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A 'Meta-Constructive' Reading of Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*

In his essay,

"Reading as Construction," Tzvetan Todorov presents the concept of reading as a "constructive" process. He sees the reader as the creator of the imaginary world the writer presents: by synthesizing a number of perspectives, readers create personal meaning from the plurality of meanings given in a text. Through a process of filtering out the elements they feel relevant to his interpretation, the reader endows a text with a particular meaning. To quote Todorov, "What exists first and foremost is the text itself, and nothing but the text. Only by subjecting the text to a particular type of reading do we construct, from our reading, an imaginary universe." (Todorov, 67)

Todorov's theory of reading addresses what John Culler has called the "most salient and puzzling fact about literature," which is, "that a literary work can have a range of meanings, but not just any meaning." (Culler, 52-53) Implicit in Todorov's constructive theory of reading is a

form of determinism. We as individuals read a text and develop our perspective of it based on two constraints. First, there is the intention of the author; if the author hints at a perspective we should take toward the text we will surely follow those hints. The second constraint is one that is historically and culturally based; as individuals in society we collect a frame of reference and a "life history" with which we interpret literature. These two factors, the author's intention and the reader's "life history" are the two major tools we use to interpret the text in a constructive fashion. They in one way determine our view of the text by giving boundaries within which to explicate. But within these boundaries to our interpretation we are still free to create our own personal meaning for a text.

The relationship between the constructive process and determinism which exists in the process of reading is explored by Ursula K. Le Guin in her book, *The Left Hand of Darkness*. One reason she is able to address the constructive process of reading in her text is because "construction" occurs not only in the reading process but in everyday life. Readers construct, after being given many clues about a character, their own views of that character. In the same way, as individuals we construct views of other members of our society based on the clues we receive from them; we construct each other in much the same way we construct characters in a text. Since construction is such a basic part of life, many stories, including Le Guin's, address the idea of how people construct other people. In fact, as Todorov points out, construction is an inescapable part of most texts:

Construction appears as a theme in fiction simply because it is impossible to refer to human life without mentioning such an activity. Based on the information he receives, every character must construct the facts and the characters around him; thus, reading becomes (inevitably) one of the themes of the book. [A theme] which can be more or less exploited as a technique in a given text. (Todorov, 78)

Within the text of *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Le Guin deals with the notion of construction on two levels. On one level she portrays characters who construct other characters, characters who

are in fact forced to realize the "textual" nature of the way they relate to other people. But Le Guin also exploits the theme of construction to a greater degree by forcing readers to realize that reading is a constructive process and that they are involved in reading and constructing their own personal texts.

An aspect of the first first level of construction, that of a character constructing another character, results from what is easily the most famous aspect of *The Left Hand of Darkness*. Le Guin postulates, in the planet Gethen, a place where there is only a single sex. Gethens are neither male nor female but sexual neuters in a constant state of what in the language of the planet, is called "somer." Only when the Gethens are in "kemmer," their sexually active period, do they take on either a male or female gender. The unique biology of the Gethens has numerous effects on Gethen society. Some of these effects are disclosed in the report of an investigator for the Ekumen, an interplanetary society of sorts, who has come to study Gethen. The investigator observes:

The kemmer phenomenon fascinates all of us Investigators, of course. It fascinates us, but it rules the Gethenians, dominates them. The structure of their societies, the management of their industry, agriculture, commerce, the size of their settlements, the subjects of their stories, everything is shaped to fit the somer-kemmer cycle...

Consider: Anyone can turn his hand to anything. This sounds very simple, but its psychological effects are incalculable. The fact that everyone between the age of seventeen and thirty-five or so is liable to be... "tied down to child bearing," implies that no one is quite so thoroughly 'tied down' here as women, elsewhere, are likely to be... [and] nobody here is quite so free as a free male anywhere else. (93-94)

Le Guin suggests that a major implication of the Gethen biology is a different structuring of society. A social structure different from our own implies that those exposed to such a system will have life histories different from our own. The difference in the life history of the Gethens leads to problem in the constructive process for one of the main characters of *The Left Hand of Darkness*. Le Guin

introduces Genly Ai, a Terran, into the story as the First Mobile — the first representative of the Ekumen to make himself known to the people of Gethen. Because Genly has a different biology and a radically different life history he has difficulties not only in constructing the members of the Gethen society but in being constructed by them. As one of the investigators who scouted the planet notes:

