevek-Takver letters reveal Takver’s disillusionment with syndicalism
7. Shevek takes train back to Abbenay
8. Shevek “fired” from Physics Institute, disillusioned by syndicalism
9. Shevek seeks new posting at DivLab, denied, takes position in the Dust

Chapter Nine

1. Shevek suffers a hangover after Vea’s party, reflects on his time on Urras, disillusioned
2. Shevek talks with Pae about the war on Urras
3. Shevek begins to dig into his work, lots of sedentary time, engages with Ainsetain
4. Shevek has major breakthrough (280-281)
5. Fevered, Shevek talks with Efor
6. Shevek talks with Atro about the war
7. Shevek talks with Efor to find revolutionaries
8. Shevek runs away from university, talks with Tuio Maedda about the resistance
9. Writes for the resistance movement on Urras
10. Shevek participates in Urrasti demonstration: parade, speeches at the Capitol, fired upon by police, crowd flees, Shevek helps a wounded man escape
11. Shevek reflects on society, disillusioned again

Chapter Ten

1. Shevek talks with long-haul truck driver about partnership, the famine, and the evil of making lists of who can and cannot eat
2. Shevek arrives at Chakar and reunites with Takver after four years of separation
3. Shevek, Takver, and Sadik bond as family
4. Shevek and Takver discuss Tirin and society, decide to form new syndicate
5. Shevek muses, alone in the dark

Chapter Eleven

1. Shevek seeks asylum at Terran embassy in Rodarred and recovers
2. Shevek and Ambassador Keng talk about politics, adaptability, time, paradise, hell, and hope
Chapter Twelve

1. Bedap speaks at PDC about Odonians on Urras
2. Shevek raises possibility of going to Urras
3. Background information about Syndicate of Initiative and the three years that lapsed since the end of chapter ten
4. Bedap and Takver talk
5. Shevek offered job by Physics Institute, a placating and hegemonic gesture
6. Shevek, Takver, Bedap, Pilun, and Sadik meet up for dinner
7. Sadik shares her torment with her parents
8. Takver and Shevek discuss the syndicate, family, and Shevek going to Urras

Chapter Thirteen

1. Shevek aboard Davenant, headed home to Anarres
2. Shevek discusses coming to Anarres with Ketho
3. Book concludes with ship about to land

Characters

Anarresti Characters

Main Characters
- Shevek (M): main character, Takver’s partner
- Takver (F): Shevek’s partner
- Bedap (M): Shevek’s best friend
- Shevek and Takver’s Family
  - Sadik (F): Shevek and Takver’s eldest daughter
  - Pilun (F): Shevek and Takver’s youngest daughter
  - Palat (M): Shevek’s father
  - Rulag (F): Shevek’s mother

Characters from Shevek’s Youth
- Beshun (F): Shevek’s first serious sexual partner
- Rovab (F): young adult friend
- Shevet (M): fights Shevek because of their names’ similarity
- Tirin (M): Shevek’s imaginative friend, satirical playwright
- Kadav (M): boy imprisoned during the prison game
- Gibesh (M) and Kvetur (M): the other boys with whom Shevek plays prison
Anarresti Characters, continued

Shevek’s Intellectual Community
- Mitis (F): Shevek’s first mentor
- Gvarab (F): physicist who champions “Simultaneity” temporal theory, Shevek’s mentor
- Sabul (M): lead physicist at the Physics Syndicate in Abbenay
- Richat: Shevek’s student
- Salas (M): musician, composer, friend of Bedap and Shevek
- Desar (M): mathematician, packrat, Shevek’s neighbor
- Timet: chrono-topologist
- Shipeg (M): mathematician fired by his syndicate