The First Mobile, if one is sent, must be warned that unless he is very self assured, or senile, his pride will suffer. A man wants his virility regarded, a woman wants her femininity appreciated, however indirect and subtle the indications of regard and appreciation. On Winter they will not exist. One is respected and judged only as a human being. It is an appalling experience. (95)

We might think it a good thing to be judged solely as a human being, without regard to our gender. But Genly comes from a social structure, Terran society, which does not function based on the assumption that people should be judged solely as human beings. Part of the perspective of Terran society, which Genly uses to “interpret” or “read” others, is sexuality. On Gethen, in place of the sex-based system of social organization there exists a system of social organization which does not require the separation of humanity into two classes, male and female. Because distinctly separate sex roles do not exist, criteria other than gender must be used to determine a person’s place in society. For the Gethens, language takes over the function which to some degree sexuality serves in our society. Gethens maintain what is known as the shifgrethor relationship. Genly describes this as, “[the] prestige, face, place, the pride relationship, the untranslatable and all-important principle of social authority... of Gethen.” (14) Shifgrethor takes advantage of the many meanings that language can carry. Expressions of feelings, thoughts and beliefs are made subtly, through the language, not by the words themselves but by what is implied by the words. An individual’s use of language, not gender, determines place in Gethen society.

Genly ultimately realizes that many of the problems he experiences on Gethen are due to differences in the way Terrans and Gethens construct. We see this realization as Genly reflects on

his involvement in a match of shifgrethor with a well practiced Gethen opponent:

He had long practice in the evasions and challenges and rhetorical subtleties used in conversation by those whose main aim in life was the achievement and maintenance of the shifgrethor relationship on a high level. Whole areas of that relationship were still blank to me, but I knew something about the competitive, prestige seeking aspect of it, and about the perpetual conversational duel which can result from it. That I was not dueling... but trying to communicate was itself an incommunicable fact. (33-4)

Genly has difficulty communicating with the Gethens because he does not share their life history. What communication is for Genly is not communication for a Gethen and vice versa because they do not share an even remotely similar life history. Genly realizes this difference and so realizes the difficulty of constructing another viewpoint without a common history.

Thus Le Guin's work deals on one level with the difficulties involved in a character's construction of another viewpoint. The difficulties in construction this character has on Gethen parallel those that the reader has in the "real" world. One thing which readers construct in the "real" world are texts and thus Genly's difficulties in construction also parallel the reading process. Genly comes from a background, from a history, from a perspective, different from the Gethens. In order for him to understand them he must try to construct an idea of them: of their motivations, beliefs, loves, hates, interests — their experience as humans. In much the same way, we, as readers of the text containing the character "Genly," must try to get a sense of him: of his motivation, beliefs, loves, hates, interests — his experience as a character in a fictional world. As a character Genly parallels within the text what we experience as members of society, and readers of the text.

But one of the most remarkable things about *The Left Hand of Darkness* is that not only is the main character forced to realize the importance of life history, or viewpoint, in the process of construction, but also the reader is forced to this same realization. Le Guin's work can in fact be seen as a piece in the genre of

metafiction — fiction which comments on the writing and reading process. And because the view of writing and reading presented is constructive, we can see Le Guin's work not only in the genre of metafiction but in the genre of meta-construction.

From the first line of the first section of *The Left Hand of Darkness* the reader is encouraged to look for a meta-fictive reading. Genly is the narrator and he tells us about how he is going to report his experiences on Gethen: "I'll make my report as if I told a story, for I was taught as a child on my homeworld that Truth is a matter of the imagination." (1) From this first line the reader's attention is drawn to the method of communication. Genly is going to tell the information he will give us in the form of a story. This is the detail which he sees as of utmost importance and the first thing he discusses: Genly is first and foremost a storyteller. But the internal storyteller's calling attention to his story telling should also make us think of the other story teller present, the one who tells the story of Genly's story — Ursula K. Le Guin. Just as the character, Genly, is concerned about the manner of his communication, about the form it will take to have its desired effect on the reader, so must Le Guin take into account her reader in constructing her discourse. By calling to mind his storytelling, Genly calls to mind Le Guin's; Genly anticipates his textuality.

In the same sentence that Genly first defines the method of his communication to be that of a story, Genly goes on to define the perspective he wishes his readers to take toward his work. He notes that, "Truth is a matter of the imagination." This is exactly the constructive viewpoint that meaning, what we see as our own personal Truth, is a matter, at least to a certain degree, of the imagination. We see Genly's constructive view more clearly as he continues to discuss the method of his storytelling.

The soundest fact may fail or prevail in the style of its telling... The story is not all mine, nor told by me alone. Indeed, I'm not sure whose story it is; you can judge better. But it is all one, and if at moments the facts seem to alter with an altered voice, why then you can choose the fact you like best; yet none of these are false, and it is all one story. (1-2)

With this Genly once again calls attention to Le Guin's

having told us that Genly will be telling a story. Genly tells his story from his point of view, and in his voice as first person narrator. But Genly's story is only part of *The Left Hand of Darkness*. When Genly says, "The story is not all mine, nor told by me alone," we realize that "the story" is Le Guin's. When Le Guin tells her story she includes voices other than Genly's. Le Guin sprinkles, it would seem randomly, the following viewpoints: the viewpoint of a Gethen, that of other visitors to Gethen, and the mythic/historic view over the twenty narrative sections of her novel. She uses many voices, many snapshots of perspective to tell her story. The use of these snapshots of perspective is once again in line with the constructive theory of reading. It is the reader's responsibility to interpret a number of perspectives into his or her own single perspective.

Le Guin uses a particular ordering of these snapshots to make a comment upon the idea of perspective and the reading process itself. The first of the twenty narrative sections begins with Genly, and at the very beginning, his philosophy of the text. In this first section we are made to feel that his perspective is trustworthy and correct. We see Gethen through his eyes and believe him to be constructing correctly for us the Gethen world. The next of the twenty sections catches us off guard by switching perspective to the telling of a Gethen myth. After giving us what we believe to be a trustworthy perspective, Le Guin takes it away. In the third narrative section we return to Genly's view, his comforting voice. In the fourth narrative section we are pulled away from Genly's perspective once again, to be returned safely to it in the fifth section of the novel. (Rabkin, 12-13)

By the time we are ready to begin reading the sixth narrative section of the novel we have as readers set up an intuitive sense of viewpoint ordering. The author has trained us to expect that the next change in point of view will be to a view and a voice other than Genly's. We are ready to hear another voice. But the sixth section does not immediately disclose what viewpoint it takes. Le Guin, training us in how to read her text, taunts us by not immediately disclosing the perspective of the narrator. When the narrator turns out to be someone other than Genly we are rewarded with the confirmation that we have learned the method of reading which Le Guin sought to teach by her changes in viewpoint. We realize not only that we are involved in reading a text but that we

are expected to read the text in a constructive fashion.

Le Guin continues to switch perspectives and voices until chapter nineteen. In this chapter there is a repeated perspective: we read Genly's first person narration in both chapter eighteen and nineteen. But because we have been taught by Le Guin that her text is to be read with a constantly alternating perspective we are forced to a realization. From the way the author has trained us to read her work we must realize that although the voice is the same — Genly's — the point of view has changed.

Thus, Le Guin requires us to be aware of how we read in order to understand her text. Beyond seeing characters construct each other based on their point of view, we are forced to realize that our interpretations as readers are based on our point of view. And just as the point of view of the characters of the story are based on their life histories, that is, the way they have been taught to construct, so are our perspectives of the text based on our "life histories," the way we have been taught to construct a text. While in chapter nineteen (or perspective nineteen) it appears that Le Guin has made a mistake and deviated from her structure of constantly switching viewpoints, we realize that this supposed mistake is for a purpose: this calls to mind not only the meta-fictional realization that we read but the further meta-constructive realization that as we are reading we also construct views about the characters and the text.

Ultimately, the constructive viewpoint seems to postulate three different kinds of readers who are at the same time authors. There is the reader who is usually thought of as the reader. There is the reader in the text, the character of the fiction who as a fictional character constructs other fictional characters. And there is the reader who is thought of as the author of the text, the only person who can know the true intentions of the author. Each of these persona reads the text with a different viewpoint and so authors a unique individual text for himself.

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