Minor Characters
- Vokey: truck driver with whom Shevek converses about partnership
- Trepil (F), Ferdz (M), unnamed young man: representatives to PDC
- Skovan and Gezach: members of the Syndicate of Initiative
- Clerk at DivLab (F): helps post Shevek to the Dust
- Defense worker/foreman (F)
- Nursery matron (F)
- Kokvan: desk clerk
- Pesus: named as a not-nice Odonian
- Pipar (F): Shevek’s father’s sexual partner
- Gimar (F): works in the mines
- Bunub (F): nosy and envious neighbor of Takver and Shevek, machinist
- Cheben (F): woman with baby in Chakar
- Sherut (F): Takver’s roommate in Chakar
- Terrus, Kvigot, Turib, Simas: biologists with whom Takver works
- Terzol (F): eldest girl at Sadik’s learning center, harasses Sadik
- Farigy (M): inventor of Pravic, their language

Hainish and Terran Characters
- Ketho (androgynous): Hain, first mate aboard Davenant, accompanies Shevek back to Anarres
- Hainish captain of the Davenant
- Ambassador Keng (F): Terran ambassador to Urras, helps Shevek
- Terran embassy workers
- Ainsetain (M): allegory for Einstein, physicist that Shevek reads
Urrasti Characters

Physicists (M)
- Dr. Saio Pae: young, Ioti patriot
- Dr. Atro: elderly Ioti aristocrat
- Dr. Chifoilisk: young Thuvian patriot
- Dr. Demaere Oiie: young Ioti, closest to Shevek

Ancients, in Texts Only
- Aseo Odo: Laia Odo’s deceased husband
- Laia Odo: founding philosopher of Odonianism, lived 170 years prior to Shevek
- Dr. Keremcho: physicist Shevek reads

Revolutionaries
- Siro (F): young, violent revolutionary on Urras
- Tuio Maedda (M): leader of revolutionaries on Urras
- Unnamed man who dies with empty hands after the demonstration

Women
- Vea Doem Oiie: main female character on Urras, Demaere’s sister
- Sewa Oiie: Demaere’s spouse, mother to boys Aevi (9) and Ini (7)
- Laia: child of Shevek’s valet, Efor

Minor Characters (M)
- Dr. Kimoe: ship physician on Mindful
- Captain of the Mindful
- General Havevert: Benbili general
- Dr. Oegeo: scientist at the Space Foundation
- Kae Oimon: Shevek’s taxi driver on Urras
CURRICULUM VITAE
Hillary A. Jones

EDUCATION

Doctor of Philosophy in Communication Arts and Sciences, The Pennsylvania State University, graduate minor in Women’s Studies, defended July 14, 2011

Master of Arts in Speech Communication, Colorado State University, 2003
  Thesis: Empowered Strange Little Women: Feminist Resistance Tactics in Tori Amos’s Strange Little Girls, Advised by Dr. Cindy Griffin

Bachelor of Arts in Speech Communication, Colorado State University, 2001
  Honors: Magna cum Laude, Honors Scholar, Honors Participant, and Phi Beta Kappa
  Thesis: Just Call Him Ishmael: Exploring Daniel Quinn’s Rhetorical Fiction, Advised by Dr. Carl Burgardt

RESEARCH


TEACHING

The Pennsylvania State University, Department of Communication Arts and Sciences (30 Sections)
  Message Criticism and Analysis Emphasis (asynchronous online), Fall 2009, Summer 2009, 2011
  Effective Public Speaking (Basic Course), Spring 2011, Fall 2010 and 2011, Summers 2008-2010
  Mass Media and Public Speaking Learning Edge Academic Program (LEAP), Summer 2007

Colorado State University (7 Sections)
  Public Speaking and Discussion (Basic Course), Department of Speech Communication, Fall, Spring, and Summer Sessions, 2001-2002
  First-Year Students Honors Seminar, Honors Program, Colorado State, 1999-2001

AWARDS AND GRANTS

Pennsylvania State University: University Graduate Fellowship, and Advanced Methods Funding, Travel Grants, and Research Award Funding from Department of Communication Arts and Sciences and the College of Liberal Arts

Colorado State: Speech Communication Graduate Fellowships, Distinguished First Generation Scholar, College of Liberal Arts Outstanding Student Award